Digital Solidarity, Analogue Mobilization: 
An Ethnography of the Technology-Embedded 
Protest Networks of the Québec Student Strike

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ABSTRACT

Background This article presents the results of an ethnographic study of the online and off-
line communities participating in the “Maple Spring” student strike in Québec as a case 
study for theorizing the trajectory of the technology-embedded social movement.

Analysis Analyzing data collected during field visits that include over 50 interviews with 
participants, community organizers, union representatives, community-media producers, 
and activists, this article argues that it is the practices of online-offline sharing, belonging, 
strategizing, and affectively being together that allowed for a hybridized practice of social 
movements to translate into concrete direct democratic action.

Conclusions and implications The social and mobile media uses of the Québec student-
strike participants suggest that the strategy of using mediated exchanges in order to both 
build community belonging and share information/knowledge can be effective in mobilizing 
boots-on-the-ground actions as a means of democratic participation and social change for 
today’s hybridized social movements and direct actions.

Keywords Social movements; Social media; Protest; Media theory; Québec student strike

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte Cet article présente les résultats d’une étude ethnographique sur les communautés en 
ligne et hors ligne qui ont participé à la grève étudiante du Printemps érable au Québec. Cette 
étude de cas sert à l’analyse de la trajectoire de ce mouvement social renforcé par certaines technologies de la communication.

Analyse L’auteur a recueilli des données à partir d’enquêtes de terrain comprenant plus de 50 
entretiens avec des participants, des organisateurs communautaires, des représentants 
syndicaux, des producteurs de médias communautaires et des activistes. En se fondant sur une 
analyse des données recueillies, l’auteur soutient que c’est une combinaison de pratiques 
hybrides (partage, solidarité, formulation de stratégies, camaraderie, et ce, tant en ligne que 
hors ligne) qui a permis la mise en œuvre d’une forme de démocratie directe.

Conclusions et implications L’utilisation de médias sociaux et mobiles par les 
participants au Printemps érable montre qu’il peut être efficace de recourir à des 
technologies de la communication pour créer un sentiment d’appartenance communautaire

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et pour partager des informations et savoirs. Ces technologies peuvent en outre motiver les participants à entrer dans le feu de l'action, encourageant la participation démocratique et le changement social au sein des mouvements sociaux hybrides et de l'action directe d'aujourd'hui.

**Mots clés** Mouvements sociaux; Médias sociaux; Protestation; Théorie des médias; Grève étudiante au Québec

**Introduction**

The 2010s have emerged as an era of popular social movements and direct democratic political action throughout many areas of the world, a moment of organizing for social change that is unparalleled in recent memory. Direct democratic action continues to be a mainstay of political activism, but from the very onset of the decade, it became clear that a technology-embedded social movement had emerged, characterized by new, hybrid networks of online communication and connectivity, operating alongside offline mobilizations in physical space (Carolyn, 2018; Castells, 2013; Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Kreiss & Tufekci, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). These contemporary social movements, such as the Arab Spring, the global Occupy Movement, the 2017 Women’s March, and numerous protests in Hong Kong, Iran, Turkey, Spain, and dozens of other places, share a structure in which a multitude of disaffected individuals exercise their fundamental human rights in a generally horizontal form of participatory action that strongly embeds media technology into its practice (Brown, 2015; Butler, 2015; Hardt & Negri, 2009, 2017; Massumi, 2017).

Many popular accounts (Andersen, 2011; Beaumont, 2011; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Hermida, 2014) have deterministically credited the uses of social media in the establishment of popular democratic movements, as though these technologies can simply be inserted into the hands of an oppressed people and human freedom unfolds. Yet social media is not a plug-and-play technology for democracy, despite overblown attributions to so-called “Twitter revolutions” (Andersen, 2011; Morozov, 2009), which fail to understand the complex processes of social action. Conversely, other accounts of contemporary movements suggest that direct mobilizations and occupations of space continue to be central strategies for political struggles worldwide (Carolyn, 2018; Duncan, 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2014, 2016).

It is important to refuse either side of this dichotomy and recognize that digital tools are part of an assemblage of activist strategies. Social media are woven into the fabric of everyday life, to dismiss them as irrelevant or celebrate them as saviours in social movements are myopic views that ignore the nuances of a set of technologies that are firmly embedded in the complex negotiation of meaning and power, culture and community. There are many critiques of social media technologies and platforms, but it is worth remembering that these digital tools have their strengths, and connecting like-minded people is one of them.

The challenges, then, are how to theorize the interconnections between online, participatory media and offline communities in terms of the cultural practices, meaning-making, and discursive exchanges that underlie any contemporary direct democratic movement; to establish a narrative of understanding that incorporates the
trajectory of how the contemporary technology-embedded social movement coalesces through its online and offline practices; and to develop conclusions and strategies that may be useful future movements.

This article examines the case study of the “Maple Spring” Québec student strike of 2012–2013, an important moment for understanding the trajectory of the contemporary technology-embedded protest movement. It coalesced a balance between a horizontal, decentralized, networked organization and more traditional grassroots and union-based hierarchical structures. It embraced its online, user-generated mediated discourse and participatory platforms with its offline mobilizations, occupations, and direct democratic actions. It used community-based live-stream mobile video as a central information source in an era where this technology was in its early stages. In short, this movement serves as a prominent point in the course and direction of the movements since, and it offers an important understanding into the way that hybridized online-offline communities drive the contemporary technology-embedded social movement.

This research is the result of a large-scale qualitative ethnographic study on the online and offline mobilization of the “Maple Spring” Québec student strike of 2012–2013. Over 50 individuals were interviewed for this project, including community organizers, student participants, journalists, media producers, student union representatives, government officials, union representatives, and others. Using a theoretical framework of participatory affect and politics (Berlant, 2011; Butler, 2015; Castells, 2013; Duncan, 2017; Hardt & Negri, 2009, 2017; Nancy, 1991, 2000), community and technological belongingness (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kavada, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Turkle, 2011; Wenger, 1998), and techno-activist literature (Comunello, Mulargia, & Parisi, 2016; Flesher Fominaya, 2014, 2016; Gerbaudo & Trërè, 2015; Kavada, 2015) this article argues that it was the participants’ online-offline interconnectedness that allowed for a new conceptualization of community participation to emerge through a number of strategies of co-belonging and being together that span various cultures and constituencies, both online and offline, in what Zeynep Tufekci (2017) terms a “network protest” (p. 4). Furthermore, the role of sharing—of information and knowledge, of collective struggle in space, of affective connections—represents a coming together through networks of being, a feeling of togetherness that unites people under some degree of commonality. This article concludes that the role of participatory media in direct democratic movements is to enhance and supplement offline mobilization and organization, not to replace it.

Methodological considerations
Data for this project was collected over numerous field visits to Montréal from 2013 onward. Over 50 interviews were conducted with participants, community organizers, union representatives, community and student media producers, undergraduate and graduate students, and other constituencies, totalling over forty hours of audio recordings. All the interviews were conducted in English, although most participants were bilingual, and all were done face-to-face in Montréal and its surrounding region. Although most participants were québécois, several were from outside of the province and came there to attend school or for work. Interviews were conducted in offices,
cafes, libraries, parks, homes, restaurants, and bars. Participants were recruited through public requests for interviews on a variety of social media sites and listserves, as well as through the personal connections and affiliations of the researcher, with a snowball-sampling strategy extending outward from each of these populations. This project received Ethics/Board/Institutional Review Board approval.

Qualitative ethnographic means (including interviews, textual or discourse analysis, participant observation, descriptive observation, etc.) have long been used in studying cultural groups (Clifford, 1986; Hannerz, 2003; Willis & Trondheim, 2000), and are particularly useful for understanding social movements, especially technology-embedded ones (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Flesher Fominaya, 2016; Kavada, 2012; Milkman, Lewis, & Luce, 2013b). While ethnographic data collection strategies provide a valuable insight into the cultural practices and values of a given people, it is important to accurately represent the population being studied in terms of the cultural characteristics that tie a group together or its collective identity, what James Carey (1989) calls the “representation of shared beliefs” (p. 18), especially when the researcher is not a member of the population being studied, as was the case in this research. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), the central analytical approach used in this article, is a strategy to examine texts and discourse by tying social theory and social relationships together as they produce meaning (Fairclough, 2000). It is a tool that Teun van Dijk (1993) notes deconstructs the discursive “practices of production” that examine the “role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance” (p. 249). CDA is advantageous in this regard in that it can directly address the emotional and discursive connections that are built when a collective amasses through cultural forms, and it was particularly useful in deconstructing the data that was collected in this project.

Additionally, the case-study method is an especially useful approach when studying activist movements, such as Daniel Kreiss and Zeynep Tufekci’s (2013) analysis of the horizontal politics of Occupy Wall Street, or Carolyn Kitch’s (2018) discussion of how participants in the 2017 Women’s March used social media to make meaning. In case studies, the specificity of the individual case and its context allows for a unique look at the particularities of a given movement, but also allows a view into the commonalities that are shared, and in turn, leads to more useful and generalizable conclusions, especially when looking at historical flashpoints and political trajectories, such as Ruth Milkman, Penny Lewis, and Stephanie Luce’s (2013a, 2013b) analysis of the community of participants in Occupy Wall Street. Case studies provide the specifics, and the specifics become commonalities, a useful tool for critical scholars when looking at the generalizability of neoliberalism’s global regime of economization or exercises of state power—as well as the actions of activist communities that have worked to counter these forces.

Background: The 2012 “Maple Spring” Québec student strike
The 2012 Québec student strike began as a series of student and community demonstrations in many cities in Québec, most notably in Montréal and Québec City, but also in smaller municipalities (for detailed timelines, see Banet-Weiser, Baym, Coppa, Gauntlett, Gray, Jenkins, & Shaw, 2014; Barney, 2012; Charaoui & Savard, 2013; Sorochan, 2012; for contextual and historical accounts of previous protest movements
in Québec, see Charaoui & Savard, 2013; Lacoursiere, 2007; Lapointe & Glinoer 2013). In early 2010, the Québec Cabinet under Parti libéral du Québec (PLQ) Premier Jean Charest, proposed a 75 percent increase in tuition rates at Québec universities over five years, from CND$2,168 for the 2012–2013 academic year to CND$3,793 in 2017–2018. Affordable or free tuition is not only a strongly held cultural belief in Québec but also political doctrine, enshrined through numerous provincial public-policy decisions over the last half-century (Lacoursiere, 2007). As such, students began protesting and petitioning immediately, and a student strike began in February 2012, expanding quickly through the following weeks (Curran, 2012). It would label itself the “Maple Spring/Printemps Érable” in response to the Arab Spring democratic uprisings in 2011.

The higher-education system in Québec was comprised of approximately 450,000 students at the time, 200,000 in its collège d’enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEP) tuition-free preparatory college system, and 250,000 in tuition-funded university systems, with uniform, provincially set rates across the entire system (Québec Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2015). The Québec higher-education system has a strong presence of three province-wide student union organizations, as well as a wide variety of smaller, university-wide or department-wide unions or federations of unions (Charaoui & Savard, 2013; Lacoursiere, 2007; Sorochan, 2012). Educational strikes, usually organized by one or more of these unions, are relatively commonplace in the Québec higher-education system, having occurred in 1968, 1974, 1978, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1996, and 2005 (Charaoui & Savard, 2013).

At the height of the 2012 strike, approximately 175,000 of Québec’s university students participated in a classroom walkout that would last for over six months, making it by far the longest student strike in the province’s history (previous to that, the longest strike had been for seven weeks) (Forster, 2012; Sorochan, 2012). The 2012 student strike began in response to tuition hikes, but it quickly evolved to a more generalized anti-austerity protest that involved both students and non-students alike in their resistance against these and other neoliberal policies of privatization and marketization (Giroux, 2013; Pineault, 2013; Sterne, 2012). The movement would soon expand outward from Québec, with red fabric squares pinned to clothing or bags becoming symbolic of anti-austerity resistance in many communities outside the province.

The strike began to manifest itself in the form of regular protests and marches through downtown Montréal. Although the exact numbers are disputed, the demonstrations were huge—several had between 200,000 and 300,000 students and non-student supporters (Austen, 2012; CBC News, 2012; Charaoui & Savard, 2013)—and clashes between police and protesters were regular occurrences during this period. Police violence and mass arrests were common, particularly following the passage of Bill 78 in June 2012, which effectively outlawed protest in Montréal (Austen, 2012). Throughout this period, support for the strike would be primarily signified with the symbol of a red square, along with several other combinations of different coloured square markers that signified various perspectives on the issue (Gaudreau, 2012). Later, support was signified through the practice of casseroles; supporters of the movement would bang a pot outdoors during a designated 15-minute period each night in an aural show of solidarity across the city (Sterne, 2012). The strike dwindled through the
summer and autumn of 2012 with the new academic school year, although support for the movement would continue through a number of activist events and mobilizations through the upcoming academic years (Charaoui & Savard, 2013; Michael, 2013).

**Analysis: Online-offline political action and community mobilization in the Québec student strike**

Why was the Québec student strike so successful in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people to participate in a months-long activist movement? Québec has a long history of social protest against encroachments on its numerous distinct and overlapping cultural and political identities, but history alone does not explain the timeliness, scope, and breadth of the strike. Instead, perhaps the more prescient question is to address the practices that cultures use to bring people together and create meaning, and in particular the way that media technologies create exchanges where the online meaning-making process can act in parallel with offline togetherness (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Social media are particularly good at creating common intersections of sharing, and for social movements, these media spaces create communities where feeling together in a social struggle develops the togetherness and belonging that is necessary for meaningful democratic change and community self-determination (Butler, 2015; Castells, 2013; Hardt & Negri, 2009). And today, the role of participatory media platforms are clearly important to the form, structure, and constitution of the contemporary social movement, but the heart of the Québec protests was on the ground, and its strength was the mobilization of hundreds of thousands to occupy physical space. Participatory media are important contributors to any mobilization, but they still do not replace the power of an amassed crowd of bodies.

The evidence from the ethnographic study of this movement has led to three central strains of analysis on the overlapping circles of digital discursive platforms and analogue boots-on-the-ground mobilization: 1) the way that social-movement communities form their affective connections is an extremely important practice for building solidarity, which happens through both online and offline exchanges; 2) the practice of sharing, whether online or offline, whether information-based, knowledge-based, affective, or discursive, is essential for a building solidarity and strengthening ties within a social movement; and 3) online user-generated content and participatory networks can be effectively used as a strategy exchange to mobilize offline direct democratic action, which today continues to be an essential element of any meaningful social change.

**Feeling together and being together in online-offline solidarity**

Cultural studies’ approach to the idea of community is one that is continually in flux: with the tension surrounding power relationships, representation, discourses, and narratives, identifying the composition, practices, values, and collective identity of any community is a fundamentally political exercise (Driskell & Lyon, 2002; Grewal, 2007; Nancy, 1991; Wenger, 1998). But all communities, no matter how small, share in common that they require an affective connection between participants: feeling together is the first step to being together as an amassed body. To feel as though one belongs to a social group—particularly for social movements—is largely an affective attachment,
one that gives individuals the feeling that they have found a community of people they can be with, people with whom they have things in common (Berlant, 2011; Butler, 2015; Duncan, 2017; Kavada, 2012; Nancy, 2000).

In Québec, technology was an important factor in building shared togetherness through the movement’s activist ties. Jacqueline (all names are pseudonyms), an undergraduate student at Concordia University, commented on this connection:

I think that one of the really interesting things about this strike was that this community of like-minded protesters emerged and formed a tight-knitted network. We all very much know who each other is on a much deeper level because of social media, and it happened in unexpected ways, like seeing where people move around [on social media] ... it was like, “We’re all here. We all know where each other are because we’re tweeting our locations, so we might as well just meet up and be friends.” And that did end up being really helpful when we all ended up getting arrested and had to help each other get out.

The placelessness of many online communities decouples the community from the necessity of face-to-face encounters to create a social movement, yet it also creates a hybridized commons of information- and knowledge-sharing that is not dependent on simultaneous meetings in time and space. Several authors (Allen, Carpentier, Bailey, Fenton, Jenkins, Lothian, Qiu, Schaefer, & Srinivasan, 2014; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Butler, 2015; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Kreiss & Tufekci, 2013) have commented on the usefulness of online-offline hybridized spaces in building community and social movements, but it is worth noting that the political uses of these spaces emerge from everyday encounters. The possibility of finding affective political connections with other people in the platforms that are normally used to commodify culture (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, tumblr, etc.) can be a powerful organizing tool, creating encounters and events that are affectively rewarding, if not politically advantageous, and encounters that, at least in some regard, subvert the primary goal of these platforms in commodifying their users’ everyday lived experiences. In other words, the cultural practices of everyday life can lead to affective political attachments if the network is strong enough, and for the network’s ties to be strong, individuals need to feel as though they are a part of something, to feel as though they are connected to other people, to feel understood in their discontent.

Today, participatory media create a possibility where the difference between belonging to and supporting a social movement can be a function of affective connections, rather than simple geographic proximity, as part of the placelessness of belonging in a networked society. This can function as a secondary role for those who are not present in a physical space: the connections, the support, the knowledge sharing, and the togetherness that social media provides can create new forms of an amasses multitude. As information and feelings get shared through networks structures, it leads to greater solidarity and connection between like-minded individuals (Gerbaudo & Tréré, 2015). It is not always perfect—deliberation and horizontalism can break down in the presence of online participatory technologies (Flesher Fominaya, 2016)—but the democratic possibilities of these technologies create the possibility of connection through
the sharing of information, knowledge, and affect. The distribution of content through network-based structures creates ties, but it is movements’ effective use of those ties through Nancy’s (2000) notion of being together (both affectively and in space-based practice) that has the greatest possibility of creating effective democratic change.

**Digital solidarity: Hybridizing online-offline affective connections for social movement community building**

Every social movement has, in some way or another, been built on a shared affect of some sort: the first step toward social change is for the members of a community to feel that they are not alone. Communities come together by relating experiences, history, tactics, outlooks, and even injustices or collective oppression through sharing with one another. This sharing requires a rethinking of the connection between the self and the community as more than just an aggregate of selves, but rather a singular body (Nancy, 2000). Communities’ communication, production, and reproduction of content through sharing and connection has attracted much attention lately as a practice central to the Web 2.0 era (Hermida, 2014; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; O’Reilly, 2005), and is particularly important here: whether through a retweet, an emoji, a Snapchat picture, or the creation of a how-to video, the desire to be understood and recognized by others is what drives much online behaviour, especially in feeling togetherness with like-minded activists or political dissidents (Goodings & Tucker, 2014; Thorburn, 2014a).

Yet, while the post-2010 social movement relies on the affective connection of individuals being together, the actual *practices* of being together have changed with new technologies of media production and distribution. In Québec, the sharing function between those who were in each other’s social networks was centrally important. McGill University undergraduate Lisa noted the importance of one’s networked connections for raising awareness:

> The shareability. People who are not going to scroll through yet another demo[nstration] story in the newspaper and post to all their friends. But they will re-tweet a story by a participant or share on Facebook to all their friends. And especially when it’s all students who are sharing these things; they’re on Facebook all the time. That was definitely something that helped us maintain attention rather than just when something big happened, having attention on these personal stories.

In other words, protest images focused on the spectacular shares well, shares fast, and shares broadly in one’s personal network. This is especially useful for a social movement, and information sharing has become exponentially easier due to network structures of connectivity. The participants interviewed in this project overwhelmingly used mainstream social-networking sites—Twitter and Facebook, in particular—as their central information source, commenting regularly on the role of these media as an information-sharing source, operating nearly in real time. Furthermore, these media provided a community-based narrative, operating outside of the mainstream news outlets, which were generally not valued or trusted by protesters. Michel, a non-student community journalist, noted the importance of these media in providing a real-time, community-driven narrative:
Twitter was super important. To be able to tweet live while it’s happening? Because people did follow it while it was happening. So if you tweet that people are getting beaten up, and people are following it live on Twitter, that gets a lot of attention. And it allowed us to cover more minute events ... you can’t write a story about every single night march. But you can tweet about them.

In the same way, the sharing function of this communal narrative and presence built solidarity and affective connections through social media’s information-sharing function, especially through the immediacy of network-based sharing. Nicole, an undergraduate student at McGill University, stated,

Twitter was really good to find out where things were happening, like, of the moment, there were like 20 different people that, straight down to the Montréal Police, that I was following, and those were places where I could go, places to stay out of, calls for support, things like that that were going through Twitter.

Similarly, Concordia University student Elise commented:

So in your city, when marches were happening ... if only 50 people in NY knew about them, then 50 people in NY knew about them. And I’m going to keep doing this, because it is something that people are seeing. Those people are going to know about the things that are happening in different places. But that solidarity is really important, because you think, “Oh, this worked in Chile, it could work here. That worked in New York, it could work here.” And this sort of sharing tactics, sharing successes is helpful for everyone involved.

Knowledge sharing, a concept that Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (2002) argue is central to the building of communities of practice, is rooted in the production and reproduction of ways of being through online or offline means. Communities of practice are built on connecting like-minded individuals who not only exchange information online but also engage in meaningful participation in a community as a contributing practitioner. As the global reach of power and neoliberal practices exists both within and outside of physical boundaries, the exchange of knowledge can also occur at a distance, decoupling the social movement from the ties to the site of immediate production, and building solidarity between movements across space by feeling togetherness (Duncan, 2017; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Kavada, 2015).

This feeling together can often take the form of simply seeing signs of a community that you are connected to through the semiotic linking of meaning to cultural artefacts—a collective identity, tied by some show of solidarity. As a visual marker, the red square was the most notable symbol for the student strike (among other less-common markers). Almost all who supported the movement displayed a fabric red square pinned to a backpack or bag or article of clothing. During the strike, many individuals who supported the movement—both in Québec and worldwide—changed their social-media profile images to a red square. Virtually and materially, the red square symbolized a being-together mode of not just supporting the student strike but also
belonging to it outside of the physical realm. Catherine, a graduate student at McGill University, discussed the importance of this marker as a sign of community identity and solidarity, both offline and online:

I remember seeing them when I was travelling, just different cities around the world. Every now and then, you would see a red square. It was such a secret code, a wonderful thing to see. And it supersedes subcultural markers. Like, “Oh, you’ve got that hair and ripped jeans. You might be an activist.” But anyone could have a red square. Your professor could have a red square. The person sitting next to you at the coffee shop could have a red square. Your mom could have a red square. And of course, everybody changed their Facebook or Twitter pictures [to the red square] to show their support.

However, the emergence of spaces where individuals can feel togetherness occurs neither naturally or spontaneously: the emergence of togetherness requires a space for sharing, a commons where exchange can occur (Butler, 2015; Hardt & Negri, 2009; Kavada, 2015). The constitution of these spaces is not necessarily governed or limited by any centralized body or organization: spaces can be physical or virtual, online or offline. In this era, where spaces are hybridized between online and offline realms, the site of protest is equally hybridized. Yet what mainstream social-media sites do particularly well is to organize one’s social network of close ties through a community-centric information architecture, while simultaneously allowing for the mass distribution of information through shareable content within that network. In other words, social media are especially good at creating intersections of sharing, spaces where the affective connections of individuals can double as a mass-media distribution channel. A central application of these spaces can be seen in the Québec student strike with the testifying function of social media, a practice that allowed the movement to bear witness, building togetherness and affective connections through shared social struggle in common spaces, both physical and online. For example, Kevin, a Concordia University undergraduate student noted the importance of social media in witnessing:

There was a real positive effect of social media for the protests. For example, when there was a protest, the pictures of the protest ... a huge amount of people were circulating on Facebook and people were like, “Oh, there were so many people!” and when the media would say, “A few hundred people were walking ...” they would say, “That’s bullshit. I just saw it.”

What was unique in the case of the Québec strike was that the witnessing function of the movement was served through the real-time mobile live stream of CUTV, Concordia University’s student-community television station. Almost every interviewee mentioned the importance of CUTV to the movement, and, to an extent, CKUT, Concordia’s radio station. Today, live streaming through a phone is a native feature, but in this era, the technology was still largely inaccessible. Using a backpack-mounted mobile internet live-streaming rig rented from an audio-visual company specializing in the technology, CUTV live streamed the protests from the front line almost every night for months, with on-camera reporters providing commentary during the protest
in near-real time (Thorburn, 2014a).

The broadcasts were extremely popular among protesters and allies, often with tens of thousands of viewers of the live stream during protests (CUTV, 2012). The relationship between protesters and police turned violent at times, and thousands of people watched what was happening on the streets in real time in their homes or on their mobile devices. The visual images of CUTV became one of the strike’s central information and mobilization forces. Marcel, a student protester at Concordia University, discussed the way that this technology facilitated online community:

One of the most exciting parts of [the live stream of the protest on CUTV] was the communal aspect of watching it, of calling your friends and saying, “dude, whoh, you need to go on to CUTV right now and see this shit.” If it’s someone getting hit or whatever it is. So that thing was happening at the same time, and viewed by many people, and over a long duration of time, and that was an important part of the strike, for people to understand what was happening and what it meant. They saw it, themselves. It was there, in real time.

Beyond the shared affective connections that came through communal media consumption, online media served as an information-sharing mechanism, one that was peer produced, and it allowed for knowledge and information to be transmitted within the community. Rebecca, a graduate student at McGill University, reflected on the importance of these media for the movement, particularly as they used multiple media platforms to share and re-share their content:

People would tune into social media and CUTV to see where the demonstration is … CUTV’s Twitter feed—their feed was really important to remember. It allowed people to know safe zones. Because the downtown got pretty intense in May, last week of April, first two weeks of June. There was a lot of conflict on the streets.

Similarly, Henri, an undergraduate student at University of Montreal, stated:

If you were running late, if you didn’t happen to be at a manif [protest] at 7pm or 2pm or 10am or whenever, you could check Twitter. And you could send those to your phone. If you don’t have a smartphone, you can forward Twitter messages to your phone and get an update as you’re headed there. “OK, now we’re at this corner. Now we’re at that corner.” Tons of people, journalists and otherwise, really made an effort to let people know where the manif was. So it had this sort of guerilla quality to it that pretty much anytime, anyone could call a manif and they could get 2,000, 3,000 people.

**Analogue mobilization: Participatory media in tandem with offline mobilization for movement solidarity**

While the technology, and the ties that the technology enables, is an important part of the story in Québec, the online activities of the strike exist necessarily alongside boots-on-the-ground offline political mobilization. This is true for almost every social movement in the current era. All meaningful social movements today continue to re-
quire the physical occupation of space through direct democratic action, even as these movements increasingly use social and mobile media as a central tool (Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Kitch, 2018; Thorburn, 2014b). Online strategies help share knowledge, share support, spread information, and help recruitment, but it is the affective offline relationships of togetherness that build and maintain meaningful social change.

Today, these relationships are hybridized throughout both online and offline realms, and these realms require spaces for discourse and direct action to occur (Butler, 2015; Gerbaudo & Trërê, 2015; Kavada, 2012). The notoriety of the global Occupy movement, for example, came through the physical occupation of space in Occupy Wall Street, and the media attention that came with that. Yet the participants (as well as the opponents) of each of these movements took to the internet to share content and commentary on the movement, building a globalized movement that resulted in over 700 Occupy encampments around the world within several weeks (Barron & Moynihan, 2011; Milkman et al., 2013b).

In the case of both the Occupy movement and the Québéco student strike (as well as countless other movements, such as the Arab Spring, the 2017 Women’s March, and the 2017–2018 Iranian protests), the virtual nature of movement building quickly became an essential tool for social-justice mobilization, but it does not replace the necessity of offline togetherness and belonging—affective connections that solidify movements. Paige, a Concordia University undergraduate student involved in both Occupy Montréal and the student strike, noted the importance of offline togetherness for effective community building:

The flip side of online media is that it can sort of foster a kind of nihilism. If all of a sudden you become politically active, and you start reading all of these news stories about what’s actually going on, and these Chomsky YouTubes, you can get very depressed about the state of things... But you can sort of lose hope. So that’s where I think having a network of people who are involved, you can say “Hey, you feel helpless in all of this? Come to this manif. Or come to this workshop. Or come help me serve soup on the sidewalk. It’s gonna be great!” But if you don’t have these [offline] outlets, it’s going to feel really powerless.

The affective connection that comes from physically being with others in a communal space through the amassing of bodies has a force to it that is difficult to mentally construct into a movement through virtual means, since being together physically highlights the amplified affective bonds that come through the unification of individuals in a physical commons when it feels as if they are fighting back, together (Duncan, 2017). The goals of a collective, while they may be diverse in motivation (particularly in decentralized, horizontal movements that have occurred in recent years), often have an underlying commonality, one that is strengthened by the physical connections that come from manifest togetherness (Allen et al., 2014; Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Sterne, 2012). For example, participant Carrie noted that:

You can’t deny that [social media] had a positive effect in creating and reinforcing a sense of community. But I think you can’t really compare this
to the feeling that people have when they gather in hundreds in a general assembly and they vote in the strike mandate, and the strike passes. I mean ... there’s a euphoria there that no amount of photos on Facebook or tweets on Twitter are going to equate to that.

Community activist and strike participant Thomas echoed the strengthened ties that came from offline mobilizations rather than solely watching or participating online:

There’s nothing that changes the role of police than sitting in front of a riot cop ... [the police] smashed into people with flash-bang grenades, and I think that immediately, a fair part of these people thought, “OK, now I know where the violence happens in a protest.” A lot of stuff, people seeing things out there on Facebook pictures, it might sort of color [sic] their opinion about police, but it’s not going to change it as near as experiencing police repression, itself.

Kirsty Robertson (n.d.) describes this affective connection as a “tear-gas epiphany,” the joyful but traumatic “heightened emotions and feelings of unity, empowerment, and collectivity that can accompany group action” when faced with “the threatening presence of the forces of security, the use of tear gas, the press of the crowd, the sound of chanting are necessarily acted out on and through the body” (p. 5). A tear-gas epiphany come from the affective connection of being together in a state of collective oppression, but it is focused on the communal lived experience of surviving danger. It can be incredibly powerful to go through an ordeal together and collectively experience the violence of an oppressor, as was the case during the Québec student strike. As participant Paige noted, “The people who you start out thinking of as colleagues, and then a year later, you end up inviting them to your birthday party. You went through some shit together. So it forges a real bond.” Similarly, union organizer Bernard noted the way that this epiphany can lead to empowerment, “… when the police attack you, you realize that you are really bothering the state. And then it degenerates, and you understanding something about state power.”

Conclusions: Theorizing the boundaries of online-offline togetherness
The Québec student strike is a case study that represents a particular community’s practices and concerns in a particular political conjuncture, but it is an important moment in the trajectory of the protests of the 2010s worldwide. And context matters in studying these phenomena: the global reach of various neoliberal practices of economization, austerity, state violence, and wealth transfer has led to similar cuts to social services, including education, as a worldwide practice that continues to expand rather than contract (Brown, 2015; Pineault, 2013). However, even more important is the way that tactics, both online and offline, are being shared through the network ties afforded by social and mobile media, and where these practices overlap, regardless of local political context. As social movements continue to navigate and incorporate these strategies, we are beginning to see the development of a generalized theory of activism that not only understands the particularities of a technological, cultural, and practice-based movement but also places specific and seemingly discrete events—such as the Québec
student strike—into the larger context of other struggles for social and economic justice around the world, whether it is the Arab Spring or the Occupy Movement in the early 2010s, Hong Kong’s 2014 Umbrella Movement, the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, the 2017–2018 Iranian protests, or countless others. It is one chapter of a story that continues to unfold as new social movements emerge, as new technologies are applied, and new strategies of offline protest manifest themselves, but the story is becoming increasingly familiar with each new case study.

However, it is worth noting that every social movement is built on a long arc, and each provides both successes and lessons to be learned, some of which are remembered by few, others that become part of the discourse of the narrative surrounding these events. This is particularly relevant when it comes to the role of participatory media platforms in social movements in the current era. Simplistic narratives of participatory media technologies inserted into a disaffected populace as some sort of deterministic formula for social change bely the very real optimism, opportunity, and indeed, real risk, that goes with challenging an entrenched power structure, particularly one as hewn into culture as the global reach of neoliberalism and state police powers.

Yet, for all of their strengths in connecting like-minded people, cases such as the Québec student strike remind us that the role of participatory media technologies is to supplement offline mobilization and organization, not to replace it. Offline action has long been foundational for any sort of meaningful social change, and today, continues to be effective in spaces where strong ties of community and belonging are being formed. In the end, it remains necessary for a social movement to amass in space, and to be together, to feel together in common, in order for democratic movements to be truly effective. Social media helps, but it is not the only step. It is the risk-taking of individuals amassing themselves into a multitude that fundamentally leads to social change in a global society rooted in a commitment to the exercise of democracy and dedicated to human rights.

References


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