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Occupying the Noosphere: The Evolution of Media Platforms and Webs of Community Protest

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Abstract

This article suggests the emergence of a new dominant ecological system in civil discourse and protest: the noosystem. The idea of a vibrant noosystem is taken from the concept of the noosphere which was introduced near the beginning of the 20th century. The noosphere is a complex, uniquely human system of activity where individual minds use meditational tools to engage in the transfer of information and problem solving activities. The Internet has given the idea of a noosphere new vibrancy, creating a platform where that is capable of augmenting and extending humans minds so that they are capable of engaging in joint activity in ways that transcend traditional boundaries of time and space. The noosystem is offered as a subcategory of the noosphere, an ecological system that not only allows human intellect to guide our perceptions of more concrete settings, but to actually participate in defining and redefining these activity settings. Nowhere has the noosystem had more impact than in the current occupy movement (exemplified by Occupy Wall Street). This article argues that our burgeoning noosystem is redefining both protest and social change. This idea is illustrated through an analysis of Occupy Youngstown, an Occupy Wall Street affiliated group.

Keywords: Internet, protest, Occupy Youngstown

Introduction

This article suggests the emergence of a new ecological system in civil discourse: the noosphere, or sphere of human thought. The noosphere is an emergent "space" for development of autonomous project communities that allows human intellect to guide our perceptions of events and of the built environment, and to actually participate in defining and redefining these events and places over time. The noosphere is a complex, uniquely human system of activity where individual minds use mediational tools to engage in the transfer of information and problem solving activities. The Internet has given the idea of a noosphere new vibrancy, serving as a platform that is capable of extending human minds so they are able

to create autonomous community projects that transcend traditional boundaries. These community projects serve as hubs of action, fostering connections with new types of information and sympathetic groups, transcending limitations inherent to local cultural histories and larger hegemonic forces. This can be especially important in movements of dissent and protest against the status quo, where information is tightly controlled and often serves to maintain current systems. Nowhere is the noosphere more apparent than in the current Occupy Wall Street movement and its replication in sites across the country, an idea I illustrate here through an analysis of Occupy Youngstown.

A December 2011 article in Salon magazine describes the development and process of a new website "InterOccupy," featuring communications tools like a new phone conferencing system that can service large populations simultaneously (Elliot 2011). Emerging out of the Occupy Wall Street (#ows[1]) social/political movement, the website attempted to interconnect many of the different #ows affiliated groups across the world and to provide a platform for multilateral discussion and joint planning. Social and political movements are increasingly engaging through this type of complex, non-hierarchal networking and community building. InterOccupy represents a much broader, Internet-driven phenomenon that looks to interlink dispersed individual minds into a web of evolving community collective action. This interlinking of intellect and action takes place in what has to this point been a relatively unattainable space for the general populace: the noosphere[2].

The noosphere implies a space that enables collective intelligence and shared problem solving through multilateral communications between interested parties. As an ecological and evolutionary model of the relationship between media platforms and communicative praxis, the noosphere is a helpful framework for understanding the discursive online space that became an integral aspect of the #ows movement. Activities in the noosphere offer unique possibilities for the development of autonomous online communities capable of generating meaning and knowledge while holding together disparate populations in pursuit of shared goals. The use of the noosphere has reached its current apex through #ows and affiliated groups' use of the Internet as a central tool for disseminating ideas, political organizing, and coordinating activity in physical space. Websites such as InterOccupy serve as mediating tools for the noosphere, leading to a community that develops collective intelligence and helps move participants in disparate settings towards united action.

1.   The "#" is known as a hashtag, a metadata tag indicating an ad-hoc group or topic of discussion on microblogging sites such as Twitter.

2.   Noosphere is derived from the Greek word "Nous" or "Noo(s)" meaning intellect or understanding, in some cases translated as mind.

The Noosphere as a Meeting of Minds

The philosophical origins of the noosphere stretch back almost a century. The concept was first introduced by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in his book *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959) (the term was actually coined in 1925[3] [Bird 1963]). Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest who was both a geologist and paleontologist, was influenced by the work of Charles Darwin (and most probably the work of the geologist Charles Lyell, who was also an influence on Darwin)(Glassman 2000[4]). He envisioned evolution as occurring in layers, first geological and then covered by the layers of the hydrosphere and then atmosphere, and long afterwards, the biosphere, the "fauna and flora" that envelopes the planet. The most recent addition is the noosphere, a thin membrane of thought outside, above, and interacting with the biosphere. The noosphere is the sphere in which the human intellect spreads through communicative media such as storytelling and song. It is the noosphere which allows for maintenance of tools through generations and planning between individuals engaged in a cooperative activity.

The Noosphere and the Evolution of Media

Initially the concept of the noosphere gained little traction as a conceptualization of human behavior. One reason may be that the noosphere is directly tied to media and communication strategies; because human intellect has no organic corporal manifestation, its shared use depends on the use of mediating tools. However, the conflation of the vehicles of media with the practices enabled by those vehicles often privileges the technology over the spaces created by evolving media platforms, so we are more likely to speak of television rather than the shared community created by a community all experiencing a specific television show.

The noosphere is an important concept to understand the emergent spaces created through the Internet, and especially its progeny of Web-related tools. The concept was first applied to the types of unique, community-driven activity found in Open Source communities on the

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3.   *The Phenomenon of Man* was published posthumously four years after the author's death. The church had ordered Teilhard de Chardin not to publish any of his writings, and even at one point to stop lecturing. The book seems to have actually been written during the years 1938-40. But Teilhard de Chardin first seems to have used the phrase in his writings in 1925.

4.   One of the reasons it is important to recognize Lyell's influence on Darwin's theory is because it reflects a non-teleological interpretation of evolution— what Gould (1977) referred to as "descent with modification" as opposed to the more unidirectional interpretation championed by Huxley. See Glassman (2000) for an extended discussion.

Internet by Eric Raymond (2001). The Internet enables the noosphere as a platform for collective intelligence, especially in the form of spatially dispersed communities that are capable of reacting to difficult problems and generating unique solutions. For instance, the Websites Dailykos and Firedoglake actually serve as organizing and generative forces in responding to progressive issues (Benkler 2006), while InterOccupy seeks specifically to connect the #ows socio-political movement and Web-based community building. These communities, because they are created, developed, and sustained within the noosphere, are capable of transcending traditional spatial and temporal boundaries to thought and action.

In this sense, the Internet is able to augment the human mind, allowing it to extend out into a new system of activity where it can simultaneously interact with other minds in other locales (Bardini 2000). This new and interactive "space" was driven in part by the development of the Internet, but it did not effectively come to fruition until the development of the World Wide Web and the host of interactive Web 2.0[5] technologies (Glassman and Kang 2010). Interactive Web 2.0 tools (sometimes referred to as the writable Web) offer slower, "cooler" introductions into its information universe. This evolution of media technology towards collective platforms may be understood using a near-forgotten distinction, offered by media theorist Marshal McLuhan (1964), between hot media and cool media.

McLuhan used *hot* and *cold* as metaphors for how we perceive and engage information. Hot media draws individuals towards information through its power and immediacy but limits choice about what that information might mean or how it might be used in their lives. Hot media exists on the Web, for example in the form of static websites that utilize a combination of graphics, colors, and professional layout. Hot media tends to be centralized, linear, and controlled, concerned primarily with direct transmission of information. By contrast, cool media is far more decentralized, inviting participants into a relationship with the information source. Cool media on the Internet—e.g. wikis, blogs, and social network sites—are often simple and obscure, and invite different levels of participation.[6] But these Web 2.0 sites can offer the viewer the ability to move from consumer of information to participant in the site, and even to co-developer of the source (Raymond

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5. Web 2.0 is often defined through enabling tools such as social network site (SNS), wikis, and interactive blogs. When O'Reilly coined the term it was more a description of the processes of collective intelligence that the Web made possible. This is also why it may not be productive to equate the term social media with Web 2.0.

6. Consider the steps even in participating in a Social Network Site such as Facebook: receiving a friend request, visiting and examining profile information, visiting a wall and scrolling through posting information, participating by posting on the wall.

2001). Because online communities are ongoing and dynamic, they are more likely to operate through cool media producing tools offered through the writable Web such as social networking sites, interactive blogs, and wikis.

Mass Self-Communication and Autonomous Project Communities

The noosphere concept helps to tie together Castells's (2007) idea of mass self-communication and Benkler's (2006) description of reactive and generative online/Open Source communities (Raymond 2001). Some of Castells's work suggests that the Internet allows individuals to self-initiate communications with new and different populations and find information beyond sanctioned sources, transcending pathways provided by the traditional systems enveloping the individual's intellectual and social development. The Internet allows these communications to build on each other, sometimes exponentially, creating the potential for almost any connected individual to initiate or participate in mass communicative strategies and processes. The mass self-communication made possible by the Internet is the critical first step in expanding public discourse and moving it past traditional material, spatial, and socio-cultural boundaries.

Perhaps the most unique and important implication of this mass self-communication is the ability to develop and engage in "autonomous projects" that are beyond the control of traditional power structures. The noosphere then serves as an information-based ecology that enables disparate individuals and groups to cut through other dominant systems to create communities undertaking autonomous projects based in collective engagement. It is these autonomous online communities, especially when functioning within an Open Source model, that can create qualitatively unique ongoing projects focused on shared concerns and goals of participants. These communities can then independently develop reactive strategies to difficult problems quickly and at any time; they can also develop their own ongoing problem-solving processes that are capable of generating unique solutions (Benkler 2006).

The Protests and the Noosphere: Making the Future a Guide to the Present

An important component of the noosphere is the nonlinear, ecological mode of development and evolution that corresponds to collective intellectual practice. This makes possible sustainability of autonomous project communities where experimentation and emergence are the logical models: the future of the future (is) in the present (McLuhan 1967).

The noosphere is a collaborative space where actors engage in collective knowledge development processes. This model contradicts previous social movement models that emphasize heroism and individualism, where individuals claim ownership of the actions, in media spaces such as speeches and protest acts, and where protests are endangered when they lose leaders or critical symbols of dissent.

The importance of online autonomous communities capable of acting outside of traditional social and cultural boundaries is especially salient in authoritarian societies with strict controls on the flow of information. Protests against entrenched institutional systems can be hampered by prior experience, including those of previous generations. Members of a society can believe they are not capable of effecting change and have little choice in the life trajectories (Sen 1999). The "Arab Spring" was a surprise because the protests occurred in societies that tightly controlled the capabilities and choices of their citizens. The Internet offered not only a vehicle to quickly share and disseminate information, but more importantly, a platform to develop autonomous online project communities. These autonomous project communities were able to react to emotional and physically dangerous circumstances like military retribution, as well as to generate new strategies and approaches. The protestors were able to sustain and even expand these project communities through even the most debilitating military responses, demonstrating that the concept of the noosphere might be critical to dissent in the Internet age.

The noosphere offers a way to conceptualize a space that melds together actions and ideas emanating from various physical activity settings in ways that can be sustained over time, even in the face of dramatic changes to those physical settings. As a counterhegemonic or insurgent space, the noosphere provides a place for mass self-communication, allowing social movements the platform to develop autonomous project communities. Autonomous project communities are capable of developing their own information sources, creating new strategies in reaction to changing circumstances, and generating new possibilities for cross-community action. These online communities are both central to actions taken by the protest community in specific places and within other systems, and autonomous from traditional, often carefully choreographed information sources and pathways promoted within and sanctioned by these systems.

The Noosphere in Spatial Form: Occupy Youngstown

The role of the noosphere in current civil discourse can be traced through a small slice of the larger #ows movement – the Occupy Youngstown (OY) community. OY offers an important example of the noosphere, as it enables new creative and productive phenomenon in political and social protest.

OY went from a small, materially circumscribed protest to a networked, multilateral, autonomous community with multiple links to affiliated local, regional, and national initiatives. OY started as a local movement emerging in response to the momentum created by #ows and its affiliates. Initially, OY, like most #ows affiliated groups, was intent on fostering change by occupying physical spaces that are geographically meaningful, with the aim of forcing institutions to reconsider their policies. Occupy Youngstown began on October 15, approximately a month after #ows began their occupation of Zucotti Park in New York City. The group received a one-day permit for a demonstration in Central Square in downtown Youngstown, Ohio, the center of the city's business and shopping area. At the end of the protest day a group set up a burn barrel, chairs, and a tarp in the Square. Three days later the group set up a tent next to the burn barrel which became an initial, place-based symbol for the group, and these remained in place with at least twelve protesters maintaining vigil. OY was summarily evicted from their space on November 11 as part of a large-scale, nationwide eviction process at a number of #ows sites around the nation.

When the eviction of OY from Central Square occurred and the tent that served as the symbol of the protest was removed, protesters first directed their energy on re-taking the physical space and maintaining some presence there in defiance of institutional demands, but with very limited success. Based on Youngstown's economic and social history, along with the loss of a physical space critical to the identity of OY, one would have expected despair and dissolution among its members. Instead, OY evolved and expanded, and a little over a month later its activities were documented on a national television news show. This was largely due to the redirection of OY energies to other settings, especially on the Internet. OY used the social networking site Facebook as cool media in response to the eviction. On its Facebook site (http://www.facebook.com/occupyyoungstown), participating individuals and groups from a number of disparate and decentralized settings were able to communicate with each other easily and quickly. The OY Facebook page served as the site of community building, allowing participants to continuously redefine and re-energize the small movement in the noosphere, no matter what was occurring at specific local settings.

The Facebook page became a space where individuals and groups could meet, offer and find new information, discuss interrelated ideas, and make calls to action. Other active communities and individuals, like those attempting to establish a winter farmers' market and leading the *Stop Fracking Ohio* movement, became central to the ongoing conversation. One of the groups discussed relatively early on the page was *occupyourhomes*– an #ows affiliated national group attempting to respond to the foreclosure crisis. The group became a central topic on the page after a call to action

against the eviction of a local family and subsequent protest joined by OY members at the targeted home. The Facebook page also served to document the evolution of the protest while keeping links to the other affiliated groups open and active.

One of the most interesting aspects of OY is the fact that Youngstown is one of the geographical areas hardest hit by the changing economy—a concrete example of many of the issues at the heart of the #ows protests. The occupation in downtown Youngstown was never large but it managed to gain national attention. The resonance of Occupy Youngstown with social political movements in larger communities, and the power that this small local group was showing over an extended period of time, is evidenced through their inclusion on a national television news show.

> *This is Occupy Youngstown, Ohio. Remember them? You may remember our earlier reporting on Occupy Youngstown in one of America's most impoverished cities, turning out with their senior citizens and their few tents outside a bank and what's left of the downtown in Youngstown. Well, these are Occupy Youngstown's tents today, where they camped out in the yard of a mother and her family facing eviction from their home just in time for the holidays. This is politics too. (Rachel Maddow, December 15,* The Rachel Maddow Show*)*[7]

An analysis of the Facebook page from November 11 until the *Rachel Maddow Show* segment on December 15 suggests that OY not only thrived but actually evolved on the Internet so that occupation of a specific physical space became much less important. Prior to the eviction of November 11, the OY Facebook page had only limited postings and few links; it was something of an online ghost town. Only after the eviction did the page begin to evolve into a functioning community. Initially conversation on the page focused on the idea of keeping enough "bodies" at the site so that it remained "occupied." But as more individuals and groups began visiting the page, the idea of what "occupied" meant seemed to expand—not tied as closely to that single, physical site in downtown Youngstown.

The critical question in (re)defining OY is how a movement whose primary geographical locus had become a "protest ghost town"[8] was being hailed a month later as a powerful, dynamic group for change on a national newscast. Occupy Youngstown no longer actually existed in the space taken up by the tent set up in Central Squares outside of a bank, but as an online autonomous project community. The OY Facebook page fostered

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7. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/45697730/ns/msnbc_tv-rachel_maddow_
    show/

8. http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/11/14/1036169/-Another-39-miles-
    for-the-99,-and-down-but-not-out-at-OccupyYoungstown

evolution within the noosphere, and served as the hub of the system holding Occupy Youngstown together as an autonomous project community. The movement evolved from a unilateral battle between participants and institutional systems in physical space to a Web of interrelated activity that cut across and in many ways transcended specific physical settings.

When the *Rachel Maddow Show* discussed Occupy Youngstown as occupying an individual house to ward off foreclosure, it was presented as the next logical step in the movement. She imagined a localized battle between the microsystem of the endangered household and the institutions behind the eviction. What actually happened is that the occupation of the endangered home was simply one extension of a community web being continuously defined and redefined in the noosphere. Occupation of endangered homes became a primary idea when a call for help was put out on the Facebook page, but it was only one of many possible valences of OY's new online, autonomous project community. Other extensions of the noosphere web, such as integration with the *Stop Fracking Ohio* movement and development of a year-round farmers' market, were important tentacles of the growing autonomous project community. Different movements were integrated into action-based projects with little concern about traditional power relationships between them. OY continues to be an active, integrated protest community through its Facebook page to this day.

Concluding Thoughts

The Internet expands both access to and purpose of the noosphere, making it a space capable of facilitating change on a number of levels. Any person with some type of connectivity is capable of entering the space created by the noosphere, not just as a consumer of information, but as an active contributor to the generation of new ideas and strategies. The noosphere facilitates the development of online communities to create bottom-up solutions to problems and threats, and to effect change in ways that are not restricted by traditional boundaries imposed by time and place. These communities emerge to address common concerns and work together in a multilateral, non-linear manner with shifting decision-making structures. The communities that develop in the noosphere are effectually promoting new kinds of action because they are capable of transcending the history of a particular place, as well as the predominance of elites over the flow of information (Castells 1999).

The noosphere offers a new metaphor for effecting change. Far different from the war metaphor—the battle for control over territory—the noosphere model of change might be more akin to fishing in the ocean (Glassman and Kang 2012). The individuals participating in OY, and in the #ows movement, are like fisherpersons throwing nets out into the ocean,

searching for new activities and ideas that flow through the ocean with the tides. The noosphere brings together the fisherperson, the meshing of the net, and the ocean. Hot media has a bias towards portraying the world as moving in unilateral, well-defined directions. Cool media not only enhances our abilities to portray information as a web of possibilities, but as it evolves, it actually enables that web to grow and evolve. Facebook as cool media is another step in the evolution of cool media, part of the transformational quality of the Internet. The noosphere, as illustrated in the case of OY, and in the form of the Facebook page, allows the participant to experience the community extending out, casting its nets, and pulling in new ideas. It allows every participant to play a variety of roles such as fisherperson and net maker. It is a system that not only impacts the ways in which we understand geographies, but allows us to recreate those geographies beyond the boundaries of traditional system interactions and our imaginations.

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