Beyond the Blockade

How Social Media has Changed the Face of Resistance

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Abstract: Social media has indisputably played a role in how acts of resistance occur in the modern world. However, a prominent narrative on how social networking has impacted protest states that the influence of social media has completely reinvented resistance. This ignores the aspects of traditional resistance that remain essential to the success of a movement. This includes leadership, dissemination of information, and the creation of strong ties between participants. In this paper I use the case studies of the Occupy Wall Street and Ende Gelände movements to analyze how traditional acts of resistance have shifted and transformed through social networking. Specific attention is given to the structure and reach of these movements. The findings show that instead of a distinct spilt between traditional and online-influenced resistance, those online and offline aspects of protests should be considered interlinked. The traditional aspects have changed in appearance, but their core aspects remain in the realm of social media. Online and offline efforts work together to achieve success of a movement.

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Introduction

In politics and marketing, there is a concept of the ground war and air war. Ground refers to interpersonal efforts, which might take the form of speeches or flyers. Air refers to media, and increasingly so, social media. To win a political campaign or to promote a business in today's climate, both are needed to be successful. The same goes for acts of resistance. Writings on forms of civil disobedience have been around for a while, but the definition most people connect with is from John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. In 1971 this work, Rawls defines civil disobedience as a "public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government."[1] But in this ever-changing world, the simplicity of this definition can no longer account for the variety of modern protests.

Social media resistance is a large part of this change. However, once the definition and scope of civil disobedience is adjusted to include online activism, the line between traditional and digital protest blur. This is common in democratic states with wider access to social networking platforms. Protests that blur this line between the digital and physical world still reinforce structure and hierarchy, just through informal processes disbursement of information and social capital is just as important, but it is done so online by more than just the movement leaders; and strong interpersonal ties remain as important as ever.

This paper argues that while social media has pushed civil resistance into a more communal, loosely structed sphere that draws more on ideal-based causes rather than specific organizations, it has not undergone as vast of a change that the media and scholars often assume. By examining at the case studies of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street and the current ongoing Ende Gelände Movement, I argue that examining actors of resistance should consider both online and offline engagement.

It is important to consider terminology when discussing resistance, as different words become linked to different connotations. Civic resistance will be the primary framework that this paper uses, as opposed to the traditional phrase, civil disobedience. There are two reasons behind this. Civic is used over civil in reference to James Tully's work on global citizenship. As will be expanded upon later, social media has contributed to the globalization and interconnection of the world. Because of this, people can contribute to and support movements in a different city or even

[1] John Rawls, "Duty and Obligation," in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 320.

state; resistance no longer is tied to one location's population as implied with the word "civil." To remain with the word "civil" would suggest that protests cannot exist transnationally or that they are only legitimate when appealing to a national entity.[2]

Resistance is used in place of disobedience, following the lead of many modern scholars studying unrest, since the term disobedience is too closely linked to the traditional view of Rawls. While this paper seeks to point out that many of the main roots of resistance have remained in the online world, it also strives to expand on from the narrowness of previous definitions of disobedience. Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and the Ende Gelände movements are analyzed in this paper because they both highlight how social media has moved civic resistance beyond the form of physical protests while remaining engaged with the core aspects of traditional disobedience. They also both take place in democratic countries: while online activism has played an immense role in struggles against undemocratic regimes, the nature of resistance functions very differently in these situations and are not discussed in this paper.

More familiar to most is the Occupy Wall Street Movement, a response to the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent recession. Vancouver-based magazine *Adbusters* published a blog post that called for the occupation of Zuccotti Park, near the New York Stock Exchange,.[3] This post, alongside extensive sharing of information on social media platforms, in particular Twitter, led to the September 17th occupation of the park as well as numerous camps set up across the United States in solidarity. Due to their branding of protesting the "1%" and quick spread of information online, the movement gained significant public support. Despite extensive backing, the encampment at Zuccotti was taken down on the 15th of November.[4]

While much has been written on OWS, technology has evolved a lot in the few years since then, so it is important to also reference a current movement. Ende Gelände, a coalition against coal mining in Germany, has been active since 2015 and organizes a series of protests each year that include blockades, marches, and sit ins. Their organization and recruitment

[2] James Tully, "On Global Citizenship," in *On Global Citizenship: James Tully in Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 10.

[3] Tan Yangfang, " 2012, "A Review of the 'Occupy Wall Street' Movement and its Global Influence," *International Critical Thought* 2, no.2 (2012): 248.

[4] Paolo Gerbaudo, "Follow Me, but don't Ask Me to Lead You!: Liquid Organising and Choreographic Leadership," in *Tweets and the Streets:*S*ocial Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012):103-104.

occur mainly through their websites and on social media. One of their most intensive operations has been the camp in the Hambach Forest, where protesters have set up treehouses and blockades to campaign against the open-pit coal mine that has existed in the area since 1978.[5]

The Structure of Digital Resistance

There are many ways in which social media platforms have changed the course of civil disobedience, both in the examples focused on in this paper as well as others occurring in the current digital climate. One of the most notable aspects involves the changes to the structuring and leadership of a movement. As scholar Robin Celikates states, "in contrast to what the liberal mainstream suggests, [civil disobedience] is rarely a matter of isolated individuals standing up for their rights or their conscience against the state or the majority: more often, and paradigmatically, civil disobedience is the collective assertion of political agency."[6] Civil disobedience has always been public, to make an impact a movement needs many people to catch the attention of the government they are resisting, but Celikates' quote refers to the collective process of resistance, a process enhanced by social media platforms. Now, often instead of seeing movements defined by their leaders, such as those led by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, resistance acts display what some have called "liquid structured movements," referring to the informal and fluid structures of these protests.[7]

A large part of this is due to the increased power of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The digital tools on these sites, like event pages and posts, are now often considered substitutes of the traditional organizational requirements like in-person planning.[8] Instead of one person or a small group leading movements, protests organized online tend to rely on mass spread of knowledge. Some scholars believe that due to the availability of modern social networking technology, traditional hierarchical command structures are no longer needed. Instead, movements can rely on this communal intelligence.

[5] "Ende Gelände 2020 - Startpage," Ende Gelände, 2020, https://www.ende-gelaende.org.
[6] Robin Celikates, "Learning from the Streets: Civil Disobedience in Theory and Practice," in *global aCtIVISm. Art and Conflict in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press): 69.
[7] Gerbaudo, "Follow Me,"136.
[8] Jen Schradie, "Moral Monday Is More Than a Hashtag: The Strong Ties of Social Movement Emergence in the Digital Era,"in *Social Media + Society* no.1 (2018): 2.

The Occupy Wall Street Protest took pride in its ability to be a leaderless movement and used the communal nature of the structure to emphasize the power of the "average person" as a significant part of their resistance.[9] Instead of identifying as part of a specific organization or religion that was protesting; people felt that they were individually a part of the cause itself.[10] Likewise, in interviews conducted by Democracy Now!, an independent news source, on the Ende Gelände movement, protesters expressed that they were united under a shared desire to stop the Hambach coal mine, indicating that they were not moved to action by a central figure but a collective political want.[11]

Despite many movements declaring themselves leaderless, there are always participants who fall into a role of organizer: these roles are now just filled informally. In some cases, this refers to highly engaged social media activists who end up shaping the actions of the movements due to their stronger degree of influence and control over the communication flow.[12] For example, serial activists and influencers who used the OWS hashtags during the movement had a much larger following than the average user, meaning that the information those users dispersed was consumed at a higher rate and took up a disproportionate amount of the knowledge base. This, in turn, shaped the direction of the movement by identifying what aspects of the cause were most important to the group.[13]

As well, the initial call to action came from a specific place, the Vancouver-based magazine, *Adbusters*, showing that while the movement may have been decentralized, there were individuals that shaped those initial messages. This suggests that while the growth of social media platforms have altered the structuring of civil disobedience movements, they have not disassembled structures as many sources of media have suggested. Protests like OWS grow much faster, and do not have the traditional central figure, but still are rooted in having key activists that spread the message and recruit. These actions just also happen online now.

Beyond the structuring of organizations itself, social media has also added to the way in which information is spread to both supporters

[9] Gerbaudo, "Follow Me," 134.
[10] Gerbaudo, 136.
[11] Amy Goodman "Special Report from the Occupied Forest: Meet Activists Fighting Europe's Largest Open-Pit Coal Mine." Democracy Now!, 2017
[12] Gerbaudo, "Follow Me," 135.
[13] Dan Mercea and Marco Bastos, "Being a Serial Transnational Activist," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21, no. 2 (2016): 142.

and the general public. Gathering, storing, and dispersing data is one of the most crucial aspects of any collective action, and advancements in technology has led to this all happening much quicker than ever before.[14] In traditional forms of civil resistance, information, branding, and messages were all passed on through word of mouth or slower forms of media, often through pre-existent organizations such as churches. With access to social media, messages can now be sent and relayed to a wider and more varied audience.[15] One supporter sharing a post can connect to hundreds of others, who in turn may also share that post, relaying the information to their online circles. The fact that these online connections are not always personal ones spreads the information to a much wider range than previously possible. No longer do movements rely on a slow spread between individuals, now, given the right circumstances as was seen with OWS, support can be gained almost instantly.

With the combination of loose organization and quick information spread, people who would traditionally take the role of support in a movement now find themselves occupying both a supporter and recruiter role. Clay Shirky, a prominent scholar of digital media, has asserted that social media has allowed the public to turn from consumers of media, through means such as television or radio, to producers of it, due to the interactive nature of the internet.[16]

Protests participants have now become producers of resistance through their own social media circles. Previously, the public would simply support and follow the leaders of a protest or uprising by consuming the messages those leaders produced. They may have relayed those messages to other potential supporters but would not be creating their own forms of recruitment. Now, average members of the public can produce their own content for the movement they are a part of. Since social media platforms have minimal entry costs and limited external regulation, at least in comparison to other communication platforms, nearly anyone can open an account to curate and share information.[17] On those more creative platforms like YouTube, supporters can even create

[14]Bruce Bimber et al, "Reconceptualizing Collective Action in the Contemporary Media Environment," *Communication Theory* 15 no.4 (2005): 371.

[15] Patrick Gillham et al, "The Mobilizing Effects of Economic Threats and Resources on the Formation of Local Occupy Wall Street Protest Groups," *Sociological Perspectives* 62 no.4 (2019): 447.

[16] Clay Shirky, "Gin, Television, and Cognitive Surplus," in *The Best Technology Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 2009): 216.

[17]Jason Gainous et al, "Traditional Versus Internet Media in a Restricted Information Environment: How Trust in the Medium Matters," *Polit Behav* 41 (2019): 403.

and share their own content like videos to educate, inspire, and recruit. Even so, as the power of social media increases, so does the potential for abuse of that power through censorship, political influence, fake news, and more.

Despite the problems of social technology, becoming involved in a social movement now not only involves joining a previously created discourse, but also contributing and creating your own public sphere. Even for those not creating their own content, they contribute to knowledge construction and informal teaching by participating online.[18] In sharing and retweeting specific posts, everyone in the movement curates a sphere of knowledge. The aspects that are shared the most, the ones that appear in the most individual sphere's, often move into a curated public sphere where new members gain their background knowledge on the movement. This increased individual involvement is why social media activism is a legitimate form of resistance. By only using Rawls's definition, these acts would not be considered disobedience as they are not breaking the law or may not even be 'public' if they are only sharing to a specific group of followers. Online engagement may not be as outwardly disobedient as an activist participating in a blockade, but since participants are engaging and not just consuming content, even the minimally active online user becomes an integral part of building the discourse of resistance.

The fluidity of organization and information of social media activism may also lead to higher levels of support from participants. In a study conducted on Twitter users who used the OWS hashtag, results showed that many participants felt and expressed appreciation for having acquired a role in the movement through their active Twitter participation. This suggests that the lack of leadership allowed for participants to feel more engaged and involved in the movement.[19] Even those with minimal knowledge of other contributors have opportunities to contribute to the information pools others will use to educate themselves.[20] There are also, however, negatives to this change in information disbursement, such as the issue of digital security and the increasing concern of the influence of the political elite influence on social platforms. The transition of participants from supporters to creators does shift away from those traditional concepts of resistance but again not as strongly as some would

[18] Benjamin Gleason, "#Occupy Wall Street: Exploring Informal Learning About a Social Movement on Twitter," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 no.7 (2013): 968.

[19] Mercea and Bastos, "Being a Serial Transnational Activist," 148.

[20] Bimber et al, "Reconceptualizing Collective Action," 272.

suggest. Recruitment has always been integral to building support, and support is necessary for a movement to succeed. With online activism, that recruitment process has just been opened to participation from a broader sphere.

Transnational Activism

Social media active has also opened resistance beyond borders and specific organizations. With the increase of social media use, a movement's message may reach not only the specific people who have been affected by the injustice but also people from all over the world who can become involved or at the very least become aware. This ability for movements to cross borders has resulted in what has been termed "transnational activism."[21] Civic resistance has traditionally been intertwined with the specific physical geographies that are associated. Sometimes this takes form in a literal sense such as with the Ende Gelände movement's Hambach forest camp and other times more symbolically such as with the OWS proximity to the New York Stock Exchange.[22]

The locational attributes have traditionally shaped the movement just as much as the cause itself, for example, the Ende Gelände takes place in Germany so it will attract mainly Germans whose cultural background naturally will shape choices of the movement. As well, beyond the fact that movements are often determined by local factors, there is also the issue that traditionally, the focus is on a political problem instituted by a specific government.

With the rise of globalization and social media connecting more and more people around the world, it is difficult to pinpoint who will remain in the realm of resistance. Specifically, scholars have pointed to the fact that there is no post-nationalist authority to appeal to; in other words, there is an ambiguity to who the resistance is directed at if not at the civic leaders in charge of the state where the issue started.[23] Some types of

[21] Michael Dahlberg-Grundberg and Johan Örestig, "Extending the local: activist types and forms of social media use in the case of an anti-mining struggle," *Social Movement Studies* 16 no.3 (2017): 309.

[22] Ibid.

[23] William Scheuerman, "Civil Disobedience in the Shadows of Postnationalization and Privatization," *Journal of International Political Theory* 12 no.3 (2016): 244.

civil resistance are easier to justify, such as with environmental justice, as climate change is a global issue.[24] With most other types of movements, it is more difficult to agree on who should be considered participating in resistance.

Despite the confusion, most modern movements have increasingly committed to a diversity of ideological commitments, identities, and aims.[25] Someone who is merely supporting a movement is still in the sphere of resistance: while they might not be personally affected, they still resonate with and promote the identities or ideals of the movement. This spread has been introduced by "global activity on social media [which] amplifies the public consciousness of…popular uprisings." Support can now be garnered from much farther than before.[26] Such additional support may lead to more pressure on the government to change the law or action being protested.

The suggestion that digital resistance from abroad is legitimate echoes the concept that "citizenship is not a status given by the institutions of the modern constitutional state and international law, but negotiated practices in which one becomes a citizen through participation."[27] This refers to the fact that one may not be a citizen of the state facing the protest but can still be a part of the overarching ideals of the movement. With the OWS movement, the Zuccotti occupation may have been taken down, but "Occupy" protests popped up all over the world afterwards.[28] The concept of the 99% protesting has remained popular to this day, leading to the resurgence of the Democratic Socialists of America.[29] The sharing of a movement's message has always been essential to the impact of a protest, as there is very limited ability to pressure a government without enough support: online civic resistance is just an extension of the appeals for support that have always been used in resistance movements.

All these arguments culminate in the fact that a harsh division between online and offline protest should not be the way in which civic resistance is discussed. Instead, the scope should be broadened to encompass both: a hybrid approach, in which neither traditional offline nor online forms are excluded. Civic resistance overlaps these spaces, its organization and structure may begin or be enhanced online, but the

[24] Scheuerman, 241.

[25] Celikates, "Learning from the Streets," 70.

[26] Mercea and Bastos, "Being a Serial Transnational Activist," 140.

[27] Tully, "On Global Citizenship," 9.

[28] Yangfang, "Review of Occupy Wall Street," 248.

[29] Emily Stewart, "We Are (Still) the 99 Percent," Vox, 2019.

protests like sit ins and blockades that happen in the offline world are still just as significant they previously were.[30] Multiple aspects can be stated as overlapping between the online and offline spaces of protest. These include: the facilitation of face-to-face protests, live reporting of protests, expressing personal opinions about the movement, and making connections with fellow activists.[31] These aspects underline why it is better to use the term civic resistance, as civil disobedience is too associated with those original, now too narrow concepts. At the same time, however, the idea that resistance of the modern day should not be considered a completely new concept, severed from the past. Social media acts as an extension of its previous forms, not a new creation independent from previous iterations.

Weak and Strong Ties

Important to this conversation also is the presence of weak versus strong ties in movements. Social movements online are considered to create weak ties as they are a collection of individuals only loosely connected through the internet. Strong ties are made through trusted connections of people in personal or professional circles. Malcolm Gladwell argues in his *New Yorker* article that social media cannot give way to any huge revolution due to the weak ties it creates, with reference to Martin Luther King Jr's need for discipline and strategy that would not have been possible through tweets or posts.[32] It is a strong argument, especially when you compare it to how quickly the OWS occupation was dismantled or the disparity between the thousands of people who supported the movement online versus the three hundred that physically showed up.[33]

Other researchers have countered with the argument that the internet can link weak-tied individuals for motivation through the ability to personalize messages for a wider audience. This argument considers strong ties as non-essential, which is a difficult concept to agree with.

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[30] Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig, "Extending the local," 311.

[31] Joel Penney and Caroline Dadas, "(Re)Tweeting in the service of protest: Digital composition and circulation in the Occupy Wall Street movement," *New Media & Society*, 16 no.1 (2013): 79

[32] Malcolm Gladwell, "Why the revolution will not be tweeted," The New Yorker. 2010.

[33] Paolo Gerbaudo, "The Hashtag which did (Not) Start a Revolution: The Laborious Adding Up to the 99," In *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015) 102.

Most movements that rely only on weak ties have generally not been acts of resistance and more acts of awareness. These acts are ones that do not try to change a law but simply encourage the public to consider an issue. However, neither argument seems to fit the current climate of civic resistance. Instead, the idea posed by Schradie that strong ties often pre-exist within groups and the weak ties simply enhance pre-existing connections seems to be the most compelling.[34]

The Ende Gelände movement highlights this transitive nature of new civic resistance. Calls go out to potential activists through their social media platforms. Recruitment videos are sent to followers, posts are shared of their own camps as well as other news reports on environmental degradation, and through these social media interactions weak ties are created between potential activists. Those that actively engage with those posts are already moving towards the actual, physical form of resistance. But it is not the general public that would engage with a group that participates in environmental blockades and sit-ins. It is more likely that those individuals already have a strong tie connection with others involved in environmentalism or the cause itself.

As with most kinds of resistance, one of the first steps of a successful movement is finding "a means of identifying people with relevant, potential interests in the public good."[35] This might be through the founding of a Instagram page for environmentalists, where people can invite weak-tied online relations but also strong-tied friendships to engage with the sphere. Additionally, those strong ties are strengthened with the physical actions that the participant chooses to partake in. This further supports the idea that while social media has adjusted the way in which civic resistance is organized, the root elements have remained similar.

Conclusion

Going back to my original analogy, the newer forms of resistance, the air warfare, is not a separate branch from traditional ground warfare, instead they have become interdependent of one another: the weak ties of the online sphere support the strong ties of the offline sphere, and vice versa. It also echoes Celikates' sentiments that the newer forms of civil disobedience have a much wider and more creative repertoire of ways to engage, not only with acts of disobedience but also in recruitment of

[34] Schradie, "Moral Monday is More than a Hashtag," 3.

[35] Bimber et al, "Reconceptualizing Collective Action," 374.

individuals and identities.[36] Successful movements, like Ende Gelände, are just bypassing the old form of recruitment and engagement with social media to gain a wider base so that when the time comes, there will be physical support in acts of protests, with digital supporters echoing and enhancing their calls.

Social media will remain essential around the world. It has indisputably contributed to some of the changes civic resistance has undergone. No longer can resistance be neatly fit into the definition Rawls gave it in 1971, the narrowness of that concept misses out on some of the crucial aspects of current movements.

The organization of a campaign and efforts on social media should be considered under the umbrella of civic resistance because without that aspect, the protest would have never occurred. However, it is inefficient to only look at the physical acts themselves. One reason for that could simply be that for one to study a civic resistance movement happening today without looking at social media, nearly all the organizational and recruitment aspects would not be included in the research. This would lead to very incomplete and unsatisfying results.

Even more importantly, there is a fluid line between social media resistance and physical resistance. Traditional aspects of recruitment, organization and knowledge sharing happen on both online and offline spheres. Weak ties are made online but are enhanced by strong ties made either before organization or during protests themselves. These elements may function differently, with most now happening online, but their root functions remain as they always had.

There are certainly issues with the online sphere, censorship, fake news, and unequal distributions of technology across the global population to name a few, but new forms of resistance have been cultivated in these platforms. The idea that social media has created a completely new form of resistance, or that Facebook and Twitter are not a place for resistance may seem more dramatic, but in reality, social media has just adjusted the way in which these movements occur. The air and ground warfare that occurs in the field of resistance seem to be intertwining more and more as the digital sphere increases its prominence in our lives. Between the ever changing nature of social networking, and the growing influences of tech

[36] Celikates, "Learning from the Streets," 71.

companies and government, no one can know the role social media will play in future acts of resistance; however, we can say that it has become an essential tool for resistance, keeping these new protests rooted in traditional resistance while expanding the movement's reach.

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