After the #Keyword: Eliciting, Sustaining, and Coordinating Participation Across the Occupy Movement

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Abstract
Networked social movements (NSMs) are hybrid forms of social organization that rely on the platforms of the Internet to connect multiple individuals and groups to address a social justice issue. I mapped the communication infrastructure of the Occupy Movement from July 2011 to June 2013 to demonstrate how changes in protesters’ forms of communication reflected transformations in the organization of the movement and its capacity to mobilize participants. Through ethnography, I show how internal and external pressures—the high density of connections through social media, a desire to coordinate across locations, and police raids on encampments—led to the development of a virtual organization, called InterOccupy. InterOccupy is a communication platform owned and operated by participants in the Occupy Movement. InterOccupy took infrastructure building as a political strategy to ensure the movement endured beyond the police raids on the encampments. I conclude that NSMs create virtual organizations when there are routine and insurmountable failures in the communication milieu, where the future of the movement is at stake. My research follows the Occupy Movement ethnographically to understand what happens after the keyword.

Keywords
Occupy movement, networked social movements, collective action, infrastructure, virtual organizations

Introduction
For decades, researchers grappled with the role of technology in the transformation of social movements. From newspapers, radio, television, and phones to computers, each new technology carries with it possibilities for social change. Prior to the introduction of social media platforms, research on the use of the web by social movements focused on activists’ use of web pages and email lists to organize calls to action (Earl, 2007; Howard, 2010; Juris, 2008). The 2011 uprisings around the world radically altered how researchers approached protest events and the technology that supports them. These movements used the spontaneous tactics of flash activism and smart mobs, but somehow endured long after the initial action (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Mehta, 2011; Rheingold, 2003). What forms of participation were used by protesters to prolong the Occupy Movement after the tactic of occupying public space was no longer feasible? Using Star’s (1999) “ethnography of infrastructure” method, I present an analysis of the Occupy Movement’s use of keywords to illustrate how protesters tethered online networks to local spaces to build a networked social movement (NSM). I show that when protesters turn to constructing communication infrastructure for internal coordination, it is an explicitly political tactic to extend the life of the movement.

Social movements are often described as collections of networks. NSMs, though, depend heavily on information and communication technologies (ICTs) to mobilize (Castells, 2012; Juris, 2008; Terranova & Donovan, 2013). Conceptualizing movements as networks is not new, yet advances in material communication infrastructure have important implications for network formation and coordination. Examples of NSMs include the Arab Spring spanning North Africa and the Middle East, the Indignados Movement in Spain, and the Occupy Movement in the United States. In this article, I illustrate that while ICTs are integral to NSMs’
calls to action, the durability of NSMs depends both on linking local places to internet networks and to maintaining communication infrastructure over the long term.

Following Staggenborg (1998), I argue that in order to create an internal community that could sustain the Occupy Movement beyond the period of widespread protest, a communication infrastructure was assembled to more effectively manage the abundant flow of information. Star (1999) defines infrastructure as both a process and product, where people and technology enmesh with standards and protocols to produce coordination on a project. For NSMs, infrastructure helps bridge the “structural holes” left by heavy reliance on social media (González-Bailón & Wang, 2016). Because contemporary studies of movements tend to overemphasize the effects of technology on formation (González-Bailón & Wang, 2016), this ethnography focuses on the multiple technologies employed to overcome state repression and environmental constraints. Specifically, I look at instances of communication failure and breakdown to show why it was necessary for Occupy protesters to fashion a “social movement community” (Staggenborg, 1998) with its own “center of coordination” (Suchman, 1997).

By charting how the communication infrastructure of protesters changed alongside internal and external pressures, I identify three distinct, but related modes of participation in the Occupy Movement’s transition from distributed encampments into a coordinated movement. When eliciting participation, keywords are the stabilizing agent connecting protesters across platforms, which brought participants into the camps. The durability of Occupy, however, depended on securing local spaces and maintaining relationships across multiple online and offline domains. Sustaining participation meant that Occupy protesters sought out niche roles across various groups, where they developed plans to take action. Without recourse to local places after police departments evicted protesters from public spaces (Bratich, 2014; Gillham, Edwards, & Noakes, 2013), some turned toward scaling participation nationally by building a semi-centralized communication infrastructure. Coordination of participation was accomplished through the construction of InterOccupy, a virtual organization that synchronized action across multiple groups, locations, and issues. Importantly, these shifting modes of participation are not mutually exclusive and successive, but remain on-going, overlapping, and intertwined.

**Movements in the Algorithms**

Recent scholarship in communication studies, anthropology, and sociology focuses on how movements use ICTs to find one another, coordinate action, and make media (Castells, 2012; Coleman, 2010, 2012, 2014; Earl, 2007; Earl, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2008; Earl & Schussman, 2002; Juris, 2008). Bennet and Segerberg (2012) outline the difference between the logic of collective action, where organizations decide on the strategy and tactics to reach a goal, and connective action, where digital media is shared to promote participation as a form of personal expression. They identify a core paradox facing contemporary social movement researchers, that is, how does the use of ICTs change or influence movement structures as participants become more knowledgeable of technology’s affordances and constraints? To look more closely at connective action, scholars have turned to research on Twitter because movements use it frequently and the digital media content is ready-made for analysis.

Some scholars of social media focus on Twitter’s hashtags (#) to track transformations in social movements, where movements augment their communication strategies as they mature (Pavan, 2017). For the Arab Spring, Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess (2013) studied the spread of English language hashtags and found users moved from using #Jan25 to #Egypt as the protest continued. Studying the Indignados, Postill (2014) discusses the relationship between #15M, #15MDemo, and #SpanishRevolution as “virals” that kindled interest leading up to the occupations of squares. Monterde and Postill (2014, p. 433) argue that the use of hashtags by Spanish activists, including #15m and #TakeTheSquare, was not spontaneous, but a strategic move to “play the algorithm” of Twitter to spread their message. But, few studies address if the use of social media alters how people enter into movements and what retains participants after the initial burst of attention to an issue.

Others refute the logic of the connective action thesis based on how researchers and movement participants situate the importance of online technologies to mobilizations, especially street protests. Pavan (2014) is critical that formal organizations’ use of digital media can be separated out from connective action events. Earl (2010), writing before the expansive mobilizations of 2011, countered similar claims by illustrating that the fundamental processes of mobilization are not transformed with digital media. Rather, she shows that the speed and reach of information has second order effects that transfer tactics across movements and populations. González-Bailón and Wang (2016) confirm these findings, they write “Digital technologies […] have not changed the mechanisms that encourage people to join a collective action effort. What technologies have changed is the speed and the reach of communication” (p.103).

While changes in speed and reach may not encourage engagement, they do fundamentally alter the characteristics of a movement’s organizational structure, where reliance on public Internet platforms reinforces decentralization. Castells (2012) writes,

The characteristics of communication processes between individuals engaged in the social movement determine the organizational characteristics of the social movement itself: the more interaction and self-configurable communication is, the less hierarchical is the organization and the more participatory is the movement. (p. 15)
Vertical communication networks, typically used by bureaucracies, depend on a centralized organization to act as the hub switching information between disparate nodes. In a rhizomatic model, the nodes can communicate directly with one another, in effect bypassing the need for centralized organizations altogether. Rhizomatic communication refers to the many points of entry and contact made possible by networked platforms, where content is circulated and tagged in unpredictable ways (Terranova & Donovan, 2013). In this model, there is no way to ensure information is equally received across networks. González-Bailón and Wang (2016) argue that online networks are often organized around structural holes that require bridging by information brokers to allow information to travel. Later, I show how the Occupy Movement sought to redirect communication flows to cultivate national coordination. The ability to generate and modify the content and flow of digital media is integral not just for mobilizing quickly (Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014), but also for the organizing of NSMs over the long-term.

Drawing inspiration from the Spanish Indignados and mobilizations in Tunisia and Egypt, Occupy protesters circulated online images, blog posts, messages, and videos to promote the upcoming event on 17 September 2011 in Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park (Schneider, 2013). These posts included calls to “Get Money out of Politics” and to share stories tagged with keywords such as “Occupy,” “OccupyWallStreet,” and “WeAreThe99Percent.” Protesters used their mobile phones as political tools for recruiting new participants, requesting resources, and broadcasting live updates (Acker & Beaton, 2017; Sasha Costanza-Chock, 2012). On that evening, nearly 300 people stayed overnight in Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, kicking off what became one of the largest protests in American history. In this ethnography, I show how Occupy activists were not only gaming the algorithms, they were also cognizant of platform interoperability and how to manipulate bottlenecks and blockages by strategically augmenting keywords.

The keyword of “Occupy Wall Street” travelled across many domains. Keywords are data used by search engines to index content on websites. Beginning in the 1990s, webmasters tagged sites with keywords to make them searchable, sortable, and retrievable (Battelle, 2005). While these tags are often invisible to the web user, they are the connective substrate of search engines. Because of algorithmic differences, each website with a search field will return different hyperlinks for the very same keywords. That is to say, across Google search, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, the indexing and return of “Occupy” related material is vastly different. In addition, many social media platforms allow users to add their own customized tags. Vander Wal (2007) calls this “folksonomy,” where tags connect content and users, and aid in information retrieval. Shirky (2009) discusses how Facebook, Flickr, and Wikipedia are platforms for groups, who add and manage content as a community, where the use of already existing web architecture lessens the burden of creating infrastructures from scratch. Because each platform is flexibly determined by the folksonomy of the users, the coordinating capacity of the platform is open for experimentation. Due to heavy participation from users, “Occupy Wall Street” as a keyword could be queried on any platform and return unique results.

By focusing only on tags, researchers tend to overemphasize Twitter as the most important technology available to protesters, but I argue that search engines continue to be the primary tool for organizing both tags and users within and across platforms, especially for growing social movements. The introduction or disappearance of a keyword indicates many things, such as a change in a campaign strategy, the introduction of a new action, or the movement’s decline. Later, I show how the retiring of keywords by Occupy protesters, such as #OccupyWallStreet and #OWS, coincided with a shift toward building a virtual organization called InterOccupy.

The Virtual Organization of the Occupy Movement

Because the widespread use of the mobile Internet is a new phenomenon, few scholars of NSMs have dealt with it as part of the cycle of protest. As Tarrow (1993, 1994) illustrates, cycles of protest are characterized by times of inaction punctuated by moments of intense participation. While Melucci’s (1984) describes movements as comprised of submerged networks that occasionally mount a political challenge, Staggenborg (1998, p. 182) sees social movements as communities of “human relations, which may be maintained through social networks rather than physical locale.” Using the case of the women’s movement, Taylor (1989) describes how social movements enter periods of abeyance that shape the goals, tactics, and collective identity of movements. Studying movements as submerged networks with no physical locale, during periods of perceived inaction is difficult because of the limited visibility of cultural and discursive activities (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 37).

In terms of mobilization, Tufekci (2014) argues that participatory political movements, like Occupy, invert the free rider problem, “it’s not who will protest, rather, it is who, if anyone, will do the unpleasant, tedious long-term instrumental work of engaging in electoral, legal, and policy domains for the purposes of challenging and changing power?” (p. 207). Instrumental work takes shape over the longue durée and often manifests in the formation of social movement organizations, especially when long-term projects require the management of resources, volunteers, and interaction with government and/or corporate bureaucracies (McAdam & Scott, 2005). In NSMs, the participatory moment of street protest is exaggerated, while little is known about what happens when these networks recede back into society only to emerge again.

Critically, it is these slow periods, where movements are not generally in view of the media or politicians, which allow for the development of tactics and networks within social
movement communities. Welsh (2001) illustrates that during periods of inaction, social movements will continue to develop new skill sets. In particular, Welsh shows how antinuclear movements trained many activists in direct action techniques that were useful in other mobilizations. Staggenborg (2001) explores periods of abeyance in the women’s movement to draw out the influences of cultural organizations on future political contestation. As such, social movement organizations must attend to maintenance of community life in order to ensure that the next wave can produce collective contentious action (Staggenborg, 1998, 2001; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005). Earl (2007) asserts that because leadership structure is difficult to define with decentralized movements, researchers should look closer at the tasks taken up by movement participants to see where the action is, especially during moments of abeyance.

For web-enabled movements, Earl (2007) illustrates that social movement organizations rarely devote resources to maintaining the movement’s internal life or community. Tasks like ensuring internal communication is not often considered salient to activists because when resources are available, social movement leaders often turn toprofessionalizing and building organizations that consolidate power in leadership roles (McAdam & Scott, 2005). Overall, social movement scholars have largely neglected the dynamic infrastructural efforts of movement participants to overcome structural holes in rhizomatic communication networks. Because the Occupy Movement did not professionalize or bureaucratize movement resources, it is critical to look at how protesters turned to developing a communication infrastructure as a political tactic to sustain the social movement community. Under the name InterOccupy, a small group of protesters formed a virtual organization to provide the movement with a reliable, consistent, and flexible process for communication (Donovan, 2016).

Usually associated with large-scale cyberinfrastructure and scientific projects, virtual organizations are made possible by the network-making capacity of the Internet to bring shared resources, ideas, people, and information together to support collaboration on projects (Borgman, Bowker, Finholt, & Wallis, 2009; Lee, Dourish, & Mark, 2006; Mowshowitz, 1997; Strader, Lin, & Shaw, 1998). Characterized by their use of email lists, websites, digital filing cabinets, video conferencing, sharable databases, and distributed labor, virtual organizations are a product of the current technological milieu and practices of digital labor. Those working on a project as a virtual organization may never meet one another due to geographical distribution (Borgman et al., 2009). As a result, they must attend to the role communication infrastructure plays in organizing their group, especially when considering which components are necessary to complete a task (Mowshowitz, 1997).

When groups adopt a model of virtual organizing, they build infrastructure to support collaboration by designing plans, assigning roles, and allocating resources. In this way, InterOccupy is not a traditional social movement organization that advocated for a particular political aim within the broader milieu of the social movement (Cress & Snow, 1996), rather InterOccupy sought to solve an organizational puzzle facing the movement: how to connect hundreds of local assemblies in real time for meaningful discussion on topics of their own choice? Earl, Hunt, Garrett, & Dal (2015) emphasize that infrastructural resources available online has augmented how participants seek membership in organizations, or if they do at all. Rather than map membership networks, I base my ethnographic analysis on the different ways protesters created and modified communication infrastructure to show how they elicited, sustained, and coordinated participation as community needs changed.

**Ethnographic Methods**

In order to understand how NSMs recruit, get organized, and make decisions, I conducted an “ethnography of infrastructure” of the Occupy Movement from July 2011 through June 2013. Star (1999) describes infrastructure as a process and product with a dense entanglement of people, protocols, and technology, where studying infrastructure is more than observing people’s use of technology. Because most of the work done to provide infrastructure is relatively invisible labor couched in previously established standards, most infrastructure only becomes visible when it breaks down or does produce expected results (Lee et al., 2006; Star & Ruhleder, 1996; Strader, Lin, & Shaw, 1998). Therefore, my analysis of the Occupy Movement’s infrastructure foregrounds moments of communication failure and breakdown to illuminate the tasks taken up by protesters to maintain the internal life of the movement.

To document the infrastructure of the Occupy Movement, I participated in the Occupy Los Angeles encampment from 1 October 2011 to June 2012, where I attended meetings, actions, and events throughout southern California. In July 2011, I began collecting materials about the kinds of ICTs protesters were using by embedding myself in online spaces of coordination including email lists, social media accounts, websites, and IRC chat rooms. I conducted multiple rounds of interviews with sysadmins for prominent Occupy websites and social media administrators from New York and Los Angeles. Though I spent the majority of my time at the LA encampment, I acted as a relay between camps in Long Beach, San Diego, and Irvine as part of OccupyLA’s Occupation Communication Committee. I was also the administrator of a regional email list, #OccupySoCal (Occupy Southern California), a group dedicated to planning monthly regional convergences. Beginning in October 2011, I was a co-creator of the InterOccupy.net communication platform. InterOccupy is a small group of protesters from various locations, who came together in October 2011 to build an online communication infrastructure for coordinating direct action. Additionally, I video-recorded events,
meetings, actions, and interviews with over 100 protesters to document how protesters use ICTs.

Longitudinal ethnographic analysis explains how changes occur over time (Burton, Purvin, & Garrett-Peters, 2009). Focusing on temporal changes to infrastructure, I created a timeline of events using field notes, media accounts, digital media, and interviews that marked when Occupy protesters referred to changes in the organizing capacity of the movement. Specifically, interviewees discussed events that tested their capacity to communicate, including the difficulty of living outdoors in public and the police raids on encampments. I mapped how protesters modified or adopted different communication technologies and organizational tasks to demonstrate how the affordances and constraints of different ICTs were conceptualized by protesters.

Findings

In the next three sections, I analyze how Occupy protesters used different configurations of local places and ICTs to mobilize as the political and social conditions shifted. First, I briefly discuss how protesters used keywords to elicit participation. While Bennet (2014) illustrates how the Occupy Movement used Twitter to quickly respond to emerging political opportunities and constraints, I show how Twitter was just one tool among many. Next, I turn to the way protesters employed a diverse array of communication technologies to sustain and scale the movement throughout 2011-2012. Finally, I show how Occupy protesters coordinated action using the infrastructural resources generated during earlier moments in the cycle of protest.

Eliciting Participation

In an interview, a protester from Zuccotti Park remarked that Occupy was an “open-source brand,” where “people can choose to adopt it to represent what they do.” In this sense, the mutability of the keyword combined with rhizomatic communication allowed many people to participate in the movement from multiple points of entry through a web of interconnectivity. The rhizomatic communication model used by Occupy protesters included the simultaneous use of email groups, websites, social media, SMS text groups, conference calling, and physical space to foster the circulation of information from many to many. While it cannot be guaranteed that the same information will show up on every platform, by staying in touch with each other across many spaces, Occupy protesters created a rather stable and redundant information milieu. Redundancy was ensured in large part by the overlapping networks of networks across platforms. To elicit participation, Occupy protesters leveraged the connective capacity of different platforms by understanding how their algorithms returned search results.

In 2011, the only social media site that used hashtags to make keywords searchable was Twitter. While some were familiar with the use of Twitter to stage protests locally, this printed poster turned meme, coupled a blog post on the Adbusters owned website, OccupyWallStreet.org, sparked interest across a wide variety of social justice networks. As well, the recent overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt, including a citizen occupation of Tahir Square, was inspiring to those who sought social change globally (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012). Those who could not travel to New York sought connections by using multiple hashtags in their Twitter posts, including “#OccupyLosAngeles,” “#OccupyOakland,” and “#OccupyBoston,” among hundreds of other places. As Bennet (2014) also shows, this cross-tagging allowed new networks to form as users followed one another directly and organized meetings in their city.

In Los Angeles, protesters posted links to an IRC chat room called “Occupy Los Angeles” to Twitter and Facebook. In this chat room, participants discussed the logistics for an encampment and coordinated face-to-face meetings. Subsequently, they registered several social media accounts and circulated memes to announce an occupation of Los Angeles City Hall on 1 October 2011. Keywords, like #OccupyLosAngeles, allowed networks to flourish as information about the movement was queried across multiple search engines. “Occupy” worked well as a keyword because previous uses of the term were not affiliated with a corporation, organization, nor was it used heavily in domain names. The low rate of use, coupled with other keywords such as “Wall Street,” meant that search engines would rapidly pick up the increased usage of “Occupy Wall Street” and rank specific domain names highly in results.

In addition to being able to find websites, keywords also facilitated linking participants, which led to more durable contact through the acts of adding friends on Facebook, following on Twitter or Tumblr, or subscribing on YouTube. As the volume and density of users utilizing the tag “#OccupyWallStreet” increased, this hashtag and sets of others emerged as filtering mechanisms. Those familiar with the movement used shorter tags, “#OccupyWallSt” or “#OWS,” so they could convey longer messages in a single tweet. As well, administrators of Twitter accounts would use tags to call for specific resources with #NeedsOfTheOccupiers. Occupy social media administers reported mimicking the keyword tactics of the Egyptians (#JAN25) and Spanish (#15M) by rallying protesters on days of action using #N17 (17 November 2011) and #D17 (17 December 2011). The strategic mutability of keywords are tactical innovations that affect the structure of protests in real time (McAdam, 2013; Squire & Gaydos, 2013). Especially because Occupy protesters could quickly respond using social media to cities’ attempts to evacuate camps, protesters could rapidly link together older keywords with new ones to facilitate widespread resistance (Bennet 2014).

As protesters became more familiar with one another online and off, more direct messaging occurred not only on social media, but also via SMS. While networks built upon
one another to populate discussions, much of the importance of social media was its ability to link people to content, content to content, and people to people, a process that Bennett and Segerberg (2012) called “connective action” (p. 735). These networks may overlap and be redundant, but they do not perfectly overlay one another. Organizing through keywords rallied people in the streets, but other uses of ICTs became necessary to sustain participation.

Sustaining Participation

Occupy protesters faced a problem uncommon to earlier social movements. Instead of free riders who do nothing and hope to reap the rewards of the struggle, many people were excited by the openness of participation in street actions (Tufekci, 2014). A key turning point away from flash activism is marked by participants building infrastructure that transitioned protesters from using keywords to amplify actions to using ICTs to coordinate participation on local and national scales. Later I describe how national coordination unfolded, but before social movement organizations took shape, protesters focused on getting their local affairs in order.

Since communicating through social media was chaotic, protesters experimented locally with an internal communication infrastructure that supported discussion and distributed decision-making online and off. This process of communication created new bottlenecks, where access and control were exercised by forking communication in times of disagreement (Gerbaudo, 2017). In this section, I show how protesters at OccupyLA configured communication within the encampment to produce prolonged participation and a sense of autonomy when taking action. Importantly, because access to electricity was difficult, protesters camping at occupations utilized physical information hubs and moderated meetings as integral components of their communication infrastructure.

While channels of communication between Occupy encampments were open through social media, it appeared as if the movement was densely connected with a high degree of coordination due to the redundancy of memes, accounts, and posts. Protesters moved between online spaces by utilizing communication tools to call people to local places, while also using local places for meetings to discuss making content for online channels. While most encampments managed a Facebook page, Twitter account, YouTube channel, Livestream, and email address, some areas had all of these channels, but no encampment. Significantly, the mere presence of online channels did not support internal communication. There was no “center of coordination” that ensured a message would be read or answered between locations or groups (Suchman, 1997). There were less than 20 people managing the tasks of website maintenance through the prominent movement domains of the NYCGA.net, Occupytogether.org, OccupyWallStreet.org, and OccupyWallSt.org. Quickly

Adbusters’ poster for Occupy Wall Street (Adbusters Magazine, 2011).
inundated with tens of thousands of messages and donations throughout October and November, the administrators were overwhelmed. For example, in January 2012, when InterOccupy volunteered to answer the inbox for Occupywallst.org, the email account contained 10,000 unread emails.

Because infrastructure tends to fade into the background, during moments of breakdown, other systems get considered and back-up plans are made. For example, when the OccupyLA encampment was threatened by police, it was difficult to know which information posted online was true. Misinformation spread rapidly throughout networks as reposts, retweets, and shares carried their own momentum. Especially on Twitter, if a hashtag was trending, there could be hundreds of tweets over the course of a minute. Not only was this too much information to read, it was also unverifiable. Protesters at OccupyLA realized that to produce coordination, internal communication within the camp could not flow across the same platforms as communication with the public. Communication channels needed to be moderated locally to be effective organizing tools. To address this information overload, OccupyLA employed both digital and face-to-face communication protocols to ensure information circulated internally.

The problem of local coordination was twofold. First, each encampment was itself a network with multiple and competing objectives and needs that required much attention and deliberation. For example, camps required daily maintenance, where obtaining food, water, and clean bathrooms took priority over spending monetary resources on other items, such as electricity, phones, Wi-Fi, or batteries. Second, coordinating participation across encampments required direct lines of communication between trusted relays. Despite the volume of information shared online, OccupyLA protesters preferred to transmit information across sites by physically talking to each other at the camp or travelling between local encampments for face-to-face meetings.

First, organization within the camp was streamlined through physical proximity and SMS texts. Participation in the social world of the camp was voluntary. Daily camp life was a messy and intense affair that required dedication to stay involved as “crisis” became a familiar refrain, where city health officials and police continuously threatened eviction. Those living in the park full-time divided into groups of similar class and racial backgrounds, where campers referred to their areas with names such as “Skid Row,” “Tarp Town,” and “Bike Scum.” Most participants in OccupyLA did not camp full-time, but instead retained their usual living space and employment throughout the 60-day demonstration.

At OccupyLA, protesters also communicated through the “Welcome Tent,” a large canopy located on the outskirts of City Hall Park that acted as a “center of coordination” (Suchman, 2011). A center of coordination must be located in a stable site so that participants can easily and predictably find it. As well, participants must be able to access and act upon the center of coordination in order to accomplish the goals of the group from any place at different times. This tent was continuously staffed by trained volunteers who collected donations, posted a daily calendar of events, and kept records of committees and agreements. It was networked through SMS text groups and two-way radios. While the Welcome Tent served many bureaucratic functions, it also was a place for new participants to learn how to engage.

There were several other informational tents dedicated to service work including media, mental health, medical, library, education, relaxation, prayer, and peacekeeping. Because of the density of people and volume of activity, the camp’s culture was not so much about the functional aspects of movement coordination, but the affective dimensions of collaboration, camaraderie, and working for social change locally. Significantly, the physical infrastructure of the camp-tents devoted to facilitating group work-reflected the organizational structure of Occupy Los Angeles itself.

As the camp grew in size, protesters’ roles became increasingly specialized. Numerous committees formed to handle functional tasks within the encampment (see Figure 1). Everyday each committee would meet, discuss objectives, and delegate tasks. Every evening, a large general assembly was held in the center of camp, which began with reading “the process.” The rules of process entailed allowing report-backs from daily committee meetings, followed by a long discussion of two or three proposals from committees, then voting on the proposals, and finally allowing for individual announcements. Because the assembly format gave more speaking time to committees than individuals, tensions often erupted into shouting matches within the crowd that detailed discussion.

While camp life revolved around committee meetings, protesters frequently communicated within encampments using SMS text messages. Access to electrical power was scarce, so some protesters restricted their phone settings to save battery life. Shutting off certain streams of data, like email, stemmed the overwhelming amount of notifications. As SMS texts became the routine form of communication though, group SMS messages quickly overloaded inboxes. In interviews, protesters remarked that the “reply all” feature of email and SMS group texts, which was supposed to offer convenience, became a loathed obstacle to “getting shit done.” Increasingly, the camp-wide email and text lists forked into smaller subgroups maintained by the “point person” within a committee; a move that sacrificed the capacity for internal coordination across committees for the sake of decreasing the volume of information overall.

By mid-November 2011, several committees stopped attending the nightly General Assembly in favor of working on their objectives autonomously. Similar kinds of network-forking were present in each camp I visited and were also noted by those I interviewed. As participants became more comfortable with the routines of the camp and each other, committees felt empowered to make autonomous decisions. This autonomy was supported technologically as the ability to coordinate actions privately through non-public SMS groups bolstered independence from the larger group.
At OccupyLA, the direct-action committee adopted divisive protest tactics, such as blockades and sit-ins, without the input of the General Assembly. In another controversial decision, the civic liaison committee took private meetings with city officials to discuss the camp’s eviction.

These actions caused widespread dissention and the General Assembly structure began to breakdown. Attempts to reorganize the General Assembly were challenging because the facilitation committee, the group tasked with moderating the meeting, sought to have all committees’ decisions pass through the General Assembly before being labeled as “officially” from OccupyLA. Ultimately, the consequences for taking action without the General Assembly’s approval were limited. It meant that the action would not be promoted via the camp’s social media or website, that is, that these local decisions did not get amplified through “official” accounts. The rhizomatic structure and openness of the brand, however, meant that anyone could use tags to get around this control. For example, some took advantage of the looseness of the organizational structure for personal gain by calling their own meetings, registering social media accounts, and asking for donations. Attempts to thwart cooptation were futile for an “open source brand” as the only way to prevent it was social policing. Censure was informally spread through gossip, but in some instances, offenders were expelled from the camp. Some denounced this behavior online by calling it out, which had its own reputational risks.

At the same time that OccupyLA was breaking into smaller nodes both online and offline in late November 2011, the importance of regional coordination was expanding. Initially, the “OccupySoCal” email list comprised protesters I met face-to-face and expanded as existing members recruited new points of contact. After the raids on encampments in November and December 2011, OccupySoCal’s online network grew rapidly. Because participants were freed from the commitments of running a camp, some had more time to explore new connections and build political projects. Not just in Southern California, protesters were convening regional gatherings to sustain participation across the United States. In January 2012, protesters from Zuccotti Park spent 1 month on a bus tour of the east coast, while organizing across the Midwest occurred simultaneously.

While participants understood that the camps were not permanent fixtures, few planned logistically for what would happen after the evictions. At this stage, the movement’s continued viability hinged not on the capacity to recruit new people, but protesters’ abilities to coordinate internally to sustain the internal life of the movement. The turn to regional coordination was reinforced by the formation of a virtual organization, InterOccupy, dedicated to maintaining communication infrastructure for the movement.

**Coordinating Participation**

At the time of the police raids, there were multiple problems emerging from protesters’ heavy reliance on social media. The use of social networks by protesters meant that most communication channels were owned and monitored by profit-seeking companies, who could shut down or delete accounts at their
own discretion (Terranova & Donovan, 2013). Using all platforms simultaneously ensured that information flowed, even if several accounts disappeared. Because heavy police repression engendered distrust and these platforms required users to share a single password or gave full permissions to all account administrators, it was difficult to bring on new participants knowing they could delete the account at anytime. As a result, social media committees within encampments often closed ranks or enforced membership criteria to prevent infiltration (Gerbaudo, 2017; Terranova & Donovan, 2013). These social media accounts, which amassed hundreds of thousands of followers, became a critical resource to be protected after the raids.

Moreover, there were numerous instances where long-time administrators did seize accounts or delete Facebook pages and groups out of sheer anger or intractable disagreements (Fuchs, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2017). In situations like these, the accounts and networks were completely lost to the movement as these corporations were not concerned with settling ownership disputes or account recovery. Additionally, proving ownership of the account was negligible as these were not outside hacks. The open participatory nature of the movement and its “open-source brand” made it difficult to present a coherent narrative of online accounts as personal property. Website domains were also a site of struggle as those who paid to register the domain were able to change its content, delete posts, or even sell it off to the highest bidder. For example, the owner of OccupyLosAngeles.Org wanted $2000 to transfer ownership of the domain in October 2012.

Consequently, there was a demonstrated need for a communication system that would be cooperatively owned by protesters. Owning the means of network production required an organization dedicated to this end. Here, keywords do not disappear, but are used to call attention to issues and promote specific actions across the networks locally, regionally, and nationally. Juris (2004) stipulates that NSMs rely on the Internet for “self-directed or self-managed networking” to coordinate across time and distances (p. 342). Here, I highlight the work of Occupy protesters who created InterOccupy to illustrate how building communication infrastructure is a strategic response to constraints and obstacles faced by the movement. Like the Welcome Tent at OccupyLA, InterOccupy acted as a center of coordination that organized information, kept a schedule of events, oriented newcomers, and provided structure to communication flows.

At the start of the Occupy Movement, there was no expectation that each encampment would want to coordinate with one another. Driven by the failure of social media and email to bridge local Occupy groups, the co-creators of InterOccupy took on the logistical puzzle of communication across locations (Donovan, 2016). One technology in particular, the conference call, became a central mechanism for building nationally networked projects and synchronizing networks of protesters across the United States. InterOccupy began using conference calls as a way to discuss the diverse agendas across the movement, where topics ranged from politics, debt, public education, economics, policing, racism, globalization, and many more. To promote broad participation, participants could fill out a webform to request a call and InterOccupy would provide technological support and facilitation. Mimicking the General Assembly structure of camps, conference calls followed a process where participants were presented with an agenda, agreed to the rules of discussion, and voted on action items. Importantly, InterOccupy followed a code of ethics that barred facilitators from offering their viewpoints to the captive audience. In this way, InterOccupy did not develop into a social movement organization that advocated for specific outcomes, but sought to be perceived as a neutral provider of communication infrastructure services to anyone who requested it.

The overarching goal of InterOccupy as a virtual organization was to channel the culture and process of the Occupy Movement into a cohesive and coordinated network by leveraging as many platforms as possible, while simultaneously ensuring that internal networks were recoverable by keeping archives of email lists, call logs, and meeting notes. Earl (2007) stipulates that while leading tasks in a movement are varied across social movement organizations, maintaining the “internal life of the movement” is rarely a priority for organizers (p. 1337). Earl (2007) writes, “leading tasks generally associated with building the internal logic, organizational infrastructure, and relationships necessary for maintaining longer term, and more costly, mobilizations are not likely to be as salient” (p. 1341). This point is crucial for understanding how the Occupy Movement continued after several scholars wrote the movement’s obituary.

InterOccupy took on leading tasks by dividing the workload among different teams (see Figure 2), where most of the labor of maintaining the infrastructure remained invisible to the rest of the movement. In addition to conference calls, InterOccupy managed over 70 email lists, a weekly newsletter, a website with a newswire, and several social media accounts. Relying on search engines and keywords, InterOccupy channeled participants toward issues and events by culling, sorting, and publishing information amassed from multiple sources including conference calls, social media, blogs, websites, and news agencies.

As a virtual Organization, InterOccupy acted as a semi-centralized information repository that lightened the information overload experienced by protesters. Additionally, InterOccupy later supported the work of several social movement organizations that took on what Tufekci (2014) called “the unpleasant, tedious long-term instrumental work” of challenging laws, regulations, and politicians, while other groups used InterOccupy to stay in touch with members and form coalitions on issues related to debt, police brutality, healthcare, racism, human rights, and more (p. 207). Protesters used the communication systems maintained by InterOccupy to launch national campaigns and protests, such as the West Coast Port Shutdown of 2012, the May Day General Strike of 2012, Strike Debt, The Million Hoodies for Trayvon Movement, the #NoNato actions in Chicago, among others.
The infrastructuring of Occupy Sandy, in particular, illustrates the political impact of turning to infrastructure during moments of movement abeyance. After Hurricane Sandy left 40,000 people homeless in New York, InterOccupy progressed from a platform designed to connect networks into a platform that provided disaster relief. InterOccupy with other groups used the infrastructure built after the encampments to mobilize over 50,000 volunteers and raised $2.5 million in resources. In practice, the call to #OccupySandy required InterOccupy and others to tap every pre-existing network, utilize every ICT, and contribute every known skill to organize this mutual-aid project. InterOccupy learned that the rhizomatic structure of communication across many open channels required strategies aimed at reducing redundancy in the projects taken up by protesters, so as to not exhaust volunteer labor or sap participants’ attention. Finally, the organizers of the InterOccupy project found that to be effective, they had to be attuned to the affordances, limits, and interoperability of multiple platforms to coordinate collective action. The strategic use of keywords remained a fundamental tool for eliciting participation from new volunteers and calling for resources, but decisions about managing labor and resources were often deliberated in local meeting hubs or through closed conference calls.

**Conclusion**

InterOccupy is a case where an NSM sought to endure after the keyword by turning to infrastructure to maintain the movement over the *longue durée*. Keywords served a critical function in the initial phase of NSM formation, but did not ensure the long-term viability of the movement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The communication infrastructure of the Occupy Movement transformed insofar as protesters were flexibly attenuated to social and political conditions that prevented mobilizing in public places and on social media. Learning to play the algorithms of search engines across many platforms ensured the redundancy of information, but also made it difficult to verify disinformation and rumors. In the wake of keywords bringing together myriad networks online and in the streets, protesters built their own communication infrastructure to harness the power of the rhizomatic network and to create sustained participation. Because it is difficult to maintain the internal life of the movement as a social movement community, it is imperative that a center of coordination for that community be available so that new people can join and future campaigns can be planned (Earl, 2007; Staggenborg 1998; Suchman, 1997, pp. 186-187). As meeting in public became difficult due to police repression, the Occupy Movement entered a moment of perceived abeyance. InterOccupy saw infrastructure building as a political tactic to ground the movement in direct forms of communication, where new norms and forms of action could incubate across this virtual organization. More broadly, the failure of communication tools, such as social media, to produce mass coordination inspired protesters to reevaluate and modify the relationship between local places, communication infrastructure, and national coordination.

For NSMs, infrastructure is not a resource like any other. When used in conjunction with on-the-ground organizing strategies, virtual organizations can channel significant resources to projects and call other groups to action. Of course, the conditions of the crisis or interest in the issues still matters for the success of any call to action. As more of everyday life and work are arranged through platform companies’ algorithms, NSMs continue to adopt and modify the digital means available to coordinate social change. While digital media continues to play a substantial role in the way
issues are recognized, the power of NSMs lies in their ability to organize effectively after the #keyword.

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**Note**

1. I used Google Trends to gage how popular keywords the “Occupy” and “Occupy Wall Street” were prior to July 2011. These keywords began trending in September 2011.

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