(SOCIAL) MEDIA FOR THE 99%

OCCUPY CHICAGO AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA PRODUCTION ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

By

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A Laila e a tutte le altre

Abstract

In this thesis I investigate the relationship between contemporary social movements and social networking sites. By critically engaging the literature on alternative media, I provide an account of the changes brought about by the web 2.0 and I underline their importance for social movements' practices. Through a content analysis, I examine the social media accounts of Occupy Chicago during the protests of May, 2012 and identify the most important functions that this social media content performs for the movement; my findings show a very limited importance of content that expresses the identity of the movement, spreads alternative news and criticizes mainstream media, while the preponderance of protest reporting content suggests that activists use social media mainly to inform the public of "what they do". My analysis thus suggests that theories of alternative media should be rethought to account for the changed nature of Internet communications, the different needs of social movements and their strategic choices. Furthermore, I explore the interaction between the features of social media platforms and the political and organizational choices of Occupy. I argue that there is an incompatibility between the open and decentralized political processes of Occupy and the individual-centric nature of social media and I propose to address such clash by looking at the ways in which technologies can solve the needs of social movements and support their efforts, rather than restricting their possibilities.

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Introduction

Much like our government this website is broken. Don't worry we're working hard to fix them both.

("Chicago Spring" website, opening page, April 23rd 2012)

Twitter revolutions, Facebook revolutions, hashtag politics: these were some of the keywords used by media and commentators all around the world to refer to the political and social phenomena of 2011. The events of the year – the Arab Spring, the "Indignados" movement and Occupy Wall Street – have brought to the attention of the media and the public a set of new political realities and have triggered a fair amount of debate on the role of media, social networking sites and new technologies in social and political processes. The impression is that commentators have mostly focused on the opportunities given by new technologies to contemporary movements, underlining how the Internet is "helping" activists to be more effective in their organizational efforts and in their capacity to produce news, while bypassing mainstream media.

Although some more critical voices have started to emerge (notably Morozov 2011), the general tendency has been to attribute a revolutionary role to social media, as if their nature was inherently fostering democracy and political engagement. The web 2.0 has been generally attributed a positive image, as a space full of opportunities for unheard voices to emerge, for concerned individuals to get in touch with the likeminded and for informal groups to reach out to a global audience. In the case of the Arab Spring, social media have apparently allowed individual activists to connect and share opinions and information in an online space that displayed more favorable characteristics than the local and/or national public sphere. In this respect, social media have acted as an aggregator, bringing together activists, offering them a space for engagement and allowing Western media to report on the events by increasingly

relying on alternative voices (Hermida, Lewis and Zamith, 2012). Many accounts of the events of the last months have basically seen the Arab Spring, the Indignados movement and Occupy as overlapping phenomena, especially from the point of view of their use of Internet-based communications. As a student's banner in an Occupy Wall Street demonstration effectively described, "Arab Spring, European Summer, American Fall…" (cited in Writers for the 99% 2011, 51). Although a process of mutual influence has occurred on many levels, saying that these movements have shared a common set of tools, i.e. mainly social networking sites, is fundamentally different from saying that these movements are therefore the same or that social media have been the key to their very existence. What I wish to underline here is that although all of these experiences have used similar media tools, they have done so in response to different conditions and different needs. While the tools might be the same, the patterns of usage are undoubtedly distinct. For instance, Occupy Wall Street perceived its presence on social media as needed to spread its "true" message independently from mass media coverage – thought as negatively biased towards the movement –, while activists of the Arab Spring needed the coverage of (Western) mass media in the hope of informing the world of what was happening in their countries and therefore used social media also to reach out to mainstream journalists. In my opinion, describing these different practices simply as the "use of social media" – as many have done in the past year – means missing two crucial points: the role of the choices and the practices that social movements adopt when dealing with social media and the interaction between the implicit and explicit structures of the web 2.0 and the choices and practices of the movements.

It is with these issues that I will engage in this thesis, that will analyze the use of social networking sites of the Occupy movement, by focusing on Occupy Chicago, the local expression of the movement that emerged in the city of Chicago in late September 2011. The key idea of this literature is that social movements – among other actors – need strategies to

counterbalance what is perceived as an hostile attitude of the mainstream media towards protest and activism (Stein 2009, 750). Alternative media are a response to this need of getting access to the public and put the ideas of the movements on the agenda. Much of the literature on alternative media, is based on the experience of the global justice movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s, but since a lot of the activities of that movement where based on Internet websites, forums and mailing lists, it also means that theories of alternative media are based on the conceptualization of a structure of Internet-mediated communications which does not really grasp the current and new environment of the web 2.0. While there is no doubt that the features of the web 2.0, and most of all social media, are offering great opportunities for those interested in joining a conversation on political and social topics and expressing their own opinions, their impact on more complex collective entities, like parties, groups and movements, is unclear. Are social media only a positive invention for the life of social movements?

Drawing on the literature on alternative media and social movements, I argue that social media are in fact challenging certain aspects of the internal life of social movements and that this might have important political consequences. Social media change severely the picture of social movements' media production that theories of alternative media have elaborated in the past years. This is why scholars like Poel and Borra (2011) are asking whether social movements can successfully appropriate social networking sites as platforms of alternative media production and distribution. Along very similar lines, Fenton and Barassi (2011) argue that the self-centered and individualized participation promoted by social media services is likely to represent a threat to organized political groups, rather than presenting a favorable opportunity. Writing specifically about the Occupy movement, Jeffrey Juris (2012) contrasts the "logic of networking" typical of the global justice movement with the "logic of aggregation": a framework of political interaction based on the use of social media,

characterized by the aggregation of individuals rather than groups. He argues that his concept is useful to describe the fluid forms of protest movements that we have seen in the year 2011. The picture of activism that emerges from the use of social media and that is described by these works is drastically different from the "traditional" understanding of alternative media as it emerged from the global justice movement.

In my thesis I will investigate the self-produced media of Occupy Chicago. Through a content analysis of the official accounts of Occupy Chicago on social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter), I wish to understand the functions that social networking sites perform for the movement. In addition to this, by analyzing documents, forums and online discussions of Occupy Chicago, as well as other sources about different Occupy movements, I aim at reconstructing a picture of the complex processes that characterize Occupy, both in terms of its social media and media content and its political discussions. The hypothesis explored here is that the interaction between social networking sites and the organizational structures of Occupy might have important repercussions on the politics and the internal life on the movement.

In Chapter I, I will compare different approaches to alternative media in the literature, focusing on both content-based and process-based theories; in Chapter II I will outline the changes that the Internet and then the web 2.0 platforms have brought about in the production of alternative media, thus challenging the established definitions. While assessing the consequences of the new environment of the web 2.0 I will underline some critical approaches to the political features of technology, which will help me in pointing out some of the potentially problematic characteristics of social networking sites; in Chapter II I will also start to develop a discussion of the practices of media production in social movements and their political importance. In Chapter III I present the research design and the methodology: I introduce the case study I have chosen to examine – Occupy Chicago in the month of May

2012 – and the methodology, specifically the content analysis of the social media content produced by Occupy Chicago. In Chapter IV I discuss the results of the content analysis and their implications for the questions at the center of this research.

Chapter I – Theoretical Background

The concept of "alternative media" has been at the center of a fairly intensive debate over a limited amount of time. Even though in the course of the 20th Century there have been successful attempts to create alternative media, both their production and the scholarship on their production has increased tremendously over the past fifteen years. Needless to say, the fundamental change that triggered the interest in such topic is the emergence of the Internet as a driving force of communication processes. But most of all, it was the experience of the Zapatistas' international solidarity network (Olesen 2005) and the early forms of the global justice movement – notably the Independent Media Center – that showed the actual political and transformational possibilities given by Internet communications. Since the end of the 1990's, alternative media have been widely discussed and linked directly or indirectly with social movements (among others: Downing 2001; Atton 2002; Couldry and Curran 2003; Fuchs 2010).

The various approaches to alternative media share a set of core assumptions and case studies, but define alternative media differently either as "alternative content" or as "alternative processes". For the proponents of the former, a medium can be considered alternative if its content is in itself alternative, i.e. challenging the status quo, expressing opposition, providing points of view that are different from the dominant ones (Downing 2001; Fuchs 2010). For scholars working on the latter definition, it is the process through which the medium (and therefore the content) is produced that defines it as alternative; for example if it is a process that seeks participation and inclusion of different, unrepresented voices and/or if it is following democratic principles and procedures (Villarreal Ford and Gill 2001; Atton 2002).

Defining alternative media: alternative to what?

Before comparing these two broad groups of theories, I want to address a question, which arises from the definition of "alternative media", regardless if they focus on content or process: "alternative" to what? Asking if "alternative media" is a relative category is a nice way of bringing the social context of alternative media into the picture. In his highly influential work, Downing tackles this in a widely quoted sentence, which justifies his concept of "radical", rather than alternative media by stating that "everything, at some point, is alternative to something else" (2001, ix). Of course it is arguable whether substituting "alternative" with "radical" ultimately changes the picture.[1] But it is unquestionable that defining alternative media also means defining what actors or structures they are alternative to. In this respect, content-oriented and process-oriented theories can differ, but it is clear that the main object from which alternative media are trying to be different is the mainstream mass media. While defining mainstream media is beyond the purposes of this research, it is however useful to pinpoint which aspects of mainstream media are seen as negative by alternative media and therefore challenged. While Marxist scholars like Fuchs would indicate "dominant capitalist forms of media production" (2010, 178) as the most important aspect that alternative media criticize, some would refer to "concentrations of media power" (Couldry and Curran, 2003, 7) and others would point to the logic of newsworthiness and the hierarchy of access as the mechanism which alternative media were born to challenge (Atton 2002, 11). The critique that unites all these different standpoints is the perception that mainstream media are not really doing their job. In more analytical terms, because of the market-logic driving them (and its far-reaching consequences), mainstream media just do not present social reality as it is, because they systematically underrepresent certain categories of people, they don't cover certain topics or events and they try to impose their narrative on the

[1] In their brief discussion of Downing's work, Couldry and Curran interestingly argue in favor of "alternative media" as a "flexible *comparative* term", coherently with their process-oriented definition of "alternative media" as media production that challenges "concentrations of media power" (2003, 7).

events and topics they do cover. The decision to create alternative media stems from the difficulty to present "non-mainstream views" within mainstream media (Fenton 2007a, 147); alternative media are created specifically to host the stories that mass media do (or would) not present (Atton 2002, 11). This is why alternative media are heavily (though not exclusively) linked to social movements, as I will discuss below.

Process-based and content-based definitions

Having assessed the relationship between alternative and mainstream media, I will now describe the two approaches to alternative media highlighted above. While scholars of alternative media in general recognize the importance of both content and process in defining alternative media, most of them do provide an implicit hierarchy among the two. Such a hierarchy is most visible in Fuchs' definition of alternative media as "critical media", i.e. "critical form and content" which actively opposes dominant structures of society, identifies possibilities of resistance and takes the specific viewpoints of the "oppressed and dominated groups" (2010, 183). In his perspective, mainstream media can also be considered "critical" if the content they express is itself critical, a position to which I will later return. In turn, he strongly criticizes process-based approaches to alternative media, because they broaden the field too much, by including all types of media production that "take place outside of the established mass media" (2010, 184). From his point of view, inside a capitalist social system true participation is only an illusion and a dangerous one; alternative media necessarily need to reach a wide audience to advance their cause, and to do so it is absolutely legitimate for them to employ "capitalist structures" (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 146). Dogmatic approaches to non-commerciality and participation only condemn alternative media to being marginal, and such dogmas should therefore be rejected (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 148). Fuchs' makes a crucial point by emphasizing the importance of looking at the actual message that is carried by the media we consider. Yet, he brings a quite restrictive definition of what counts as

critical, and therefore as alternative, whilst by breaking the link between the content and the practices through which that content is made, he drastically underestimates the potential of democratic and participatory processes in building a bottom-up critique of the same structural inequalities whose criticism is at the core of his definition. It is very hard to think about the emergence of critical content out of non-participatory and inclusive practices, unless one resorts thinking about alternative media as the expression of an enlightened individual capable of directing others towards political and social change.

Unlike content-based approaches, process-oriented theories of alternative media emphasize the importance of principles of democracy, inclusion and participation in guiding the production of media content. These theories do not ignore the relevance of content, but they insist on the necessity to guarantee certain features of the process of alternative media content production. These theories share a fundamentally optimistic view on the possibility of democratic and participatory processes to create media products that are radically different from that of the mainstream media. Implicit in this approach is a critique of the top-down, hierarchical and closed processes behind newsgathering and news making in mainstream mass media. As Atton nicely puts it, alternative media are not just about providing space for underrepresented points of view, their aim is to do a better job – compared to mass media – in facilitating a "wider social participation" (2002, 25); Downmunt also argues that alternative media are "more accessible and participatory" because they are not driven by a bureaucratic or profit logic like mainstream media (Downmunt 2007, 1). By focusing on the way media content is produced, alternative media often break the distinction between users and producers, and call for active audiences that wish to get involved in the creation of content. But mostly, what defines the process-based approach is the emphasis on alternative media as a space in which and through which normally marginalized groups and individuals can express themselves; these alternative media spaces can therefore have empowering and

emancipatory effects, for individuals and for groups (see for example Coyer, Downmunt and Fountain 2007; Coyer 2005; Atton 2002; Juris 2005). An important dimension of process-centered theories is the question of ownership and control: alternative media are opposed to mainstream media also because they criticize forms of editorial control and censorship; furthermore they break away from the logic of profit to embrace a non-commercial vision of media creation. This is an important point to which I will return when discussing the experience of the Independent Media Center and the contemporary use of social networking sites.

Both content-based and process-based approaches draw heavily on the work of John Downing, who, as underlined above, speaks of "radical media" instead of alternative media (2001). In his definition of radical media, content and process are considered together. Although slightly privileging content over process, Downing provides a middle ground for thinking about alternative media in a comprehensive way, as an intersection of organizational principles and political positions. In his view, radical media are both expressing opposition to "hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives" (2001, v) and internally organized to try to be "more democratic than conventional mainstream media" (2001, xi). Downing underlines the double purpose of radical media, understood as the intersection of a vertical and an horizontal action: radical media challenge the vertical domination of structures of power and hegemony on society, but they also build horizontal (lateral) networks of solidarity and support against these structures of power (Downing 2001, xi). For the purposes of this research, however, the most important feature of Downing's work is the establishment of a very close link between alternative media and social movements. Although this close link has been questioned by other scholars in the field (e.g. Atton 2002, 21-22), it does not state that only social movements create alternative media. Downing himself includes in the definition of radical media the possibility of "minority ethnic media" and "religious media" (2001, ix).

However, I share Downing's opinion: alternative media are first and foremost the media of social movements.

Alternative media: the media of social movements?

As challengers of the status quo, in sustained contentious interactions with power holders and authorities (Tarrow, 2011), social movements are by definition presenting views that are alternative to the dominant views; but their alternative ideas are often getting framed (see for instance Kolb 2005, Benford and Snow 2000) and depoliticized (Atton 2002, 11) by mass media. This is why social movements seek an unmediated access to the public, which allows them to freely express their ideas: they want to engage with the media landscape on their own terms (Atton 2002, 11). Of course, from the point of view of social movements, practices of media production are very important, too. "Collective rituals" and participatory practices for the "collective construction of political messages" play an important role in the life of social movements (Fenton and Barassi 2011, 181). I will return to these practical and symbolic aspects of media practices on several occasions in Chapter II. As Downing argues, alternative media are very important for movements, because they are usually the first to "articulate and diffuse" the ideas and the topics of the movements (2001, 30); the existence of social movements and alternative media is highly interdependent (Coyer, Downmunt and Fountain 2007, 10).

Much of this research is concerned with understanding the challenges and the opportunities that social movements actors face when confronted with the media, with alternative media and with technology. So it is important to consider the point of view of activists when defining and evaluating what alternative media can do. In doing so, we necessarily need to consider the specific conditions – social, political, cultural – that movements face (Coyer, Downmunt and Fountain 2007, 10). This means, for instance, recognizing that a lot of alternative media experiences just do not become significant enough

to achieve their goals. Of course, while part of the reasons for this lies in the specific choices of activists that might determine success or failure, there are also systemic factors that are very influential, even on alternative media; as Downing would argue, it is important to remember that everything going on inside movements, including their debate and media content production, is still influenced – "shaped" – by the established structures of "capitalist economies, (…) social order, and patriarchal cultures" (2001, 30). This is why Fuchs is so skeptical of participatory methods: in his view they result in permanently confining alternative media, and therefore their ideas, to marginality (Fuchs, 2010; Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010). It remains to be seen whether his proposed solution, that of adopting capitalist mass media structures to spread critical media, is an answer for social movements. One of the examples of successful alternative (critical) media using mainstream techniques that he cites is the Canadian collective Adbusters, and their monthly magazine; as I will underline in the course of this thesis, Adbusters has had a unique role in the Occupy movement from its very beginning. However, my impression is that their strategy – at least the part on establishing a pay-for magazine – is not that popular with social movements. Nevertheless, the issue of marginality and some of Fuchs' arguments become prominent when we think about social movements and media production in the web 2.0 era.

Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of social movements' media production on the Internet, I want to stress that the point of view I will adopt in this research is that of combining process-oriented and content-oriented definitions of alternative media. In my opinion, the two cannot be separated, especially when we are analyzing how social movements produce their media content. Referring especially to Downing (2001), in this thesis alternative media are defined as media experiences that a) try to work on the basis of democratic and participatory principles and b) produce content which challenges the political

and social status quo, by providing alternative points of view, as opposed to the dominant views expressed, for instance, by the mainstream mass media.

Chapter II – The web 2.0 and social movements

For all the reasons discussed in my review of the literature on alternative media, contemporary social movements attach great importance to producing their own sources of news, which generally target both the outer world and the activists of the movement. In addition to "preach[ing] the converted" (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010), self-produced media offer to movements the possibility to express themselves and communicate to the outside world without the mediation of mass media. Creating alternative media makes movements less dependent on the mainstream media to communicate their ideas, avoiding the simplifications usually employed by mass media when framing protest movements (Atton 2007, 74) and thus being supposedly more truthful to the nature of the movements and their demands. Furthermore alternative media allow the activists to take control over the process of media production (Juris 2005, 201). As I will argue below following Fenton and Barassi (2011), alternative media are important for the political and internal life of movements, because they help them make sense of themselves, their complexities, their ideas.

Social movements and the Internet

As mentioned above, alternative media have gained more importance with the emergence of the Internet as a mass phenomenon. Internet technologies allow users to freely publish content on websites and blogs, interact with other users in different parts of the world and share resources online. This allowed, for instance, the emergence of transnational networks of protest and activism, such as the one broadly described as the "global justice movement" (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005). Internet technologies greatly enhanced the possibilities of activists to communicate with each other and with the public. The Internet changed the rules of the game and it also changed the "dynamics of group mobilization", by

reducing communication costs and reducing opportunities of free-riding (Chadwick 2006, 141). By reversing the traditional top-down models of mass media (and political) communication, the Internet was the first technology through which groups and individuals could communicate with a (potentially) global audience, without the need of mass media mediation (Villarreal Ford and Gill 2001, 202). And this is of course the transformative potential of the Internet that social movements have fully understood: through digital technologies "ordinary citizens and the politically marginalized" do not need mass media to speak on their behalf, they can speak for themselves (Chadwick 2006, 6). It seems that the Internet has solved the problem of access, i.e. the problem of getting the ideas of the social movements out to the public, therefore radically altering the relationship between social movements and other actors (citizens, institutional politics, mainstream media)(Chadwick 2006, 118).

A crucial example of the possibilities that the Internet has offered to social movements is the project of the Independent Media Center, as it emerged from the global justice movement, especially after the events of Seattle in 1999. The Indymedia network created an open-publishing platform for activists, who could report "from the 'frontline'" (Atton 2007, 75) and upload documents, footage and images from protests and demonstrations all over the world. The IMC websites operate on a dual level, bringing together local struggles and global issues and linking different local chapters of the IMC and different groups; they allow activists and interested users to get to know a wide variety of issues and actors, while also providing them with the opportunity to learn more about them and "intensify their state of information" (Downing 2003, 251): while physically connecting groups and causes worldwide through hyperlinks, they also created a fabric of political integration, helping to make sense of a fragmented and complex movement.

Even though the technology itself was quite extraordinary at the time of its creation, – and this undoubtedly played a role in its popularity among activists – it is evident that Indymedia was more than a web-sharing experiment. It was a network of political participation: "broadly collective, egalitarian, non-hierarchical" (Atton 2007, 75). According to Juris, the values of "horizontal collaboration, open access and direct democracy are physically inscribed into Indymedia's network architecture", making the Independent Media Center "an important example of informational utopics" (2005, 202). For the global justice movement, Indymedia was an experiment – mostly perceived as successful – which tried to turn into practice the movement's ideals of open participation and horizontal collaboration (Juris 2005, 205), in line with the movement's general rethinking of politics and democracy outside of the institutional (Della Porta 2005). As Downing argues, the IMC was not seeking to be a "Leninist directing center" for the global justice movement, but rather a platform at the service of a variety of actors (Downing 2003, 251). The symbolic value of Indymedia – and of self-produced activist media in general – is quite clear: they represent a tool, for social movements, but also a model of collaboration and participation (Fenton 2007b, 226).

The relationship between the Occupy movement and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook has been recently described in similar terms. Early accounts about Occupy Wall Street in the Fall of 2011 described social media as "convenient instruments", which "correspond in some sense to the horizontal network structure and democratic experiments of the movements themselves" (Hardt and Negri 2011). As underlined above, social media have been charged with a very prominent role in the development of the Occupy movement and of the events of the Arab Spring. Although Occupy has been using a variety of media formats, most of the attention has been focused on their presence on social networking sites. Activists themselves – and not only in Occupy – have indeed been very active on these social networks, especially because of some favorable characteristics: they are free and fast,

they are relatively simple to use and they can reach a wide and heterogeneous audience. But there are important differences between social networking websites and a movement network like the Independent Media Center; to be understood, however, such differences need to be discussed within the changed online environment of the so-called web 2.0 and its particular features.

Implicit and explicit structures of social networking sites

For social movements, Indymedia represented a way to bypass traditional media and communicate directly to the public. The movements of 2011/2012 – and the enthusiasm that they have generated about social media – bring about the question of whether social networking sites can be platforms of alternative media production (Poel and Borra 2011), and if so, what consequences does their use have on the strategies of social movements' communications.

The first important aspect to be underlined is that Twitter and Facebook (and also other popular services like YouTube and Flickr) are commercial platforms. Activists can use them for free, but the platforms themselves are not under the direct control of the activists. This is not necessarily a negative feature, but it should be noted. In 1999, the technology offered by the IMC was quite advanced; today anyone can upload content to the Internet, without the interference of editorial controls or the need for financial resources. So from a strictly technical point of view, Occupy does not need its IMC, differently from the global justice movement more than 10 years ago; Occupy does not need to set up its own platforms to publish content, because this technology is already available elsewhere: it is free and for free. Nevertheless, using preexisting commercial spaces – instead of creating new ones – is a choice, and it should be examined as such. It is important to point out that using something for free is not the same as owning it. Some of the literature on alternative media implicitly considers it important for social movements to own their means of media production, as the

only way of retaining control over the process and at the same time freedom to pursue goals and strategies. This is changing with the rise of social networking and sharing websites, whose use is free of charge and open virtually to anyone, but which is governed by Terms of Agreement to which users are obliged to adhere. As Ethan Zuckerman correctly argued, on a very similar line:

> [h]osting your political movement on YouTube is a little like trying to hold a rally in a shopping mall. It looks like a public space, but it's not – it's a private space, and your use of it is governed by an agreement that works harder to protect YouTube's fiscal viability than to protect your rights of free speech (Zuckerman 2010)[2].

Furthermore, it is true that content published on social media is not "mediated" in a traditional sense (i.e. there is no editorial control over the content that users publish), but the platforms do impose some constraints. Some features are platform-specific and influence the way in which the content is presented to the readers. It is enough to think how content is organized around the so-called "hashtags" on Twitter or how limited the interaction options on Facebook are (e.g. there is a "Like" button, but there is no "Dislike" button). Moreover, in addition to the platform-specific features, I would argue that social networking services have also seen the development of some sort of shared guidelines, to which users feel the need to conform in order to be truly part of the network. I agree with Lindgren and Lundstrom who suggest, for instance, that "in spite of Twitter's apparently anarchistic mode of operation, an expected type of utterance evolves and leads, at the aggregated level, towards tweeting patterns that give rise to a terminology shared to some extent by anyone entering the field" (2011, 1014). Social networking sites' users have collectively developed some rules of the game, which build upon the features of the platforms involved and influence the way in which users create, present and share content (on similar lines, Bruns and Stieglitz 2012). This

[2] Ironically, some of the occupation camps put in place by Occupy – including the first and iconic Zuccotti Park encampment in New York City – have taken place on privately owned spaces, whose rules were way more favorable to occupiers than those of "true" public spaces.

influence is certainly not equivalent to what we would traditionally consider a form of editorial control; in my opinion, however, these rules of the game form an implicit structure of the communication processes that happen on these platforms. And I argue that this implicit structure matters, especially when we want to assess if social movements can successfully appropriate social networks as tools of alternative media production and distribution (Poel and Borra 2011, 15).

In the current web 2.0 environment, uploading content to a website, writing a blog post or sharing a link on Twitter are all relatively simple actions, which can be carried out by respecting a limited number of rules (e.g. the 140 character limit on Twitter); being able to freely produce content on the Internet is natural for most of us (at least where Internet censorship is not put in place by governments). What matters now, for most Internet users, and especially for those who wish to make a political use of the web, is how to make sure that the content they produce is visible to other users. As boyd, Golder and Lotan (2010) put it, it's about taking part in a broader "conversation" which is signaled by varied – but clearly understandable – "conversational practices", like the retweets on which their analysis is focused. The rise of Search Engine Optimization tools and their widespread use even among amateur bloggers is another signal of the general shift to a new understanding of the Internet, which is less and less about the possibility of freely expressing one's opinion and more about making that opinion visible. In this framework, rules of the game become important, because complying with them increases the chances that the published content will gain prominence and visibility. In his discussion of alternative media outlined above, Fuchs aggressively tackles this issue when he warns us of the risks of marginality (Fuchs 2010, 189); in his own words, giving people a voice "does therefore not mean that their voice is also heard" (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 148). The point is well taken, for it expresses one of the fundamental shifts that we are now witnessing in the web 2.0: while for social movements

access is not a problem anymore, relevance is. And how to be relevant in a fragmented and interactive environment is a complicated matter. The interesting aspect to note is that the struggle for relevance is not very different from the work of editors of traditional media, who are concerned with choosing the newsworthy items for their outlet.

One important issue needs to be addressed here. My concerns with the implicit and explicit structures of online communications are not the expression of an updated version of technological determinism. I recognize that the human practices connected to the use of specific platforms and services have a far more influential role than the mere technology behind them. On the contrary, I think that considering the rules of the game as interplay between technological architecture of specific platforms and the human practices that develop within these platforms ultimately means recognizing that it is not possible to separate the two. When we talk of social networking sites, we necessarily consider them for what their users make of them. Even social networks' developers have – to some degree – accepted to make changes to the platforms to reflect the practices of the users. This has been the case for certain changes to Facebook, which have been negatively received by the users and later abandoned by the developers of the website. Twitter has also been responsive to the needs of the users: the "retweet" function is now built into the platform, while in the beginning it was just the outcome of users' attempts to develop a common syntax for interacting with each other (boyd, Golder and Lotan 2010). It is human actions, interactions and practices that define our conception of social media. But all this still happens within the boundaries of an online service, with its defined characteristics and features with which users have to actively engage. Such engagement can give rise to great possibilities, but can also generate constraints. And these constraints must be investigated if we want to understand the potential use of social networks as alternative media.

As indicated above, Hardt and Negri suggest that social media represent a model for Occupy (2011). But given the peculiar features of social networking sites that I have previously discussed, can they really be considered a successful model for a movement that is so keen on deliberation and democracy? The IMC's idea of creating a space for participatory news making (for "being the Media", as their slogan said) is clearly a very different approach to the issue, if compared to the practices that the Occupy movements have been implementing in the past months. While Indymedia was a truly alternative space, created by activists for the needs of the movement, Occupy's media content is disseminated across different media formats and also hosted on commercial platforms that are not under the control of activists. Understanding whether and how the more political choices of the movement interplay with their choices over technological tools is the main aim of this thesis.

Criticism of mainstream social media in the Occupy movement

Some of the concerns over the use of commercial social media platforms that I have addressed here have proven to be of some importance in the Occupy movement, thus making this discussion far from just theoretical. As Manuel Castells points out in his book "Networks of Outrage and Hope", in Occupy Wall Street the use of Facebook was openly criticized both for its commercial nature and its potential for surveillance (Castells 2012, 175). In the booklet that Occupy Chicago prepared for the protesters aiming to take part in the events of May 2012, the movement acknowledges that most of its organization and outreach effort takes place through social networking sites. This is how they address this potentially problematic fact: "If you do not have a Twitter or Facebook, due to their insidious privacy policies and contribution to surveillance culture, simply make a fake, temporary Facebook or Twitter account, use it to get involved, and then delete it." (Occupy Chicago 2012).

Occupy Wall Street in New York City tried to work on more effective and stable solutions than recommending the creation of fake accounts. As Castells underline, activists in

OWS have tried to use existing non-commercial networks (e.g. Diaspora) or build their own (e.g. AmpedStatus). In particular, there has been an attempt to build a social network for the movement, conceived as an alternative to corporate social media, under the name of "Global Square" (Captain 2011). In an open letter to the Occupy movement, a heterogeneous group of activists[3] called on "the revolutionary wizkids of the world" to help develop Global Square, a platform intended to combine "the communicative functions of the existing social networks with the political functions of the assemblies to provide crucial new tools for the development of our global movement" (Roos 2011). The activists acknowledge the crucial role of social media in allowing for the coordination of protests, but they also recognize that they are " increasingly restrictive in their functionality" (Roos 2011). As they explain,

> [w]hile Facebook and Twitter have been very helpful for disseminating basic information and aiding mass mobilization, they do not provide us with the tools for extending our participatory model of decision-making beyond the direct reach of the assemblies and up to the global level. (Roos 2011)

They propose the creation of an open-source, multilingual and multipurpose comprehensive social platform, which could effectively "encourage the active participation of citizens, the consolidation of online working groups, the collaborative scheduling of events, the establishment of consensus, the process of participatory budgeting, and the exchange of needs, proposals and ideas – in a local *and* a global context – between individuals and assemblies" (Roos 2011).

Social movements and practices of media production

In the previous section I have stressed the importance of understanding the practices involved in the processes through which movements produce their own media content and formats. These practices of media production become even more important if we wish to

[3] From the volunteers of the groups/websites: *Take the Square, United for Global Change, 15october.net, European Revolution* and *Reflections on a Revolution*.

consider these media also as a model and a metaphor of social movements. As Fenton argues, movements' use of the Internet is "problematic at the democratic level", because "many sites are generated and maintained by individuals or small groups of people with little or no accountability or representativeness" (2007b, 227). Poel and Borra seem to find similar evidence in their analysis of the social media coverage of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests and claim that protest reporting was dominated by a "relatively small number of users" (2012, 1), in a way that is not very distant from more traditional journalistic practices (Poel and Borra, 2012, 5). More pessimistic accounts of alternative media in general stress that they inevitably "tend to remain in the hands of media-literate professionals" (Villarreal Ford and Gill 2001, 204).

In fact, even the participatory and egalitarian experiment of the Independent Media Center was not immune from the question of internal democracy. Indymedia activists were quite aware of this problem and devoted a lot of time and energy to the consensual resolution of internal differences in the global IMC network (see Coyer 2005, 174). The open and participatory structure of the IMC gave rise to "a kind of tyranny of structurelessness" and some groups, like the "techies", became crucial to the activities of the network, inevitably gaining a lot of influence (Coyer 2005, 174-175). Many scholars have underlined that, despite the commitment to open-publishing, consensus and horizontal collaboration, a limited number of activists is actually at the core of the network and can enjoy an amount of decision-making power, especially in the form of editorial control (Poell and Borra 2011, 5; Coyer 2005, 172). The absence of explicit hierarchical structures and the voluntary character of media activism determined a context in which certain individuals or groups could enjoy a position of privilege, which was at odds with the goal of openness and radical democracy sponsored by the global justice movement.

Surely the problem of guaranteeing openness and democracy in a structureless movement is of some importance for Occupy. The media content produced by Occupy has enjoyed a lot of attention since the beginning of the movement, partially because of the association with the Arab Spring and the Indignados movement and partially because of the undergoing changes in journalistic practices, now increasingly keen on relying on social media sources. It is legitimate to expect that, given their importance, there will be a certain degree of struggle, within the movement, to exert some kind of control over the media content which is produced and its production process. On the other hand, activist self-analysis of the Occupy movement tends to underline how spontaneous and individualized the initial approach to social media has been (Writers for the 99% 2011, 84).

Chapter III – Research Design and Methodology

Originating in New York City in September 2011, with the call for the occupation of Wall Street and the subsequent creation of a camp in Lower Manhattan, the Occupy Movement spread across different cities in the United States and around the world. The different local versions of the movement display particular characteristics, both in their organizational strategies and in their demands; by looking at the Occupy movement in one single city, I do not seek to produce an analysis that accounts for the entire movement. However, a case study can highlight some of the strategies that the movement uses to respond to constraints and stimuli that are common across the entire Occupy movement. Moreover, notwithstanding the great differences among the various local versions of Occupy, there is a certain – and surprising – consistency in the choices over the production of the movement's alternative media. It is of course legitimate to hypothesize that such a consistency derives from a sort of mutual imitation, with Occupy Wall Street in NYC presumably setting the standards for the other local versions of the movement[4]. Nevertheless, all of the local Occupy movements have developed websites and have created profiles on social networking sites. In the biggest cities, and where there was greater participation, the movement has also produced some self-funded print publications, the "occupied newspapers". In this thesis I will mainly focus on the "official" accounts of the movement on the social networking sites Facebook and Twitter.

The case study: Occupy Chicago, May 2012

I have chosen to limit my analysis of the Occupy movement to one geographical location and one temporal frame: Occupy Chicago in the month of May 2012. Chicago was

[4] This was the case also for the Indymedia websites, that were created using one standard template and which – despite their great differences – always looked to IMC Seattle as a point of reference (Downing 2003, 251).

meant to host a NATO meeting and a G8 summit during the month of May 2012; the prospect of such meetings encouraged the movement to plan an entire month of mobilization in Chicago, starting from May 1st and culminating with the two international meetings scheduled for the second half of the month. In one of its newsletters, the Canadian collective Adbusters issued a call for mobilization which echoed the one that triggered the first events of Occupy Wall Street in New York: "#OCCUPYCHICAGO, May 1 – BRING TENT" (Adbusters 2012a)[5]. They announced the participation of 50,000 people from all over the world (Adbusters 2012c). The decision of the White House to move the G8 summit to the military facility of Thurmont – better known as "Camp David" – was welcomed by the Occupy movement as a success. Adbusters spoke of a "Surprise G8 Backdown" (Adbusters 2012b), claiming that the G8 was rescheduled by the Obama administration out of fear of the announced demonstrations. On the other hand, the change of location of the G8 summit also caused some debate within the Occupy movement, because it partially jeopardized the plans for a month of mobilization concentrated in the city of Chicago; the idea to try to occupy Camp David was also put forward (Adbusters 2012c). Furthermore, the fact that Adbusters did not reach out to Occupy Chicago before calling people to a month of mobilization in their city created quite a bit of irritation in the movement (Macaré 2012).

Although smaller in size than originally planned, the May mobilization in Chicago did feature some events that gathered activists from all over the United States and that are significant enough to be analyzed: the May Day demonstrations, the People's Summit (May 12-13) and the events organized in the days of the NATO meeting (May 20-21). A description of the planned and unplanned events that took place in May 2012 in Chicago is available in the Appendix.

[5] The original call for the occupation of Wall Street, featuring the iconic image of a dancer standing on the top of the Stock Exchange bull statue in New York City had a similar caption: under the question "What is our one demand?", the indication was "#OCCUPYWALLSTREET SEPTEMBER 17TH. BRING TENT."

Furthermore, the conditions in Chicago during May 2012 can be considered very similar to the events of 1999 in Seattle, which was the large-scale debut of the global justice movement and, crucially, also of the Independent Media Center. Although this thesis does not intend to directly compare the two events, nor the two movements, these similarities provide an additional reason for the choice of Occupy Chicago as my case study.

For the purpose of this research, I will analyze Occupy Chicago's social media activity in the month of May 2012. This will allow me to observe how the movement's media activists respond to the conditions that arise during special events, where the necessities to distribute information and produce media content are even more pressing than in a more relaxed setting (such as the 2011/2012 winter months after the wave of evictions all over the US). Furthermore, observing the activities of Occupy in May will allow me to get a picture of the movement after several months of activities, when it is reasonable to assume that a certain learning process has taken place and that the interactions and activities of activists followed some consolidated and well-established lines – and were not just randomly caused by pressing needs.

Analyzing social media content: data collection methodology

As underlined above, there is a significant homogeneity between the communication choices of the different Occupy movements, in terms of the formats and platforms that the movement's activists are using to spread their message. For this research, I will mainly analyze social media content on Twitter and Facebook, as summarized in Table 1. Since I am interested in the content produced by Occupy Chicago, i.e. the content that is intended to speak about the movement and its positions, I have chosen to study six accounts that are managed by three groups in the movement; two of them are committees that were formed within Occupy Chicago – the Social Media committee and the Press committee; the third group decided to create a print and online independent newspaper – an Occupied newspaper –

under the name of "Occupied Chicago Tribune". My analysis does not focus on individual accounts or pages, because I am mainly interested in the processes behind the production of media content that "officially" represents the movement[6]. Occupy Chicago – unlike Occupy Wall Street – has been very upfront at indicating which accounts were to be considered the official ones; it is thus safe to say that they are representative of the movement at large, or at least of some groups within the movement. The Social Media committee is responsible for the management of the official accounts of "Occupy Chicago"; the Press Committee, besides dealing with journalistic requests, also manages one account on Twitter and one on Facebook.

The data were collected on a daily basis during the month of May 2012, both manually and through an online-based scraping software[7].

Table 1 - Sources of social media content of Occupy Chicago

Facebook	
Occupy Chicago	https://www.facebook.com/occupiedchicagotribune
The Occupy Chicago Press Committee	https://www.facebook.com/PressCOMM
Occupied Chicago Tribune	https://www.facebook.com/occupiedchicagotribune
Twitter	
@OccupyChicago	https://twitter.com/#!/OccupyChicago
@OCPress	https://twitter.com/#!/OCPress
@OccupiedChiTrib	https://twitter.com/#!/OccupiedChiTrib

For the Facebook accounts, my data consists of the posts published by the official accounts (i.e. status updates) and the linked content (notes, pictures, articles, videos, etc.). For the Twitter accounts, I considered the original tweets of the official accounts I monitored, as well as the direct replies and the retweets made by the accounts. As in the case of Facebook, the content linked by each tweet is also considered an integral part of the tweets.

[6] The issue of what can be understood as "official" is a challenging one, especially for Occupy, and its implications are discussed in Chapter IV.

[7] I used the collaborative website Scraperwiki (https://scraperwiki.com/) to modify a preexisting template of a script designed to scrape Twitter accounts, collecting and storing tweets and date and time of their publication. I also used another website, Twimemachine (http://www.twimemachine.com/), to scrape and store an additional copy of the tweets.

I think it is straightforward to consider this social media content as public data. In addition to being technically public – all of the content is available on publicly available website – I think that it is also perceived as public by the activists who are producing it. It is intended to reach out to the public and perform an informative and educational role. Considering this, I have collected and analyzed the media content data without informing the activists of Occupy Chicago of my activity.

I performed a content analysis of the data collected, with the aim of mapping the social media content produced by Occupy Chicago. Following Stein's example of content mapping of social movement organizations' websites (2009), with this content analysis I seek to discover what functions are attributed to the different media in the life of the movement in Chicago; I will try to assess what is the actual content that is communicated by Occupy through their media.

Content analysis methodology

The content analysis aims to understand the functions that social media content performs for Occupy Chicago. Such mapping of the functions should also provide a picture of differences across authors, platforms and time, if present. The overall question that this content analysis should answer is: what is the function of social networking sites for Occupy Chicago? My dataset consists of 5,108 elements: 405 Facebook updates and 4703 tweets.

Laura Stein developed a typology of social movements' communication in six categories, which allowed her to map the content of the websites of social movement organizations (SMOs) in the United States (Stein 2009). These categories are: (1) information, (2) action and mobilization, (3) interaction and dialog, (4) lateral linkages, (5) creative expression, (6) fundraising and resource generation. I have built on these categories to identify the categories I used to perform the content analysis of the social media activities of Occupy Chicago. One important thing to note is that a website is a fundamentally different

object from a single Facebook post or tweet, which is my unit of analysis. First of all, Stein was concerned with identifying which functions were performed in each website, I am interested in the function that each message performs. Of course it is possible that certain updates could perform more than one function at the time, and in this case I would identify the primary function only. Secondly, tweets and posts almost always contain some linked content; this means that analyzing the pure text of the update is often not enough to grasp its meaning or identify its function. This is why it's necessary to also consider the pictures, the messages and the external websites that are linked to each message. Such social network activities are by definition interactive; the categories should also therefore integrate the analysis of different kinds of actors with whom the movement interacts. Lastly, social networks simply do things differently from websites; they allow interaction by default and they can be updated easily, which means that they're much more likely to be used to report on things that are happening, while they are still happening (e.g. protests).

The other contribution I have incorporated in these categories is the definition of "protest reporting" employed by Thomas Poell and Erik Borra to analyze the potential for alternative journalism on social media during the Toronto G20 protests of 2010 (Poell and Borra, 2011). Since protest reporting in mainstream media is usually criticized by social movements for neglecting substantive issues in protests while giving disproportionate attention to elements of "spectacle and violence" (Poell and Borra, 2011), it is interesting to see how much the preoccupation of presenting an alternative account of protests is evident in Occupy Chicago's social media presence. Poell and Borra also underline that monitoring police behavior towards protesters has been very important for activists of social movements. Police behavior has been a critical topic since the very beginning of Occupy; all of the activists' accounts I have read so far insist heavily on the actions of the police (see for instance Writers for the 99%, 2011, 169). From a more media-centric point of view, police

brutality was actually what sparked widespread mainstream coverage of the Occupy movement: the pepper-spraying incident at UC Davis is the most well known episode of this. I expect police to be a key element in protest reporting for Occupy Chicago.

My coding scheme for the content analysis includes the following ten categories:

(1) Identity

Content which describes the ideas, issues and objectives (even slogans) of the movement, in Chicago and elsewhere. Since one of the functions of alternative media is that of offering unmediated access to the public, activists should be free to present their ideas without fear of being misrepresented by mainstream media or misinterpreted by the public. Such content speaks about the identity of the movement, the reasons for mobilization and the opinions of the movement on the issues that are being debated.

(2) Organization

Content which calls for action, informs about upcoming events, invites to take part in the activities of the movement. It is different from (6) in that it communicates that something is going to take place, rather than asking for a precise input from activists.

(3) Interaction with individuals

Content through which the accounts of Occupy Chicago interact with individuals. This can include endorsement of personal opinions (e.g. retweets on Twitter) or engagement with criticism that the movement receives. What differentiates this category from the following is that it only considers individuals; such content is often a direct response to what an individual asked or said.

(4) Interaction with groups

Content through which the accounts of Occupy Chicago interact with other groups, such as Occupy movement groups in other cities (e.g. Occupy Wall Street) or groups that are active in Chicago and working with Occupy (e.g. teachers' unions, nurses' unions, National Lawyers

Guild). Stein employs the similar category of "lateral linkages", which insists on the idea of links (both in terms of hyperlinks and political ties) between SMOs; while links are still very important, I prefer to use the idea of "interaction", which in my opinion describes more accurately the environment of social networking sites.

(5) Irony and culture jamming

Ironic, absurd or parodic content which communicates something about the identity or positions of the Occupy movement, or content by others which is endorsed by Occupy. It is different from the category of "identity", because it privileges less direct ways of conveying the message and it is usually funny and provocative. The term "culture jamming" is often employed to describe the collective Adbusters, who among other things produced the image for the original call to occupy Wall Street (i.e. the dancer on top of the stock exchange bull); irony and parody have been widely employed by the movement, especially on social media. An example of this is the transformation of the dramatic image of the pepper-spray incident at UC Davis into a widely circulating meme, in which the image of the cop was cut out from the original picture and placed into different backgrounds. Placing the "pepper-spraying cop" on the background of famous paintings created absurd images, which conveyed the intended message: the absurdity of police brutality.

(6) Resources for and from the movement

Content which either asks for support of different kinds or offers support to movement activists and to the general public. This includes, on the one hand, fundraising, requests for donations in forms other than money (e.g. food), requests for help and on the other hand, tips for protesters (e.g. the telephone number of the National Lawyers Guild to use in case of arrest), trainings and resources to learn about the movement (e.g. guides for protesters).

(7) Protest reporting

Content which reports on protests that are either happening or have recently happened. As specified above, it also includes reporting on police activity and violence.

(8) Alternative news

News content which is directly produced by Occupy Chicago (or the groups related to it, e.g. National Lawyers Guild); news content which is produced by organizations other than mainstream media and is promoted and/or endorsed by Occupy Chicago (e.g. retweeted or linked).

(9) Positive interaction with mainstream media ("news we like")

News content which is produced and hosted by mainstream media organizations and is shared by Occupy Chicago (e.g. retweeted or linked) with a positive judgment: it is news that activists of Occupy Chicago like, either because it talks about the movement and/or it presents topics perceived as important by the movement or because it is news they perceive as well reported. It is not necessarily the content of the news item that they like (i.e. it might also contain information they don't agree with), but the way in which it is reported.

(10) Criticism of mainstream media coverage ("news we don't like")

News content which is produced and hosted by mainstream media organizations and is distributed by Occupy Chicago (e.g. retweeted or linked) with a negative judgment: it is content that activists of Occupy Chicago don't like, either because it doesn't portray the movement in a correct way or it criticizes it. This category also includes more general statements of criticism of mainstream media. As I have underlined in my theoretical analysis of alternative media, social movements in general are skeptical of mainstream mass media, because they perceive them as trying to frame the protests (Benford and Snow 2000) or deliberately misrepresenting the oppositional elements of their message (Poell and Borra 2011, 4).

Test of the content analysis coding scheme

To test and fine-tune my 10-category coding, I have employed a sample of 125 social media updates from the accounts of Occupy Wall Street (New York City). The rationale is simple: by testing the coding scheme on a similar dataset I avoid the danger of having a coding scheme that looks adapted to fit the actual data at the center of the analysis. The sample has been chosen randomly among the Facebook statuses of the page "Occupy Wall St" (n=25) and Twitter updates of "OccupyWallStreet" (n=100) that have been created between May 1 and May 23.[8] The time frame, although not perfectly coinciding with the time period considered for the content of Occupy Chicago (the entire month of may), due to access problems[9], is sufficiently compatible to suggest a meaningful testing of the coding scheme.

Overall, I consider my categories to have worked well in capturing the sort of updates created by Occupy Wall Street. The results of the coding are displayed in Table 2. Every category seems to be represented, in one or both the platforms. I have found particularly low frequencies only for "criticism of mainstream media" – just 3 updates in this category – and "irony and culture jamming", also with only 3 updates. Only 6 updates (all of them tweets) could not be attributed to any category. In particular, 3 could not be correctly analyzed because their content appears to have been removed (broken link; user removed from Twitter; tweet not retrievable); one could not belong to any category (it recommended an art exhibition unrelated to OWS); two could belong to multiple categories: they both linked content from mainstream media, which involved some news of the New York Police Department, while adding a judgment of the movement not so much on the content of the articles, but rather on police in general. Since these two tweets crossed the barriers of three categories (positive

[8] The Facebook page, and therefore the statuses, can be retrieved at https://www.facebook.com/OccupyWallSt; the Twitter feed can be found at https://twitter.com/OccupyWallSt.

[9] Although access to the full content produced on Facebook was possible, the time limit constrain of the Twitter API did not make it possible to retrieve data from May 2012. I have therefore worked on a previously collected database of tweets from Occupy Wall Street, which was unfortunately limited to the period May 1 - May 23.

interaction with mainstream media; identity; protest reporting, which includes police behavior), they were not coded.

Table 2 - Frequencies of the content analysis on a random sample (n=125) of Occupy Wall Street updates on Facebook and Twitter

Category	Frequency	Percentages
(1) identity	14	11,8%
(2) organization	26	21,8%
(3) interaction with individuals	15	12,6%
(4) interaction with groups	11	9,2%
(5) irony and culture jamming	3	2.5%
(6) resources for and from the movement	13	10.9%
(7) protest reporting	18	15.1%
(8) alternative news	10	8.4%
(9) positive interaction with mainstream media	7	5.9%
(10) criticism towards mainstream media	2	1.7%
Total (valid cases)	119	100%
Could not be attributed	6	-

It is also worth looking how the different categories seem to have different frequencies on Facebook and Twitter (Table 3). The percentages refer to the distribution of the 10 categories within each social network (e.g. 10.7% of the tweets fall into category 1, identity).

Consistently with the differences in the platforms, for instance, protest reporting accounts for 18% of the tweets (17) but only 4% of the Facebook posts (1). On the other hand, the category of alternative news applies to 20% of all the posts on Facebook (5), but it is much less important on Twitter, with only 5.3% of the tweets (5). This suggests that Twitter

and Facebook could indeed perform different functions for the movement. However, for the specific case of Occupy Wall Street, results should be taken with extreme caution given that the movement in New York City has refrained from clearly indicating which accounts can be considered as officially representing the movement; for Occupy Chicago, on the contrary, the official accounts can be clearly identified, thus allowing for a more meaningful analysis.

Table 3 - Distribution of the categories in the test sample (n=125), according to social networking platform

Category	Twitter		Facebook	
(1) identity	10	10.7%	4	16%
(2) organization	22	23.4%	4	16%
(3) interaction with individuals	15	16.0%	0	0%
(4) interaction with groups	7	7.4%	4	16%
(5) irony and culture jamming	2	2.1%	1	4%
(6) resources for and from the movement	10	10.6%	3	12%
(7) protest reporting	17	18.1%	1	4%
(8) alternative news	5	5.3%	5	20%
(9) positive interaction with mainstream media	4	4.3%	3	12%
(10) criticism towards mainstream media	2	2.1%	0	0%
total	94	100.00 %	25	100.00 %

Questions for the content analysis

The purpose of the content analysis is that of answering the following questions:

1. what functions do social media perform for Occupy in Chicago?
2. are there differences between the different groups/accounts?

3. are there differences between Facebook and Twitter?
4. what is the relationship between the calendar of events and the distribution of categories: is it an event-driven social media production?

Chapter IV – Findings and discussion

The events of May 2012 in Chicago

The key events of May 2012 were co-planned by Occupy Chicago and CANG8 (Coalition against NATO/G8), a group that was founded in August 2011 (thus predating Occupy). They worked together especially to plan the People's Summit and the days of action against NATO during the official summit (May 20 – 21). Another crucial group for the activities of the "Chicago Spring" was the National Nurses United, a nurses' trade union that gained a prominent role because of the march on May 18; Occupy Chicago also worked on the topic of healthcare, especially opposing the closures of neighborhood clinics planned by Rahm Emmanuel's city administration.

A timeline of the most relevant events of the month is available in the Appendix. It is noteworthy that while the main events and certainly the topics of the different activities were planned in advance, most of the "direct actions" and a significant number of marches were spontaneous or made public just before the beginning of the action. This was of course one of the main lines of conflict with the Chicago Police Department.

Organizational structures in Occupy Chicago

The organizational structures of Occupy Chicago are rather similar to the structures developed by Occupy Wall Street in New York City, even though in Chicago there was never a permanently occupied space like the encampment in Zuccotti Park. This meant that Occupy Chicago developed in a more decentralized but also more organized way.

The movement holds two General Assemblies per week. The procedures of the GA include voting; the approval of a proposal requires a supermajority of 90%. Like other Occupy groups, in addition to the GAs – which, as Occupy Chicago activists admit, are less and less populated – the movement created a number of working groups and committees (Occupy Chicago 2012a). In a guide to the Chicago Spring written by Occupy Chicago

activists, while presenting their activities, they underline that "[o]ne aspect to note on the infrastructure of Occupy Chicago is that communication is largely based through [sic] the internet" (Occupy Chicago 2012a): the resources include Google Groups, mailing lists and, of course, Facebook and Twitter. The website of Occupy Chicago also hosted some Forums that have been shut down after May 2012 due to low participation and spamming.

The functions performed by social media for Occupy in Chicago

The results of the content analysis are summarized in Figure 1 and Table 4, where the distribution of the categories in the dataset is shown. Overall, the biggest function of social media for the movement seems to be that of reporting on actions, protests and police behavior: "protest reporting" constitutes 38.17% of all the content produced. As I will discuss later, the amount of protest reporting content suggests that social media are seen by Occupy Chicago as a convenient platform for spreading news about their activities as they are happening; activists want to be the primary sources of news about the movement and what the movement does.

The second most important function is "organization"; content in this category informs about the upcoming events of the movement and calls for active participation (12.94%). On Facebook this can typically take the form of a link to an "Event Page". It is important to note that "organization" is closely connected to "protest reporting": while one is information about events that will happen and an encouragement to participate (organization), the other is information about events happening in that moment.

The third most important function is "alternative news"; this category includes news that is produced by the movement, groups close to it, individuals or media outlets other than mainstream media (10.67%). This category is of course also one of the features of ideal

typical description of alternative media. Its presence among the most important categories indeed signals that it is of some importance for Occupy Chicago, too.

Figure 1 - The overall distribution of categories in the social media content

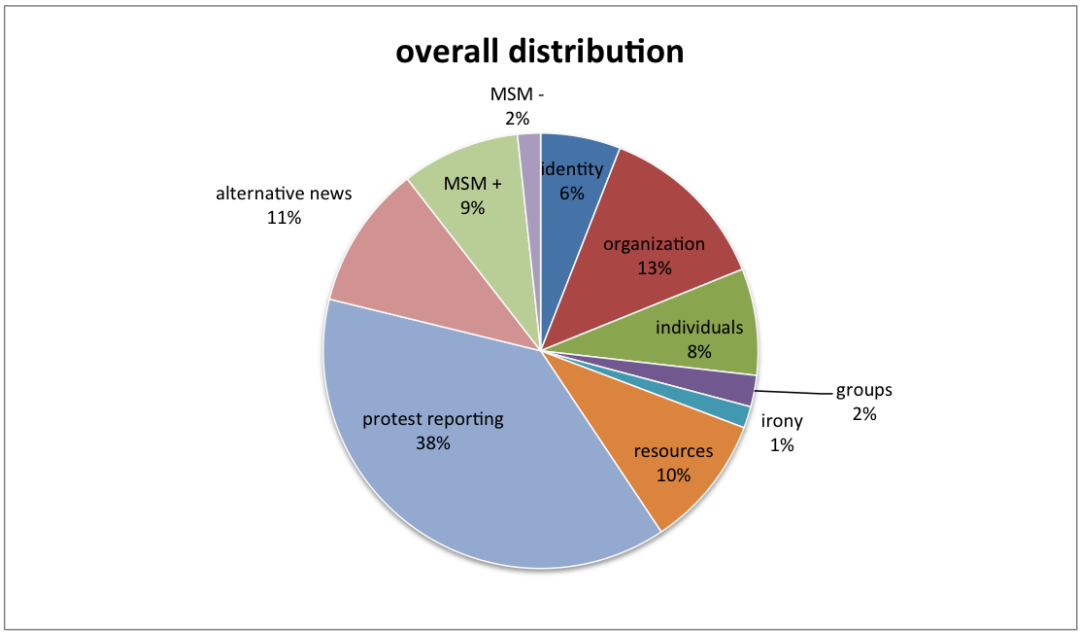


Table 4 - The overall distribution of categories in the social media content (frequencies and percentages)

	Frequency	Percentages
identity	296	5.95%
organization	644	12.94%
individuals	394	7.92%
groups	116	2.33%
irony	80	1.61%
resources	492	9.89%
protest reporting	1899	38.17%
alternative news	531	10.67%
Positive interaction with mainstream media	438	8.80%
Negative interaction with mainstream media	85	1.71%

N= 4975

The fourth category is that of "resources", which includes both specific requests of support for the movement (e.g. funds, food, volunteers) and resources that the movement

wants to provide to the general public (e.g. tips on protest safety). This category accounts for 9.89% of the content. Needless to say, this is also closely connected to organization.

The fifth most important function is "positive interaction with mainstream media", which accounts for instances in which mainstream media content is shared, posted or retweeted. While the size of this category, 8.80%, is not *per se* striking, it is interesting to compare it with the share of the opposite function – criticism towards mainstream media – which accounts only for 1.71% of the content.

The most remarkable findings of the overall distribution of categories in the dataset are mainly related to the ranking and size of four categories: protest reporting, alternative news, identity and positive interaction with mainstream media (especially in comparison with instances of negative interaction); I discuss such findings in detail in the final paragraphs of this chapter. However, one point worth emphasizing here is the small share of identity-related content, only 5.95%. This is somewhat contradicting alternative media theories, because it suggests that content with direct political and ideological references is overall marginal in the social media content produced by Occupy in Chicago. Even ironical and parodic content, potentially relatable to identity, is negligible, since it is only 1.61% of the posts. In turn, a clear finding of this analysis is the importance of content related to the organizational needs of the movement; in fact, the categories of 'organization' and 'resources' together account for 22.83% of the overall content produced. The fact that movements use Internet-based technologies for organizational purposes is, of course, widely anticipated by the literature on social movements; the point is taken for granted also in my analysis of the evolution of the interaction between social movements and Internet structures presented in Chapter II, since the key question in this field is rather related to "what else" movements can create, i.e. what non-organizational content is important for activists.

The differences between groups and accounts

Despite the self-proclaimed unstructured nature of the movement, there seems to be some (conscious or unconscious) division of labor on social media, as showed by Table 6 and the three pie charts in Figure 2. The three groups I followed tend to concentrate on different functions. For example, the biggest part of the content produced by the Occupy Chicago Press Committee falls into the "positive interaction with mainstream media" category: 43,3%. Their second most frequent type of content is "alternative news", but it is much less than the previous category, only 16,7%. Protest reporting is also prominent, with 15.4% of the content.

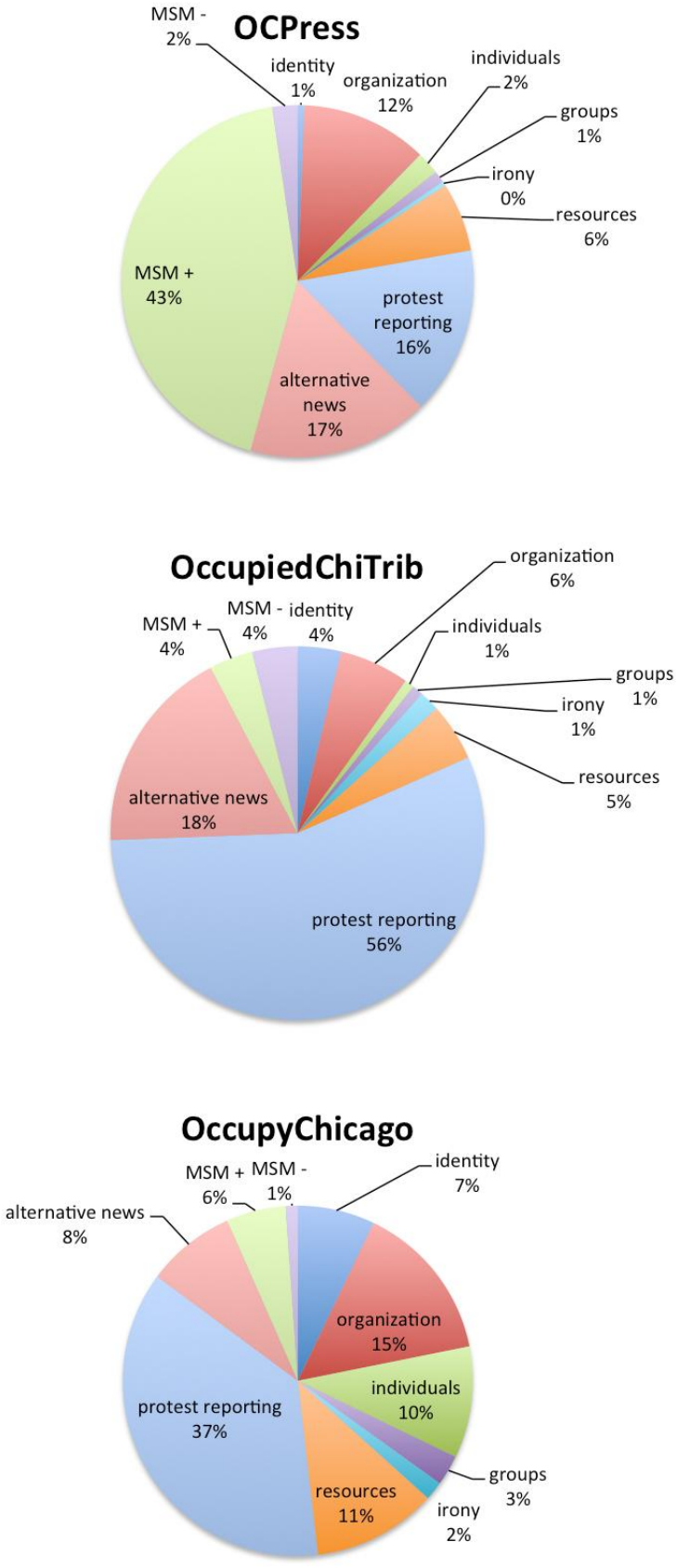
Table 5 - The distribution of categories in the accounts of the Occupy Chicago Press Committee, the Occupied Chicago Tribune and Occupy Chicago.

	OCPress	OccupiedChiTrib	OccupyChicago
identity	0.63%	3.79%	7.14%
organization	11.63%	6.04%	14.71%
individuals	2.11%	0.83%	10.31%
groups	1.06%	0.95%	2.82%
irony	0.42%	1.78%	1.72%
resources	6.34%	4.98%	11.48%
protest reporting	15.43%	56.04%	36.99%
alternative news	16.70%	17.89%	8.23%
MSM +	43.34%	3.79%	5.49%
MSM -	2.33%	3.91%	1.12%

Cells marked in yellow indicate the first category by size; cells in green the second category; cells in light blu the third category, where relevant

For both the Occupied Chicago Tribune and the official Occupy Chicago accounts, the most important function is that of "protest reporting". This represents more than half of the activity of the Occupied Chicago Tribune accounts (56%) and 37% of the content produced by the official Occupy Chicago accounts.

Figure 2 - The distribution of categories in the accounts of the Occupy Chicago Press Committee, the Occupied Chicago Tribune and Occupy Chicago



The other important function that social media seem to have for the Occupied Chicago Tribune accounts is – of course – that of alternative news; it is unsurprising given that these accounts refer to the occupied newspaper of the movement in Chicago and thus also share links to their articles. The rest of the functions seem much less important, as they each account only for 6% or less. The official Occupy Chicago accounts, on the other hand, seem more focused on organizational matters: organization (14.7%) and resources (11.5%) are the second and third most important categories.

The three groups of account are formally managed by three distinct groups of activists. As explained in Chapter III, the Occupy Chicago accounts are managed by the Social Media Committee, while the Occupy Chicago Press Committee manages its own accounts. However, from what I was able to infer from the internal discussions of the movement and from the social media content itself, it is fairly clear that the members of the two committees greatly overlap. Unfortunately, attempts to interview activists involved in the Occupied Chicago Tribune group have not been successful; therefore, it is not possible at this stage either to determine the choices of this group in the matter of social media production nor to ascertain their exact relationship with the other groups of Occupy Chicago that are considered here.

Some external resources produced by the members of the OC Press Committee for other Occupy groups and activists in general, help to explain their use of social media. In their two guides – "Occupy the Media! Press Relations 101" and "Press Relations for Activists 201: Creating Breaking News" – they clearly indicate both the importance of reposting mainstream media coverage of Occupy (a topic I will discuss later in this chapter) and of being the ones that break the news about their actions to the mainstream media. In their second guide they particularly underline the importance of social media for spreading updates on actions that are taking place (also by sharing footage and pictures): this is exactly the kind of content that falls under the definition of 'protest reporting' employed in this analysis.

While the OC Press Committee seems to be applying a precise strategy in their social media use, the picture is less clear for the Occupy Chicago accounts. As one member of the Social Media committee reports, each account on Facebook and Twitter is managed by several activists; however, activists usually deal either with one platform or the other, due to the amount of work required (Activist1, 2013). Activist1's description of the internal division of work of the Social Media Committee was unfortunately not very helpful: "[w]e coordinate via email and some other tools like Hootsuite10 to schedule and prioritize the information we share. It's not a perfect system and mistakes happen but in general it works"; on the other hand, this activist also hinted at some sort of topic-based division of work among the activists: "[t]here are some events that happen that get voted on and are supported by the entire committee (NATO/G8), and other issues that are more concerns of a few people" (Activist1, 2013).

One important aspect, which differentiates the Occupy Chicago accounts from the others (not in terms of the people running them, but because of its nature), is that these accounts are regarded as the go-to account for the movement. Although notions of 'officiality' are often refused by Occupy, these two accounts are indicated on the Occupy Chicago website as "the two main social media outlets of the movement" (Occupy Chicago 2012b) and "the only official (…) social media accounts for Occupy Chicago" (Occupy Chicago 2012c). It is reasonable to hypothesize that these two accounts were perceived – if not by the activists, at least by the public – as the closest possible thing to an authoritative voice of the movement in Chicago. The significantly larger amount of content posted by these accounts (compared to the others in the same platform) confirms this impression. This is probably also the reason why the Occupy Chicago accounts interact directly with individuals much more than the other two accounts: this content adds up to 10% for Occupy Chicago, while it is 2.1% and 0.8% for

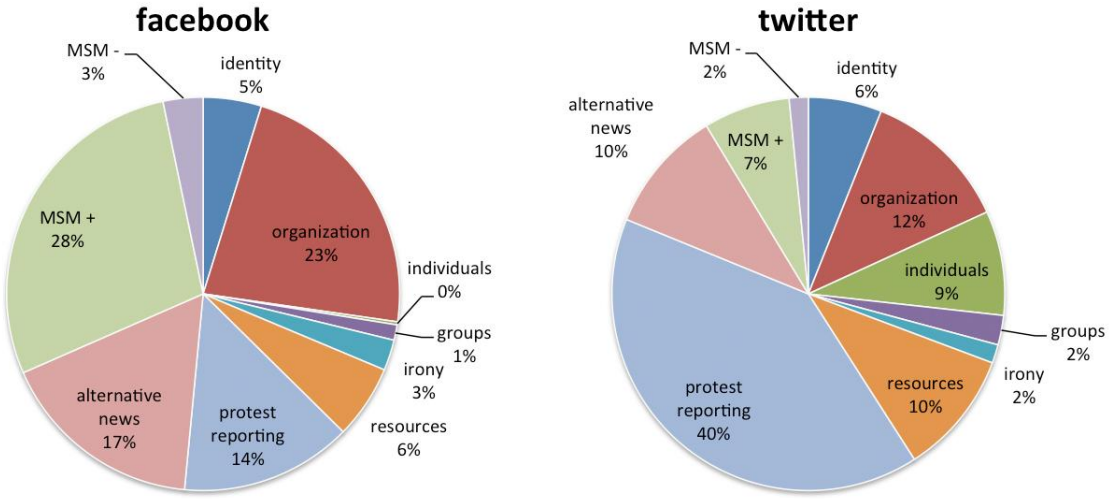
[10] Hootsuite is a social media management suite that allows the simultaneous use of several accounts on different platforms.

the others. This is likely due to the more prominent position of these official Occupy Chicago accounts, which were presumably also contacted by individuals much more than the other accounts, whether for questions, attacks or endorsements. What remains striking, though, is that despite being the official accounts of the movement, these two channels are – in frequency terms – the least critical of mainstream media: only 1.1% of the content. And even if the Occupy Chicago accounts indeed devote more space to identity-content compared to the other accounts (7.1% vs. 0.6% and 3.8%), this content is still not very predominant, since it is only the sixth category.

The differences between the platforms

Overall, there seem to be striking differences among the kind of content which is produced on the two different platforms, as can be observed by comparing the two pie charts of Figure 3. On Facebook, the biggest chunk of the content seems devoted to reposting mainstream media content (28%): this is quite surprising, as it contradicts the expectations over the relationship between the movement and established media outlets. Facebook – with its variety of formats and no limitations of length – would seem to be a favorable platform both for the articulation of criticism towards mainstream media coverage and for the expression of identity. However, these functions only score 3% and 5% respectively. Alternative news production (17%) and protest reporting (14%) are also relevant, even though they only rank third and fourth. The second most frequent type of content, in fact, is related to organizational matters and it constitutes 23% of all posts.

Figure 3 - Comparison between the distribution of categories on Facebook and on Twitter



On Twitter the most created content is connected to protest reporting; this constitutes 40% of the total tweets. The second most frequent type of content is, once again, related to the organization of events and activities of the movement (12%).

Contrary to the expectations, there is not much difference between the percentage of identity-related content on the two platforms: 5% on Facebook and 6% on Twitter. This contradicts the common assumption that the length requirement of Twitter is less conducive to the elaboration of more "political" content. If indeed there is a difference between the possibilities offered by the two platforms, it is probably not related to length and space, but rather to the users of the different platforms and the practices they have developed.

Of course, the first general difference between Facebook and Twitter lies in their popularity: Pew Research reports estimate that in the United States 67% of adult Internet users are active on Facebook, while only 16% use Twitter (Pew Research Center 2013). But going beyond the size of the potential audience, it is evident that Facebook has established itself as an all-encompassing social networking platform centered on personal individual profiles, while Twitter is especially relevant for topic-based discussions aggregated through

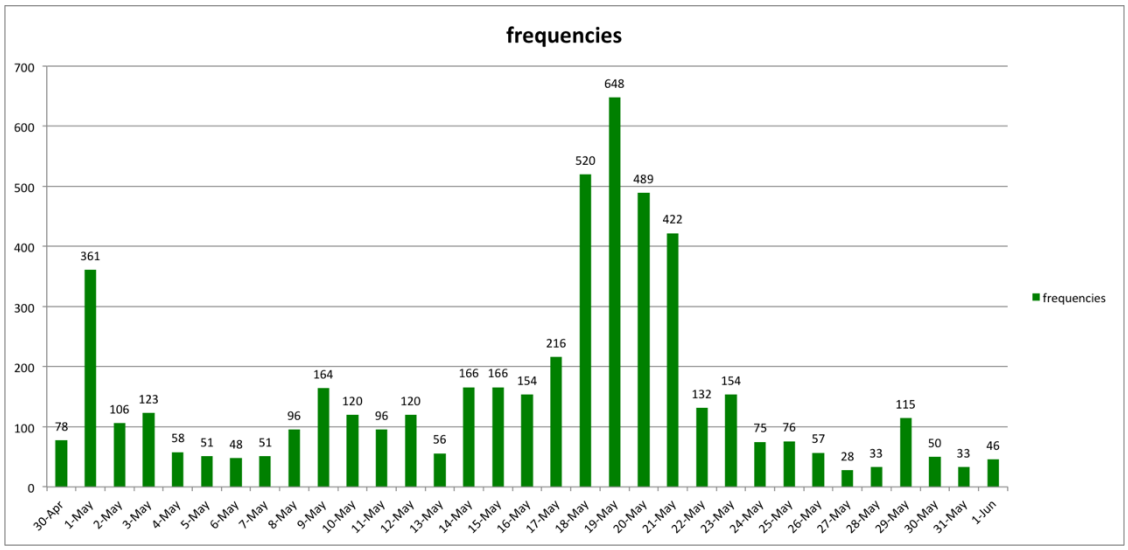
hashtags, which are often connected to events or news. This makes Twitter, for instance, particularly important for journalists, who increasingly rely on tweets as hints and sources for their stories. The importance of Twitter as a news-spreading platform can explain why 50% of the overall tweets by Occupy Chicago are devoted to news about the movement (protest reporting and alternative news); the fact that Twitter – with the direct replies between users – allows for immediate and easy interaction (any user can reply to any user's message) is probably the reason why there is more interaction-content on Occupy Chicago's Twitter accounts (11%) than on Facebook (1.5%). Overall, there are indications that the activists adapted their practices according to the expected audience on the two platforms and to the features available in the two different social networks. This is the case, for instance, of the more prominent role of organizational content on Facebook, possibly connected to the Event Page feature available on the platform.

Offline and online activities: an event-driven social media production?

Looking at the overall content production across the period of interest (April 30 – June 1), it is evident from the bar graph in Figure 4 that the highest frequency of posts and tweets can be found in the period between May 18 and May 21; these are also the days in which the biggest protest events were held. On May 18th the Nurses' rally took place and the Nato3 (3 demonstrators previously targeted by the police) were arrested; on the 19th Occupy Chicago held a pro-healthcare rally which turned into a spontaneous march culminated with the occupation of the area in front of Mayor Emmanuel's private house; later in the day, a second march in solidarity with the Nato3 was held, during which a demonstrator was run over by a police vehicle, causing great outrage in the movement. The 'proper' anti-NATO demonstrations took place on May 20-21, during the international summit. On May 20th, some Iraq and Afghanistan veterans spoke at the convened rally and symbolically returned their medals to NATO; the demonstration later 'spontaneously' converged to the Art Institute,

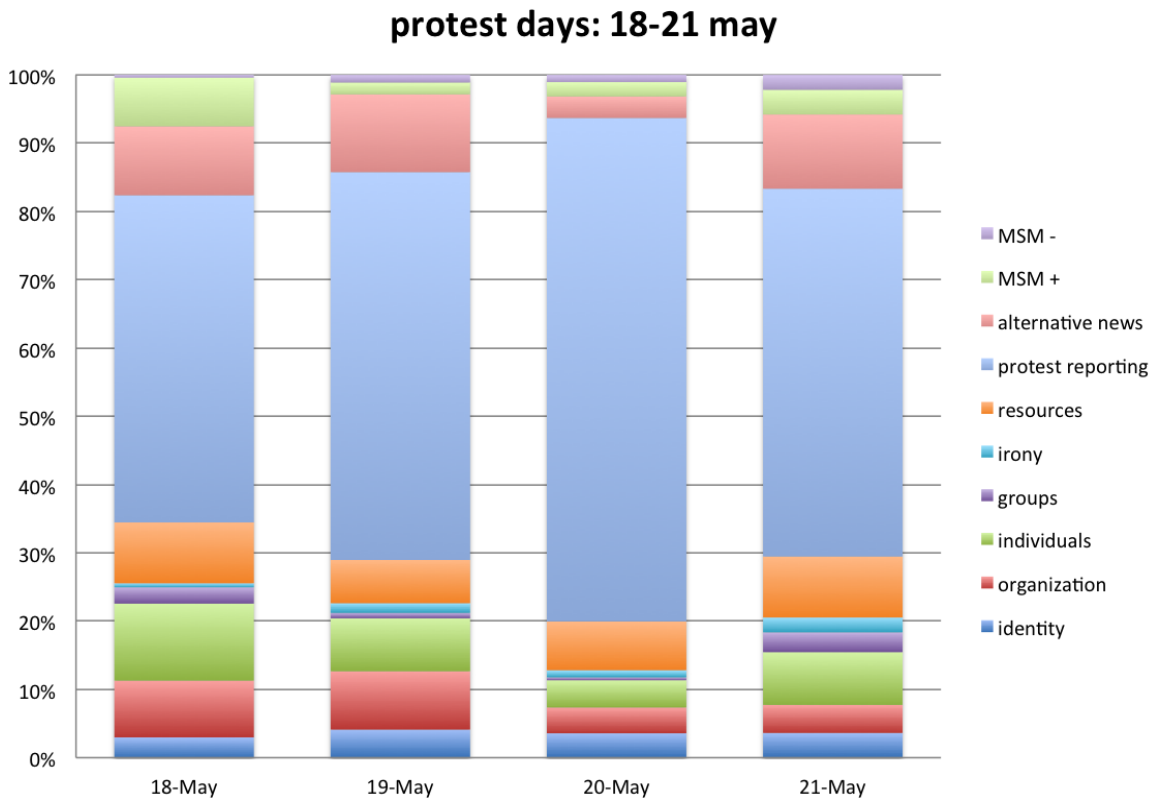
where Obama was attending an event; there was significant police violence. On May 21st the movement marched to the official headquarters of Chicago-based Boeing corporation and then to the Obama Campaign Headquarters.

Figure 4 – The distribution of social media content frequencies per date, April 30 - June 1, 2012



The content posted on these four days alone represents approximately 41% of the total content posted in the month of May. It is also interesting to look at what kind of content was posted in the days of most intense activity (offline and online). From Figure 5 it is immediately evident that the biggest part of the content is devoted to reporting on the protests that are happening: respectively, this accounts for 48%, 57%, 74% and 54% of all the content posted between May 18 and May 21. This is in line with the hypothesis that the primary function of social networks for Occupy is that of presenting themselves to the public through news about their activities, thus primarily about their protests.

Figure 5 - The distribution of the categories in days of intense protest activity: May 18 - 21, 2012



Protest reporting: saying something about "what we do"

In their analysis of Twitter-reporting of the G20 protests in Toronto, Poel and Borra (2011, 11-15) argue that – by focusing mostly on police activity – protest reporting was entirely event-driven and thus mimicking mainstream media coverage, with the effect of shifting attention away from the issues of the protest. My findings also indicate that protest reporting, while generally of great importance for the movement throughout the month of May, is especially connected to the four days of intense protest activities (May 18-21). In this sense, the social media production of the movement, by devoting so much space (38% in total) to protest reporting, can indeed be considered event-driven. The fact that protest reporting on Twitter accounts for 40% of the tweets is in line with the breaking news connotation of the platform; however, the fact that protest reporting appears to have some

importance also on Facebook, points towards an explanation that goes beyond the specific features of the platforms.

First of all, protest reporting also serves organizational needs. The decentralized (and often disorganized) processes in the Occupy movement make the task of organizing large crowds even more complex; during actions and demonstrations, protest reporting on social media can help activists understand what is happening and inform the participants about potential problems, changes of plan or obstacles. In this way, protest reporting is also an internal channel of communication for the movement; the tweets "People divided. This march headed down 25th and Michigan headed east" (Occupy Chicago 2012d) and "If you are at Jackson and Michigan, the march from McCormick is headed north to join you. Cops making it difficult." (Occupy Chicago 2012e) are clear examples of attempts to inform the demonstrators and coordinate activities. This organizational aspect of protest reporting is more prominent on Twitter, because the platform – through the hashtags – allows to sort content thematically, thus giving a clearer structure to the feed, which helps activist to share and find information quickly.

Most importantly, however, I argue that Occupy Chicago uses protest reporting to present itself to the public; through protest reporting, activists of Occupy can say something about "what they do", their actions and their protests, as they happen. Protest reporting allows them to become an authoritative source about "what they do" and to be the ones that break the news about the movement. The event-driven nature of their social media production thus seems to be a consequence of the "logic of aggregation" that Juris recognizes in the Occupy movement (Juris 2012). The "logic of aggregation" is an organizing but also cultural framework, based on the aggregation of large numbers of individuals in a physical space; this logic, according to Juris, explains the importance of the occupations of physical spaces, starting from Zuccotti Park in New York City. However, activists in the movement – even in

New York – seem to regard the occupation of the park merely as a 'tactic', albeit an important one: "Most people think Occupy Wall Street as the camp, but really it was just a tactic the whole time" (activist2, 2013). According to this activist, after the eviction of the park, OWS became more "action-oriented" (activist2, 2013). If we understand the encampments as one of the possible tactics/actions, then the event-driven nature of social media content can be placed into the context of a movement that, given the absence of clear organizational structures, needs a significant flow of events in order to sustain itself and be visible to the outside. In her analysis of the Italian branch of the global justice movement, Donatella Della Porta underlines that heterogeneous movements can integrate their "different souls" more easily when they can focus on "concrete actions", "concrete initiatives", "concrete objectives" (Della Porta 2005, 189-190). This seems to apply also in the case of Occupy, which appears to be constructing identity around protest events.

Mainstream social media? The limited importance of mainstream media criticism

One of the key ideas behind the theories of alternative media production I have considered is that alternative media are created by social movements because of their distrust of mainstream media and their techniques for framing movements or ignoring them. This is a recurrent critique also in Occupy. As Occupy Wall Street activist Justin Wedes explains:

> Throughout this process, we understood the importance of having an independent media center – in other words, of creating our own media. We could never rely on the mainstream media to depict us fairly. And we wanted to be the most go-to, responsible, accurate depictors [sic] of what is happening in this space. So, from day one, we set up an indy media center, which includes a live stream. (in Goodman and Monynihan 2012, 260)

Occupy Chicago Press Committee activists also begin their "Occupy the Media! Press Relations 101" guide by stating that "corporate media is owned by the 1%, and will ultimately protect their interests at any cost." (Occupy Chicago Press Committee 2012, 4). In light of

these concerns, it is quite striking that while reposted mainstream media content (‘positive interaction with mainstream media’) accounts for 8.80% of the overall content, the content that openly criticizes mainstream media ('negative interaction with mainstream media') is almost negligible: only 1.71%.

The Occupy movement has a complicated relationship with the mainstream media, and while social media might not help shedding light over it, their use certainly echoes the difficulties that the movement encountered. On the one hand, activists are very straightforward in criticizing the mass media for their coverage, even in the more covered New York City occupation: “mainstream coverage of Occupy Wall Street has been a fickle, ornery beast” (Writers for the 99% 2011, 167). First of all, Occupiers lamented a lack of coverage: “[d]espite attracting a thousand or so people to lower Manhattan for a spirited march on the financial district, Occupy Wall Street’s first action drew a blind eye from the mainstream media” (Writers for the 99% 2011, 168). Later, when coverage increased – a Pew Research Center’s report estimates that between November 14-20, 2011 Occupy Wall Street accounted for 13% of the total news produced by US media outlets (Holcomb 2011*)* –, activists lamented that news media were trying to frame the movement through “condescending or dismissive” coverage (Writers for the 99% 2011, 169). Activists also claim that mainstream media serve the needs of corporations by keeping the public fearful and misinformed (New York City General Assembly, 2011). Fear was also the main component of mainstream media coverage of the Occupy Chicago NATO protests, according to OC activist Terry Keenan, who hosted 27 occupiers from Atlanta in his house, allowing for television crews and press to report on it:

> Well, there was an atmosphere of fear going on, before the protests started. They had police, regular undercover Chicago Police infiltrate our movement and set up a whole raid and trying to discredit us, just before the movement started. So the media played that, I was trying to counter that - what was happening in the media - in my house, by showing them, you know, we're just

> harmless peaceful protesters… trying to stop the NATO war machine (…) (Keenan 2013).

On the other hand, despite criticizing mainstream media and emphasizing the strategic role of their alternative media production and of social media accounts, Occupy activists seem to have developed tactics to deal with corporate media attention. As already mentioned, Occupy groups typically set up a committee or group that was specifically in charge of Press Relations; training was also available for activists who volunteered their name as possible interview contact for mainstream media. Of course, one of the major sources of misunderstanding between Occupy groups and reporters is related to Occupy's declared leaderlessness. However framed – in Occupy Chicago the catchphrase was "we are not a leaderless movement, but a movement of leaders" (Occupy Chicago Press Committee 2012a, 30) – the absence of permanent spokespeople for the movement created some tension with the media, that were looking for some "official" voices from the movement. In the words of Occupy Los Angeles activist and graduate student Joan Donovan:

> (…) Occupy remains leaderless. In the current situation, the mainstream media has trouble connecting to and narrativizing the Occupy movement because of its leaderless and decentralized principles. There is simply no one to contact for an authoritative interview about the movement. (Terranova and Donovan 2013, 305-306)

The difficulties that Occupy activists are encountering with the mainstream media are not new. In the 1971 essay *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, feminist activist Jo Freeman denounced how the movement's decision of not choosing representatives actually promoted a system in which mass media selected their own "movement stars", which ended up being perceived as spokespeople of the movement (Freeman 1972). Freeman also argued that this put the movement in a dangerous position both because of the personal conflicts that inevitably emerge from this 'star system' and because of the power that the mechanism gives to the press, who can choose their own movement to cover.

At least in Occupy Chicago, the challenge of matching mainstream media press attention and the choice of not appointing a spokesperson was met by training the activists who were willing to talk to the media. The Occupy Chicago Press Committee, for instance, held a specific training for the NATO protests, advertised on twitter as: "MT @OCPress Want to speak to the media during #NATO? Attend @OCPress Liaison Trainings! TODAY & TOMORROW, 1-3p & 6-8p, 500 W Cermak rm 500!" (Occupy Chicago, 2012f). In the already cited OC Press Committee PR guide, there is a section dedicated to suggested talking points, developed by the members of the committee in Fall 2011(Occupy Chicago Press Committee 2012a, 29). Although they are clearly indicated as not representing the "official word of Occupy Chicago", they are described as "a reference for anyone who would like to speak to the press, or anyone, else, about Occupy Chicago" (Occupy Chicago Press Committee 2012a, 29). Talking points include the motivations and goals of Occupy, the organizational structures of the movement in Chicago, the relationship with the police and organized labor.

However, Occupy Chicago also used tactics that strongly resemble more traditional PR methods and introduced some mechanisms that addressed the issue of 'officiality'. Besides training activists, the OC press committee also issued official press releases and organized press conferences. Press releases were written and edited by the members of the Committee over their listserv and required three approvals within the Press committee to be sent out to the media[11] (Occupy Chicago Press Committee 2012a, 29). Press conferences organized by the Press Committee, frequently held together with other organizations involved in the NATO protests, featured – as far as my analysis can tell – one member of the committee as

[11] There is no available record of the number of members of the OC Press Committee (nor of any other committee), so it is hard to establish whether the number of three approvals constitutes a significant share of the members. The now-closed Press Liason Forum on the Occupy Chicago website listed 116 usernames of members of the OC Press Committee forum, but they are not a reliable indication given that anyone could register in the Forum and be listed there, even if he/she was not active in the Committee. A more reliable source comes from a tweet of the OC Press account, listing 8 active members of the "Occupy Chicago #NATO Press Team". "#FF @OccupyChicago #NATO Press Team: @plussone @soit_goes @squidpunk @JacqRabbitt @allshiny @PhilipDeVon1 @pHinkasaurus @SugarSolidarity" (OCPress, May 5, 2012).

representative of Occupy Chicago. In my opinion this mitigated the 'star system' effect defined by Jo Freeman for the feminist movements of the 1970s, because despite the rotation of press conference speakers, Occupy Chicago still seemed to control 'who' was delivering its message. These tactics were probably implemented also due to the requests of the activists: on the website forums, in fact, there are records of discussions about the necessity of a consistent "communication strategy", especially regarding Chicago-based mainstream media; in such discussions activists also argue in favor of nominating a spokesperson with the authority to respond to the press on the basis of shared talking points (Occupy Chicago Press Liaison Forum 2011). Of course press conferences are only one aspect of the movement's relation with the media, but in my opinion their strategic management by the Press Committee signals some willingness to conform to mainstream media standards.

There is further evidence to believe that, despite their open criticism of mainstream media, Occupy Chicago decided to collaborate with them. The OC Press Committee press relations guide cited above gives further indication of this; for instance, the guide suggests that "the media should be invited to well-planned events that are 'newsworthy'", which they define as involving "big numbers, flashy signs & banners, interesting street theater (…)"(Occupy Chicago Press Committee 2012a, 23); the general recommendation is that "[i]f we invite the media to an event, they should be able to walk away with the visual elements they need to put together a good story" and that "[w]e want to stay away from sending out releases about 15-person single-issue protests, with people in every-day clothes carrying signs (Occupy Chicago Press Committee 2012a, 23).

Considering Occupy Chicago's mainstream media strategy as a whole can help shedding light on the results of the content analysis, which show that the movement indeed reposts and shares content from mainstream media (overall 8.8% of the total content), while its direct critique of mass media is very limited (1.71% of the updates). The fact that this

content constitutes over 43% of the total content posted by the accounts of the OC Press Committee can be considered as a sign that this was a precise strategy. In fact, Occupy Chicago's PR guide can once again serve as an indication, because it recommends collecting mass media coverage of movement actions: "[o]nce you've found your clips, post them to your facebook page and tweet them. If you get coverage of an event or action before it starts, it can help get people excited and drive them out for the event." (Occupy Chicago Press Committee 2012a, 23). Mainstream coverage seems to be of some importance for Occupy Chicago activists, at least as a way of motivating potential sympathetic viewers and readers and this is probably why such media content is so prominently featured on the movement's social networking accounts. As stated at the end of the second PR guide, "You should also collect and post all of your clips, including buying hard copies of local newspapers the next day, and posting images of your articles." (Occupy Chicago Press Committee 2012b, 14)

The "tyranny of the password": identity-content and social media

Unlike the case of mainstream media content, there is little evidence that the limited amount of identity-related content is the result of a strategic choice made by the movement. Rather than in a deliberate strategy, the explanation should probably be traced in the peculiar interaction between the political characteristic of Occupy, the processes of media content production in the movement and the features of corporate social networking platforms.

Occupy LA activist Joan Donovan describes to Tiziana Terranova how the use of social media in the encampment of Los Angeles created some tensions and conflicts within the movement (Terranova and Donovan 2013). On the one hand, in Occupy LA the media committee was rather closed, almost "an insular group" (Terranova and Donovan 2013, 299); this created the tensions that led to the formation of a radical-anarchistic group named "Occupy LA Anti-Social Media" (OLAASM). OLAASM criticizes the media (and social media) committee for being non-transparent, non-inclusive and autocratic, thus not abiding to

the principles of consensus and participatory decision-making (OLA Anti Social Media 2012). On the other hand, what is evident in Donovan's reconstruction of the Occupy LA social media management is that another kind of closure, of insulation, developed directly from the structure of the social networking platforms, rather than from the activists' actions (and mistakes). As Donovan explains:

> (…) the way that social networks are structured with a single point of entry posed a bigger problem: who has the password? Because you need a password to communicate through those channels, the passwords were vigorously guarded from people who were deemed provocateurs. An elaborate set of rules and requirements developed around access to these passwords, specifically for the Occupy LA Facebook and Twitter accounts, which have tens of thousands of followers." (Terranova and Donovan 2013, 300)

Donovan's remarks echo Fenton and Barassi's description of corporate social networking sites as "self-centered media production practices" (2011, 181). As Hui and Halpin underline, "(…) Facebook's very existence relies largely on the presupposition of individualism, as the primary unit in Facebook is always the individual's Facebook profile" (Hui and Halpin 2013, 106). Although slightly different from the individual profile, the creation of pages on Facebook (and of Twitter accounts) follows the same logic: there is - in Donovan's terms - "one single point of entry", guarded by a password; the content that gets published from such account inevitably comes to be considered as 'official', thus transforming a variegated movement like Occupy into a unified single voice, that of the official accounts. It is not surprising that this has created some tensions, as exemplified by the Occupy LA Anti Social Media group. In the Google Group discussion platforms of Occupy Chicago some of these issues have emerged. In a thread about 'Censorship on Facebook', one activist argued that despite having a no-censorship policy on individuals' posts on their pages, "[t]here should be policies created and enacted that all facebook admins or individuals with access to the twitter should have to follow", while another activist from the Social Media committee replied: "we have to make sure we are disseminating correct information. if it comes from us,

our official facebook or twitter, it has to be accurate and reflect the o pinion [sic] of the movement" (Occupy Chicago Google Group, 2011). However, the sort of processes that might ensure that the movement's opinions are reflected in the social media content are not specified.

The fact that some of the tensions over internal democracy in the movement ended up being expressed as a sort of 'tyranny of the password' is telling both of the importance that the movement attached to their social media content and of the inherent difficulties of using corporate social media in an open, decentralized and - ultimately - democratic way. The Occupy LA example is once again useful:

> After lots of complaints about the control of outward communications, a new protocol developed where people could email the media committee and have their action or statements promoted through social media, but only if the actions/statements were agreed upon at the General Assembly. However, this posed a new set of obstacles because the General Assembly is comprised of whoever showed up to the nightly meeting and voted on a specific proposal. Moreover, these meetings could be at- tended by hundreds of people, which meant minor issues could not be addressed. So effectively, the media committee shifted the burden of regulating communications to the facilitation committee of the General Assembly, who were the ones that decided which proposals would be appropriate to be debated at the nightly meeting. (Terranova and Donovan 2013, 300)

However, the attempt to introduce more consensual procedures in the work of the social media committee failed and backlashed:

> [as] a result of all these hurdles, the Twitter and Facebook communications served to promote the views, actions, and opinions of the small group of admins, who were routinely insulted by other members of Occupy LA who accused them of pushing a 'reformist agenda' (Terranova and Donovan 2013, 300).

In my opinion, the explanation of why so little identity-content is created on the social media accounts of Occupy Chicago lies in the fundamental incompatibility between the open, collective, decentralized and consensual decision making processes of Occupy - which are not just mechanisms, but values of the movement - and the individual-centered nature of social

networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. On the one hand, Occupy organized its political processes on the basis of consensus mechanisms (e.g. the GAs), which tend to focus on concrete proposals about actions to undertake rather than on the deliberative processes that would be needed to build clear and coherent political positions for the movement. This results in the inability of the movement to agree on anything that resembles a platform. On the other hand, their choice of relying on Facebook and Twitter has not helped them in supporting their participatory and deliberative efforts. As Hui and Halpin explain, "[on] Facebook, one can establish a group, a page, an event, but neither Facebook nor Google+ and Twitter provide the tools for collective individuation based on collaboration" (Hui and Halpin 2013, 111). These platforms – as they are now – simply do not allow the sort of complex interaction, debate and collaborative effort that Occupy would require to be able to make sense of itself and its ideas. If not effectively restricting the possibilities of the movement, these social networks are at least failing to help the activists in their activities, something that, after all, should be the primary function of any technology.

All things considered, I argue that the absence of identity-content is a coping mechanism, a solution that bridges the need to use social media platforms - "because they are familiar, useful, and give access to the broadest possible audience" (Terranova and Donovan 2013, 309) - and the existence of multiple possible identities, and thus the unavailability of one official identity-content. Since activists are aware that posting some identity-related content from an official social media account could be perceived as the attempt to impose an official platform on the movement, this kind of content is simply reduced to a minimum in the accounts; coverage of events and organizational content, on the other hand, are much less problematic, both because they are more concrete and because they generally refer to activities that have been approved by the movement. Coverage of events might then reinforce feelings of solidarity more than identity-content, which can be perceived as imposed on the

movement. When abiding to the procedures that corporate social networks like Facebook and Twitter impose on their (individual) users, for the activists of Occupy it is easier to say something about "what they do", rather than about "who they are". This challenges the definitions of alternative media that heavily rely on notions of identity to explain the communication processes of contemporary social movements; but it also suggests that the clash between multiple identities and individual-centric social media might be addressed in a better way by changing the logic behind social networking platforms, rather than compromising the principles of political decentralization that are so important for the movement.

I explore both of these shifts of perspective in my conclusions.

Conclusions

In this thesis I have investigated one of the most prominent topics in the recent discussion of social movements: the use of social networking platforms. Firstly, I critically engaged the literature on alternative media by providing an account of the changes provoked by the emergence of the so-called web 2.0. I argued that these changes seriously challenge existing theories of alternative media, but more importantly they also change our perspective on the interaction between social movements and Internet-based technologies. In order to understand the actual practices connected to the use of social media, my empirical analysis uses a content analysis of social media content produced by one local expression of the Occupy movement, Occupy Chicago, in May, 2012, during the intense protest activity against the G8 and NATO meetings. My analysis focused on the different possible functions that social networks might perform for the movement in Chicago and for different groups within the movement. The empirical results, interpreted in light of the available information about the practices of media production and political decision making of the Occupy movement, suggest that theories of alternative media should be rethought to account for the changed nature of Internet communications and that the relationship between social movements and the technologies they employ should primarily be assessed in terms of the political goals and the specific needs of these movements.

Limitations

As discussed in the description of my methodology in Chapter III, this thesis is based on a case study and its empirical findings are certainly limited to one local experience of Occupy (itself a predominantly US-based experience), to one particular moment of this movement's life. Therefore, it cannot provide a comprehensive account of the Occupy movement, its political decision making processes or its overall relationship with digital technologies. The

case study of Occupy Chicago can however provide a meaningful insight into some of the possible patterns of interaction between social media platforms and contemporary movements. As my discussion of the empirical findings emphasizes, it is it is deeply problematic to speak of movements' use of "the Internet" or social media in general; further comparative research in this field would thus be needed to advance towards a more complete definition of the possible strategies of social movements. Moreover, this thesis has dealt mainly with textual and visual content produced by Occupy Chicago. While I have tried to gain access to activists of Occupy Chicago, the information I was able to gather from the interviews is not sufficient to clarify some of the important day-to-day practices that seem to influence social media content production; the interviewees, despite being generally available for interviews, seem to have deliberately avoided to disclose detailed information over the internal processes connected to media production. While this could be entirely attributable to the difficulties of conducting interviews through online tools, it is also possible that activists might be aware of their own shortcomings and thus conceal them to the outsiders. Either option calls for different methods of research that allow for more direct observations of the processes of media content production, which were not possible at this point.

Rethinking alternative media

The results of my analysis clearly indicate that the content most connected to the theories of alternative media appears to be limited or even marginal in the social media content produced by Occupy Chicago: alternative news constitutes 11% of the overall content, while identity only accounts for 6% (7% if we include ironical content) and criticism of mainstream media for 2%. These findings clearly challenge the theoretical approaches that are based on the assumption that alternative media are created by movements to express their ideas and their identity and to criticize the work and ethics of mainstream media. The results of my analysis point towards rethinking alternative media theories in terms of understanding

the needs of movements and the ways in which technologies can serve these needs. The literature seems to be so focused on the example of the Independent Media Center that it has overlooked how the needs of movements might be very different. While the IMC openly tried to substitute mainstream mass media, it is evident that Occupy Chicago has not tried to do so with its social media content; they have (successfully) used social media to establish themselves as the primary source about the activities of their movement, as it is evident from the strategy of the Press Committee and the amount of protest reporting content that they produced.

Not only can movements have different needs from the ones expressed by the global justice movement, but these needs should also be understood in light of a different Internet landscape. In Chapter II I discussed how the changes caused by the web 2.0 have influenced political activism on the Internet; my analysis indicates clearly that Occupy Chicago – and particularly the Press Committee – fully developed social media content in light of what they thought could become relevant on Twitter and Facebook. While alternative media theories focus on the production of content that says something about the movements and that has a meaning for the activists, Occupy Chicago shows us that activists of the web 2.0 think beyond the boundaries of their internal life and try to gain visibility for their movement by producing the kind of content that can become very relevant on social media. This of course changes the picture of alternative media production because it suggests that activists' strategic considerations should also be taken into account and that they might actually be crucial determinants of the content that movements create.

Changing the perspective: technologies that help movements

As discussed in Chapter II, alternative media experiences on the Internet seem to be problematic from the point of view of movements' internal democracy, because such media production is often confined to a limited number of mostly media-literate users. This holds

also in the case of Occupy, where media professionals (or aspiring professionals, e.g. journalism students) have played an important role in setting up the press and social media committees in New York and elsewhere, including Chicago. The Occupy LA Anti Social media group is an example of the sort of tensions than can result from the exclusionary practices of the media activists. Corporate social media and the other web 2.0 platforms, contrary to the expectations of many, do not seem to solve these problems of inclusion and democracy, but rather to exacerbate them.

The global justice movement was a plural and diverse movement, not unlike Occupy. The structure of Indymedia, with its network of local chapters, also represented the structure of the movement: under one website, one label – that of Indymedia –, activists of different groups and ideas could author and publish articles. Conflicts over the content of such texts could be dealt with publicly, through responses also published by the Indymedia website. In Occupy, the processes of dealing with conflict over published content often results in the creation of a new account: in the case of Occupy Wall Street, in particular, conflicts and tensions among groups have led to the creation of several Twitter accounts, Facebook profiles and websites (activist2).

The individual-centric nature of social media clashes with the flexible, multiple, work-in-progress identities that coexist in the Occupy movement. Since its very beginning, Occupy acknowledged both its open, unstructured, decentralized character and its multi-faceted, all-encompassing aggregation of (unclear) demands. They have presented themselves as an ongoing conversation about what is wrong in the political and economic sphere, rather than as a group organized around a specific manifesto. These choices, however, have not been translated in a consistent 'social media policy'; this thesis explored how the choice of employing preexisting social networking sites has imposed some constraints on the activists. While using corporate platforms provided Occupy with the solution to some of their needs –

access to the public and a reliable infrastructure – it did not give the movement any means to either promote its multiple and work-in-progress identities or to support processes of inclusive decision-making that could come to terms with such different identities. Thus the question of the interaction between decentralized practices, multiple identities and individual-centric social media should be approached from a different angle: how can technologies serve the political aims of a movement? How can the logic of corporate social media be made to support democratic and participatory efforts?

A social networking platform for the 99% would probably not look like Facebook and Twitter; as the activists promoting Global Square suggest, it would allow collaboration, collective organization and consensus building. However, provided that such a platform could work in supporting the political processes of the movement, it might not give Occupy the kind of relevance that the movement seems to be aiming at. My analysis seems to indicate that Occupy activists care so much about being relevant on social media (and thus, as the reasoning goes, relevant for the public), that they are willing to play by the rules of corporate social networks. If the logic of relevance is indeed the key to understand how the Occupy movement interacts with the new structures of the web 2.0, this not only calls into question the theories of alternative media that I have reviewed, but it also opens up the possibility that technological features can have an influence in shaping the political decisions of social movements.

Further lines of research

The potential implications of my research certainly call for more comprehensive and comparative studies of the interaction between social movement practices and needs and the Internet-based technologies used by activists. As underlined above, such investigations should approach the topic both by looking at the political choices of movements and how they shape

technological practices and at how – in return – technology can shape the politics of social movements.

Another interesting possibility that should be explored is that certain specific characteristics of the web 2.0 – chiefly the individual-centered nature of social networking sites – might be permanently changing the picture of social engagement and activism, both online and offline. Such analyses should go beyond the debates over "clicktivism" and embrace the possibility that social media use might be promoting a vision of political participation that is at odds with the collective nature of social movements. The relationship between corporate social media and the cultures of neoliberal globalization provide an interesting starting point for investigation.

Lastly, the prominence of protest reporting in my analysis seems to suggest that Occupy activists interpret their role as that of primary sources about their movement's activities. Therefore, an analysis of social movements' use of the Internet should probably be placed in the context of the general transformations undertaken by mass media and journalistic practices. Given that movements' alternative media emerge in response to mainstream media, connecting the research about the changes in these two spheres could help to further clarify the sort of transformations that new technologies have brought about in the last years and their potential impact on society.

Appendix

List of relevant protest events in Chicago, May 2012

May 1 - Labor Day

After heated discussions, the General Assembly of Occupy Chicago voted down the proposal of declaring a General Strike for May 1, opting instead for a day of action that revolved mainly around a (permitted) march at 12 (Macaré 2012). During the day Occupiers report to have successfully blocked 5 branches of Bank of America; mainstream media reports acknowledge between 1000 and 1500 demonstrators.

May 12-13 – the People's Summit

The People's Summit was a two-day forum for activists and grassroots groups, which aimed to bring together "community groups, labor unions, anti-racist organizers, Occupy activists, environmentalists, faith leaders, immigrant rights activists and anyone else committed to social justice" (Occupy Chicago 2012). It consisted of plenary sessions and workshops.

May 18 – National Nurses United's rally

The Nurses' Union "Rally to Tax Wall Street and Heal America" took place on May 18. Although planned long before, the city administration tried to revoke the permit right before the event because of the announced participation of Tom Morello (a well know musician), claiming that his presence would have caused more participation and thus increased security problems. The city administration ultimately allowed the demonstration, but only as a rally at Daley Plaza. Once on the ground, the protestors transformed the rally into a spontaneous march.

During the day, police arrested three demonstrators – which the movement later referred to as "NATO3" – who had been previously stopped and questioned by the police; in that first

occasion, the three protesters secretly filmed the policemen stopping them, thus documenting their being harassed by the agents. Occupy Chicago released the video to make public the threats that the protesters received from the policemen.

May 19 – Healthcare rally and occupation of Emmanuel's house

On May 19, the planned rally on the topic of healthcare – one of the most important topics of mobilization for Occupy Chicago – turned into a spontaneous march and later into an occupation of the yard in front of Mayor Rahm Emmanuel's private house. Later in the day, another spontaneous march in solidarity with the arrested NATO3 took place. During the march, the police ran over protester Jack D'Amico with a van; the accident was documented by livestreamers and amateur pictures.

May 20 – Veterans for Peace rally and march to the Art Institute

On the first day of the NATO Summit, CANG8 and Occupy Chicago held a rally with the Veterans for Peace, a group of Iraq and Afghanistan wars' veterans who are now committed pacifists. During the rally, some veterans symbolically gave back their medals to NATO to signal their opposition to war operations. After the Veterans' rally, a spontaneous march tried to reach the Art Institute, where President Barack Obama was located due to Summit-related events. During the impromptu march there was significant police repression, even though neither tear gas or LRAD sound cannon were used.

May 21 – march to Boeing and Obama Campaign headquarters

The second and last day of the NATO Summit saw Occupy protesters march to the headquarters of Boeing, a Chicago-based aircraft and defense corporation, which Occupy Chicago strongly criticizes for its production and supply of military equipment. Another spontaneous march took the activists to the Headquarters of the Obama Reelection campaign.

Later in the day, both an attempt to hold a NATO farewell party by occupying the beach and to occupy a space in downtown Chicago proved unsuccessful.

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