

TALK ON THE STREET

We must all move on the ground now and not talk to one another over Facebook.

*History is made on the streets, not on the Internet.*¹

—WÆL GHONIM

In 2011, the word ‘Re-tweet’ officially entered the lexicon, being one of the words included in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (OED).² “What took it so long?” I hear you ask! Truth is, the speed of adoption by dictionaries always trails usage. It always causes a bit of an uproar. In 1911, when the OED began publishing, its editors, two brothers, stated that “we admit colloquial, facetious, slang, and vulgar expressions with freedom, merely attaching a cautionary label.”³

Whether you took the leap and registered your Twitter handle or not, you can’t ignore the impact of people yapping away in 140-character bursts. Public chatter mixed with private conversations are now everywhere, thanks to social networks that serve as conduits for whatever happens, even something largely outside our network. It is the great babbling bazaar now empowered by a mash-up of media that is, by default, open, abundant, and free.⁴

Trouble is, conversations intended for one audience in this bazaar now spill over to another. It used to not be like that. The telephone was originally a point-to-point tool. Outsiders could only listen in by invitation. (The ‘party line’, also known as the multi-party line, enabled two or more families to share a phone line). Or spillover took place by accident, when there was a cross-connection. But with wider penetration of mobile phones, the telephone, is no longer an exclusive one-to-one device. Conference calling, email and texting, now core features of phones, have turned it into a quick broadcasting, or at least a one-to-many tool. More than 432 million people regularly log into Facebook from a mobile device.⁵ In June 2011, people were sending out 200 million tweets a day!⁶ It is no surprise then that the mobile phone has contributed to so much of online conversations.

Conversations on the street don’t always require a media platform, but having one helps. The organizers of Occupy Wall Street recognize that boundary-less, platform-agnostic environments are the potting soil of a vibrant grassroots community. As such they encourage broader, deeper dialog. “At the square (Zuccotti Park, New York), everyone is empowered to become mediators, to ask about each others’ needs and boundaries, to communicate honestly, and to learn to accept conflict as possible points of community construction,” notes Suzahn E, talking of the movement’s chaos and interaction as a necessary experiment.⁷

Street talk is paradoxically vulgar and socially appropriate to its environment. If you happen to overhear a group of teenagers in a parking lot, the language sounds coarse. Gangs, at one end of the spectrum or a group of men, at the other, use language that is coded and sounds foreign. The reason? The language they use caters to their niche, so even if a person is barely outside that niche, it makes no sense. Graffiti, likewise, makes no sense to ordinary citizens who

would never use a marker pen on a bathroom wall, but would happily send out a public tweet lacking etiquette, bracketed with hash-tags. That the cryptic 140-character message reads like a snippet of non-sense doesn't bother us, even if it shows up on our social media dashboard. We tune out graffiti the same way we tune out irrelevant noise on a Twitter stream. The point is, the lingua franca of the street is both private and public, and its crossover does connect us to the crowd.

NOMADIC MEDIA

Hobos during the Great Depression used their own hobo codes or 'hoboglyphs', which formed a secret language to communicate with other hobos about the availability of food, or water, and sometimes alert them about a hostile neighborhood or potential work. Oddly enough, the digital age has devised its own hobo-like signage for nomadic bands of urbanites. The Free Wi-Fi signs cropping up in small town coffee shops and restaurants are one part of it.⁸ Yelp and Foursquare serve a similar purpose. Digital nomads spend a considerable amount of time advising other nomads with codified 'check-ins' on Foursquare, for instance. Yelp, founded in 2004, is a review and recommendation service that lets people in the United States, Canada, the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Austria share and access opinions, reviews and ratings of service providers in their local area. It had 50 million unique visitors in June 2011.⁹ Because mobile-equipped nomads make good candidates for chatting with other citizens, Yelp taps into these mobile thumb tribes to speak out about good restaurants, bad products, and easy ways around airports. In 2010, the Yelp site recorded 27 percent of check-ins that came from an iPhone app.¹⁰

Then there are the actual analog signs people put up in the form

equals participation.”¹¹)

‘A PULSING INFOSPHERE OF ENORMOUS BANDWIDTH’

The babbling bazaar we left behind had something that we don’t find in its replacement—the echo chamber. It was here that we engaged in debate or took collective action.

Paul de Armond describes how in 2004, the Direct Action Network, or DAN, improvised a network for street communication among anti-WTO activists. “Protesters in the street with wireless Palm Pilots were able to link into continuously updated Web pages giving reports from the streets. Police scanners monitored transmissions and provided some warning of changing police tactics. Cell phones were widely used.”¹²

When this network was detected and brought down, they switched to Nextel-made cell phones. A Linux-based service known as TXTMob was used. The service worked both ways, enabling activists to register with message groups so as to receive updates, but also to be able to broadcast messages to members of their group via their cell phones. Journalists with Indymedia monitored TXTMobs as an information source, and used their own TXTMobs group as an additional way to distribute news.¹³ Armond explains how they broke into talk groups of eight people in each subgroup. One of them overlapped with another talk group, helping one group communicate with the others, fast. He sums it up this way, describing how the hoi polloi find ways to route around obstacles to their communication on the street. “Floating above the tear gas was a pulsing infosphere of enormous bandwidth, reaching around the planet via the Internet.”

To think that Twitter had not even been born!

GENERATION TXT

The anti-globalization movement relied on Meetups to inform and coordinate its actions. The Meetup site, which had been founded in 2001, made it dead easy for anyone to pull together a local group or set up face-to-face meetings. Meetups provided a backbone for people who felt compelled to show up on a street for a one-off event. It was a classic case of digital-to-analog community building, closing the gap of time and distance that often hobbles event planning. But it also provided a discussion space for what its members believed in, what they were in opposition to, and for clarification, etc. The World Wide Web was giving people a first taste of what people could accomplish when they were a few degrees of separation from each other.

No phenomenon of street coordination demonstrated this better than the Flash Mob. The use of the word 'mob' in social media might make some people wince, since it conjures up images of mindless crowd behavior. But there is no getting around the reality that it is something that happens spontaneously (or makes it seem that way) and it involves a crowd. Many streets and public spaces in metropolitan centers are magnets for crowds, so it's natural for this flash mob expression to manifest itself there.

Now that Facebook and Twitter have been around for more than five years, the ability to communicate with clusters of strangers and mobilize crowds seems an accepted feature of crowd communication. People seem to forget that Short Messaging Service, or SMS, filled this need not to long before. In September 2000, ordinary citizens staged a protest in London, communicating via SMS on mobile phones, and CB radios in taxicabs. They were protesting the sudden rise in the price of petrol. Throughout one week, a text messaging service was used for broadcasting news and media alerts, creating ad hoc mo-

bile communication teams, growing subscribers, sending out event reminders, and sending 'strategic field alerts'. It also allowed flash mobbing.¹⁴

Soon after that, in January 2001, tens of thousands of Filipinos showed up on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, a street known as Edsa. It was one of the earliest smart mobs on such a large scale, communicating in short cryptic text messages such as "Go 2EDSA, wear blk." Howard Rheingold describes these early 'swarms' as the emergence of thumb tribes—young people who are extremely good at texting, and using it to bypass slower, entrenched infrastructure such as postal service and railroads. The "legend of 'Generation Txt' was born" on the streets of Manila, he says.¹⁵ Still, the Internet complements and reinforces, rather than replaces face-to-face interaction, as we have seen in the Occupy movement.

HASH-TAGS AND HISTORY

In the present Occupy Wall Street movement, the thought leaders realize the value of old media to communicate to its diverse community—a community that is semi-permanent (they live in tents and sleeping bags, after all) as well as transient (many arrived from other cities and stayed for a short while). There has been a lot of debate whether these communities would have come together without social media, or if social media was an add-on, not the cause. That's why, in commenting on the *Time* person of the year for 2011 being named as 'The Protestor,' Rick Engel noted that "this was not a wired revolution; it was a human one, of hearts and minds, the oldest technology of all."¹⁶ Like the activists before them, they were organized around networks.¹⁷

There are more than 100 different hash-tags on Twitter in support

of the Occupy Wall Street movement.¹⁸ These include: #occupywallstreet #ows #occupywallst #occupy #occupyboston #takewallstreet #p2 #nypd. The movement is super-charged by people we might describe as being digitally savvy or digital natives. Being digital is part of their lives. So much so that providing an Internet connection in the Occupy sites is a big priority, with supporters creating mesh networks, and antennas powered by diesel generators.¹⁹ But which medium do you think serves as a powerful way to keep incoming Occupiers and those already committed, on the same page? It is not YouTube. It is not a blog. It is something more ‘old school’—a newspaper.

The effect of these voices cannot be overstated. “People who’ve experienced the power of having a voice will not easily go back to silence,” notes Sarah Van Gelder, in the book on the Occupy movement. “People who’ve found self-respect will work hard to avoid a return to isolation and powerlessness...the 99% are no longer sitting on the sidelines of history—we are making history.”²⁰

The idea of a newspaper being published by a semi-permanent group of people underlines several interesting aspects of communicating on the street. First, it is a way of validating the space occupied by people who could, at any time by police action or a mayor’s order, be evacuated. Second, it gives the semblance of a more structured organization, since people often assume that only legit, formal organizations have their own media.

STREET JOURNAL

Priscilla Grimm, a single mother who had taught herself HTML while nursing her infant daughter, is the editor of the newspaper known as the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*. (The irony is intentional, since the movement which started in Zuccoti Park in Manhattan, New

York, is just 15 minutes away from the address of the *Wall Street Journal*—a paper that often pokes fun at the movement.) Grimm is one of



Newspaper printed by the Occupy Wall Street movement

those so-called ‘Occupiers’ who understand the power of voice. She has a background of editing fanzines, and had previously been involved in online action to help people understand the FCC laws. She found herself drawn to the movement, and was soon recruited to edit and write for the newspaper, a broadsheet, which is now the flagship medium of the Occupy Wall Street movement. It is not however the ‘official’ newspaper of the movement.²¹

“At the beginning, it was a cross between a fanzine, flyer and a magazine,” she said. She says that the broadsheet idea was conceived because the publishers thought that it was important to hand out a paper during marches to make it a better experience. The paper contextualizes what’s happening on the street. If someone was new to the place or the movement, and was to hear chants and could not make sense of what was going on, the paper would outline the ideas of the march.

Was it ironic that a digital media person was working in old media? Not really, said Grimm. I asked her how they could go on pub-

lishing this paper, and distribute it free. Is there a sustainable model for it? How does the press get paid? Who's doing it for them? She laughed, trying not to answer the question. "They get paid. They are getting paid," she said. (The paper is printed at a press in nearby Queens, New York.) It is sustained by payments that came via donations via a Kickstarter campaign, online. Interestingly, it publishes *Occupy Gazette* through a sister movement called N+1. It is a magazine about politics, literature, and culture. It also publishes *Indig-Nación*, a Spanish-language paper of the 'affinity group' associated with the movement.²²

As for people like Grimm who amplify the voices on the street, they are working pro bono. "We are not getting paid," she says speaking of the handful of editors, designers and copy editors. "I just paid four months of rent by way of my tax return. I'm a single parent. We are bringing in enough money to take care of printing costs, but it is an all-volunteer effort by individuals who give of their time for this messaging and communications."

Is she optimistic? "I am very hopeful," she says. "What's going to make a sea change is when we have more people on the street than cops. You don't get to change the world that often. The way you do that is that you need to educate people as to what needs to be changed and why."²³

BULL HORNS VS HUMANS

Bull horns and electronic speakers are typically prohibited in public spaces, such as in Zucotti Park, in New York. They require special permits, which are rarely given. So the Occupiers didn't miss a step, and mobilized a great device to keep the dialog on the street, and indeed the vociferous debates, from being muzzled. It was a cre-

ative way to not just get around the ban, but amplify and transmit their voices that resonated (literally) with those joining the movement. We will return to this in Chapter 15, where we will see how the Occupy Wall Street movement taps into the ultimate gadget—the human voice.