

FRIENDS, FOLLOWERS and the FUTURE

**How Social Media
are Changing Politics,
Threatening
Big Brands,
and Killing
Traditional Media**

Rory O'Connor



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Introduction: Word of Mouse

New York, November 2011

As I write, demonstrators all over the world have taken to the streets to protest against social, economic and political systems—many widely regarded as democratic—that simply aren't serving their needs. From Cairo to Athens, from New Delhi to Tel Aviv, and from Madrid to a just few miles away here in Manhattan, indignant citizens are rising up and raising their voices to send loud messages of dissatisfaction to the powers-that-be: Big Government, Big Business, and Big Media alike.

Growing networks of “ordinary people,” many of them young and feeling deeply disenfranchised, are beginning to exert extraordinary influence on societies worldwide. They are using emerging media forms to bypass state censorship, outpace traditional news organizations, and compel corporations and governments alike to listen to and act on their demands. Deeply disruptive new media tools, which now enable them to produce and distribute news and information widely, inexpensively, and efficiently, also help them to attract large audiences, to affect the rise and fall of policies,

politicians and entire governments and even to revolutionize entire industries.

Here in the United States—long regarded as the global bastion of capitalist democracy—an ongoing “occupation” of Wall Street and the financial district at the epicenter of the world’s continuing economic crisis, continues to grow in impact and importance. Initially ignored or ridiculed by the powerful global media corporations also headquartered here, the demonstrators responded by employing their own media—including viral emails, blogs, social networks like Facebook and other young social platforms, such as the video sharing site YouTube and the micro-blogging Twitter service—to spread their message by word of mouse.

Dismayed by the corporate media’s spotty, cynical coverage and upset at what they viewed as a lack of authentic information being made available about their movement, organizers relied instead on telling their own story, through diverse media that included an online livestream of the occupation, websites, a newspaper, and much, much more. Some in the tech-savvy crowd posted commentary, photographs and video to Twitter and YouTube, even when under arrest. Their friends and followers quickly redistributed the pictures, posts and tweets emanating from what soon became renowned as “Occupy Wall Street.” Within days the more established media were forced to change their condescending stance and begin to cover the protests in a more comprehensive and respectful manner.

Similar protests soon sprouted elsewhere. The loose-

knit campaign that began in New York spread to dozens of other cities across the country, “with protesters camped out in Los Angeles near City Hall, assembled before the Federal Reserve Bank in Chicago and marching through downtown Boston to rally against corporate greed, unemployment and the role of financial institutions in the economic crisis,” as the Agence France-Presse wire service reported. “With little organization and a reliance on Facebook, Twitter and Google groups to share methods, the Occupy Wall Street campaign, as the prototype in New York is called, has clearly tapped into a deep vein of anger, experts in social movements said, bringing longtime crusaders against globalization and professional anarchists together with younger people frustrated by poor job prospects.”

When New York police arrested more than 700 people on the Brooklyn Bridge on October 1, 2011, it only galvanized their campaign and provided momentum for new rallies and other encampments in cities as disparate as Baltimore, Memphis, Minneapolis, and even the nation’s capital, where an Occupy DC protest began in a park near the White House. While tens of thousands of union members and other progressives joined the demonstrators to denounce the power, wealth, and indifference of America’s major financial institutions, Occupy Together, an unofficial hub for the protests, listed sites for hundreds of future demonstrations, including some in Europe and Japan.

Nicholas Kulish chronicled the growing demonstrations in a *New York Times* report published ten days after the

occupation of Wall Street began, noting that the protesters' complaints "range from corruption to lack of affordable housing and joblessness, common grievances the world over. But from South Asia to the heartland of Europe and now even to Wall Street, these protesters share something else: wariness, even contempt, toward traditional politicians and the democratic political process they preside over."

Why are people all over the world coming to similar conclusions and taking to the streets all at once to express them? The answer should be obvious: *they feel their social systems have abandoned them*. As a result, citizens of all ages, but especially young people, are throwing off old-style, top-down constructs like political parties, traditional media and corporate brands to adopt instead the more participatory and far less hierarchical ways of the Web.

Thus the protest movements in democracies such as the United States and Israel have much in common with those that toppled authoritarian governments during the Arab Spring of 2011. In each case, a disenchanted populace moved to create its own online space, using tools such as wikis, social networks, Twitter and the like to form instant networks of like-minded people.

"You're looking at a generation of 20- and 30-year-olds who are used to self-organizing," Yochai Benkler, a director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, explained to the *New York Times*. "They believe life can be more participatory, more decentralized, less dependent on the traditional models of organization, either in

the state or the big company. Those were the dominant ways of doing things in the industrial economy, and they aren't anymore."

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, which had followed closely on the heels of the Second World War's hotter antagonisms, triumphant cheerleaders for the democratic capitalist system celebrated victory over authoritarian communism by famously declaring an "end to history." They pronounced with unexamined certitude the fact that capitalistic economics and globalization, combined with the Western world's democratic institutions, represented the only way forward to the future. But repeated economic collapses—1997's Asian financial "flu," the popping of the "Internet bubble" a few years later, the "Great Recession" of 2007–8, and the continuing debt crisis still roiling global markets—soon put their theory to the test. The subsequent paralysis of policy makers and their inability (or outright refusal) to protect their citizens from the ill effects of capitalism's crises left many frustrated at best with stale political choices they saw as mere leftovers of an era that had already ended. Is it any surprise then that when offered powerful and cost-free new tools of communication, many have now moved to create their own media, brands, and modes of governance?

As powerful as they are, the protests of 2011—from the Arab Spring that toppled dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya to the American Autumn and the Occupy movement—are but the most current and specific manifestations

of an evolving global phenomenon now affecting nearly every aspect of modern life. In point of fact, there really *is* a revolution going on—not just a political one, but a *digital information revolution*—that encompasses nearly every aspect of the way we live, work, play, vote, govern, and do business, and which is rapidly and radically transforming how we communicate.

Internet technology is constantly evolving new tools, from blogging to tweeting and from social networking to link sharing, that enable us all to produce and distribute diverse streams of news and information. For the first time in history, we now enjoy myriad ways through which we all can make our message, as well as that of others, much more accessible and amplified. The impact of this information revolution goes far beyond just the political realm, even as it has led to such previously unimaginable events as, for example, the shockingly rapid fall of Egypt's longtime and once seemingly all-powerful leader Hosni Mubarak.

The accelerating impact of the Internet, and the powerful social media that have begun to dominate its use, are now rapidly transforming our political, commercial and communications environments, while profoundly affecting the future of governance and the very nature of democracy itself. No longer passive consumers of profit-driven centralized news, government edicts, corporate advertising, and other top-down forms of information products, active users of online social media increasingly produce and break news themselves from the bottom up—while also becoming

trusted curators of and commentators on events that directly affect our lives. Although this ongoing revolution may not be televised by the legacy broadcast media, it is certainly being *digitized*, and then distributed and redistributed at the speed of light to every corner of our increasingly connected world. Considered together, the newly emerging communications technologies signal a huge shift in how we now find, consume and interact with news and information of all types.

Share and share alike—the sheer numbers say it all, as literally billions of people flock to social media sites of all sorts to communicate what they deem important to their lives and that of people within their new online networks, known in social parlance as “friends” and “followers.” The ramifications of this seismic shift are tremendous. Not long ago, highly centralized sources—the so-called media brands—were almost universally trusted and thought by many to be virtually omniscient. (Those of a certain age will recall *CBS News* anchorman Walter Cronkite’s nightly sign-off, “And that’s the way it is!”) As we now move to a new era of decentralized, distributed and networked social media, however, such old realities evanesce.

In this dawning age of media abundance, access to the means of production and distribution is no longer limited to a self-ordained priesthood of professionals. Instead, as networked technologies proliferate, new methods of creating content and new channels to distribute it have become available *to everyone* and *between everyone*. With barriers

collapsing, power no longer resides solely with the legacy media brands that are still grasping for control with their old methods and channels.

Along with losing their previously privileged position, legacy media have also lost the trust of many of their customers—largely as a result of their poor performance over time. As online outlets like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and others supplement (and begin to supplant) both legacy outlets and Google with its vaunted search engine as distributors of credible news and information, they also alter our relationships with older media. With our longstanding dependence on them diminished, the legacy media and their corporate advertisers can no longer rely mainly on brand power to inspire trust and confidence.

As previous structures vanish and the primacy of legacy media brands fades, revenue models, and commercial relationships of the past disintegrate. Entire industries such as television, film, newspapers, magazines, (and yes, even book publishing) are being radically, sometimes even fatally, disrupted. The rise of the new social media will inevitably lead to the obsolescence and eventual death or transformation of any and all brands that fail to embrace and adapt to this quickly morphing mediascape.

What changed, when, how, and why? Over the course of the last decade, the emerging social media—most of which didn't even exist before the turn of the century—abruptly altered our use of the Internet, itself still a relatively young medium. Interactive “Web 2.0” platforms such as

Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter experienced phenomenal growth by freely offering useful new tools and technologies. These platforms quickly came to dominate the amount of time users spent online, taking the place of such previously popular Internet pastimes as email and search. In a breathtakingly short period, social media became touchstones of modern communications and culture—and in the process upended entire industries, changed cultural norms, and disrupted both national and then international politics and, to a lesser degree, governance. As social media made billionaires of young entrepreneurs like Facebook's co-founder Mark Zuckerberg, while inspiring such best selling books as *The Facebook Effect* and Hollywood blockbusters as *The Social Network*, they also became prominent news sources for an ever-increasing number of people who were simultaneously losing their faith or simply no longer paying attention to long-established media brands.

Almost overnight, the previous century's centralized, one-way media reality of limited channels for the distribution of news and information—and thus of limited access to it—was transformed, as the new methods of online media distribution became available. While traditional media were busy dying, new networks were being born, offspring of an emergent link economy itself born of Google's once-revolutionary search technology.

Meanwhile Internet users with common interests in such topics as music, photography and current events began to coalesce online, initially on such platforms as Friendster

and MySpace, and later on YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, and others. At the same time, a host of external financial and structural challenges beset and began to overwhelm the traditional news media, which were also racked with a variety of self-imposed problems, ranging from declining audience interest to increasing political partisanization and even complicity in ginning up unpopular and unnecessary wars.

One result was a severe erosion in public confidence in “old media” forms. By the start of the new century’s second decade, it had become commonplace when searching for credible news and information to rely at least in part on friends and followers within these new online networks. At the same time, the dynasties and dinosaurs of the legacy media and traditional journalism were besieged by twin crises of diminishing resources and questionable credibility.

This exciting, messy, and chaotic digital media revolution, with its flood of unmediated news and information, unaddressed trust-and-credibility questions, emerging social platforms and their highly disruptive effect on brands, from long-established legacy firms such as *NBC News* or the *New York Times* to new media newcomers like Google, and the attendant commercial, communications, and political turmoil, is the story of our time—and the subject of this book. In less than a decade these new platforms leapt into prominence and became major global conduits of news, information, and social action. The emergence of our online social networks and their new media tools and technologies directly imperil every legacy media industry. With “social” now beginning to

replace “search” as a main focus on online activity, these new online titans also pose an increasing existential threat to such other Internet behemoths as Google—the current King-of-the-Hill and long thought, as the world’s leading brand, to be invulnerable and virtually immune to competition.

And as we have seen, just months after the uprising in Cairo’s Tahrir Square toppled the old authoritarian order and became synonymous with radical transformation, “Facebook-driven” protests all over the globe threatened equally to upend many other societal behemoths. Amidst common and continuing complaints from consumers and citizens alike about credibility, trust, authenticity, transparency and the nature of democracy itself, the overriding issue is not specifically political or economic in nature, but ultimately one of power relations. Who will determine our future—the centralized dominating forces of the past, or we the people?

The answer echoes from unlikely places. The occupation in Egypt’s capital during Arab Spring had a surprising and unanticipated impact in Israel, with citizens there citing the events in Tahrir Square as an inspiration for protests in their own capital of Tel Aviv. As Moshe Gant, a 35-year-old Israeli business analyst who came to support the demonstrators, told the *Times*, “Religious Jews like to think of us as a light unto nations, meaning that others will learn from us, but this time we have learned from the nations around us that change can come from people power.” Protester Eldad Yaniv amplified Gant’s remarks. “This is the first time

that instead of fighting against the Arabs we are fighting for something—our life and that of our children. The old right and left are fading. This country needs a new left, its own New Deal.”

Meanwhile back here in New York City, what started less than two months ago as a small demonstration, also inspired by the events in Tahrir Square, has already grown into a national movement. As the richest and most powerful 1 percent becomes ever richer, the “other 99%” is taking to the streets in response, protesting their country’s economic imbalance, powerful corporations, and financial entities—and its political and media systems, which are no longer addressing their needs and thus face the risk of increasing irrelevance.

The tipping point is upon us. The unprecedented power of the emerging social media is helping people connect online and in the streets to push the entire world over the edge of change. Watch out, Big Media, Big Business, and Big Government—here come our friends, our followers, and our future!