Occupy, Idle No More and Red Squares – Waves of Protest, Diffusion and Facebook

ECPR Panel - The Heterogeneity of Diffusion Processes in Contemporary Social Movements

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Abstract: Since 2011, waves of protest ripple across Canada and the United States and around the globe. From the fall of 2011 with Occupy Wall Street to the “Printemps Erable” (Maple Spring), to the Idle No More movement of December 2012, waves of protest spread to cities and towns across Canada, the US and to a lesser extent to Europe – spreading symbols, tactics, frames and identities. Each wave builds off of earlier and ongoing waves of anti-austerity protests in Europe and pro-democracy movements in North Africa and the Middle East. Each wave also utilizes the power of social media. But the power of these media is not contained in the technology themselves, but because their form and operation intersect with micro-processes of diffusion. Looking at these three waves of protest, this paper explains how different elements within the social networking platform of Facebook intersect with the processes of diffusion.

In 2011 and 2012, subsequent waves of protest have rippled across Canada and the United States and around the globe. The fall of 2011 launched the wave associated with Occupy Wall Street led to protests in hundreds of cities, especially in the US – many imitating its tactics, frames and identity claims. Then in the “Printemps Erable” (Maple Spring), students in Quebec wearing red squares and banging on pots and pans protested nightly against tuition increases. This evolved into a more general student movement, and spread to every large and medium sized city in Canada and to large US and European cities. And then in December 2012, the indigenous led Idle No More Movement began to hold round dances and drumming protests against the Canadian government’s decisions to further diminish the power of indigenous communities. These protests spread across Canada and the US, bringing round dances to shopping malls, city streets. Each of these three waves is associated with distinctive tactics, frames and identities. Each wave builds off of the waves of anti-austerity protests in Europe and pro-democracy movements in North Africa and the Middle East. Each wave in the recent period also utilized the
power of social networking software like Facebook and Twitter in unprecedented ways that allow it these waves of protest to spread more easily. This is important because systemic change, particularly systemic change in global economic and political systems is most likely when mobilization is internationalized and linked. By understanding how waves of protest, diffusion and social networking software are connected, we can better understand the current moment, and movements.

Waves or cycles of protest rise and fall. Sidney Tarrow and others have shown that as these waves accelerate, they mobilize new populations and broker relationships amongst existing sectors. These are the periods where movements are most innovative, sharing ideas and brokering relationships amongst new populations. After a period and in response to both internal tensions and external forces – movements start to fragment – often around questions of identity and strategy (Tarrow 1998/2011). Through this fragmentation, some activists will demobilize, especially those with the least experience and integration into existing movement networks (Klandermans 1997). Others will institutionalize their forms and infrastructures of activity sometimes in an attempt to maintain or obtain new advantages, while others will radicalize, frustrated with what they see as the cooptation of the movement and its limited success. These micro-waves waves may make up larger waves of protest. If one looks closely at the 1968-1970 global wave of protest, one sees the smaller mobilizations of civil rights, student, anti-Vietnam, anti-colonial, feminist, and gay and lesbian movements feeding off one another. George Katsiaficas (1987) described the way that the 1968 wave of protest spread internationally as the ‘eros effect’ an intuitive process by which people were inspired by love of one another rather than organization.
But clearly, underneath the compelling imagery of the 'eros effect', there is communication and at least some rudimentary organization. Diffusion is a collective and interactive set of mechanisms. The direct and indirect channels of communication amongst activists allow the diffusion of the ideas and practices that push these waves. As Doug McAdam pointed out, 'the pace of insurgency comes to be crucially influenced by a) the creativity of insurgents in devising new tactical forms, and (b) the ability of opponents to neutralize these moves through effective tactical encounters (McAdam 1983, 736) A new idea can offer hope, a new identity, a sense of possibility. It corresponds with peaks of movement activity (ibid, 738) and the emergence of new ‘movement generations.’ (Whittier 1995). A new movement generation can coalesce around a new idea, whether it’s an Occupy Wall Street style occupation, a casserole march of neighbours banging pots, the symbol of the red square or a round dance in a shopping mall. These new or newly branded ideas help existing activists to bring together their less committed friends and acquaintances, arguing that this time, we can win. Existing activists use their personal and organizational networks to spread these ideas. They do this through a range of direct and direct channels. This has always been the case. The 1968 wave used flyers and alternative newspapers, campus and community radio stations and meetings. They mobilized through neighbourhood associations and trade unions, parent networks and religious groups. Sometimes the ideas associated with a new movement or form of mobilization spread and caught fire, but most of the time it didn’t.

The diffusion of an idea to a new user is a process that involves many micro-processes or mechanisms. For individuals or collectivities to change their behavior a number of smaller mechanisms have to occur. First, the potential users need to know about the idea – there needs to be a channel of communication, a medium between A and B. That route needs to be understood.
to be legitimate. Second, the potential users need to be able evaluate the idea, innovation or practice as valuable and appropriate for their own context and identity. This is more likely when previous users are seen as similar to the potential users in some way, or the previous context is seen as similar to the potential context. For example, as Sarah Soule points out students are more likely to see student practices in similar types of contexts as their own as relevant. This mechanism is called ‘identification’ or ‘attribution of similarity’. This mechanism is increasingly likely to occur when other groups or individuals outside of the original users, sometimes called ‘opinion leaders’ have ‘certified’ the original users and their innovation as valuable, legitimate and useful. For potential users to engage in this evaluation, potential users may need to deliberate openly about that innovation in relatively reflexive, egalitarian ways (Wood 2012). This process of deliberation allows potential users to adapt a tactic to a new local context, as well as to their ongoing identity and strategy. These deliberations involve storytelling, evaluation and debate. Past research has shown how such conversations allowed sit-ins, non-violent civil disobedience and direct action tactics to spread to new sites (Chabot 2000, 200x, 2012, Wood 2012).

Diffusion is facilitated by the available media of communications. Sidney Tarrow pointed this out in his discussion of direct and indirect relational diffusion. But these categories are called into question by some social media. All media vary in their form, their cost, their speed, the relative influence of producers and consumers, and the way that they map onto larger social networks. Newspapers, television, email and face to face meetings differ as channels of communication. Even if we are to constrain ourselves to discussing only electronic media – email differs from Facebook which differs from Twitter in the ways that each medium spreads ideas.
Recent research has noted how social media has facilitated the spread of recent waves of protest. Merylna Lim (2012) showed how it facilitated the burgeoning pro-democracy movement in Egypt that underlay the protests of January 2011. As Stalker and Wood noted in our study of G20 protesters in Toronto in 2010, email and social networking software connected different types of protesters in different ways. Social media were more likely to be used by younger protesters and those more active in the protester networks. And because people’s individual networks are more diverse than any organizational list that they may be on, social networking software posts on someone’s Facebook ‘wall’ for example, are more likely to be seen by diverse readers than an email.

If we crudely compare email to social networking software we find that

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<th>Email</th>
<th>Social Networking</th>
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<td>Average Age of Users</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Younger</td>
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<td>Use</td>
<td>Bidirectional</td>
<td>Multi-directional</td>
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<td>Networks</td>
<td>Known networks</td>
<td>Combination of known and unknown networks</td>
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<td>Media identity</td>
<td>Formal, old-school, organizational, predictable</td>
<td>Informal, fast-paced, unpredictable</td>
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<td>Messages</td>
<td>Sender to receiver, with potential forwarding</td>
<td>Many options – most frequent – sender to receiver, publicly shared</td>
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<td>Mobile networking (through smartphones)</td>
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<td>Even simpler</td>
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Because of the way the platform is used and interacted with, social networking sites like Facebook are more likely to, and able to communicate ideas, tactics or practices to non-activists than email or traditional media. Social networking is more likely to communicate in a way that will allow those young people to identify with the previous users through interactive conversations on posts, ‘sharing’ and the role that high status opinion leaders have in social networks. Social networking is also more likely to facilitate deliberative discussions amongst non-activists than other media through providing space for quick engagement. But exactly how this happens still needs to be examined.

At present, social networking, although spreading rapidly through Canadian and US population, associated with young, network based organizing. The Facebook and Twitter Revolutions of the Middle East and North Africa were understood to be successful and spread widely because of the use of social media. These forms of communication, partly because of their novelty and partly because of their form were able to avoid government interference, were able to be more flexible than traditional political organizations, and were able to communicate quickly using existing social networks. However, much of the discussion of the leverage that these media offered saw the advantages being from the media itself, rather than the way that the form and structure of the media intersected with processes of diffusion. The power of social media like Facebook and Twitter in facilitating waves of protest is through the way that they allow potential adopters to discuss, certify, adapt, criticize and disseminate information on a practice or symbol.

Although it may be self indulgent, I’ll use myself as an example of how one medium, Facebook combined with traditional media, facilitated the spread of the Idle No More movement. Idle No More was initiated by four indigenous women in Saskatchewan in late October 2012.
They were concerned about the federal bill C45 which threatened indigenous treaty rights and environmental protections of water and land. They turned to Facebook to organize an initial protest in Saskatoon on November 10th. A week after that small meeting, there were events in Regina, Prince Albert and North Battleford, Sask., and Winnipeg (CBC News). By January 5th, 2013 the Idle No More Facebook group had more than 45,000 members, but what do such numbers mean? To understand, one needs to look at the way such social media are being used.

I’m not describing myself as typical of anything in particular, but I think that its people who have some similarities to myself that may be playing key roles in these new movements. I’m already a committed activist, one involved in a range of movements, including ones involved in indigenous solidarity. However, while sympathetic, I’m not able to spend much of my time directly involved in that movement. I’m listen to the radio, read newspapers, and am also a heavy Facebook and occasional Twitter user.

I first heard on the radio in mid December 2011 that Chief Teresa Spence of Attiwapiskat was going on a hunger strike about the treatment of indigenous communities and the passage of Bill C145 which affected their governance and autonomy. I then saw a few posts about Idle No More on Facebook from friends doing indigenous solidarity work. I noticed them, but didn’t take any particular action myself. Then, someone posted a video of a round dance protest in the West Edmonton Wall. I watched it, ‘liked it’ and shared it on my Facebook page – reaching potentially over 500 ‘friends’. Some of them then ‘shared’ the video clip as well. Now I had publicly certified the movement amongst to my friends. I now started to receive more Facebook links to other videos from friends in other cities. A Facebook ‘group’ for Idle No More was started. I was asked by a student how to learn more about Idle No More. I referred them to Facebook. I started ‘following’ the Idle No More Twitter feed. Then a Facebook ‘group’ for Idle No More Toronto
was formed. I received an invitation for a ‘round dance’ action in Toronto on December 21st a day where there were similar flash mob actions across the country. I ‘joined’ the event, promoting it to other on my ‘wall’. During the same period, increasing numbers of posts from across the country also promoted Idle No More Events, and statements. There was clear online evidence of a growing movement that increasing numbers were ‘certifying’ as important. My first physical involvement occurred at this point. I attended the flash mob in Toronto, seeing other activists I knew, and many more I didn’t. This was my first ‘face to face’ interaction with the movement. After the action, and hungry for more information, I joined the Toronto Idle No More Facebook ‘group.’ It was Christmas time and I went to family dinners where I heard about Idle No More from non-activist and conservative family members. On Facebook, I started hearing about Idle No More actions in the US, where many of my friends live. I ‘liked’ those actions, spreading information about them back into denser Canadian networks. On a walk, I ran into my neighbor asked me about the movement and I then ‘friended’ her on Facebook and shared information with her about upcoming actions. She ended up attending a nearby blockade and offering material support. She became far more involved than I. Throughout the period I read about the movement in the paper and heard radio and saw television interviews with spokespeople from the movement. On Facebook there were posts discussing the strategy of the movement, discussing the divisions within the movement and arguing about the significance of blockading, hunger striking, the Assembly of First Nations and the role of non-natives. For New Year’s celebrations I was with other activists and sympathizers and everyone was talking about the movement. Most had not attended any events for the movement, but were engaged and hopeful about its success. Returning to the city, I heard about more protest events through
Facebook, and watched as friends coordinated rides with strangers through Facebook, with others commenting – ‘we need another action in Toronto!’

This recollection of the period from December 15th 2012 until January 5th 2013 is inevitably partial. But it shows how social media operates not only to share information quickly, but to provide spaces where processes of deliberation, certification, identity formation, framing, and collective analysis are occurring. These processes underlie the adoption of movement identities, the incorporation of movement symbols and experimentation with and participation in movement practices - spreading the wave of protest.

Figure A shows how Idle No More is being spoken about using social media – both Facebook and Twitter. However, such data does not differentiate between indigenous and non-indigenous users. My description is based on the spread of the movement through my networks of mostly non-indigenous activists. One can probably assume that face-to-face communications, email and offline organizational networks would play a larger role for those actively engaged in organizing as part of indigenous community networks. However, for non-indigenous solidarity activists at least, it is clear that the pattern of participation in the movement is tied to the way that social media are organized. Given that
indigenous communities have embraced social media technologies such as Facebook the interaction between these media and diffusion may be significant there as well. As Jean LaRose, Aboriginal People’s Television Network's chief executive explains about the high use of social media in indigenous communities, "This is new and it's pushing change in the community," said And it's coming up from the bottom. I'm not talking about an Indian spring here or anything, but it's an interesting shift in the way our politics are happening." (Canadian Press 2012, Taylor 2011)

One can see the rapid growth of the movement if one looks at Figure A, a map of Idle No More Events in November and December 2012 (Groves 2012).

Figure B shows the map of events for the day of action on January 12, 2013.

There is a rapid spread of protests in the first few weeks across Canada, and then spreading into the United States, Europe and beyond. One can see similar spread of events during
A similar pattern happens with other waves of protest. In Figure C, one can see the mentions of Occupy Wall Street on all forms of social media through time. Whether these correspond with protest events and size of protest events is a project for another day.

One can see a similar pattern in the mobilization of the student protests and those in solidarity with the ‘Printemps Erable’ in Quebec during the spring of 2012. In this case too, the wave of protest was facilitated by diffusion processes that utilized social media to allow potential participants to learn about the protest practices, frames, and symbols, then to cumulatively comment, share, ‘like’, critique or adapt those practices, frames and symbols, facilitating quick diffusion of the movement. The wave of protests had spread across Canada by May 30, 2012 – after the Quebec government had tried to contain the student protests in Quebec. Existing organizational networks, along with online social networks, facilitated the diffusion that accelerated the wave of protest.

Of course correlation is not causation. But what is clear here is that to understand the role of social networking in waves of protest, one needs to look at the way that the technology interacts with the micro-processes that underlie diffusion – processes of identification, deliberation, certification and adaptation. Let’s break these down one by one using the example of Facebook.
Identification or the attribution of similarity is a key micro-process within diffusion. It is the process whereby a potential user of an innovation sees themselves as similar to past users of that innovation – building a shared identity. Identification between past users of an idea or practice and potential users of such is facilitated by shared identities in the past, shared demographics, structural positions and shared language (McAdam and Rucht 1993, Soule 1997).

Facebook uses existing social networks to give legitimacy to a particular piece of information – such as a video clip, photograph or article. As repeated studies have shown, the source of information matters in diffusion, and when an idea is communicated by a source one finds legitimate, it carries additional influence. If a Facebook user sends out a piece of information about an event, identifying with that movement or event, that association between their ‘friend’ and the movement or event is clear – and highlights that relationship, thus facilitating identification. This process is even more likely to occur when one’s ‘friends’ invite one to join the ‘Facebook group’, or attend an upcoming movement event. The casual and low cost way such associations are invited through the software encourage symbolic ‘joining’ that may, in a subsequent period, translate into physical engagement.

Similarly, certification of an idea, movement or practice as worthwhile or important is facilitated by Facebook. Certification facilitates diffusion when respected members of social networks visibly approve of an innovation. The channel of communication and source of information as a friend, in combination with the possibility of positive or critical editorializing by the ‘friend’ who is sharing the information create the conditions that will facilitate identification.

Online deliberation about the tactics, strategies and symbols also facilitate diffusion, allowing activists in particular locations, organizations or networks to emphasize or deemphasize
certain aspects of the innovation, allowing it to be adapted to their own contexts, identities and trajectories. For example, Toronto activists promoted the initial Idle No More protest in that city using existing networks of anticapitalist and environmental activists on Facebook. Their posts triggered discussions about the similarities and differences between those movements and the indigenous led Idle No More. Longstanding indigenous solidarity activists started a new Facebook group on December 23rd discussing how to be a good non-indigenous ally and how to best support the movement. These online conversations about the identity, practices and goals of the movement then continued on different posts within the various Facebook groups and associated individuals as new events were organized. The conversations accelerated and decelerated through time and online space, amongst a changing set of participants, but accumulating and coalescing, and concurrently influencing and being influenced by offline conversations.

Each of these micro processes or mechanisms; identification, certification and deliberation are part of the process of diffusing new tactics, practices, symbols, frames and movement identities. Their operation drives the undulations of waves or cycles of protest. Their operation can spread excitement and inspire engagement or can facilitate factionalism and disengagement through online flame wars that activate boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and show the limited or negative support a campaign or event may elicit.

This argument should not suggest that these are “Facebook Revolutions”. Although the Occupy, Quebec student and the Idle No More waves of protest each utilize social media in various ways, it is clear that offline social networks are the ones that underlie the cores of the physical mobilizations that initiated and will sustain these movements. However, knowing this fact should not mean that the operation of social media is not important. These media are
transforming and speeding the ebbs and flows of waves of protest, through the way that they facilitate social processes that underlie the diffusion of symbols, frames, tactics and identities. They do this as channels of information flow, where they are more likely than email to spread their information to non-activists, and they do this as sites for certification and identification that facilitate spreading their message in ways that encourage participation. They also do this through providing spaces for deliberation that can help those mobilized to adapt, adjust and consolidate the meaning and form of their participation. When we understand how social media structures and facilitates these distinct social processes, we can better understand these rapidly expanding and contracting waves of protest.
References


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