

Occupy Movements in the Media¹

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In this century, the year 2011 will be remembered as a historical landmark for mass demonstrations for social change. Starting with the so-called Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, followed by the 15M Indignant movement in Spain and Occupy movements in the United States and other countries, these rallies quickly and heterogeneously spread around the world. Despite their distinctive features, they share some common characteristics. On the one hand, there is a general feeling of indignation toward the political and financial systems, resulting in subsequent claims for change. This public call for change was made explicit in the United for Global Change demonstrations that took place on October 15, 2011 in more than 80 countries worldwide. On the other hand, there is a growing role of information and communication technologies, especially social media networks, in the development of social movements.

The relationship between social movements and the media has a long tradition in scholarly debates. Although people are increasingly looking for information on social media networks, they also rely on media groups for news. Hence, it is important to better understand the relationship between the media and social movements. The main concern of this essay is how the media has portrayed social movements that began in 2011. In order to provide a comparative perspective on the protests, we specifically focus on Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in the United States and the 15M Indignant Movement (15M) in Spain. For the purpose of this inquiry, we group the two together under the descriptive, “Occupy movements.” In each case, protesters are expressing their indignation about the financial and political “crisis,” and they are responding to it by occupying and re-appropriating public spaces to create awareness and openly ask for change. Specifically, we analyze these Occupy movements with regard

¹ This is a post-print version of an article published in 2013. You can cite the original article as follows: Iranzo, Amador & Farné, Alessandra (2013). Occupy Movements in the Media. *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 25(3), 384-391. DOI: 10.1080/10402659.2013.816563

to the demonstrations that took place on October 15, 2011 (hereafter 10/15), organized under the common slogan “United for #GlobalChange.” We have chosen 10/15 because it is a significant moment for Occupy movements. It is representative of massive and mainly nonviolent protests where tens of thousands of people gathered “to claim their rights and demand a true democracy.” Demonstrations were held mainly in Western countries (Europe, USA, Australia and New Zealand); however, people also took to the streets in several cities of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Although some rallies focused on specific issues, such as student complaints in Chile, it can be argued that world protests united around the core idea of global resistance against inequalities. A shared common ground allowed distinct groups to express their outrage against the privileges enjoyed by “the ruling power” elite over the majority of the world population. The widely spread motto, “[w]e are the 99 percent,” captures and embodies this pivotal conception of these movements around the iniquitous transnational political and economic neo-liberal capitalist system.

For our analysis, we will compare how OWS and 15M were portrayed during a two-day period October 15 and 16, 2011 in the online versions of two major newspapers. With regards to OWS, we reviewed the coverage in *The New York Times* (the NYT) and for 15M we examined *El País*. Utilizing the search terms, “Occupy Wall Street” and “*Movimiento 15-M*” [15-M Movement], we analyzed the NYT and *El País* websites respectively for these two days. For the NYT, we found a total of ten news media pieces; seven were articles also published in the print version, and three were posts in different blogs on its website. Four out of the seven articles consisted of news reporting, and the other three included a news analysis, a Sunday dialogue (in which some readers provide their opinion on the OWS) and an op-ed by Nicholas Kristof. The search in *El País* website returned a total of sixteen media pieces, distributed in eleven news reports, two videos, two slide shows and one editorial. We chose these media sources because they both qualify as liberal elite press, allowing for a significant comparison of Occupy movements in two distinct countries. These elite newspapers are particularly relevant in the media landscape because they serve as references for other media. For our purposes, Noam Chomsky provides a useful definition of elite press. He explains that

media functioning as elite press sets the agenda for other news groups and, at the same time, acts like corporations, “selling privileged audiences to other businesses.” Thus, it does not come as a surprise if the worldviews they present reflect the interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the product.

We conducted an analysis of the NYT and *El País* coverage in order to explore how these media “framed” both Occupy movements. Based on Robert Entman, we can define framing as “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation.” In the case of OWS and 15M, our analysis shows that the media pieces were structured around four sets of frames: Nationwide/Worldwide scope; Socio-Political/Economic focus; Deviant/Legitimate citizen; and Security problem/Social change outcome.

The first set of frames, nationwide/worldwide, defines the scope in which the movement is presented. In the case of OWS, the NYT offers a predominantly national perspective. Only two articles out of ten provide information about the global scope of Occupy movements. The first is a blog post about the use of social media during the 10/15 events. The second is a news article with a local focus that portrays OWS as the driving inspiration for the worldwide demonstrations. The article, whose headline states, “Buoyed by Wall St. Protests, Rallies Sweep the Globe,” mainly provides information about demonstrations in the US and, more specifically, New York City. This nationwide frame is also emphasized by the featured photograph, portraying protestors in New York. At the international level, only Rome gains more attention, as it is associated with violent incidents. Additionally, although hosting the most crowded demonstrations, Spain is merely mentioned in a short paragraph at the end of the text.

On the other hand, *El País* provides a global scope of Occupy movements, which is grasped in the headline of the editorial, “*Malestar global*” [Global discontent], published on October 16. An example of this focus is an article that offers a live account of several demonstrations around the world. Reporters and correspondents wrote up-to-date news reports about the protests through “Eskup,” *El País*’ own micro-blogging social network. Afterwards, these entries were also published as a single piece in the website of the newspaper. Overall, the expression, “*protesta global*” [global protest], is extensively used,

even in more local-centered articles. A news item about the demonstrations in Spain states, "*Esta es una movilización planetaria de centenares de miles de personas que trabajan en red*" [This is a planetary mobilization of a hundred thousand people working as a network]. Despite this global approach, however, *El País* stresses the role of the Spanish 15M as the catalyst for the global protests, as the NYT does with OWS. A main headline reads, "*Cómo el 15-M se exportó al mundo*" [How the 15-M was exported to the world.] These approaches respond to traditional news selection criteria, which include "proximity."

The second set of frames, socio-political/economic, emphasizes the sociopolitical or economic concerns of the movements. Regarding OWS, the NYT presents the movement as a peripheral group mainly demonstrating against "economic injustice." Indeed, the slogan, "[w]e are the 99%," refers to citizens' claims against the world's richest 1 percent. Nevertheless, very little is said with respect to this core and integral message of the movement, with the exception of an op-ed by Nicholas Kristof. Although he considers himself a "fervent enthusiast of capitalism," he provides extensive data and explanations to the current crisis. The economic focus is visible when he mentions problems of the political system. He points out that "the critical issue" in the United States is "economic inequity." Regarding general news coverage, other issues, mainly related to policing, overshadow the movement's core message. Even when OWS is the focus of attention, as in a Sunday Dialogue among the newspaper's readers, other topics, such as the lack of a clear leader or a consistent message, tend to center the discussion. Overall, the NYT provides little critique to the system. When activists do appear, they are represented predominately through activists' quotes inserted at the bottom of the piece. Paradoxically, but tellingly, the NYT devotes an entire news article to the mostly negative opinions of Wall Street bankers concerning OWS.

El País, on the contrary, frames the protests as grounded in both sociopolitical and economic concerns. An editorial acknowledges that the 10/15 demonstrations all over the world were "*en favor de un cambio global y en contra de los recortes sociales y de las élites políticas y financieras*" [in favor of a global change and against social cuts and the political and financial elites]. In one of its news articles, *El País* reports mottos and slogans heard and seen in

demonstrations in Spain and other countries. The topics range from economic issues like, “*Se ofrece esclavo titulado*” [graduated slave available], to political ones like, “*Que no nos representan*” [They do not represent us]. The claims against the economic and political system not only appear in quotations from the protesters, but also are immediately emphasized by reporters at the top of the articles. In the first sentence of one of the news pieces, the journalist tackles the chants against banks and politicians. In the second paragraph, the reporter points out, “*Los indignados españoles reclaman un cambio de sistema profundo. Consideran que los políticos están en manos de los banqueros. Que la democracia actual no funciona*” [Spanish Indignants claim a deep change of the system. They think politicians are controlled by bankers. That current democracy does not work].

The third set of frames, deviant/legitimate citizens, portrays demonstrators either as deviant or as legitimate members of society. In the NYT coverage of OWS there is an evident under-recognition of participants in favor of a profuse practice of relying on official sources for reporting the events. Most quotations, particularly those in the forefront, are from members of the establishment who are typically perceived as reliable and legitimate sources of information (for example, politicians, police officers, and businessmen). For instance, the article on the postponement of the forced clearing of Zuccotti Park quotes a state senator, a city councilman, an elected official, the chief executive of Brookfield, and the Mayor of New York City. It is only at the end of the feature that a statement appears from a participant, and his only reported words are, “[t]his place is extremely important.” Apart from being under-quoted, OWS indignant participants, their images as activists, tend to be both over-characterized and stereotypically constructed. Characterizations are also conveyed through the lenses of the establishment. For example, one banker defines demonstrators as a “ragtag group looking for sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll.” When interviewing protesters, some quotations come from “freak” and “fringe” examples, like a man dressed in a Viking costume and someone who describes himself as a “full-time cannabis activist.” Moreover, the deviant character of the protesters is mainly expressed through their association with arrests and problems of public order. Among all of the pieces, the actual diversity of OWS activists is best addressed in an article where “a 23-year-old

sound engineer and composer” emphasizes “how complicated the mix really is: students and older people, parents with families, construction workers on their lunch break, unemployed Wall Street executives.” By emphasizing the “fringe,” and deviant characters, OWS participants in the NYT are de-legitimized as citizens, especially in comparison to the legitimate portrayals of official sources.

With regards to 15M, *El País* generally frames 10/15 demonstrators as peaceful and legitimate citizens with sensible demands. Many quotations from participants of different ages and professional status are included, even in prominent positions within the articles. For instance, a news article about demonstrations in Barcelona provides a statement of a participant, a 46 year old female administrative assistant. The headline reads, “*Hoy estoy aquí y ya no vuelvo al sofá. Esto no es justo*” [I am here today and I am not going back to the sofa. This is not fair.] The selected photographs reinforce the image of protesters as peaceful people. Reporters mainly rely on participants to explain the events, rather than authorities. They recognize indignant protestors as legitimate sources of information. The quintessential example in this regard is a news article that explains how a group of activists decided on and organized the squatting of an abandoned hotel in downtown Madrid. The journalist reports the story from the point of view of the squatters, who declares: “*Esto es un acto de desobediencia civil*” [This is an act of civil disobedience].

Finally, the last set of frames, security problem/social change outcome, either addresses the movements as a problem for security or as people struggling for social change. In the NYT, various reports on OWS are related to law enforcement and police intervention, with several references to camp clearings, arrests, and incidents. These attributions convey an image of a problem for public order and security. Only one op-ed addresses a core idea of the movement, income inequality. The author states, “the protesters have lofted the issue of inequality onto our national agenda to stay.” Besides this column, the movement’s ideas and concerns for social change receive little attention. Images also reflect the emphasis on OWS as a problem rather than grassroots initiatives for social change. The selected photographs mainly portray police officers facing demonstrators, conducting arrests and guarding public facilities. The general emphasis is on direct actions carried out by protesters, rather than on the structural violence that causes inequality. It is this latter institutionalized

injustice that Occupy movements are trying to denounce and to make visible. They call for accountability and stress that the responsibility of the crisis is directly related to “the greed and corruption of the 1%.” For instance, although in Rome very few demonstrators used the black bloc tactic, the NYT reports: “tens of thousands of people turned out for what started as peaceful protests and then devolved into ugly violence. The windows of shops and banks were smashed, a police van was destroyed, and some Defense Ministry offices were set alight.” These aggressions toward corporate and institutional powers are labeled by the newspaper as “ugly violence,” where the use of the adjective “ugly” intensifies the significance of “violence.” Even when the protest actions were mainly peaceful and implied no damage at all, the emphasis on incidents and arrests convey an image of OWS as a dangerous movement and a security problem.

As for the 10/15 in Spain, *El País* frames participants as promoters of social change instead of the cause of public disorders. There are few references to detentions. In addition, actions categorized by the authorities as offenses receive a thoughtful look, as also occurred with the squatting of an abandoned hotel. Its coverage of the incidents in Rome also indicates that the responsibility of the assaults belonged to a “grupo de violentos” [“group of violent people”] and explains that, reflecting other worldwide protests, the demonstrations were mainly peaceful. Referring to Rome, *El País* also remarks that the violent group had been set apart by the other demonstrators. The editorial maximizes the importance of these incidents, however, and defines them as a “grave rémora” [serious hindrance] for the movement. Overall, the newspaper emphasizes the “*cambio social*” [social change] feature. It also appears in a subheading, “*Indignados de todo el mundo salen a las calles para exigir un cambio global*” [Indignants from all over the world take to the streets to demand global change.] Moreover, the reporters accurately reflect the protester’s desire for change by capturing their direct quotations, slogans and mottos: “*Estamos arreglando el mundo, disculpen las molestias*” [We are fixing the world, sorry for the inconvenience.]

Through the comparative analysis of the NYT and *El País* coverage of OWS and 15M during October 15th-16th, 2011, we can tease out some tentative conclusions on these movements and media framing. First, findings show that despite the fact that they both qualify as elite press, the two newspapers adopt a substantially different approach towards their home movements. *El País* frames 10/15 events as a global endeavor for sociopolitical and economic change, carried out by peaceful and respectable citizens. In doing so, the newspaper's image of the United for Global Change demonstrations coincides with the original call to protest of the organizers of the event (October 15th). On the other hand, the NYT provides a more negative image of OWS by narrowing the scope to a national one and by emphasizing security problems and the deviant character of demonstrators.

A second aspect of these findings relates to the following question. Why do two elite liberal newspapers frame such similar social movements (both with international implications) in such different ways? In our analysis, the NYT coverage of OWS follows a pattern similar to the "protest paradigm." According to this theory, developed mainly by U.S. scholars, social protests tend to be portrayed in a negative way, providing emphasis on social disorder, official sources, and deviant protestors due to journalism practices and media constraints. Examples of these practices and constraints can be found on the NYT website. For instance, among the more than 14,000 subjects in its "Times Topics," tags for "social movements" or "social justice" are glaringly missing. At the end of 2012, the specific "Occupy Wall Street" topic incorporated 672 articles: 403 (almost 60 percent) were tagged as "Demonstrations, protests, and riots"; 93 as "Police"; and 63 as "Police Department (NYC)." Only 41 were labeled as "Income inequality." A search for specific terms within the articles also reflected this bias. The word "police" is used in 400 articles, whereas "[t]he 99 percent," the most popular OWS motto, appears in only 125 articles.

In the case of *El País*, it is possible to trace a tentative explanation for the higher level of support for the 15M in the Spanish sociopolitical context at the time of 10/15. First, 15M had a wide social endorsement from its May 2011 initial burst. According to an opinion poll published by *El País* at the end of June 2011, 79% of the Spanish people thought that the "indignants" had valid

reasons for protesting. Second, 10/15 took place only one month before the Spanish general elections of November 20. A more outward support of the movement, labeled by other information sources as leftist, could have also been interpreted as an attempt to hinder the predicted victory of the conservative party, *Partido Popular* (PP). This interpretation was supported by *El Mundo*, an elite and pro-PP newspaper.

Although it is not the purpose of this essay to advance future media framing on social movements, our findings on the NYT reflect Chomsky's argument that mainstream media "will generally reflect the perspectives and interest of established power." With regards to *El País*, this argument is less evident and further research would be necessary to better understand its relationship with the 15M. Finally, as the people involved in protests are increasingly informing directly through social media networking and mobile applications, further research is required on how direct news (from protestors) and mediated ones (from the media) interact and counter-act to convey the prevailing public image of social movements.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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This essay forms part of the research projects CS02012-34066 and P1·1A2012-05 mentioned in the introduction of this edition.