

## The importance of scale in Occupy movement protests: a case study of a local Occupy protest as a tool of communication through Public Relations and Social Media

La importancia de la magnitud de las protestas del movimiento Occupy: el caso de una protesta local como instrumento de comunicación mediante las Relaciones Públicas y los Medios Sociales

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### Abstract

This paper explores the persuasive communications (public relations and branding through social media) of a micro Occupy event, namely a nine-day appearance of the global protest movement at Bournemouth University (BU), on the south coast of the UK. It reflects on how student and town protesters used digital and social media in comparison to the wider and more successful UK movement. It interviews the student leader, and asks questions about the role social networks like Occupii.org played in formulating communication strategies as well as how they integrated with more popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. The conclusions coming from our micro case study suggest that without a supportive geographic and civic location; clear and focused messages, and robust strategic communication planning and execution, Occupy events will remain very small.

**Keywords:** Occupy – Bournemouth – Social Media – Public Relations – Social Networking - Dissent PR

### Resumen

Este artículo explora las comunicaciones persuasivas (relaciones públicas y branding a través de los medios de comunicación social) de un minúsculo evento de Ocupación, la Ocupación de nueve días del campus de la Universidad de Bournemouth (BU), en la costa sur del Reino

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Unido. El artículo refleja cómo los ciudadanos y estudiantes manifestantes utilizan los medios digitales y sociales y los compara con el movimiento más amplio y exitoso de Ocupación en el Reino Unido. En este artículo se incluye la entrevista al líder estudiantil del movimiento, con preguntas sobre cómo el papel que redes sociales como Occupy.org han jugado en la formulación de estrategias de comunicación de ese grupo, y como el grupo integra sus comunicaciones con las plataformas sociales más populares como Facebook y Twitter. Las conclusiones de nuestro estudio sugieren que sin una ubicación geográfica favorable y cívica, sin mensajes claros y concretos, y sin una sólida y planificada estrategia de comunicación, las Ocupaciones se quedarán muy pequeñas.

**Palabras clave:** Ocupación – Bournemouth - Medios Sociales - Relaciones Públicas – Redes Sociales

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Occupy Bournemouth

The Occupy protests started on November 17, 2011 in New York, on Wall Street “giving voice to a more broad-based frustration with how our [American] finance sector works” (Barack Obama cited in DeLuca, Lawson and Sun, 2012). In its first weeks, the movement was often neglected and dismissed in traditional media reports only to end up, a month later, changing American conversations from the economic deficit to economic inequality and jobs.

By December 2011 Occupy had become a worldwide movement with estimates of the number of encampments ranging anywhere from 750 to over 2,500. Part of this popularity was said to be due to the resonance of the message that the 99% was presenting (ibid), and

also in part due to social media, its ability to link potential supporters, its information distribution and propagation model (Caren and Gaby, 2011; Juris, 2012).

Apart from the shifting interest of media, academic interest in the topic has shifted as well. Since the beginning of Occupy, numerous academic articles have been written with some focusing on media discourses and media frames (DeLuca, Lawson and Sun, 2012); politics; activism (Gerbaudo, 2012); citizenship and uses of social media (Caren and Gaby, 2011; Juris, 2012; Skinner, 2011). Similarly, many of them have focused on the American locations or have produced wider reflections on the impact of Occupy worldwide. However, most of these pieces of research concentrate on wider groups coming from a wider geographical area and metropolitan populations.

This research is different as it concentrates on Bournemouth, a town in the rural English county of Dorset and the very small, mini occupation that happened on the doorstep of Bournemouth University where the two researchers work.

If the Occupy protest movement was a commercial brand, consistent performance would be impossible to deliver. Protesters may be happy not being concerned about consistency, saying that their 'business model' is very different. But they cannot escape one similarity with international capitalist ventures: the impact of physical location on performance.

We argue that a metaphorical distinction between "stony ground" and "fertile ground" is at work, suggesting that even for protests to be successful they need to happen at the right time and in the right place. We illustrate this point in the "stony ground" of Bournemouth, knowing that it contrasts with metropolitan lushness. Bournemouth is a coastal, conservative tourist town of 168.000 people, next to the English Channel. In this town, the Occupation movement stationed itself at several locations. These were a community centre; outside a bank (reportedly); outside the local government headquarters and finally at Bournemouth University (BU).

The BU Occupation started on March 16 and ended on March 27, 2012 after the full-time six protesters left, following a court decision that ruled they had no legal grounds for staying on the sliver of land at the southern entrance to the campus. The court case was brought by the University, and the Talbot Trust which is the legal owner of the land. The University also

argued that the tent village was a health and safety matter raising concerns about hygiene and personal security of students and staff. The protesters left quickly and peacefully.

This paper looks at the communication aspects of a micro Occupation and compares them to some of the bigger UK Occupiers. It was prompted by the researchers' meetings with the Occupiers and their interest in uses of public relations by non-corporate entities, including activist and protest groups. This is perhaps among the first research papers, if not the first, analyzing the Occupy movement from a communication and public relations perspective.

### **1.2. Protest, public relations and social media**

The public relations studies have changed in the last decade from a focus on the symmetry of communications to one on the power effects of PR. This paper's topic of an Occupy protest, its use of PR via social media, and its effectiveness is an example of that change.

Moloney (2000; 2006) argues that PR in the UK has been increasingly used by the public and voluntary sectors and by cause and pressure groups since the 1960s because of what he calls "accelerated pluralism" (2000: 33-42), more varied interests competing in the political economy and civil society for advantage. Previously, PR was a promotional mode almost completely used by government and big business and most exceptionally by the trade union for local government from the 1920s who wanted to inform the public about increasing welfare rights.

It was the rise of mass, social movements such as feminism, environmentalism, consumer and gay rights that increased the pluralism of interests competing for political attention and policy advantage. They used PR, knowingly or otherwise, to achieve their goals; took it into the public sphere to be heard and seen by millions. Alongside business that had colonised PR in the UK since the 1920s, these movements converted the public sphere into the "persuasive sphere" (2000: 150-156).

Coombs and Holladay (2011) confirm the continuing change of focus in PR studies in the US away from corporate interests and towards social movements, activism and thus protest. They situate the origins of PR in the Muckraker and progressive reform movements from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1914; and then more activist use of it by progressive movements

in the Roosevelt 1930s. They say about this activist focus that it “holds promise for re-imagining the field and legitimizing the works of activists as an important component in public relations theory and research” (Coombs and Holladay, 2011: 347). While this paper generally supports this aim, the case study presented here, however, illustrates a contrary point: that without significant and growing public support, activism dwindles.

Coombs and Holladay (2011) also list others who have written about PR activism: Dozier & Lauzen (2000); Holtzhausen (2007); Karlberg (1996); Smith & Ferguson (2001); Reber & Kim (2006), and Taylor, Kent and White (2001). Holtzhausen (2007), for instance, wrote of activism as a practice for PR professionals working inside corporate bodies. This professional stance is a new interpretation of an older idea, the PR person as the conscience of the organization, urging management to behave ethically<sup>3</sup>. A year earlier, Berger and Reber (2005) published what is effectively a handbook for the corporate PR person to carry out internal resistance. Reber and Kim (2006) have looked at how activists use their websites for PR purposes.

Cottle, Lester et al. in their 2011 work on mediated coverage of the international protest movement come at the PR and activist theme through old and new mass media effects. They note, among other things, the worldwide protests against the Iraq war in 2003, the international call for Action Against Poverty in 2005, and the demonstrations against the Copenhagen summit on climate change in 2009. These protests were instances of traditional activist opposition to elite and closed-door decision-making but what was novel was protesters’ use of old and new mass media, and the numbers of people they reached. If government policy was becoming more globally constructed, so was opposition to it. The book’s general argument is that protesters wanted mass audiences and new media provided a direct line of contact to them. But whether the use of new media is effective, and whether it has a positive or negative impact on awareness or policy still remains to be answered. Adi and Miah (2011), for instance, question the purpose and impact of the online campaigns lead by international advocacy groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to raise awareness and to initiate a debate around China’s human rights as Beijing was preparing to host the 2008 Olympics. They note how both advocacy groups launched

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<sup>3</sup> This raises an interesting thought about journalists. Would the UK’s phone- hacking-by-journalists scandal 2008 to 2012, April, have been avoided if reporters acted as ‘consciences’ of their publications?

bespoke platforms for debate around China and special awareness campaigns which were also shared online, yet almost all their communication came to a halt during the Olympics, with the platforms being taken offline soon after the Games ended.

Ghanavizi in the Cottle, Lester et al. edition (2011: 256) wrote about political protests and the Persian blogosphere, reflecting in particular on the use of new media around the Iranian presidential elections of 2009 “in improving public reasoning in countries where people have limited opportunities for publicly sharing and publishing their socio-political views” and its role in shaping public opinion. Unlike Adi and Miah’s chapter (2011) which focuses on the planned communication of two activist groups, Ghanavizi’s chapter ponders more on the role of the Internet as a medium where alternative voices converge. Extended considerations about the role of the Internet, and in particular social media, as a place where masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds participating in the Occupy actions are assembled within physical spaces are also made by Juris (2012) and Caren and Gaby (2011).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse how the digital and social media help converge or mediate such alternative voices and the ways in which communication unfolds. In doing so, it focuses on the uses of social media by protest groups and whether they contain any signs of planned and monitored communication activities.

One of the reasons why we believe it important to pursue such analysis is underpinned by observation that the literature on the protests by pressure and interest groups reflects the established discipline of interest and pressure group campaigning. Whiteley and Wingard (1987) looked at the strategies of groups representing the poor in the UK. Jong, Shaw & Stammers (2005) noted the mobilizing and integrating effects of the Internet on potential and committed activists. Juris (2008, 2012) reported on his ethnographic observations of the #Occupy Everywhere movements and the groups’ uses of social media and the influence this medium had in shaping the forms and practices of #Occupy in comparison with previous global justice movements. Jordan and Maloney’s (1997: 3) observation on environmental groups highlighted the importance of marketing efforts by campaign organisers in their manipulation of the predisposed public even though such groups are traditionally suspicious

of traditional marketing practices. This is protest persuasion, often anti-capitalist, using business persuasion techniques. This paper investigates these similarities.

Apart from Jordan and Maloney, none of these texts, to our knowledge, focused on communications strategies of protest groups. There is, instead, more work published when one looks at business promoting its interests via the Internet. For example, Demetrious (2011) has analysed corporate approaches to social media. These campaigns seek to mould values of friendship, community, transparency, proclaimed to characterise the electronic public spaces they use, in order to promote corporate-friendly individualism and consumption. This paper therefore observes and analyses how protest groups communicate and whether they are using any corporate messaging styles. In our view, corporate communication is characterized by command and control of messaging, branding and content, and a single corporate verbal and visual style which are, both online and offline, consistent, coherent and integrated. Consistency, coherence and demands for integration are characteristics which White and Mazur (2005) as well as Grime (2011) suggest as essential to the success of corporate communication efforts.

The rising in the general academic interest in protest communications noted above calls for refining definitions. The Americans Robert Wakefield et al. (2011) for instance use *PR for prosocial activism*, a term rarely mentioned in Europe. By that they mean PR for non-oppositional activism of the sort which "(...) helps societies obtain education or escape poverty and disease" (2011: 1). What is interesting to European and Latin American eyes is the distinction made about activism (welcome) that is confrontational (negative) and that which is *prosocial* (positive). Prosocial PR uses techniques such as relationship building, educating and seeking co-operation. However, PR for confrontational activism in their schema uses techniques such as strikes, boycotts, and lawsuits, carrying a negative connotation. Protest PR in Europe and Latin America uses these methods as well but negative connotations are not widely associated with them.

Moloney (2012) on the other hand explores the meaning and uses of the terms *dissent PR* and *protest PR*, terms that are apparently new to the disciplinary lexicon. He differentiates the terms from *activism PR*. Dissent PR is about bringing attention to new thinking and new behaviours in areas of national life. It promotes ideas for change and for retention in the

political economy and civil society. It is PR promoting the ideas of public intellectuals, academics, experts, people of faith found in both progressive and conservative philosophical circles. It is PR techniques designed to bring attention to these thinkers and their arguments in order to change the policy climate, the political weather. Protest PR, on the other hand, is a consequence of the dissent PR. It is also persuasive communication but not principally about ideas, behaviours and policies. Instead, it persuades via occupations, demonstrations, strikes, public speaking and other forms of non-violent and violent protest in order to implement those ideas, behaviours and policies into law, regulation and other forms of executive action. This paper shows protest PR in action.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Prompted by the researchers' direct experience of Occupation, supported by their interest in protest communications and by the lack of focus on online communications strategies by protest groups, this paper aims to explore the communication strategy and practices of the Occupy Bournemouth group and compare its online activity and uses of social media with wider UK-based Occupy groups. In doing so, the study employs an inductive, exploratory approach and uses a combination of qualitative research methods.

The initial stages of the research involved non-participant observation, as the researchers passed the Bournemouth University Occupiers on their way to their work. Further exploration of the group and more insight into its operation, organization and approach to communication was possible once one of the members of the group agreed to be interviewed.

While semi-structured in format and exploratory, the face-to-face interview enabled the two researchers to verify some of their prior observations as well as gain more in-depth insight into the group's strategic vision and messaging approach to social media. The interview was not recorded, only notes were taken. The interviewee's consent was obtained. The interviewee will be referred to generically as J.

As a result of the interview and the additional information, it provided more questions about how the group actually used social media for communication and how it compared to other UK-based Occupy groups were raised.

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative, click-by-click exploratory analysis of the social media presences of Occupy Bournemouth was undertaken. The absence of prior knowledge of how the group communicated and the limited information received from the in-depth face-to-face interview required us to pursue our research in an exploratory manner. We started therefore by using the social media presences mentioned during the interview and analysed them from a public relations and branding perspective, aiming to identify whether a single corporate verbal and visual style can be identified and whether this was consistent across the social media platforms used by group. Our observations and data collection therefore focused on:

- Historical and activity data – such as date of opening the account, number of likes, number of comments, number of followers, friends, mentions or shares depending on the account type, comments per update or “people talking about this”<sup>4</sup>. This information could be an indication of the level of maturity of an account and whether its activity is ad-hoc and uncoordinated or planned, showing signs of deliberate communication, assigned responsibility and monitoring practices.
- The picture used as avatar, the bio or the description of the account and any links shared. This allows the researchers to identify the mission and vision of the account holder, help define the purpose and messages used as well as indicate whether an effort to portray a coherent, consistent image across multiple platforms is made.
- The visual and message coherence of the accounts both within as well as among themselves as a means of testing the existence of a brand-like concept. Correlated with the existence of a single avatar, similar bio and similar links shared across multiple social media platforms, this could be an indication of both planned communications as well as maturity of an account.
- The messages shared. This is simplified content analysis based on an in-depth reading of textual outputs and identification and summary of the most frequent topics

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<sup>4</sup> “People talking about this” is a metric introduced by Facebook which measures the number of unique users who have created a “story” about a page in a seven-day period, where a story is the equivalent of an update or an item displayed on a user’s News Feed.

covered. This helps identify the type and tone of the messages the audience to whom they are aimed for.

Similar observation patterns and data were collected from other UK-based Occupy accounts which were chosen based on their mention during the interview and on their online activity. They include the UK group on Occupii and Occupy London. Occupii is a bespoke Occupy social network and social media platform where occupiers can liaise to discuss future actions. Occupy London is the biggest UK occupy movement group, the most referred to during the interview and one of the most active on social media.

To facilitate these observations this paper uses a combination of visual and qualitative data made available publicly through the profiles and accounts studied (@OccupyBMouth, @Occupy\_Bmouth, @OccupyLondon on Twitter Occupy Bournemouth Facebook page, Occupy London Facebook page and UK Occupy group on Occupii) and automatically generated visuals and analytics (*Foller.me*<sup>5</sup>, *Mentionmapp*<sup>6</sup> and *Wordle*<sup>7</sup>).

The information thus gathered in one stage serves as support and verification for the next. This enables triangulation of results and, we believe, enhances the reliability of this study.

In reporting the results, the data collected was publicly available and did not require the creation of any accounts or any login details in order to access it. The data thus reflects mainly information uploaded by the account holders rather than their users. For this reason, Facebook groups that were found via search or direct links from Twitter that required a login were excluded from the analysis.

However, the data obtained from Twitter was not anonymised, the account names being necessary in capturing the nature of the dialogue and its context. Yet when images and screen grabs of Twitter conversations are used, the avatar and name of the account holder are hidden. While the information and the accounts are within the public domain, the researchers' believe that the disclosing of the full names and avatar images of the account holders, apart from those of the Occupy accounts studied, is unnecessary.

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<sup>5</sup> Foller.me is an analytics application which provides insight about public Twitter profiles

<sup>6</sup> Mentionmapp is an online application that enables the visualization of the most frequent interactions of a twitter user with other users and hashtags.

<sup>7</sup> Wordle is a word cloud online generator visualizing the frequencies of words within a given text or URL.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Fieldwork report: Meet Spokesperson J.

J., the BU Occupier who accepted to be interviewed, was a maturing media operator and the researchers' half-hour spent with J. (near the start of the eight day campus occupation in March 2012) was repeatedly interrupted by audible signals from its new media devices. J. had four/five months activism at the Finsbury Square Occupation in the City of London and blamed the lack of pre-publicity about the BU Occupation for the low levels of attention from students, and from the public. J. thought apathy was the explanation and then with frankness admitted that "we forgot to tell people there's a protest". J. thought that what was common sense to the Occupiers was not common to the public.

J. indicated that the Occupiers disruption of campus life was used as a pretext to initiate dialogue with the students. During the conversations, most interest was received when the UK's banking crisis was mentioned, and the least attention when the environment came up. There were some negative student reactions, both face-to-face and online. The high point of student interest was when some 30-40 students called for support of the group at a union meeting. The academics' union, UCU, also attended that meeting.

J. had visits from local radio, TV and papers. *Rock*, the student newspaper, appeared as did students from the University's Media School. Although fascinated and happy with the media attention, J. did not want to play "the media game" for that led to Occupiers amending their behaviour to suit media news sense and timing. What kept the BU Occupiers concentrating on online activity was control of content and timing. But whatever route they went, J. suggested that they should have been more effective communicators because "publicity was very important".

Even if their publicity had been first class, the researchers doubt whether BU Occupy would have grown in numbers or attention for a number of reasons. Timing was against them: if they had come to BU when the St. Paul's Cathedral event in London was at its height, they would have made more impact on public opinion. But even so, the impact would not have much more.

Bournemouth is a “stony ground” for radicalism. The Occupiers came to BU because they were three times moved on from elsewhere or failed to attract attention. The movement’s work of “protest and convert” is a lonely task in Dorset: the town is conservative and Conservative; most BU students are on vocational courses and not politicized, and media coverage is conventional and “safe”. Some locations are just very “stony”, we argue.

### 3.2. Occupy Bournemouth

J. indicated that the group was using the micro-blogging platform, Twitter, and suggested to search for “Occupy Bmouth”. Using Twitter Search, two accounts were found: @OccupyBMouth and @Occupy\_Bmouth.

According to *Foller.me*, an analytics application which provides insight about public Twitter profiles, @OccupyBMouth was created on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 2011 while the @Occupy\_Bmouth was created on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 2011. This suggests that the first account, @OccupyBMouth, ceased its activity on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2011, meaning that between its break in activity at the creation of the other account, @Occupy\_Bmouth, there is less than a week. This raises questions about ownership of the accounts, purposes, and target audiences but most importantly about the history and events surrounding the Occupy movement in Bournemouth.

A closer look at the two accounts reveals major differences. For instance, @OccupyBMouth, describes itself as being “in solidarity with #OccupyWallStreet. Bournemouth Branch of the Occupy movement, Peaceful and lawful Our message is Worldwide. We are the 99%” (@OccupyBMouth Twitter Bio<sup>8</sup>) and it lists a Facebook group link<sup>9</sup>. Based on this bio, one could argue that the account represents the activity of a group and is managed and updated collectively. The inconsistent capitalizing of words might indicate a rushed account creation but also points to a group that aims to be part of a bigger movement, OccupyWallStreet. The @Occupy\_Bmouth on the other hand has a much shorter bio, no listed link and calls itself “Official Twitter feed for Occupy Bournemouth (South West of England)” (@Occupy\_Bmouth

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/OccupyBMouth>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/groups/151797548250531/?id=152730838157202&notif\\_t=group\\_activity](https://www.facebook.com/groups/151797548250531/?id=152730838157202&notif_t=group_activity)

Twitter Bio<sup>10</sup>). The location explained as South West of England indicates perhaps either an integration within the UK Occupy scene or a differentiation from another Bournemouth location or account, although no other Occupy Bournemouth accounts were found. What is interesting here is that @Occupy\_Bmouth presents itself as an official account, dismissing indirectly the existence and value of @OccupyBMouth, the activity of which ceased days before this account was made active.

At the time of the analysis, @OccupyBMouth had 0 followers, 0 following and 398 tweets. The zero number of following indicates that the account owners might follow and join conversations via hashtags and tweet-searches. The null number of followers could indicate either a lack of interest in the account or that the account was too short-lived to gain any interest. Similarly, it could also indicate that any conversations between the account and other Twitterati followed a similar search and find pattern. Regardless of the reasons, this is unusual for an account whose purpose would be to reach out, get known and be part of a wider group that supports a specific cause. Moreover, compared to the average of 14 tweets per day updated during the active time of the account, the zero ratio of followers and following is particularly intriguing. A closer look to the nature of the tweets reveals that a high number of them are directed to particular accounts (mentions or replies) or are repeated tweets (RT<sup>11</sup>s or same text tweets addressed to different users)<sup>12</sup>. The high dialogue-like activity can also be seen in Figure 1, a visualization of the twitter users and hashtags that are mentioned or used the most by the account, which also shows that @OccupyBMouth is mostly reaching out to either local media (@BBCRadioSolent and @BournemouthEcho) or other Occupy groups (@OccupyTogether, @OccupyOccupyArt, #solidarity, #occupytogether).

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<sup>10</sup> [https://twitter.com/Occupy\\_Bmouth](https://twitter.com/Occupy_Bmouth)

<sup>11</sup> RT= re-tweet, a Twitter message repeated in full by another account and marked as such. An RT could be considered as a guarantee that the tweet has been read. A mention or reply on the other hand, can be interpreted as attempts to open/continue a dialogue, an asynchronous exchange of information between at least two different accounts.

<sup>12</sup> According to Foller.me, @Occupy\_BMouth presents the following ratios as calculated based on the last 100 tweets sent by the account: 32/100 replies, 57/100 mentions, 51/100 tweets with hashtags, 26/100 RTs by the account of someone else's information and 29/100 tweets with links. This shows a high use of social media integration and dialogue through the use of links, replies and mentions as well as an attempt to be part of wider conversations as reflected by the high use of hashtags.





**Figure 3. Conversation between @Holsie and @OccupyBmouth on Twitter about the protest and occupation at Bournemouth University. Captured on August 2, 2012.**



Source: Twitter

With regards to the content shared, there is a major difference between @OccupyBMouth and @Occupy\_Bmouth, the latter reporting far less about their movement and attempting to engage in a dialogue with more people. Apart from trying to justify the occupation of Bournemouth University, @Occupy\_Bmouth is consistently attempting to answer questions and respond to tweets that mention their actions. Figures 4 and 5 provide more examples of such conversations, displaying 2 different answer approaches – one explanatory and one rather defensive, indicating more of a personal approach to managing the account than a

strategic, planned communication. The content of the tweets therefore displays different themes compared to the previous account and they are mostly related to the definition of the Occupy movement and Occupy Bournemouth which includes dissociations from negative representations, the mission of their occupation of Bournemouth University, and awareness raising by seeking approval and support via RTs of celebrities, media and other occupiers.

**Figure 4. Conversation between @wesleypickett and @OccupyBmouth on Twitter about the goal of their occupation at Bournemouth University. Captured on August 2, 2012**



Source: Twitter

The key dates below reflect, in part, these conversations as well as showing how the themes we identified emerged:

- Nov 22 – Moved to Boscombe – 4<sup>th</sup> site; announce twitter account as being their “new” account; asking for new supplies; new messages of hope, solidarity and unity;
- Nov 23 – Media relations (zerogov.org – offers media help);
- Nov 27 – Flyers distributed (same as the ones seem on FB group);
- Nov 30 – Camp destroyed;

- Feb 20 – Occupying the Boscombe Community Centre for Arts (council reacts – assuming from the reaction and invite to negotiation to avoid court fees);
- March 16 – Occupy already on BU campus soil (@SUBUBournemouth discusses the “occupation”);
- March 22-23 – Discussing with BU students unhappy with fences being put up and access to campus diverted;
- March 25 – Rupture in the movement shows<sup>14</sup>.

The two twitter accounts capture the history and development of the occupation of Bournemouth including that of Bournemouth University over a half year. They provide a glimpse into the daily life of occupiers from fighting with cold to facing legal action and to trying to raise awareness to their cause while dismissing negative associations. However, the two accounts also show an ad-hoc approach to communication albeit a good sense of social media engagement and etiquette. Despite the good effort, both accounts are currently abandoned and no updates have been sent from either of them for months. This raises questions about effectiveness of online and social media communication for activist and/or protest purposes which will be addressed later in this paper.

**Figure 5. Conversation between @themsmt and @OccupyBmouth on Twitter about the goal of their occupation at Bournemouth University<sup>15</sup>**



Source: Twitter

During the interview J. suggested that beyond Twitter, the group was actively using the social networking platform, Facebook, and a bespoke Occupy network, Occupii. Three

<sup>14</sup> A blog post is shared in one of the last tweets from the account. It calls the university occupation group as separate and in conflict with other occupiers and it launched a call for apology from the Bournemouth University occupiers to the rest of the group. It shows personality conflicts within the group which could in part explain the lack of success with their general occupation of Bournemouth as well as the lack of coherence in their online communication: <http://time4change4all.wordpress.com/2012/03/25/occupy-bmouth-university/>

<sup>15</sup> It includes a link to a Wikipedia page about Occupy and the “we are the 99%”. Captured on August 2, 2012.

presences on Facebook were identified: a page, which was identified as associated with Occupy Bournemouth when checking the details on Occupy UK and Ireland information hub<sup>16</sup>, and two closed groups. The first closed Facebook group was linked to from the bio of @OccupyBMouth and the second closed Facebook group was linked to from the “about” section of the Facebook page indicated above. This second group, called Occupy Cherry Town, is not directly associated with Bournemouth but with Occupy Direct Action. As indicated in the methodology section, the groups are excluded from the analysis.

The Occupy Bournemouth Facebook page<sup>17</sup> presents a minimal activity: only 395 likes registered, and 6 “people talking about this” metrics displayed. Its “about” section describes Occupy Bournemouth in rather general terms: “OCCUPY BOURNEMOUTH - End the Money and People Abusers - Apathy of Evidence is Evidence of Apathy In Solidarity with the Global Revolution”. This brief description, formulated in a specific slogan-like protest speak, is very much in line with the general anti-corporatisation and anti-commercialism messages seen on Twitter on both the @OccupyBMouth and @Occupy\_Bmouth accounts. The page also lists in the description section its support with other protest groups:

“In solidarity with Global Revolution - UK Uncut -Anonymous- Occupy Together Occupii- Save the BCCA Community Arts Centre - Occupirates -OccupyBH in Unity- CONQUERING THE DIVIDE IN UNITY” (Occupy Bournemouth Facebook page description).

This description, like those on Twitter, shows an attempt by Occupy Bournemouth to reach out to and define itself as being one of many protest groups.

In terms of dialogue and discussion, the Occupy Bournemouth Facebook page records similar poor levels of activity: the number of posts shared receiving ‘likes’ and comments is very small. Looking at the numbers and the general activity patterns on the page, one could assume that not only was the page not successful in creating dialogue but it failed in even attracting the attention necessary to start one.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.occupyuk.info/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/OccupyBournemouth>

In fact, the last update on the page is a to a [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) report entitled “Occupy Protesters Shut Encampment” shared on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September and preceded by a letter announcing the official closure of the Priory Road site in Bournemouth town, about 3 miles away from the University’s Talbot campus. This reflects the general lack of engagement from the public as seen from Twitter as well.

In terms of engagement, share of voice and reach, the “people talking about this” metric is far more important than the number of “likes” as it shows the number of individuals who have posted something about Occupy Bournemouth on their “walls”. Considering the population of Bournemouth of around 168,000 which we could consider the target audience of Occupy Bournemouth and the 395 likes which we could interpret as equal with the number of people showing some interest in Occupy Bournemouth, the number of 6 people freely sharing information to their networks about Occupy is very small. In fact, the number is very close to the total number of Occupiers we witnessed on the Bournemouth University campus.

A similar attempt at inclusion is also done via the Occupii network where Occupy Bournemouth has an inactive link to a *Livestream* embed. It is unclear at this point whether there were any livestreams from Bournemouth, as no archive of recordings could be identified.

This too shows the ad-hoc approach to social media and an attempt to secure these spaces for outreach and message control. Yet due to the lack of clarity, purpose and direction of such use, the accounts are unsuccessful in obtaining the engagement and conversation they seem to seek. This aspect will be revisited later in the paper.

### **3.2. Occupii UK and OccupyLondon**

Seeing the lack of success and impact of the Occupy Bournemouth group, both online and real life, questions about how other occupy groups communicate were raised. The researchers’ looked at the Occupy UK group within Occupii. As Occupii is a bespoke social network for occupiers, we wanted to verify the assumption according to which, a UK-wide group on Occupii would enable us to witness discussions about direction, mission, vision and

strategy to address the general public and the media taking place between various representatives of UK-based Occupy groups.

We also looked at OccupyLondon and their respective website and Twitter accounts as this group and their associated hashtags were the ones the most often referred to during the social media conversations of both @OccupyBMouth and @Occupy\_Bmouth. Also London has been described as the place for inspiration and training by J., the leader of the BU Occupation.

In line with Adi and Miah's (2011) findings, according to which activist groups often fail to spark action online, the Occupy UK group on Occupii records very little activity. With a total of 355 members, there are only 24 discussion and 83 total comments on the group main page. The discussions, too, are very weakly populated, the most successful called "Mayday! Mayday!". A call for a general meeting on May recorded less than 20 comments. While this shows very little engagement, the Occupii network provides members with a variety of interaction opportunities and livestream options including *Mumble*, a voice chat service. Perhaps, the public display of discussions and comments could explain the lack of general activity but with our access to "behind closed doors" talks being restricted we can only speculate. The point, however, is that the more general the nature of the group and the cause that they support, the harder it is for them to obtain and maintain long-term engagement online.

The contrary is shown by OccupyLondon. The group is geographically restricted to the area of London yet their communications are extremely active. Their constant generation of their own content shared via their social media accounts and the bespoke Occupy News Network, enables OccupyLondon to continue to receive attention online and engage with various publics. Perhaps one of the reasons of its success, beyond its constant posting on social media, is the clarity in information which it provides through its website. Organized as an NGO, the OccupyLondon website has a clean visual identity, (in contrast to what we have seen in Bournemouth) which it repeatedly displayed on all its social media accounts, and a very clear menu of "about", "events", "GA"<sup>18</sup>, "groups", "people", "media", and "donate". Out of these the "about" and "media" sections are particularly rich in information containing

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<sup>18</sup> General Assembly

sub-menus which include, among others, links to pages like: safer place policy, statement of authority, international statement, economics statement, corporations statement, united for global democracy, City of London demands, homelessness statement, online safer place policy as well as livestream, occupytimes, occupy news network, photos, flyers and posters, logos and banners.

While OccupyLondon reaches out to mass media, they are more than anything else creators of their own content. Coupled with a brand identity, OccupyLondon's contribution to the online talk about Occupy, if not its influence, is much higher due to, on the one hand, the sheer amount of content they produce and, on the other hand, to the very clear, corporate-like organization of their identity, demands and messages. By comparison with OccupyLondon (whose twitter account at the time of data collection has 33105 followers, was following 987 users and has 8793 accounts since September 2011), the Occupy Bournemouth twitter accounts are just not strong enough or consistent enough<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The location principle was against the Occupy protesters in Bournemouth as the demographics and political complexion of the relatively small town worked against them, forcing them to abandon their cause. They did, however, claim that they had stopped the closure of an arts centre in the suburb of Boscombe. They have certainly been persistent and loud on the issue. There is only one organisation for protest of a radical nature operating in the town. It is the Bournemouth and Poole Anti-Cuts Coalition (BPACC<sup>20</sup>) that has a well-organised foundation in the town's trade unions and an almost daily email presence with Twitter and Facebook links. The organisational ability of BPACC marks it off from Occupiers: personnel are constant and know the politics of the town well. BPACC called the most successful protest march in Bournemouth's recent history when a 1000 people turned up to

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<sup>19</sup> By comparison, the Foller.me activity reports for @OccupyLondon show a ratio of 72/100 tweets with mentions, 77/100 tweets with hashtags, 27/100 retweets and 75/100 tweets with links which are clear indication of dialogue, content generation and content monitoring seen through the high number of hashtags and mentions and the small number of RTs.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://falseeconomy.org.uk/campaigns/item/bournemouth-poole-anticuts-coalition>. Accessed 29.04.2012.

oppose public sector pension cuts in September 2011<sup>21</sup>. But even BPACC cannot turn to the BU campus for support in depth.

The Occupy movement uses the slogan “We are the 99%”. This, however, is not universally true: it does not apply in the “stony ground” of Bournemouth, whether there is or is not social media.

The members of Occupy Bournemouth, as J. suggested, resorted to using social media in an attempt to raise awareness of their cause and their mission. However, their communication is ad-hoc, inconsistent, and contradictory at times, pleading and trying to explain by denial rather than by positive associations. Their struggles to continue their Occupation in real life and avoid eviction from the sites they chose can be followed on social media. However, their social and digital media outputs include very few messages that make any claims or state a vision that would support their protest and occupation. Unlike OccupyLondon who define both their mission and transparently allow outsiders to see how the decisions are taken within the group, Occupy Bournemouth is on an uncertain journey rather than a well-founded communications path.

Unlike OccupyLondon, which is also geographically confined, the Occupy Bournemouth group lacks the power, the clarity and strength to make their communication coherent online. In the case of Occupy Bournemouth, social media provides us with only a pale reflection of group dynamics. Through our observations, we can infer not only that the geo-political location and the economic context matters for an activist or protest group to be successful, but also that the clarity and conciseness of its messages are also extremely important. However, a communication strategy which borrows the structure, format and even tactics of the corporate world, including its consistency and tone, seems to have more chances of being heard, as well as supported online. It is not only the ability to create and share their own content that makes an activist and protest group successful online but its relevance and its ability to communicate that quality.

### **Postscript**

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<sup>21</sup> One of the researchers was present at the march.

The micro Occupy movement in 'stony' Bournemouth, England, had a very short life. If that small number of Occupiers reflected on their experiences of campaigning against the global financial crisis, they may have noted the following comment from Mervyn King, the Governor of the Bank of England. After the scandal of the rigging of the Libor interest rate, he told British people that their banking system was 'very wrong' and that deep, urgent reforms were needed (Elliott, Treanor and Watt, 2012).

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