How social media matter: Repression and the diffusion of the Occupy Wall Street movement☆

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role played by social media in reshaping the repression-mobilization relationship. Drawing on the case of the Occupy Wall Street movement, we examine the impact of Facebook and Twitter on the spatial diffusion of protests during a period of heightened state repression. Results from event history analyses suggest that the effects of repression on protest diffusion are contingent on the presence of social media accounts supporting the movement. We find that state repression at earlier protest sites encouraged activists to create Facebook and Twitter accounts in their own cities, which then served as important vehicles for the initiation of new Occupy protests. Moreover, results suggest that repression incidents can directly facilitate future protests in cities that already have Occupy Facebook accounts. This study highlights the potential of social media to both mediate and moderate the influence of repression on the diffusion of contemporary movements.

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1. Introduction

Scholars continue to debate the complex relationship between mobilization and repression. Some argue that state-sponsored repression discourages protests by raising the costs and risks of participation, and by depleting a movement's resource base (Davenport, 2010, 2014; Marx, 1979; Koopmans, 1997; Tilly, 1978).Others suggest that state repression can lead to greater participation in protests when it compromises the normative evaluation of state authorities and fuels public sympathy for protesters (Hess and Martin, 2006; Rasler, 1996; Opp and Roehl, 1990; White, 1989). The sometimes contradictory impact of repression on social movements has been dubbed in the literature as the "repression paradox" (Brockett, 1995, 2005).

Contemporary social movements increasingly rely on online platforms provided by social media. In addition to traditional channels of communication − interpersonal information-sharing among residents in adjacent cities (Andrews and Biggs, 2006; Hedström, Sandell, and Stern, 2000; Myers, 2010), associational networks of civic and religious organizations (Heaney and Rojas, 2014; Vasi and Strang, 2009; Steil and Vasi, 2014), and national and local media (Myers, 2000; Oliver and Myers, 2003) −, nowadays activists can disseminate information across wide geographical distances at unprecedented speeds

through the Internet (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Several studies have documented how social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter contributed to the spread of information and the recruitment of new participants in the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, and other contemporary social movements (Gaby and Caren, 2012; Howard and Hussain, 2011; Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012; Rane and Salem, 2012; Vasi and Suh, 2016). We extend previous work on the direct effects of new information technology on mobilization by examining the role of social media in the broader relationship between state repression and movement diffusion.

In this study we develop a novel model to understand the complex relationship between state repression, social media, and the diffusion of protests. We use an original city-level dataset to examine the role played by social media accounts in the spread of Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States in 2011. Our findings show that state-sponsored repression had unintended positive effects on protest diffusion, an outcome mediated and moderated by the creation of supportive social media accounts. Our study contributes to the growing literature on digital technology and social movements by highlighting the potential of social media to reshape the repression-mobilization relationship.

2. The emergence and diffusion of the Occupy movement

The Occupy Wall Street movement began with the Twitter hash tag, #OccupyWallStreet, accompanied by a poster that showed a ballerina dancing on the back of the Wall Street bull in New York (Berkowitz, 2011). *Adbusters*, a Canadian-based anti-consumerist magazine, posted the Twitter feed on July 13, 2011, to initiate a peaceful demonstration on Wall Street (Yardley, 2011). Its main goal was to criticize economic inequality and corporate greed under the now-popular slogan "We are the 99%." The Twitter post summoned a few hundred people to Zuccotti Park on September 17, 2011, and within two weeks, the movement quickly spread from New York to other major cities, including Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, and Los Angeles. By mid-November, over 300 municipalities recorded occupation protests in their cities.

Although the popular narrative cites the seminal Twitter post as the catalyst for the Occupy movement, structural factors played a foundational role in the dramatic emergence of the movement. In particular, the movement was motivated by frustrations with the financial crisis that began in 2008 and the U.S. government's massive bailouts of corporations and Wall Street banks (Gould-Wartofsky, 2015). While distrust of political institutions in the United States is well documented (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Pharr and Putnam, 2000), it is noteworthy that trust in financial institutions was lower than trust in the federal government in 2010.[1] Public awareness of rising inequality in America and the growing mistrust of financial institutions were important background factors contributing to the popular support for the movement.

The Occupy movement had three unique characteristics. First, the movement was purposefully organized in a way that enabled the rapid diffusion of occupy events (also known as occupations) across cities (Gerbaudo, 2012; Muskal, 2011). Local groups took the lead in actively organizing as the movement itself did not have an overriding formal governing body. Each occupation site established its own independent coordinating body called a general assembly. Second, occupation sites were for the most part peaceful without a high frequency of violent exchanges with police authorities. Movement coordinators consciously worked to abide by law when they chose occupation sites and marched in the streets (Gould-Wartofsky, 2015). Due to the peaceful nature of the movement, police repression was more readily construed as unjust and helped the movement garner public sympathy. Finally, new digital technology was used widely to help spread the movement (Gaby and Caren, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Tremayne, 2014). Many people in local communities found information and coordinated occupations through various online communication channels, in particular through social media accounts.

Due to these features, the Occupy movement was able to diffuse rapidly across the nation. Shortly after the first event in New York, the movement quickly spread to hundreds of U.S. cities under the larger banner of the Occupy movement. The movement was also represented beyond national borders in 900 cities across Europe, Asia, and Africa. This worldwide diffusion of the Occupy movement culminated on October 15, 2011, in the "global day of rage" (Adam, 2011). The rapid emergence of a global Occupy movement reflected the power of digital technology to overcome traditional barriers to mobilization such as geographical distance and physical copresence (Earl and Kimport, 2011). The Occupy movement quickly became an exemplary model for mobilizing in the Internet Age as it was initiated, diffused, and sustained through online communication channels (Castells, 2012).

3. Repression and social media

3.1. The repression paradox

Repression, as juxtaposed to opportunity, is often the less salient dimension of the larger political environment influencing the potential for collective action (Goldstone and Tilly, 2001). Repression discourages participation in social movements because it increases costs and risks for protesters (Tilly, 1978). These can include physical costs such as beatings and arrests, as

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[1] Data from the General Social Survey, which asks respondents about the degree to which they have confidence in the people who run institutions, show that in 2010 the overall level of trust in financial institutions dropped to its lowest level since 2000, while the level of trust in the government has improved slightly since 2008 (Smith et al., 2011).