

Chapter 10

The impact of social media on traditional media agenda setting theory — the case study of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the USA

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Abstract: Looking at the growing usage of social media in the world, it is necessary to notice its influence on public perception of different issues and problems. Social media is not only employed as a place for discussions and content sharing but also as a tool for social activism in the offline world which may be illustrated by recent events in Egypt or Tunisia known as the Arab Spring, or started in July 2011 in the USA, the Occupy Wall Street movement. This study focuses on the impact of social media on agenda building and agenda setting in traditional media by examining the case study of Occupy Wall Street movement where social media was used as the most important tool for communication. It also discusses the implication of social media coverage on the theory of issue-salience cycle.

Key words: Occupy Wall Street, agenda building, agenda setting, issue-salience cycle, social media.

Introduction

Ever since the emergence of social media in the 1990s, communications scholars and professionals alike have sought to understand the impact of social media on traditional mass media communications. Of particular note has been the concern that social media (and user-generated content) could supplant traditional mass media as the leading information source and agenda setter for audiences in the digital age.

Several papers have been written investigating the issue, frequently electing to focus on individual components of the social media sphere: blogs, Twitter feeds, YouTube videos, et cetera. Although these investigations have yielded some results, many larger questions regarding the role of social media in public issue salience have gone largely unanswered. Furthermore, given the still evolving nature

and role of social media in the lives of its users, questions are frequently answered with yet more questions, as researchers hedge their bets against impending and often unforeseen evolutions in the field.

As mentioned, however, despite the relatively small number of previous studies on the subject, social media continues to play an ever increasing role in the lives and the attentions of its audiences. A recent survey conducted by Pew revealed that record numbers of Americans are turning to the Internet both for social and informational reasons with ever increasing frequency (Figure 1).

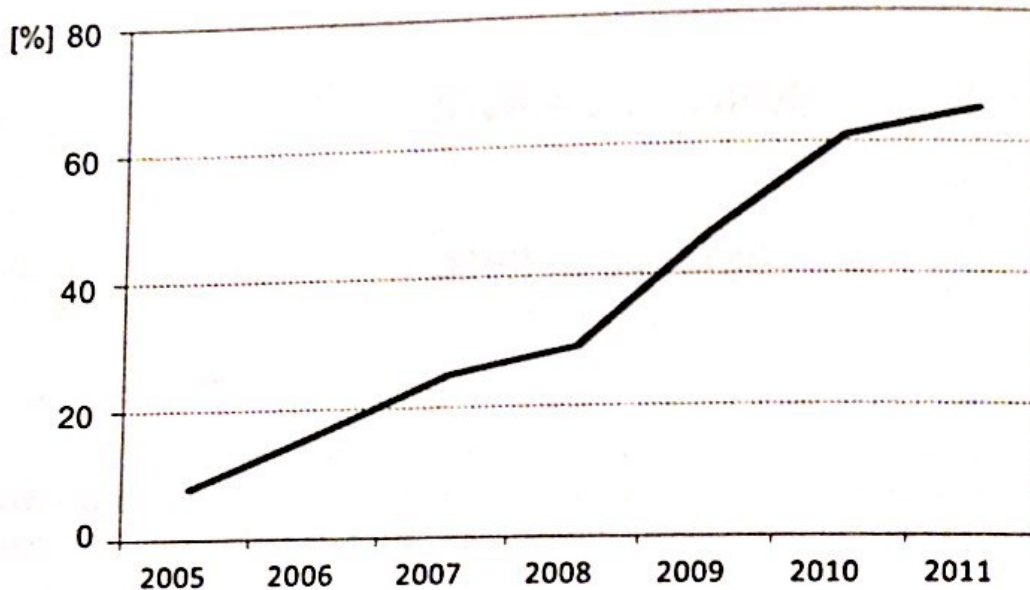


Fig. 1. Social networking site use by online adults, 2005–2011

Source: www.pewinternet.org.

Given these trends, this article seeks to delve into the troubled waters of the role of social media in modern agenda and to add to the growing body of literature investigating the state and the future of social media as a key component of public discourse. To examine this topic, the authors elected to delve into a case study of the roles of these competing media avenues surrounding a contemporary news topic: the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Occupy Wall Street — overview of the case

Occupy Wall Street is a “leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors genders and political persuasions” (www.occupywallst.org). The protesters define themselves as

the 99% of lower wage earners who do not agree with greed and corruption of the 1% top wage earners and an open, participatory and horizontally organized process through which we are

building the capacity to constitute ourselves in public as autonomous collective forces within and against the constant crises of our times. (www.nycga.net)

The movement was first started on July 13, 2011 when members of foundation called Adbusters¹ issued a call to action: Occupy Wall Street and started a website (www.occupywallst.org) supported by Facebook and Twitter channel. The goal proposed by Adbusters was to gather 20,000 people at Wall Street in New York City on September 17, 2011, beginning a popular occupation of that space for two months and more (www.occupywallst.org). The idea was inspired by the events that occurred in Arab World, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia in 2010, frequently referred to as the "Arab Spring" (Kuhn, 2011). The protesters declared to follow the spirit of the movements in the Arab World as they considered it "a revolutionary tactic to achieve the ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants" (www.occupywallst.org). What was crucial for protesters was the significant usage of social media as a tool of a grass root revolution that took place in Egypt or Tunisia. The protesters in Arabic countries used Facebook and Twitter to organize and activate themselves to pursue their goals of changing the social reality they lived in (Kuhn, 2011). The Occupy Wall Street participants wish for social media to play a similar role in their movement.

On September 17, 2011, hundreds of demonstrators gathered in the streets on Manhattan's financial district. Somewhat contentiously, the early days of the protests went largely uncovered by traditional media outlets, leading many to claim that the demonstrations were being "blackout," or being left deliberately uncovered, by the mainstream media. This "blackout" was widely decried both through social media channels as well as through alternative, yet still traditional media sources such as Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* ("Parks & Demonstration" 10/5/2011). Although statistics show that the term "blackout" does not necessarily represent the exact level of coverage (several news agencies ran brief stories in the opening days of the movement, on and around September 16/17, 2011), it is nevertheless clear that agencies were slow to respond and only quietly covered the early days of the OWS movement.

Despite this meager coverage, the OWS movement nevertheless took root in the public consciousness during their first week until September 24, when YouTube footage of an activist being pepper sprayed by an officer of the New York Police Department went viral (Caren & Gaby, 2011). From that moment the movement began to accumulate an ever more significant presence in the traditional news cycle, including traditional media coverage of the arrest of over 700 people

¹ The Adbusters Media Foundation is a Canadian-based not-for-profit, anti-consumerist and pro-environment organization founded in 1989 by Kalle Lasn and Bill Schmalz in Vancouver, British Columbia. Adbusters describes itself as "...a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age."

on the Brooklyn Bridge on October 1 (Reuters, 10/2/2011) and riots during the protests in Oakland at the end of October (Fox News, 10/26/2011).

Although originally the movement was focused in New York City as the financial center of the United States, it spread all over the country. Organizations such as Occupy Together (www.occupytogether.org) and Occupy Colleges (www.occupycolleges.org) were formed to popularize the movement nationally. As Caren and Gaby point out, with the idea being framed to everybody outside of the top 1% of wealth holders in the United States, it makes it flexible to apply to different communities and social groups (Caren & Gaby, 2011).

Occupy Wall Street is above all an offline activity. Protesters gather in central city locations for hours or days. Collective decisions for activities and events are made during live, in-person, scheduled assemblies. That said, one of the most activating channels for protesters is social media. Occupy Wall Street maintains a presence on all major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Meetup, Livestream and individual websites made by particular chapters such as Occupy Colleges. These are where everybody can find information about the next gathering, sign in for newsletters or discuss with other activists. Kalle Lasn, the editor-in-chief and co-founder of Adbusters says in the interview for Aljazeera that the movement aims to be international and does not have a planned end:

I'll be happy if this movement is one of the biggest blasts of revolutionary fervor [sic] that we've seen since 1968. If that happens, then we will have ignited a spark that will then spread into all kinds of different factions. (Aljazeera.com, 10/7/2011)

Social media agenda building theory

Lasn's quotation is a profound example of one component of agenda setting theory: agenda building. Agenda building has been defined as "the process through which the media chose which events, issues, or sources to feature over others" (McCombs, 2004). Its concept has been outlined by Scheufele to Cobb and Elder's 1971 study of politics and news (Scheufele, 2000). According to authors, agenda building is prior to agenda setting. The main difference between these two is that agenda setting refers to how traditional media agenda influences the public perception of issue salience whereas the main point of agenda building is how some topics become a part of media agenda when others do not (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Zach and Molleda observed that the influence in agenda building process is allocated by who started the narrative or who is responsible for the nature of the story (Zach & Molleda, 2006).

As defined by Scheufele (2000), agenda building represents the initial stage in any sort of larger media or public agenda. In short, agenda building is, in Lasn's terms, the "spark." Many different factors can drive agenda building, however,

several key variables have particular power at this stage in the process. Intriguingly, it is at the agenda building stage that the relationships between traditional media outlets and their audiences are most pronounced in terms of audience interests shaping agenda. At the opening of this issue salience process, Sheafer and Weimann (2005) propose that agenda building is a result of media channels responding to external events they suspect their audiences would be interested in, "real-world conditions and events, and the activities of political actors." This definition, however, still externalizes the motivating agents of agenda beyond the mainstream audience. Agendas are attributed to either "real-world conditions and events" (non-human/non-individual actors) or "political actors" (opinion leaders within their respective communities). Intriguingly, though, this definition neglects to consider some of the ways in which power for opinion leadership may have shifted in the social media age. Are "political actors" the sole "opinion leaders" for a given community? Do social media channels enable average citizens to serve as "opinion leaders" in a given context? These questions led the authors to the first research question,

RQ1: Can social media "build the agenda" for the traditional media?

Social media and agenda setting theory

Level one agenda setting theory

The theory of agenda setting deals with the influence of news media on the salience of events in the public mind (McCombs, 2004). The concept was fully introduced in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the study of the role of the media in 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), but it was debated by different scholars earlier on without using the name "agenda setting." In 1922 the intellectual father of agenda setting theory, Walter Lippman, stated in his classic *Public Opinion* that news media is the window to the vast world beyond our direct experience and for that matter defines how we perceive this world. According to Lipmann public opinion responds to the pseudo-environment created by news media (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). In 1963 another scholar, Bernard Cohen made the case that the media does not tell people what to think but points out which issues are important (Cohen 1963).

The main focus of the research examining the issue of agenda setting is so-called "salience-transfer"; how the media serves to establish issue importance and consideration (i.e. "salience").

Through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda setting role of the news media. (McCombs, 2004: 1)

In their pioneering research from 1972, McCombs and Shaw proposed that the mass media set the agenda of issues for a political campaign by influencing the salience of issues among voters. To test their hypothesis, the authors conducted a survey among a sample of undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Respondents were asked to name the key issues of the day regardless of what the politicians were saying. Their answers were measured against the actual media content (five local and national newspapers, two television networks, two news magazines). The findings supported their hypothesis that the media plays a role in setting the agenda for public opinion by accentuating specific topics (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009).

The study conducted in 1972 showed the existence of first level agenda setting, also known as priming. First-level agenda setting focuses on the transfer of object salience from the media agenda to the public agenda (Chyi & McCombs, 2004: 23). "When making decisions about political actors or public figures," Iyengar and Kinder argued, "audience members rely on those issues as a basis for evaluation which are most salient to them at the time they make the decisions. This process is commonly referred to as priming." (Kim et al., 2002: 8). Within the next years scholars went further with the research on agenda setting and started to examine the framing role of media which is called second-level agenda setting. Second level agenda setting deals "with attribute salience in the media and its impact on both object salience and attribute salience among the public" (Chyi & McCombs, 2004: 23). Level two is examined by analyzing two types of attributes: cognitive and affective ones. The first group of attributes refers to subjects/people and their perceived characteristics that have media content, whereas the second one shows opinions about these subjects/people (Golan & Wanta, 2001: 249).

Social media — definitions

The biggest social networking site in the world, Facebook.com exceeded in September 2011 800 million users. This is more than the population of the United States (312 million) and Brazil (190 million) together. The phenomena of social networking sites and the rapid development of Web 2.0 after 2004 focused the attention of many scholars. Nonetheless, there seems to be confusion among academic researchers on what social media is and what exactly should be included in this term. According to Kaplan and Haenlein, social media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Another group of scholars argues that "social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content" (Kietzmann et al., 2011). There is no certainty as well which

Internet tools exactly can be included to social media and how to categorize them. Kaplan and Haenlein differentiate categories of social media depending on social presence and media richness. The first category would be collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), then blogs, content communities (e.g. YouTube), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual game and social worlds such as World of Warcraft or Second Life (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

The research on social media's impact on agenda setting theory

As social media itself is a relatively new phenomenon, research on its effects on the agenda setting process is somewhat limited. In 2001 Chaffe and Metzger point out that "the key problem for agenda setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about." Later on this prediction will be followed by some authors who were trying to explore the impact of social media on agenda setting (Delwiche, 2005). Some scholars reviewed the subject theoretically such as the authors of *Trends in social media: Persistence and decay* who claim that "when topics originate in media outlets, the social medium acts as filter and amplifier of what the standard media produces and thus contributes to the agenda setting mechanisms that have been thoroughly studied for more than three decades" (Asur et al., 2011). Other work went further in order to check whether social media can influence or even set the agenda. The most developed group of research on the influence of social media on agenda setting is the one that examines the role of blogs in priming and framing. In 2004 Drezner and Farrell examined the interactions between significant blogs and traditional media outlets. According to them, under specific circumstances — when key bloggers focus on a new or neglected issue — blogs can socially construct an agenda or give the frame that "acts as a focal point for mainstream media, shaping and constraining the larger political debate" (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). The authors proved their thesis by analyzing the network of blog links, as well as with a survey of media professionals about their blog preferences (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). Later on in 2005 A. Delwiche made a case that as traditionally the issue salience is explored by focusing on audience recall and public opinion blogs give a chance to consider hyperlinks as behavioral indicators of an issue's perceived importance (Delwiche, 2005). He tracked news stories most often linked to by blog authors in 2003 comparing to results highlighted by traditional media making the thesis that blog authors construct an alternative agenda within limited blogospheres (Delwiche, 2005).

This methodology was later applied in the survey conducted by S. Meraz from University of Illinois who examined the use of the hyperlink as an external marker of source influence within 11 newsroom political blogs of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and within 18 top U.S. independent political blogs across the

political spectrum (Meraz, 2009). Meraz argued that agenda setting power stopped being universal among citizen media outlets and that bloggers redistribute this power between traditional media and citizen media. Thus makes the traditional media agenda setting one of the forces among many influences (Meraz, 2009).

Next to the blogosphere the second most researched social medium is the broadcasting website YouTube.com. In 2010 a group of scholars from different universities analyzed thousands of videos posted to YouTube and their relationship to coverage of Proposition 8 in California in traditional media, tracing the correlations between them using vector autoregression (VAR) to juxtapose the effects each bore on the other (Sayre et al., 2010). The authors found that YouTube allows users to drive or even lead public discourse on politically or socially relevant issues, effectively supplanting, or at the very least countering traditional "opinion leaders" such as religious authorities, community leaders, or political agents (such as in the case of Proposition 8). Further, the study provides an example of how social media platform can create issue salience when the mainstream media is interpreted as under-covering an issue or object (Sayre et al., 2010).

This study emphasizes the role of social media as a component in this agenda setting process, both by providing alternative content to traditional media and by examining whether or not social media, with its relative flexibility and speed, can "scoop" traditional media outlets, thus determining the objects they opt to cover. This is not to say a causal relationship exists between the two media types, merely to elucidate a potential correlative relationship between trends in their respective coverage. This objective in turn led authors to the second research question.

RQ2: Does social media content correlate with traditional media coverage, and if so, which occurs first?

The theory of the issue-attention cycle

Originally proposed by Downs (1972), the issue-attention cycle represents the typical trajectory for issue salience for American audiences. In his article "Up and down with ecology — the 'issue attention cycle'" he described the phenomenon of public interest in crises and major problems highlighted by media within American society. The author built a theory of "issue-attention cycle" that comes from the nature of some domestic problems and in the way traditional media outlets interact with the public (Downs, 1972). Downs differentiated five stages of the issue cycle: the pre-problem stage, alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, realizing the cost of significant progress, gradual decline of intense public interest and the post-problem stage (Downs, 1972: 40) (Figure 2).

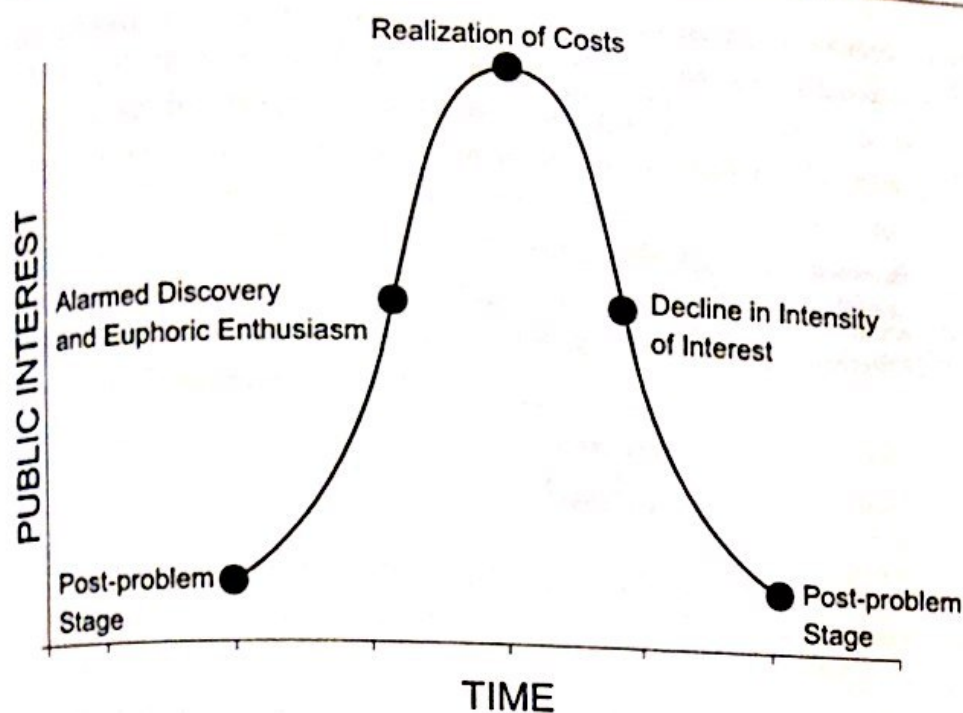


Fig. 2. The issue-attention cycle according to Downs

Source: Downs (1972).

The first or pre-problem stage occurs when the problem exists but does not grab much public attention. It is only discussed by selected groups that have the best access to the news source or to the issue itself (Downs, 1972). The second stage — alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm — begins when early media reports suddenly introduce the issue to the public consciousness, inspiring a flurry of engagement and activation of various exposed publics. Downs observes that this interest is usually accompanied by excitement connected with society's intention to "solve the problem" (1972). The third stage — realizing the cost of significant progress — occurs when, despite interest and activation, affected publics come to believe that the cost of solving the problem is simply too high. This loss of public agency in turn leads to a drop in interest. This in turn leads to the fourth stage — the gradual decline of intense public interest. Without the will or the perceived capability to solve the problem, public attention gradually begins to turn elsewhere, leading to the final stage: the post-problem stage. Described as a "prolonged limbo" (Downs, 1972: 40), publics remain aware of the issue in the post-problem stage, but interest has turned elsewhere.

Building from Downs's work, Peterson (2009) revisits the issue-attention cycle as it has emerged surrounding the international terrorism issue following 9/11. In her article, "Revisiting Downs' issue-attention cycle: International terrorism and U.S. public opinion," Peterson proffers a modification of Downs's model in an updated context (Figure 3).

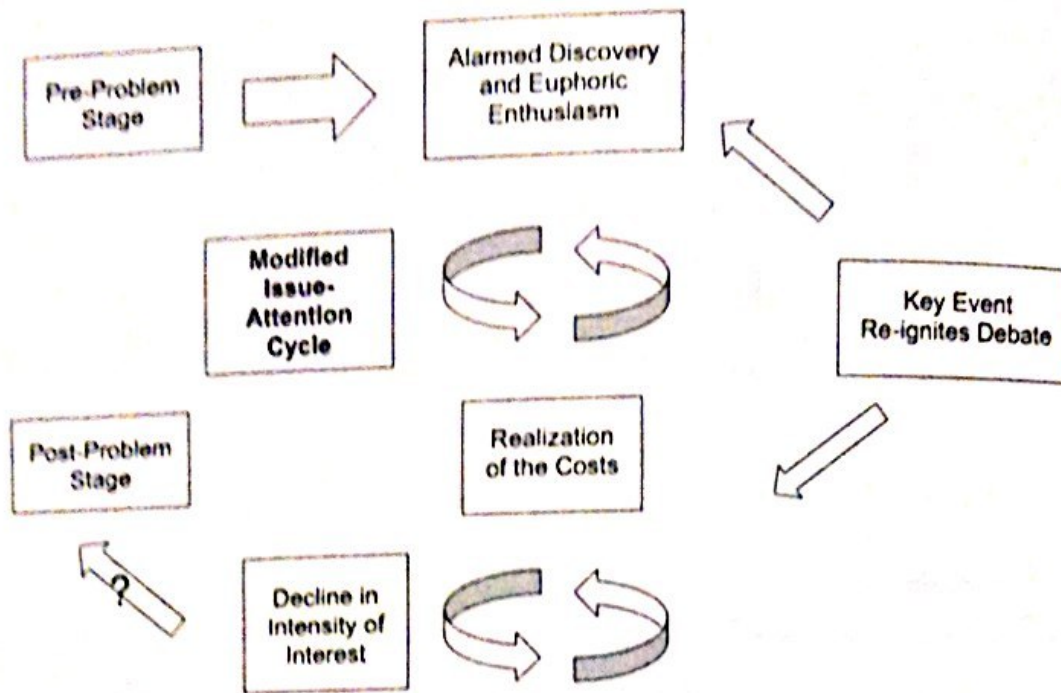


Fig. 3. Changes in Downs's issue-attention cycle

Source: Peterson (2009).

From the perspective of terrorism, Peterson proposes that several factors may modify the traditional, relatively linear cycle. The first of these factors is confusion about the issues themselves.

Because the public lacks the will or ability to process the complex issue of international terrorism, the issue-attention cycle is disrupted ... the issue could become mired in a process whereby it cycles through stages two ... through four rather than progress linearly into the final stage of a twilight realm ... (Peterson, 2009: 11)

Despite these updates and revisions, Downs's original model still remains remarkably useful, and yet it is somewhat limited by the emergence of social media as an integral part in the way publics receive information and communicate with each other. This added layer to Downs's pioneering work led to the final research question of this study.

RQ 3: Does social media impact the way in which the issue-salience cycle unfolds? And if so, how?

Methodology

Content Analysis

In order to evaluate the objectives in this study, the quantitative content analysis was conducted. It is a research technique for the "systematic, objective, and

quantitative description of the manifest content in communication" (Berelson, 1952 qtd. in Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989). With an extensive body of literature in agenda setting research, content analysis has also emerged as one of the critical approaches to examining the role of the media in shaping public issue salience (Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989). This method has proven particularly constructive with samples that have a large amount of data because a percentage can be used for analysis and still provide reliable results. What is more, content analysis has been used in previous research on the impact of social media in communication research (Trammell, 2004).

Sampling

In November 2011, the authors investigated the relationships of three major, national papers' coverage of the Occupy Wall Street events with the activities on the two largest Facebook pages dedicated to the movement. The three newspapers selected were: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. These papers were selected for several key reasons. The first reason for these papers is that all three have well-developed national sections dedicated to reporting news from around the nation. In this way their coverage may represent the traditional print media's closest approximation to the reach and the focus of social media site such as a Facebook page. Secondly, it was considered that these three papers also share a broader approach to news reporting, with extensive Opinion-Editorial (Op-Ed) and human interest reporting, again providing a more direct relationship with social media content.

Facebook was selected as the key social media site because it, similar to the newspapers, has in many ways the broadest reach in terms of audience access. As the site has grown in popularity and its user base has diversified, the volume and demographic diversity of active users have also grown considerably. With 800 million active users, Facebook is not only the largest social networking site in the United States but it is also the second largest website in the country (Alexa.com, 11/2011). Pivotaly, Facebook was also found in a survey to be the social media site most frequently accessed by active participants in the Occupy Wall Street movement, thus making it a critical link between the protestors and the general public (www.fastcompany.com).

Although Facebook hosts a multitude of pages with various relationships with the Occupy Wall Street movement (and its various, local-level relatives), two Facebook pages were identified as the largest based on total number of "likes" (a process through which Facebook users signify their approval of the page's content), "activity" (overall number of posts, comments, and interactions of users with the page), and "users" (individual Facebook members who "follow" the content of the page). The first page, "Occupy Wall St." was the first, and is considered to be the "official" page of the protest movement. Started on August 8, 2011,