

THESIS

THE BEST ALTERNATIVE?

THE USE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Science

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2013

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## ABSTRACT

### THE BEST ALTERNATIVE? THE USE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT

This research study explores the use of alternative media among the Occupy social movement. A combination of factors, including emerging media technology and an antagonistic relationship with mainstream media has led many social movement actors to use alternative media to mobilize participation. The study looks into the participants' perspectives concerning mobilization through alternative media. Qualitative interviews with participants of Occupy Denver revealed insight into methods of mobilization, users' relationships with mainstream media sources, and vulnerabilities of alternative media use. The findings revealed that mobilization has been observed to occur successfully using open, interactive forms of online alternative media. Despite several risks identified with alternative media use, participants explained that Occupy Denver continues to prefer mobilizing through alternative media due to opportunities for horizontal structure, control, and independence from the mainstream media.

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## **Introduction**

Occupy: a statement, a group, and a movement that has been viewed around the world through television, newspapers, fliers, websites, social media, protests, and symbolic action. Occupy has been a socioeconomic movement that by early 2012 had spread throughout 1,590 major cities across the globe (Van Stekelenburg, 2012). Initiated in September of 2011 in New York City's Zuccotti Park, the movement has focused primarily on the global economic crisis of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, protesting particularly against the severe mishandling of funds by top executive management of corporations and government institutions, who Occupiers identify as the "1%" (Van Gelder, 2011). Since its inception, the movement gained attention from worldwide media; images of a diverse group of activists setting up camps and holding signs with the message, "We are the 99%" made their way across borders and to the viewership of people who shared similar grievances. Compared to other social movements such as those witnessed during the Arab Spring and the M15 protests, the Occupy movement appeared to have similar potential for widespread, global momentum (Kroll, 2011; Van Stekelenburg, 2012).

A year after its establishment in September, 2011, the movement has since become a worldwide phenomenon with many major cities becoming homes to single-issue affinity groups who originated from the identity of Occupy. In the State of Colorado, the group Occupy Denver has become an influential force continuing to support the Occupy movement by taking action towards resolving economic and social issues affecting the people of Denver and other territories of Colorado (ABC 7 News, 2012). The phenomena observed with Occupy Denver and other affinity groups goes beyond the physical protest activities and the diverse affiliations with other networked groups; participants' relationships to media are an interesting one, and one that has

been argued to be a prime contributor to the momentum of the Occupy movement. The media network that has been used and produced by the group to connect participants and mobilize action has been a monumental focal point for Occupy and other contemporary social movements (Caren & Gabey, 2011; Juris, 2012; Van Stekelenburg, 2012).

The use of media to include the World Wide Web, email, social media and mobile devices by participants has been a prime resource for many major social movements over the past three decades. The Zapatista movement in Mexico has been recognized as one of the first and most well-known social movements to actively use the Internet as part of its network for publicity and recruitment. The movement demonstrated how an indigenous and marginalized group could adopt new forms of technology and produce an alternative form of media, which eventually expanded the group's affiliation into a worldwide movement (Kowal, 2002). Other social movements have actively used various forms of media as resources for publishing their own alternative media to communicate information and calls to action (Atton, 2002a). Significant events such as the WTO protest and the Arab Spring have also been known for their combined use of Internet websites and social media to coordinate specific actions online and mobilize participation offline against government institutions and powerful corporations (Khondker, 2011; Starbird & Palen, 2012; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004).

In the case of Occupy, the participants' use of alternative media seems to be following much of the work being practiced by past social movements. The interactive, do-it-yourself features of many forms of alternative media are present in the Occupy movement. Media resource efforts combine the use of group websites, blogs, social networking sites (SNSs), and streaming video to publicize the philosophy and struggle of Occupy as well as connect viewers to active participants of the movement (Van Stekelenburg, 2012). However, Occupy's

relationship to media goes beyond interaction among participants through user-friendly media. Some participants of the movement have taken a step further in their mobilization efforts by opposing mainstream, corporately-owned news media coverage (Van Gelder, 2011). Reacting to negative framing and portrayal of past social movements, media producers of Occupy have set up their alternative media network not only as a mobilization tool but also as a symbol of autonomy from mainstream media resources (Schneider, 2011; Van Stekelenburg, 2012).

Upon initial examination, the past year of Occupy activity has shown that multiple types of alternative media have been present in the Occupy movement. There are indications that it could be a preferred resource among the participants of the movement to mobilize participation. The power and potential of alternative media in the hands of participants has been witnessed worldwide, and it is often credited as an enabler of social revolution. Yet, while resources such as websites, blogs, and SNSs have all been endorsed as tools to build a successful social movement, the processes by which participants use specific types of media to achieve certain goals is still an area in need of much exploration. Additionally, the critical relationship between alternative media production and mainstream media coverage is an evolving one that also requires further explanation in social movement studies.

As digital forms of media continue to develop and enable users to produce their own alternative media content, it is very important to examine this phenomenon of alternative media and its role in social movements. It is essential to explore what types of alternative media Occupy is using and producing, as well as how these alternative media are being used to mobilize mass participation. Using Occupy Denver as the associated group of study, this research approach uncovers answers to why alternative media is considered such an important resource in the Occupy movement as well as what vulnerabilities exist in using this resource.

The researcher's intent was to harvest many important antecedents that will aid in understanding how social movements, and perhaps any organization, can successfully mobilize action among its participants using interactive and do-it-yourself resources.

This research study takes a qualitative look into the workings of Occupy Denver, examining the relationships that users have with media as a resource. Qualitative in-depth interviews were used by the researcher to investigate the participants' use of alternative forms of media as part of the movement. Reviewing past literature on social movement activity and media use, the researcher uses theoretical concepts to develop a set of research questions and a comprehensive interview question guide to explore the phenomena of Occupy Denver and alternative media. Upon interviewing founding members and other participants of Occupy Denver, the researcher conducted a thorough analysis and interpretation of findings from the interviews to hopefully better explain the role of alternative media in the Occupy movement.



## Literature Review

The use of media by social movements has often been examined through the lens of resource mobilization theory. Resource mobilization theorizes that rational actors come together to form social movements set on achieving goals of social change. Resources are available throughout the networks of rational actors within social movements, and these resources are then used by groups to mobilize or encourage the participation of prospective actors. This involves communicating with participants, encouraging them to support the social movement and then take action as part of the movement. As social movements are able to mobilize participation, more resources become available to the networks of participants that can help them to achieve their goals. Rationalization is strongly emphasized in resource mobilization theory; people will only participate within socially moral means and as long as the benefits of their participation outweigh the costs. For example, through resource mobilization participants of a social movement will be more likely to cooperate with authority and government institutions rather than advocate violent disruption, as the former approach is more likely to affect public policy (Jenkins, 1983; Klandermans, 1984; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Alinsky (1971) summarized this same idea prior to the formation of resource mobilization theory, stating that participants of social movements will simply use tactics to do what they can with what they have.

In the discipline of sociology, resource mobilization focuses on the social structures built through social movements and the resources that can be aggregated through these networks. McCarthy and Zald (1977) constructed much of this theoretical framework as they studied social movements from the 1960s and 1970s. They defined **social movements** as “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the

social structure and/or the reward distribution of a society (p. 1217-1218).” Upon the foundation of these opinions and beliefs in a society, rational actors then form multiple levels of organization to gather necessary resources and develop methods for using these resources to achieve adequate participation. These levels of organization include social movement organizations (SMOs), which are formally organized groups who align their goals with fulfilling the opinions and beliefs of the social movement, as well as social movement industries (SMIs), which are a collection of SMOs who work towards accomplishing similar goals. SMOs may be structured to be highly organized and professional groups, or they can be composed of non-bureaucratic, decentralized and grassroots models (Jenkins, 1983). Additionally, the introduction of new social movement theories into the social movement paradigm has influenced the concept of social movements in resource mobilization theory. While early resource mobilization theory focused on largely structured, rational economic class struggles, new social movement theories have posited that groups may form through commonly shared grievances that transcend economic or social classes and statuses (Beuchler, 1993). Goals for social change among these groups have expanded to include a broader range of social issues, with many affinity groups advocating to affect political and cultural change in society (Beuchler, 1995; Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield 1994).

In order for social movements to mobilize, they depend on the successful positive control of resources from their networks of participants (Jenkins, 1983). Resource mobilization theory commonly defines **resources** as assets that are collected and used by a social movement to affect social change (McCarthy & Wolfson, 1996). Types of resources have included money, labor, equipment and legitimacy, which if employed by rational actors can lead towards a social movement’s successful mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Jenkins (1983) further

subdivided the definition of resources to include specific types of tangible and intangible assets. Tangible assets consist of material goods such as money, facilities and channels of communication; intangible assets consist of people and their various skills. In many instances, a social movement might already possess several tangible and intangible resources among its network of participants. Jenkins (1983) stated that social movement actors will use a combination of these tangible and intangible resources to build relationships with people and organizations that can provide access to further resources, all of which can support the continued mobilization of the social movement. He uses the example of the civil rights movement of the 1950s to illustrate this network of resources. As African American communities became more centrally urbanized, their access to resources increased; increased opportunities for labor provided more funding, churches could provide facilities for assemblies, college-educated students could provide leadership, and better geographic positions for these communities provided a stronger setting for political action.

**Mobilization** has developed into a concept that focuses on the process by which social movement actors persuade prospective participants to become supportive and active participants of the movement. Klandermans (1984) offers a very detailed definition of mobilization, stating that it is the means of “persuading people to support the movement organization by material and non-material means” (p. 586). With this, Klandermans explored a workers’ union campaign in the Netherlands and investigated how audience members can be motivated to participate via the mobilization tactics used by SMOs. He identified two essential social-psychological components for the mobilization process. The first component is *consensus mobilization*, in which the social movement attempts to gain support from a population to adopt its viewpoints and ideology. The story of the struggle and the demands of the social movement are thus communicated with an

aim of reaching people rationally and emotionally, offering arguments and narratives that illustrate the perceived collective benefits of supporting the social movement. The second component is *action mobilization*, which involves the social movement communicating with the supporting population to participate in direct action. Additionally, Klandermans (1984) integrated expectancy value into the mobilization process as a determinant for participation. Expectancy value is a function in which participants psychologically determine whether the means of action are likely enough to successfully achieve a collective good. Klandermans (1984) summarized that if prospective participants observe a large network of participants engaging rationally in support of a social movement, greater expectations for success and a higher willingness for participation can be achieved. Therefore, a successful mobilization would depend on effective methods of communication to affect participants' attitudes of the social movement.

The process of mobilization has continued to focus on persuading the participation of people as a valuable resource. Walgrave and Klandermans (2010) studied the mobilization process by looking at the need for participation in social movements through the lens of supply and demand. Analyzing a sample of interviews from participants of anti-war demonstrations during the Iraq War, Walgrave and Klandermans (2010) found that organizations interacted with prospective participants through “closed” and “open” mobilization tactics based on the demand and supply of participants. Closed mobilization involved interaction with social movement actors in which conversation topics were very focused and limited to a small group of participants. Open mobilization, on the other hand, involved a higher degree of audience interaction with broader conversation topics directed at mobilizing a larger population. The respondent interviews conducted by Walgrave and Klandermans (2010) identified that SMOs

achieved open mobilization through the employment of several types of media resources, including posters, flyers, news articles, and Internet websites that communicated messages publicizing planned anti-war protests and demonstrations to audiences. The interview responses revealed a pattern of mobilization methods correlated to the supply and demand factors of participation; as SMOs demanded more participation, they geared towards more open forms of mobilization that welcomed mass audience interaction. Walgrave and Klandermans' (2010) discussion of these mobilization patterns consistently showed the presence of communication through media channels to achieve open mobilization and expand the networks of participants among social movements.

Communication studies have used resource mobilization theory to concentrate particularly on social movements' relationships to media as a resource for mobilizing participation. Mass media has been an effective resource for not only publicizing social movement actions to public officials and mass audiences but for also building a foundation for moral support among a population (Jenkins, 1983). Gamson and Wolfsfelt (1993) examined social movements that maintained positive relationships with news media in order to assist the mobilization process. With this, the framing strategies employed by the media were a critical point for social movements, and thus actors needed to develop methods for affecting messages through media that worked to gain support from both the news media institutions and the audiences in which they sought to reach. Gamson and Wolfsfelt (1993) hypothesized that movements should take on a more organized and focused structure to build a positive relationship with the media. Additionally, narrow and focused messages were observed to support a more successful mobilization.

Ryan, Carragee and Schwerner (1998) used resource mobilization theory to study how certain social movements utilize assistance from partner coalitions to develop specific strategies for engaging with mass media for mobilization. The case study of the Media Research and Action Program (MRAP) and its development of a media strategy with the Coalition Against Workplace Reproductive Hazards illustrated the process by which a social movement can successfully formulate a plan to communicate through the resources of mainstream news media and achieve mobilization among potential supporters, similar to the hypotheses presented by Gamson and Wolfsfelt (1993). MRAP assisted the coalition in building a multi-step media campaign strategy, which involved formulating appropriate messages to interested audiences, choosing the appropriate mass medium to communicate with these audiences, and framing key messages in ways that portrayed the importance of these issues and used credible, scientific expert sources to support the information. The Coalition's primary goals through this media campaign were to engage the attention of viewers to the workplace hazards experienced by members of the Coalition, with an intention of building support among prospective participants and imposing pressure on public institutions to enact policy changes. A content analysis by Ryan, Carragee and Schwerner (1998) of newspaper articles in the Boston, MA area revealed that MRAP's campaign was successful in gaining recognition on the front pages of several newspapers. While it could not be determined whether policy change resulted directly from this media campaign, several activists identified that they were able to acquire the intangible resources of media campaign skills and relationships with several mainstream media publications, which could have helped to support their movement.

Studies in public relations have examined the resource of media to include the use of the Internet for building relationships among social movement networks. Access and availability of

the Internet has enabled several SMOs to build online pressrooms and strengthen network relations with mass media and other institutions to communicate changes in public policy. Taylor, Kent and White (2001) used the principles of relationship building in public relations practices and compared them to the resource mobilization efforts of social movement actors, focusing on the use of organizational websites for mobilizing participation. Their content analysis of 100 activist organization websites revealed some advantages that assisted the mobilization process. One of the most prominent features was the ability to engage organizations with prospective participants through dialogic communication. Organizations were able to generate messages directly using their own tangible and intangible resources, providing information for public audiences on issues, philosophy, and means of action. Pictures and graphics served to illustrate the foundations of the social movements. Additionally, audiences had the option to participate in discussion with members of these organizations through email and surveys linked onto the pages of the websites. Taylor, Kent and White (2001) concluded that the resources of websites served to close the gap between well-resourced organizations and individuals looking to be involved in the activities of social movements.

Recent studies of social movements have continued to utilize resource mobilization theory. Taylor and Sen Das (2010) used resource mobilization theory to study the websites of stem cell advocacy organizations. Their content analysis of these organizational websites revealed how Internet resources can not only provide multiple forms of information pertaining to a social movement, but can also serve as a resource hub for building relationships with mass media institutions. Published press releases and statistical information were present on several of the websites to support mobilization through the news media. Additionally, these websites allowed for the aggregation of further resources from participants, such as money donations and

professional connections with other organizations. Sommerfeldt (2011) found similar results through his content analysis of activist websites. Online pressrooms as well as opportunities to donate money and register for membership and email distribution lists were identified. These studies display how organizational websites can serve as an invaluable resource to mobilize social movement participation, as well as lead to the aggregation of further resources for support. Referring back to Klandermans' (1984) conceptualization of mobilization, the dialogue and information communicated through websites fulfilled both the consensus and action mobilization needs for involving participants with SMOs. In many ways, new media technology and practice has become the centerpiece of study for how many social movements come to be built and strengthened (Wolfson, 2012).

### **The Resource of Alternative Media**

A major resource that has appeared very prominently in the study of contemporary social movements is the resource of alternative media. **Alternative media** is defined as any type of print or electronic media used and produced independently by socially or politically excluded citizens to provide content that is alternative to the dominant media institution (Downmunt & Coyer, 2007). Atton (2002a) identifies several attributes that characterize alternative media, specifically citing its low production costs, its streamlined publication process, its radical and aesthetic form, its use of developing technology (e.g. open source, user generated content), and its horizontally structured network. When examining this resource using Jenkins' (1983) distinction of tangible and intangible assets, alternative media is a product of both of these assets, utilizing the tangible assets of digital media and networks of communication combined with the



intangible, technical skills of users. Operationalized types of alternative media can include user-generated websites, blogs, Internet social networks, radio programs, streaming video content, posters, signs, fliers, murals and graffiti (Downing, 2008).

The motivation to create alternative media could be attributed to various degrees of conflict that might exist between social movements and mainstream mass media. Studies of social movements and media have revealed this conflict has occurred primarily with the mainstream media's framing strategies, which might be causing social movement actors to separate themselves from mainstream media and move towards alternative media as a resource for communication (Dowmunt & Coyer, 2007). As Gitlin (1980/2003) identified with his firsthand account as an organizer of student social movements of the 1960s, the framing strategies employed by mass media can have a strong influence on public perception of a social movement. Gitlin (1980/2003) cited how print and broadcast media first served to publicize issues and concerns of the social movements to a mass audience. However, major news organizations that covered the New Left and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) eventually shifted from a supportive stance to one that glorified the violence and disruption observed during several protest events. The scope and reach of mainstream broadcast media had the power to frame the movement of the New Left and the SDS in a much different way than the participants of the movement intended. At the same time, Gitlin (1980/2003) also recognized that these frames of the mainstream media had the potential to represent the oppositional undertones held by established institutions towards social movements. Still, what remained an antagonistic challenge for social movement actors was developing tactics of communicating specific messages through the media to engage audiences in mobilization.

Degrees of conflict still exist between social movements and mass media in many nations. The events of the WTO protests in 1999 displayed several cases in which mainstream media's framing strategies have either misrepresented or completely ignored the messages of social movements. Houston's (2004) discourse analysis of news articles covering the events of the WTO protest found that multiple frames were employed in similar ways by mainstream newspapers. These frames centered on themes portraying the city of Seattle as a model for modern capitalism, while portraying the protesters as disorganized and largely responsible for instigating violence and police brutality. Houston (2004) concluded that with this portrayal, the mainstream media largely ignored the purpose and specific messages of the protest in favor of sensational and violent incidents. Baasanjav's (2005) content analysis of major metropolitan newspaper articles uncovered similar findings, revealing how the mainstream media exhibited a tendency to advocate and legitimize the policies and interests of the WTO and many of the corporate members involved in the conference. Compared to these entities, the agendas communicated by the protestors were largely marginalized by mainstream media prior to the actual day of the protest; following the events of the N30 protest, coverage of the protestors increased heavily for as long as two weeks afterwards. Yet, Baasanjav (2005) found that much of this coverage focused on a theme of deviance used to portray the agenda and tactics of the protestors. These studies of the WTO protests indicate that social movement actors have become a largely muted group, whose existence in society is largely understood by public audiences at the expense of mainstream media frames.

Studies of social movements in Latin America have identified similar conflicts to be present throughout mainstream media at an aggressive level. Peschanski (2007) reviewed several social movements in Latin America and found that a clear conflict existed between

corporately owned media and participants of social movements. Journalists in Argentina during the mid-1990s aligned themselves with protecting the interests of the corporations and political groups in power by using framing strategies to suppress any popular dissent. Articles published through Argentinian mainstream newspapers about the Piqueteros, a group that defended workers' rights, framed the participants in the movement as "demons," with an emphasis on violence and defiant action. Essentially, Argentinian journalists created a clear division between "good" and "bad" for public audiences, with mainstream media standing up as an institution to support morality and the authority of the state. Waisbord and Peruzzotti's (2009) qualitative content analysis of news articles covering the Asambleísmo in Uruguay also found complex degrees of conflict present in local and national media publications in Argentina and Uruguay. The analysis of these media found that local media tended to support the environmental concerns of the Asambleísmo regarding the construction of paper mill plants in the Rio Uruguay, stating how the actions of participants assisted in mobilizing the communities surrounding Rio Uruguay. On the other hand, the movement did not gain national media attention until the conflict over the construction of the plants was framed as a political conflict between Argentina and Uruguay rather than an environmental risk. The protest activities of the Asambleísmo and political conflict were portrayed frequently through national mainstream media, but the environmental concerns originally addressed by the Asambleísmo were very much suppressed. Again, the Latin American media were observed to uphold the authority of their respective states and clearly emphasized political conflicts between groups in society as opposed to the messages of the protestors.

The conflicts between social movements and mainstream media have led many social movement actors to develop ways of circumventing mainstream media channels and use

resources that are more easily accessible to them for communicating messages to initiate mobilization. Alternative media has served as this resource for social movements (Dowmunt & Coyer, 2007). Early forms of alternative media have mostly appeared in print format, with many alternative newspapers and magazines, also known as ‘zines, being generated by marginalized student and political groups. Phillips (2007) conducted a historical review of many alternative publications and found that radical ‘zines from the 1960s and 1970s such as *Spare Rib*, *Marxism Today*, and *Red Pepper* were formed in response to the negative portrayal and suppression of dissenting voices by the mass media. These publications stood as an avenue to formulate identify and solidarity among radicals and activists. Phillips (2007) noted that these alternative media faced several challenges, however, in terms of sustainability and distribution. This caused many publications to turn to solicitation of advertising and sponsorship to help sustain readership. Because of this, it can be argued that some publications which considered themselves “alternative media” might have become the very entity that they stood against: commercially owned media. Yet, Phillips (2007) suggests that improvements in technology and the Internet have helped to resolve some of this dilemma.

Some of the earliest adopters of Internet technology to produce and distribute alternative media came from social movements in Latin America. Kowal (2002) examined the Zapatista movement, citing it a prime example of the adoption of information communication technologies (ICTs) by an impoverished class of citizens. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation, also known as the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), consisted mostly of indigenous people across Mexico, united by an opposing view to the neoliberal Mexican government. The EZLN utilized ICTs including cellular phones, radio, and a group website to communicate with a worldwide audience and gain publicity across the country. Russell (2001) identified that much

of the alternative media use by the EZLN resulted from the group's conflict with mainstream media in communicating messages about their demands and interests to public audiences. As mainstream newspapers and broadcast media refused to publish any communiqués from the EZLN, members of the group established an alternative usenet group known as "Chiapas95," which provided a forum for group members to communicate information regarding the social movement of the EZLN. Russell's (2001) content analysis of messages and postings through Chiapas95 revealed that, compared to content from mainstream newspapers, the EZLN sought to informatively and symbolically challenge the institution of mainstream journalism.

With the developments of the Internet, alternative media has moved almost completely online and has transformed the way many social movements communicate. Atton's (2002b) study of anarchist groups revealed the existence of "cyberanarchists," who maintained large online networks to facilitate the sharing of personal opinions and the distribution of independently produced literature. Websites such as the *Spunk Library* and Internet radio stations such as *Irrational Radio* were examples of alternative, independently produced media that provided information and content to a global anarchist community. Atton (2002b) cited that such media gave an advantage to anarchists in that it eliminated much of the cost for printing and distribution of media, thus enabling a group of "have-nots" to overcome huge challenges. He warned, however, that users would not be able to unlock the potential of such resources without having the professionally developed skills to produce them.

As Russell (2001) identified in her study of Chiapas95, a prominent attribute that draws many social movement actors to use and produce alternative media is interactivity. Content can be constructed by both producers *and* audience members in an interactive way. Atkinson's (2010) qualitative study of the Peace Alliance revealed some very important attributes of

interaction between audience members and producers of alternative media. The first was that interactivity between audience members and producers was a constant process throughout the publication of Peace Alliance-affiliated alternative media, which included print newspapers, websites, and community radio programs. Viewers were able to interact directly with the producers via email, user-posted comments and face-to-face conversations in order to provide feedback for encouragement and improve accuracy of content. Additionally, many local and global alternative media producers viewed this interactivity as a strong point, enabling them to not only make more comprehensive alternative media publications, but also generate a greater level of support for the social movement by engaging directly with audience members (Atkinson, 2010).

For some forms of alternative media, the level of interaction among the participants is so great that the roles of producer and audience member are intermixed. Bruns (2005) conducted a case study of the Independent Media Channel, also known as Indymedia, a network that was instrumental in documenting the events that occurred during the N30 protests of the World Trade Organization in 1999. Bruns (2005) identified that Indymedia, in its earliest form, used an open-source, wiki-style programming format which allowed users to publish their own stories onto the site, while at the same time allowing other users to edit the stories immediately upon publishing. This website helped to generate many alternative perspectives of the WTO protest straight from participants who were on ground during the events. The news stories they produced ran in contrast to mainstream news coverage, with user-uploaded photos and videos contributing to these alternative perspectives. Bruns (2005) viewed Indymedia's open-source programming, anti-corporate stance, and almost anarchistic organization as a symbolic representation of the

radical participants who are involved behind many of the movements portrayed in the Indymedia's content.

Recent studies have revealed that participants of social movements are producing alternative content using mainstream social media networks as much as they are through websites of their own. Poell and Borra (2011) conducted a content analysis of user-generated content (UGC) on networks including Twitter, YouTube and Flickr. The UGC covered the 2010 G20 protests in Toronto, Canada. These social media networks featured not only websites but also mobile applications used to record and upload content. While some of these social media networks are clearly commercially owned, they can be considered alternative media in that they provide freedom for users to publish their own content, much of which can be considered alternative to the mainstream media (Phillips, 2007). For the G20 protests, participants followed much of the same practices as seen through Indymedia in 1999 (Bruns, 2005), posting photos and videos of the protest events, as well as "tweeting" live updates and links to online independent news articles covering the purpose and key goals of the protest. Like the WTO protest, the crowd-produced content demonstrated how interactivity on these sites provided an alternative form of communication, as opposed to relying on the content of mainstream news media. Yet, Poell and Borra (2011) found that a majority of the images and messages generated through alternative media placed an overwhelming focus on social conflict and police brutality, which many protesters had hoped to avoid as this was already being portrayed through mainstream news stories.

It appears that the attributes of alternative media that distinguish it the strongest from other types of media, including some of the most highly interactive forms, are the attributes of independence and autonomy from the mainstream media. Alternative media is more than just a

do-it-yourself form of media; it serves to represent the culture and opinions of largely marginalized groups that have faced social and political challenges in communication through mainstream mass media (Dowmunt, 2007). It is an open forum in which producers and users can interact and collaborate to create content that represents the identities and goals of collective movements (Atkinson, 2010). Through the development of necessary technical skills, social movement actors are able to use alternative media as not only a means of communication but also as a representation of their independence from commercially owned institutions (Bruns, 2005). Friedman's (2005) idea of the "flat world" comes to mind in describing this developing situation. The development and spread of communication technologies into the hands of ordinary citizens has "flattened" the playing field for people to participate. Friedman quotes, "It is this convergence – of new players, on a new playing field, developing new processes for horizontal collaboration – that I believe is the most important force shaping global economics and politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (p. 6). Thus, alternative media have served as an excavating tool to break down barriers and level the field for a clear, line-of-sight means of communication between participants, making it a resource that social movements can positively own.

### **Alternative Media Tactics for Mobilization**

Can alternative media be effectively used to mobilize social movements? Recent studies of alternative media use by social movements have demonstrated that these media are becoming an integral resource for the mobilization process. A common activity that has been used by several social movements due to the public availability of the Internet and mobile networks is "smart mobs." These activities consist of the mobilization and coordination of participants



through decentralized networks and the execution of “swarming” tactics that utilize multiple media resources including mobile devices, hand held radios, and computers (Rheingold, 2007). Van Aelst and Walgrave (2004) examined the 1999 WTO protest, citing it as being monumental in the organization and mobilization of multiple non-government organizations, labor unions, and grassroots activists by employing the use of alternative media tactics. Support for the movement was achieved online through a decentralized model known as the Direct Action Network (DAN), comprised of listserv and message boards to connect groups under a strong stance against anti-globalization of economic trade policy and regulation. Direct action was coordinated over the same decentralized network to bring together hundreds of activist groups at the Washington State Convention and Trade Center on November 30, 1999 (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004). Protesters who could not make it to Seattle that day could still conduct direct action online, taking part in virtual “sit-in” operations to block access to major corporate sites (Rheingold, 2007; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004). Looking at these cases through the lens of Klandermans’ (1984) model of mobilization, the coordination, planning and execution efforts used to build support and direct action for the protests aligned alternative media as a mobilization tool.

Blogs have been shown as an alternative medium used to assist in building consensus mobilization, as such publications can communicate content dedicated solely to explaining the issues concerning the social movement. Atkinson and Leon-Berg’s (2012) qualitative content analysis of alternative media blog publications by conservative Tea Party activists illustrated this idea in action. Analyzing the content of three different Tea Party blogs, Atkinson and Berg (2012) found that these publications reinforced the group’s stance in the current realm of American politics. “True Republicans” and their values, as well as “Enemies of the United

States Constitution” were clearly defined themes throughout the content of the blogs. Records of planning and activities by the Tea Party were also documented in some of the content, displaying transparency of the group’s actions. Through these forms of alternative media, prospective participants could understand the nature of the social movement as it was communicated directly by current participants of the movement. This enabled prospective participants to identify for themselves whether their beliefs and values were compatible with the stance of the Tea Party. Although the Tea Party’s media offered a very narrow approach to public participation, the various themes helped to create strong solidarity among those who sought to support the movement.

Recent studies have displayed a trend of social movement participants to communicate through mainstream social media networks to mobilize direct action by participants. Harlow’s (2011) qualitative analysis of the protests against Guatemalan president Alvaro Colom identified that the social media network Facebook was a dominant source for mobilization. The primary means of building consensus mobilization occurred through comments and conversations among users on Facebook revolving around the controversial actions of President Colom. As multiple users were able to build a base of support, they then engaged in action mobilization through Facebook to coordinate planned physical protests. Maireder and Schwarzenegger (2011) identified similar uses of Twitter and Facebook to mobilize Austrian student protests in 2009. They cited that through these social media networks, the issues of the movement were emphasized more prominently by individual users as opposed to the ideology of one specific group, which inspired support from many participants. Additionally, the platform of these social media provided low obligation for participation and high interaction among users, motivating participants to engage in the offline protests (Maireder and Schwarzenegger, 2011).

The events witnessed in the Arab Spring also reveal the concept of mobilization using multiple forms of alternative media. Khondker (2011) cited a combination of alternative media as tools for mobilizing the social movements seen in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Bahrain. Participants in these countries used blogs and videos to portray accounts of government oppression and social injustice, while using the interactive features of Facebook and Twitter to coordinate specific collective protests. Khondker (2011) argued that the use of alternative media by participants for mobilization was due to two forces: the control of conventional mass media by the host nations' governments and the globalization and horizontal structure of alternative media resources. Although alternative media played a crucial role in mobilization, Khondker (2011) did emphasize, however, that news coverage by conventional mass media played a supplemental role to the social movements rather than being completely circumvented.

Starbird and Palen's (2012) content analysis of "tweets" broadcast over the social media network Twitter during the protests in Egypt in early 2011 revealed how messages could be communicated and re-communicated by protesters to power consensus and action mobilization. Popular messages among Twitter users included digital and technical themes in their wording, such as "Uninstalling Mubrak: 99%" and "Freedom loading in Egypt." These messages were followed by thousands of participants through Twitter and then subsequently "retweeted" by a comparable amount of participants. The spread of messages demonstrated some major points regarding mobilization. First, the number of participants advocating specific messages served to reinforce the solidarity of the movement. This can be compared to the main function of consensus mobilization: building support among the population. Secondly, the messages also documented the collective work of the crowd during the protest, inspiring further action mobilization among prospective participants (Starbird & Palen, 2012).

Although many of the cases of mobilization have exemplified strengths in using alternative media, this process is not without its vulnerabilities. One attribute that has been criticized is the decentralized structure of many alternative media networks. Bennett's (2003) seminal critique of anti-globalization activism through the use of decentralized online networks brings to the forefront some major issues that social movements must consider when taking part in the global online realm. He states that as a social movement mobilizes global momentum, they are nearly required to adopt an online communication network integrating alternative media for coordination. However, while decentralized networks have enabled the connection of related groups across a wide spectrum and have strengthened weak ties, the tasks of maintaining control, decision-making and building an agreed collective identity for the social movement are particularly difficult to undertake, especially for movements with no solid leadership. Bennett (2003) argues that online forms of alternative media provide a high level of interactivity for the individual, emphasizing a wide range of individual ideas and perspectives but making the process of formulating collective ideas and action very thin and undeveloped. Referring back to Klandermans' (1984) process of consensus and action mobilization, consensus mobilization can be difficult to attain due to differences in opinions, thus preventing action mobilization from occurring.

Furthermore, the often-unregulated interactivity of alternative media has the potential to allow only a few "popular" voices to dominate the conversation among the social movement. Russell's (2001) study of Chiapas95 found this phenomenon through several of the posts by participants. Many articles and messages supported the Zapatista movement, but some supporters of the movement aggressively rebutted differences of opinion from other participants. Loaded questions and accusations were exchanged in a fashion that left little opportunity for credible

conversation. While Chiapas95 enabled the Zapatistas to build alliances with likeminded social movements that shared similar goals, the suppression of opposing opinions was definitely present. Atkinson (2010) observed similar findings in his case study of the Peace Alliance Network. Several activists expressed their concern with voicing certain opinions for fear of creating tension among alternative media producers. The reaction of participants was to not express opposing views verbally and instead continue to communicate words of encouragement to the producers. Like in the study of Chiapas95, the suppression of differences made way for a stronger perceived support within the group. This could serve as a strong attribute for mobilization; at the same time, it also poses vulnerability as a group engaging in this kind of interaction might become limited in its scope of advancing the movement.

## **The Occupy Movement**

The early stages of the Occupy Wall Street protests in October, 2011 appear to have been mobilized through alternative media. A primary alternative media publication that has been credited with inspiring the first protest activity known as Occupy Wall Street was the independent Canadian magazine *Adbusters*. Inspired by the demonstrations of social movements in Spain and the Arab Spring, *Adbusters* posted a blog entry on their website on June 13, 2011, calling for participants across the United States to be awakened to the established government that the magazine stated has become a “corporatocracy” (*Adbusters*, 2011) The blog entry contained a clear statement to mobilize protest activities on Wall Street, as they declared, “On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months. Once there, we shall incessantly

repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices” (Adbusters, 2011). That demand was for President Obama to organize an executive commission charged with the duty of investigating and eliminating corporate influence over Congressional representatives (Adbusters, 2011). This call for direct action by *Adbusters* was also accompanied by a visual image: a portrayal of a ballerina posed atop of the famous Wall Street bull. The poster, which originated from *Adbuster’s* website, soon made its way around the Internet as a meme and assisted in the creation of awareness of the proposed collective action (Kroll, 2011).

The demonstrations that occurred on September 17 were not sparked alone by the blog entry or the poster produced by *Adbusters*. Many community groups and SMOs in New York and other cities began planning specific demonstrations to take place in preparation for Occupy Wall Street. The New York City General Assembly (NYCGA), made up of several members the New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, was at the forefront of calling the first meetings to organize the occupation of Wall Street. A diverse array of grievances was addressed by its participants that included unemployment, politics, and cuts in public services (Kroll, 2011). An alternative media document entitled “How to cook a pacific #revolution” circulated among many participants of the NYCGA to inspire talking points during assemblies (Kroll, 2011). Additionally, the integration of groups such as US Day of Rage and Anonymous also provided “hactivist” assistance and online networking to coordinate the demonstration (Schneider, 2011). The coordination over many months by these groups laid the initial groundwork for the movement, with the *Adbusters* blog entry and poster serving as the visual, symbolic action mobilizer for the demonstration (Kroll, 2011). On September 17, 2011, over 2,000 participants initiated encampments in multiple areas of New York City. While the quantity of participants didn’t nearly match the 20,000 demonstrators that *Adbusters* had envisioned, it resulted in an

initial action that spread well beyond Wall Street and into nearly every major city in the United States (Van Gelder, 2011).

The Occupy movement is no stranger to the use of alternative media. As demonstrated in initial mobilization through *Adbusters*, Occupy has found power in the use of alternative media to mobilize participants worldwide. Schneider (2011) chronicled the events of the first week of Occupy Wall Street. Recognizing that the movement could not rely on the influence of mainstream media to communicate its messages, organizers on ground established a makeshift media center for broadcasting content that documented the day's events, including tweets and blog posts to publicize Occupy Wall Street. An online video livestream was set up to allow viewers to watch the demonstrations in realtime. Hundreds of arrests were documented and shared virally by participants using these same resources. Schneider (2011) argues that the communication over these multiple channels inspired increasing support for the movement from labor unions, student organizations, senior citizens and celebrities.

Long after the initial demonstration of Occupy Wall Street, occupiers of the movement have continued to utilize alternative media. Since the movement has spread to other major cities worldwide, the preferred channel of communication of the movement's vision and calls for direct action continues to be alternative media; participants of the movement have viewed communication through mainstream, "corporately corrupted" media as unnecessary and undesired (Van Gelder, 2011). Critics have argued that mainstream media has recognized the opinions of the movement but has deliberately marginalized and demonized many Occupy events, focusing only on violence and risk of the demonstrations in order to discredit the movement (Corcoran & Maher, 2012). Keeping with this radical stance, participants of Occupy have produced their own sources of alternative media in direct opposition to the mainstream

media. The Occupy Wall Street website serves as an informational hub declaring the demands and principles of the movement, with many other Occupy groups in other cities modeling their own group websites in solidarity with the movement. Other Occupy-affiliated networks have set up online publication focusing specifically on strategic, independent media operations to circumvent mainstream media resources; these include the Occupied Wall Street Journal, Media for the 99%, and Occupy.com (Rivlin-Nadler, 2012). Organizers of similar international social movements, including Ahmed Maher, one of the leading organizers of the protests in Egypt, have teamed with Occupy participants through the online workgroup networks to develop tactics and strategies (Ackerman, 2011). Social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter have played a major role in aiding Occupy's communication. Facebook in particular has served as a resource with multiple uses for Occupy, including the recruiting of participants, posting relevant news stories and individual narratives, and closing gaps in communication among geographically separated groups (Caren and Gaby, 2011; Juris, 2012). Personal mobile devices have also been essential for connecting participants in multiple locations to build momentum and organize action (Wyer, 2012).

The goals of Occupy's alternative media use appear to be aligned with Klandermans' (1984) principles of achieving consensus and action mobilization. As demonstrated through Caren and Gaby's (2011) content analysis of Occupy's presence on Facebook, the same process of achieving these types of mobilization is being employed through posts by participants. Based on data collected in October 2011, over 170,000 participants were recruited to be part of the Occupy movement through Facebook, with 1.4 million "likes" displaying support for Occupy-related content. Caren and Gaby (2011) also identified postings of several news stories and narratives by participants of the movement that helped to portray the struggles and the reasons



for participants to “occupy.” When viewed in terms of mobilization, this user-generated content appeared with the intention to build consensus mobilization for prospective participants interested in the movement. Action mobilization was communicated through specific messages posted by occupiers geared towards recruiting prospective participants to attend meetings and other events. Juris’ (2012) case study of Occupy Boston revealed the influence of these same alternative media tools for mobilization. For Occupy Boston, online videos and micro-blog entries that documented the events in New York City inspired support among many prospective participants in Boston. Using listservs, social media and mobile devices, these participants convened a month following the protests on September 17 and initiated Occupy Boston. Juris (2012) conceptualizes the “logic of aggregation” as a similar concept to mobilization, explaining how participants are drawn to support social movements through social media networks and subsequently coordinate through these same networks to engage in physical collective action.

Over a year after the original occupation, Occupy groups in cities around the United States have established their own sources of alternative media. These groups have adopted the principles and demands of the original Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, and while they stand in solidarity with the overall Occupy movement, they have targeted these principles to affect their own geographical locations (Occupy Together, 2012). For example, in the state of Colorado, Occupy groups have been established in many cities, including Occupy Denver, Occupy Greeley, Occupy Fort Collins, Occupy Boulder, and Occupy Colorado Springs. Among these, Occupy Denver has appeared as one of the most active and networked groups, providing guidance and resources to related affinity groups around Colorado. The issues that Occupy Denver has addressed as part of the movement have combined economic and environmental concerns for many areas in Colorado, including action against hydraulic fracturing, also known

as “fracking,” by oil companies (Occupy Denver, 2012a). Occupy Denver has used and produced several forms of alternative media to communicate their advocacy for action on this and many other issues. The publishing of Occupy Denver’s website serves as foundation for the diversity of ideas tied to the overarching Occupy movement, with links to a code of ethics aligned with the original tenets of demonstration outlined on the Occupy Wall Street website. Information on issues and general assemblies is provided publically and accessibly to participants through the website and through links to related social media. Videos and blog entries on the website also serve to provide alternate points of view on public issues and events that might be inaccurately portrayed through the mass media (Occupy Denver, 2012b). Through Occupy Denver’s alternative media, prospective members can learn more about the movement and find ways to connect and take action by attending events with other participants. This interaction among participants via alternative media is demonstrating the potential that Occupy Denver has to mobilize the overall Occupy movement.

## **Research Questions**

The theoretical framework discussed earlier has described some of the major reasons behind many social movements’ use of media resources for mobilization. The two-component process developed by Klandermans (1984) helps to illustrate the tactics that social movement actors must use to engage in mobilization: consensus mobilization to build support from the population and action mobilization to get the population out to the streets and accomplish the movement’s goals. In addition, the concept of alternative media opens up an area of investigation for understanding emergent media tools among social movements. Improvements

in the access of communication technology resources among public populations have enabled social movement actors to take positive control of these as resources for mobilization.

Combining the right messages and technical skills with this availability of alternative media, social movements are able to mobilize independently from the aid of mainstream media (Atton, 2002a). While resources have and will undoubtedly continue to change, the fundamental goals of inspiring support and action have remained substantial.

Resource mobilization theory has been limited in explaining whether alternative media is indeed the most preferred resource to be used by actors for mobilizing social movement efforts. Themes of social conflict, framing and marginalization have emerged through the studies of social movements and media, explaining why some social movements have made their own forms of media to defy any dependence on mainstream media (Dowmunt & Coyer, 2007). However, as resource mobilization places much emphasis on rationalization in social movements, the complete defiance of mainstream media in favor of alternative media might be considered an irrational approach. The Occupy movement, for example, has prominently proclaimed its independence from mainstream media for its mobilization, but it is arguable whether Occupy's mobilization efforts are more effective through alternative media than mainstream media (Rivlin-Nadler, 2012; Van Gelder, 2011). A year after Occupy's inception, critics have cited that participation in the movement has lost its momentum due to conflicts of opinion among its participants, as exemplified through online discussion of the movement on the website MoveOn.org (Taylor, 2012). Even in cases where SNSs were found to successfully mobilize large demonstrations such as Occupy Boston, these resources were not found to successfully sustain the same quality of solidarity towards a collective movement many months later, resulting instead in what appeared as a collection of individuals rather than a unified group

(Juris, 2012). These factors pose dimensions of vulnerability in the reliance of alternative media as a resource for long term mobilization due to emphasis on high interactivity and autonomy, which were previously addressed by Bennett (2003) and Atkinson (2010). However, these vulnerabilities can provide a more rounded perspective of alternative media and its role in mobilization.

What remains to be answered is how the detailed process of mobilization through the use of alternative media is taking place in the Occupy movement, specifically Occupy Denver. While alternative media and other forms of digital media technology have been identified as prime resources for contemporary social movements, including the Occupy movement, very few studies have analyzed specifically the steps by which these alternative media are produced and then used to gain support and engage participants in direct action. Few studies have examined the international Occupy movement beyond content analysis of mainstream news articles and posts through social networking websites, let alone any studies looking directly at Occupy Denver. The literature mentions many different types of alternative media being used by social movement actors such as blogs, video, and print publications, but it is important to understand the specific reasons for why each type of alternative media is used. Through this exploration, it may also help to determine whether alternative media is the most effective resource for mobilizing Occupy and other social movements, as well as understanding if alternative media has the potential to completely overcome dependence on mainstream media.

The review of the existing literature of resource mobilization, alternative media, and the Occupy movement has led to the formation of the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of alternative media are used by Occupy Denver for mobilization?

RQ2: How does Occupy Denver use alternative media to engage in consensus mobilization?

RQ3: How does Occupy Denver use alternative media to coordinate the execution of action mobilization?

RQ4: Is alternative media the most preferred resource for Occupy Denver to engage in mobilization?

RQ5: What vulnerabilities exist in Occupy Denver's use of alternative media for mobilization?

## **Methodology**

To answer these research questions, a qualitative research approach was used. The qualitative study employed in-depth interviews with active participants of Occupy Denver, focusing on their production and use of alternative media. It is necessary to understand the types of alternative media being produced and the process by which they are being used for mobilization in order to make sense of the activities conducted by social movement actors. The research on Occupy conducted in the past year has revealed findings that show a large quantity of participants who have engaged with the Occupy movement through alternative media (Caren and Gaby, 2011). Embedded studies have also revealed the movement's declaration of autonomy from mainstream media resources, suggesting themes of conflict and alienation between Occupy activists and state or corporate entities (Van Gelder, 2011). This could be viewed as a social problem affecting both the social movement and the mainstream media, as both groups seek to engage public audiences with information they consider important to society. This qualitative research approach investigated deeply the social realm of Occupy Denver. It could benefit social movement communities that seek to understand how they can work with the resources of alternative media to accomplish goals of social change. Overall, any organization can benefit from this research, which can help them to develop their own communication tactics and strategies (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

While some quantitative data has been collected from studies of the Occupy movement, the researcher determined that a quantitative approach would not fully suffice to explore Occupy Denver's activities. Quantitative content analyses of news articles from multiple media sources might give insight into the frames that portray the Occupy Denver to public audiences, which can

perhaps help to identify the possible dimension of conflict that is perceived between mainstream and alternative media (Houston, 2004; DOWMUNT & COYER, 2007). However, this kind of analysis would only scratch the surface in explaining the more complex process of how alternative media format and content are configured into the mobilization of social movements. A limitation exists in analyzing content quantitatively, as the researcher is constrained to a secondary perspective of text and lacks the ability to fully explore the context in which media messages are produced (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Additionally, a quantitative survey of participants from Occupy Denver might be unfeasible, given the static and decentralized structure of the group. While a survey would enable rapid feedback from a large quantity of participants, finding an adequate quantity of participants might be a very challenging task for a group like Occupy Denver. The types of responses from participants will also be limited to the predetermined answer choices of the researcher, putting stringent boundaries onto the data that can be harvested from the sampled group and limiting the diversity of voices that could be heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Qualitative observation of Occupy Denver participants engaged in regular movement activities might help to produce some insight into the processes of mobilization. Embedding the researcher into the activities of the group would enable candid observations of participants in a setting that is already familiar to the studied group (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Yet, observation alone is also not enough; to answer the questions of why group participants perform their activities, further contextual examination by the researcher was necessary (Geertz, 1973). In order to fully understand Occupy Denver's reasons for using alternative media, the researcher saw the need to investigate deeply into the cultural and social network of participants who comprise the group. The researcher sought to identify what resources are being used by

participants, learn about specific messages that are being communicated to build support and direct participants' actions, understand if certain media resources are preferred over others, know how the group's culture and structure affect this use, and evaluate the strengths and vulnerabilities that exist. The researcher determined that the best way to do this was to interact directly with the people most involved with Occupy Denver's alternative media. This method enabled in-depth exploration and understanding of personal accounts reflecting on the production and viewership of alternative media in the social context of Occupy Denver (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

### **Phase I: Sampling**

This research study was conducted in five phases: sampling and logistics, conducting interviews with participants, coding, interpretation and discussion. Phase I began with the sampling of participants to be interviewed and the coordination of logistical requirements for the interview sessions. The sampling portion of the study is essential for acquiring an adequate number of participants to take part in the interviews, which will provide a wide array of perspectives in the social context of Occupy Denver (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). The researcher was able to sample 12 participants who were interviewed for the study. While it was not necessary to use a random sampling scheme as a quantitative research approach would, the researcher ensured that the sample has the potential to capture the diverse personal accounts of the participants involved with Occupy Denver's alternative media. Although the researcher had intended to sample 15-20 participants, the sample size of 12 appeared to provide enough saturation among the responses revealed in the analysis section.



To sample participants for this phase, a purposive criterion sampling scheme was used for the first three participants, followed by snowball sampling scheme (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). This first sample involved the researcher communicating with known participants from meetings that he attended. The characteristics for the first purposive sample were participants who have either produced alternative media for Occupy Denver as part of a committee or working group or had extensively used alternative media associated with Occupy Denver. These participants came from the education committee and social media committee of Occupy Denver. The researcher made contact with these participants via electronic mail, or face-to-face conversation to request their participation for the study. As the participants agreed to being interviewed, the researcher scheduled a specific date for the interview to take place during the first month of data collection and also requested the participants to recommend any other people associated with Occupy Denver who would be interested in being interviewed. If the prospective participant declined to be interviewed, the researcher asked the declined participant for his/her recommendations of other people who would be interested for an interview.

In addition to the snowball sampling scheme, the researcher attended selected Occupy Denver general assemblies and teach-ins to recruit participants. General assemblies are meetings in which participants of Occupy Denver engage in democratic discussions of upcoming events, while teach-ins are organized lectures involving guest academic and activist speakers. Both forums invited open participation from audience members to discuss current issues (Occupy Denver, 2012b). The researcher identified, from attending past Occupy Denver meetings, that these forums might draw as many as 40 audience members at a given time. This sampling scheme involved the researcher announcing the title and purpose of the study and then asking for participation from the audience members who are present during the meetings. The researcher

was able to recruit at least five participants from select meetings and then continued employing the snowball-sampling scheme with these participants. As interview participants were recruited to take part in the study, the researcher coordinated specific dates for each participant to be interviewed.

The participants who volunteered for the study consisted of both users and producers of alternative media in various degrees; some spent much time as producers of alternative media with Occupy Denver, while others were more users and observers of the alternative media. Very often, many participants identified themselves as a combination of both producer and user roles. Several of the participants who used alternative media on a regular basis varied in age from early 20s to early 40s. All 12 of the participants had some college education, with four of the participants having completed some graduate level education. Seven of the participants mentioned prior to the interviews that they had been involved in a few of Occupy Denver's committees, including the education committee and the outreach committee. One participant mentioned that he taught a university-level class dedicated to studying the social impacts of the Occupy movement. Thus, there seemed to be a passion for education that existed among the participants.

The participants who produced their own alternative media content extensively possessed very diverse technical backgrounds. Four of the participants who volunteered for the study were active members of the social media committee, with three of those participants mentioning involvement with the press communications committee. These participants had very technical skills related to web content production, film and video editing, and information technology. Additionally, many of these same participants had close connections with journalists from both mainstream media and alternative media, which aided in providing perspectives on multiple

areas. For example, Participant 6 had a vast amount of direct connections with journalists from national news websites, artists and promoters from the music industry, and activists from several social movement organizations. This group of participants was highly recommended by multiple participants during the sampling phase; many of them considered this group to be the subject matter experts on alternative media. Therefore, it was essential that the researcher recruited participants from this group for the interviews.

Two participants indicated that they had been involved with social movements while living in foreign countries. Participant 5 had become involved in social movement activity during her time in the Middle East, while Participant 12 was involved in social movement activity in Central America. These participants offered an international perspective on the Occupy movement and specifically on alternative media, as both of them were producers of their own alternative media content and could compare and contrast the activities they observed in Occupy Denver to those in other countries. The wide range of perspectives among the sampled group richly supported the triangulation process for evaluation during the interpretation phase (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

A detailed logistical plan was necessary to ensure successful interviews (Warren & Karner, 2001). The researcher offered participants the option to choose the location in which to conduct the interview. Various locations around the downtown Denver area were chosen for the interviews, including the Deer Pile open space, the Denver Public Library, the Denver Art Society, and Pablo's coffee shop. These locations offered physical space that was familiar to most participants of Occupy Denver, and some locations were previously used by Occupy Denver for teach-ins and committee meetings. These locations also generally offered a quiet space that was relatively free of distractions (Warren & Karner, 2001). The key requirements for

the locations used were to have conditions that were non-intrusive and familiar to participants, as these factors can have effects on information collection and the participant's comfort level (Warren & Karner, 2001). If the researcher and the participant were not able to meet at a physical location due to scheduling conflicts, the researcher offered the option for participants to conduct interviews over telephone or through Skype video webcam software.

The researcher organized all tools required to conduct the interviews and upload the data files. A Sony ICD-PX312 audio recorder was used to record all interviews. Up to six hours of audio could be stored on the current recorder's smart disk card. The recorder included a USB cable to upload audio files onto a laptop hard disk. As technological errors have the potential to hinder the collection of quality data for the research study, the researcher carried a set of spare batteries and an additional SD card in case of any equipment malfunction. Although much of the information from the interviews was audio recorded digitally, the researcher also carried a pen and paper to record any noteworthy terms or quotes from participants. These materials were used to construct field notes, which also served as the foundation for forming categories, themes and codes during the analysis phase (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). To streamline data storage, the researcher also carried his personal laptop to the interviews and immediately uploaded data to a secured Dropbox file. The files were also backed up onto the laptop's hard disk as well as to a CD-RW.

## **Phase II: Interviews**

The researcher scheduled the first five interviews to be conducted during the month of February 2013. Upon this initial schedule, the research study transitioned into Phase II. This

phase consisted of conducting the actual individual in-depth interviews with the participants of Occupy Denver. The qualitative in-depth interview combined elements of the informant and the respondent interview formats; informant-oriented questions explored the social workings of Occupy Denver as a group, and the respondent-oriented questions assisted in understanding the perspectives of individual participants. The interviews provided particularly detailed insight into the personal accounts of participants in the given context of participation in Occupy Denver (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Additional information, covered in the Findings section, was also communicated through the interviews, which supplemented the research study beyond the theoretical framework. This included conversation about the history of Occupy Denver, discussion of alternative media projects by other affinity groups, and each participant's personal experience being involved with the movement in multiple facets. The responses in the interview were essential to build themes and ideas that answer the research questions, as well as reveal areas of interest that were not discussed in the research questions (Warren & Karner, 2001).

In accordance with IRB regulations, a standard cover letter was required to be delivered to all participants who agreed to be interviewed (See Appendix A). The purpose of this cover letter was to inform the participants of the nature of the study and their legal rights while participating in the study, and to guarantee them confidentiality of their personal information during the data collection process (Greenberg, Easton & Garramone, 2003; Warren & Karner, 2001). Participants being interviewed were not identified by their personal names or any aliases; these participants were referred to in accordance with the order that they were interviewed, using pseudonyms such as "Participant 1" and "Participant 2." Only the researcher had access to participants' names for the purposes of coding information accurately.

Upon approval by the researcher's thesis committee, the researcher submitted the cover letter (Appendix A) to the CSU Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office (RICRO) one month prior to the start of the first interview. Once the CSU RICRO granted approval, the researcher made necessary adjustments to be used for the final version given to participants. Before beginning each interview, the researcher explained the following items to the participant: all risks and hazards associated with participation in the study, the promise of keeping all personal information confidential during the study, the right to adhere to strictly voluntary participation with the option to withdraw data at any time, and the request to record the data from the interviews via audio recorder (Warren & Karner, 2001). The researcher then provided a copy of the developed cover letter to the participant.

A semi-structured individual interview guide was used to conduct the interviews (see Appendix B). This interview guide embedded the concepts discussed in the research questions into the individual questions in the guide. The researcher asked all of the questions listed on the interview guide but also allowed flexibility for any additional information provided by the participant during the course of the interviews. While some structure was necessary in order to provide information that could be coded for the research questions, the interview enabled the participant to openly express their personal experiences without restriction (Fontana & Frey, 1998). The researcher pretested this interview guide at least twice with fellow graduate students prior to beginning the actual interviews with participants. The purpose of this pretest was to ensure that all questions were as clear as possible. The pretest also functioned to assign a second scholarly perspective on the research design that could provide critique on how effectively the interview guide measured the concepts contained in the research questions (Babbie, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The researcher made sure to correct any ambiguous questions or

errors following the pretest and then retested them with the graduate students prior to proceeding into the conduct of the actual interviews.

It was necessary for the researcher to have a sense of rapport with the participants as the interviews commenced. The researcher's professional background and experience with alternative media and the Occupy movement aided in building this rapport with participants. Establishing good rapport early in the interviews helped participants speak easily and honestly, as well helped them to maintain a sense of mutual respect with the researcher. The researcher established this rapport through statements of self-disclosure prior to reading from the interview guide, explaining the topic of the study and encouraging the participants to take their time and speak honestly from their experiences (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). While these methods helped the participant and the researcher to become more comfortable in the interview setting, the researcher also abided by ethical standards in the interview process. Proper ethical considerations are necessary to ensure that findings from the interviews are collected authentically and without any manipulation by the researcher. In allowing the participants to speak openly, the researcher maintained a level of objectivity in order to prevent influencing the participants' responses to support the nature of the study. This was accomplished by avoiding the formation of leading questions, indications of agreement or disagreement by the researcher towards individual responses, and becoming too personally tied with participants during the course of the interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Greenberg, Eastin & Garramone, 2003).

After the researcher conducted each interview following the protocol outlined in Appendix A and B, the researcher debriefed each participant on the nature and objectives of the research study. The researcher thanked each participant for his/her cooperation and offered the option to furnish a copy of the interview transcript and final research report. In keeping with

ethical considerations, the offering of these documents to participants served as a “member validation,” enabling participants to see how their ideas would be portrayed in the study (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Greenberg, Eastin & Garramone, 2003; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Next, the researcher uploaded the audio files to his personal laptop and backed up all data to the secured Google Drive file and CD-RW. This allowed the researcher to move into the transcription of the interviews. This was a very important step in order to ensure that all findings were accurately recorded for analysis, as well as ensuring that materials could be readily accessible for inspection if needed (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The researcher used a local freelance transcriber as suggested by a fellow graduate student to assist in the transcription process, with the researcher paying all fees required for the service. As interviews were completed and uploaded to the electronic backup locations, the researcher sent the interview audio files to the freelance transcriber within one week following each interview. Specific details such as vocal pauses, rhythms, inflections, tones, and non-verbal cues were transcribed into the documents, as these provided insight into deeper themes behind the communication of the participants through the interviews (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Upon completion of each transcription document, the researcher cross-referenced the audio files with the transcriptions to ensure full accuracy of each set.

### **Phase III: Coding**

Phase III consisted of the coding of all interview data. The creation of categories and codes was essential to manage the wide range of data collected from the study, as well as to prioritize and reduce data that was necessary for the interpretation process (Lindloff & Taylor,



2011). The researcher used a deductive etic coding process to construct categories based on the theoretical framework, then coded units of the interviews that correlated to the broader categories. The first part of this phase included the establishment of categories to organize interview data. Categories are broad classifications of themes and ideas that relate to the phenomena being studied through the theoretical lens (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). The first set of categories was derived from the concepts embedded in the research questions. These categories included themes such as “consensus mobilization” and “preference towards alternative vs. mainstream media.” Included with these categories were specific definitions derived from selected journal articles covered in the literature review. These categories, coupled with the definitions from the literature, formed the basis of the codebook that would be used for coding the interviews (Appendix C).

After initial categories were identified, the researcher then began recording specific statements that were expressed through the interview documents, as well as any particular ideas recorded in the researcher’s field notes. These specific statements formed the basis of codes, or segments of the interviews that conveyed comprehensive ideas (Patterson & Williams, 2002). Codes serve as mechanical units to identify and link important information and recurring ideas to the larger, conceptual categories (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). As codes emerged through the transcripts, the researcher classified these into the related categories based on similarities and patterns of key attributes, documenting them onto a spreadsheet file using Microsoft Excel.

The researcher ensured that intercoder reliability was fulfilled during the coding process. Intercoder reliability provides a second research perspective on the data and will also ensure that the information coded from the interview segments will yield similar themes and ideas (Babbie, 2009). In addition to the researcher ensuring validity through specific definitions and examples

for the categories, the researcher required the assistance of a second researcher to achieve intercoder reliability. The researcher recruited a fellow graduate student from within the Journalism and Technical Communication department to assist in coding 10 percent of the interview data during the coding process. The graduate student was a Master's degree candidate who had strong familiarity with the basic principles of coding qualitative interviews. Intercoder reliability was achieved by comparing responses coded by the researcher to the ones coded by the research assistant, then by comparing these sets of codes back to the definitions outlined in the categories.

Through the course of coding, select ideas emerged from the interviews that did not closely correlate to the categories pre-determined by the researcher. These emergent codes formed the basis of new themes, constructed inductively based on the similar patterns of codes (Patterson & Williams, 2002). These themes included ones related to the formation of affinity groups, security culture, and a general cycle of protest. To ensure validity among all themes and categories, the researcher clearly defined terms used to distinguish each classification, including definitions from cited sources as well as examples of phrases that would correlate to these definitions. After new themes and categories were constructed through this inductive process, the researcher reviewed all transcripts a second time to ensure complete coding of meaning units under the appropriate themes. At this point, no information was discarded from the transcripts to ensure that all possible themes were revealed and that saturation could be reached for interpretation (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

After all codes had been recorded and categorized, the researcher conducted the data reduction process. While much valuable information emerged from the interviews, the core of the research study was focused on the original concepts and phenomena outlined in the literature

review and research questions. Themes and codes that were of most value to the research study and related closest to the themes of the research questions were highlighted and identified as part of the main area of interpretation. Other themes and codes that were not strongly related to the research questions but emerged as common patterns across the interviews became second in priority for interpretation. Segments that appeared to be off-topic or unrelated were saved in the transcripts but not completely discarded, as these findings could be used for secondary collection in different research contexts (Patterson and Williams, 2002). The reduction of the data helped to consolidate all findings into a workable data set, which could be used for qualitative interpretation and discussion (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

#### **Phase IV: Interpretation**

The fourth phase of the project was the interpretation of the reduced data set. The interpretation phase was the essential step for transforming the categorized units of information into larger meanings. To interpret the findings from the interviews, the researcher used a comparison method for the categories. The categories that were developed based on the research questions and each of the participant's responses were compared to find overarching patterns and meanings in order to build a theoretical framework (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). This initial interpretation of the patterns and messages focused solely on the verbally communicated material from the interviews. Additional attributes were then factored into the analysis, which included non-verbal cues, characteristics and background of each of the participants, relationships to other participants, and time and location of the interviews (Patterson & Williams, 2002). While factoring these attributes into the interpretation stage is important to understand the in-depth

meanings of the messages that are communicated through the segments (Geertz, 1973), the non-verbal cues observed during the interviews did not appear to have a strong influence among the verbally communicated information.

Some data that was collected appeared to be exemplary in the interpretation phase. These included commonly communicated messages among participants and quintessential statements by individual participants recorded during the interviews. Exemplars were included as empirical evidence for some sections of the interpretation. Exemplars also functioned as operational examples of the broader categories or concepts formed in the analysis phase. Although the researcher did not have the necessary tools to capture all visual items, some participants presented various visual items as examples of alternative media, including fliers and newspapers. These exemplars could help readers understand specific segments that lead to the formation of the resulting themes (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

As key themes and messages were organized, the researcher conducted a comparison of categories and codes to the original theoretical concepts proposed in the research questions and the framework of resource mobilization theory. In keeping reflexivity during this phase, it was necessary to tie these findings back to the original theoretical framework to help understand how these different elements are correlated to create a holistic portrayal of the study. Major themes that correlated closely to the concepts outlined in the research questions were organized as first-order meanings. The presence of these themes helped to further strengthen the theory's development in this area of study. Other findings displayed different types of emergent concepts that could relate more closely to other theories or even provide the initial groundwork for development of a new theory. The researcher found four of these types of themes and ordered these as second-order meanings, which do not strongly support the theoretical framework but

display common patterns among the findings (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). The proposed theoretical framework of resource mobilization theory, however, served as the basis for making interpretations, answering questions pertaining to why the participants' communication has generated the particular themes and providing a roadmap for the directions in which future research can be taken.

The evaluation of credibility in the interpretation phase largely hinged upon the triangulation of multiple sources and the validity of categories and themes. As discussed in the sampling phase, the eventual sample of 12 participants, all of whom had a unique social position in the context of Occupy Denver, was very important to ensure that multiple perspectives could be generated to provide a broad range of ideas and opinions. The researcher's field notes also served as one of these sources of ideas. This method of triangulating these multiple sources of ideas helped to better illustrate the emergent patterns and processes, as well as strengthen the research method's applicability to other types of studies (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Validity in the research design was equally important to verify that the qualitative instrument of the interview guide accurately measured the concepts and questions that the researcher was investigating. The definitions from peer-reviewed sources as well as example words and phrases were essential to confirm that emergent codes were matched to the most related categories in the research design (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). The researcher included clear definitions on the coding spreadsheet, with an additional codebook that included definitions and example statements.

In addition to maintaining reflexivity with the findings of the theoretical framework, the researcher viewed it to be necessary to be personally reflexive the entire time during the interpretation phase. A research project such as this was an opportunity for the researcher to

document how a group such as Occupy Denver can have an effect on an individual. The researcher used the field notes and in-process memos taken during Phase II and integrated them during the interpretation phase to construct a personal reflection of the research. This personal reflection served primarily as an insight into how the researcher's interaction with the group influenced his personal perceptions of a social movement, resources and relationships (Fontana & Frey, 1998). As social movement actors operate to mobilize people by influencing their perceptions of issues and persuading them to take action, this personal reflection could also serve as an individual evaluation of Occupy Denver's ability to accomplish this through verbal communication.

#### **Phase V: Discussion**

The fifth and final phase of the research project was the discussion and presentation of the interpretations. After the researcher drew patterns and meanings from the themes and codes, he compiled these interpretations into findings and implications sections to conclude the study. The findings of the research were presented in a "themes and topics" approach, highlighting how certain findings throughout the project related back to the theory and the research questions. The priority with this specific research was to be reflexive with the studies that have already been conducted and understand how the findings from this project might support or challenge the developed theoretical framework (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011).

In terms of narrative presence, the final report was written from an objective point of view with the researcher driving the direction through third person narration. The recorded conversations with the participants, as well as specific exemplars, also helped to drive the

findings section. Direct quotes were included for each theme, with the researcher giving his interpretation of each conversational theme. After the report was complete, the researcher submitted one copy each to the thesis committee members for review. Following this review, the researcher then presented the major findings in an oral presentation to the committee, while also welcoming attendance by other academic scholars and social movement activists.

The final report was intended for general disciplinary readers in the field of journalism and technical communication. Many of these readers have some experience with communication studies in various fields. While much of their knowledge might be based primarily in journalism and public relations, these readers will benefit greatly from the topics of social movements and alternative media that have been explored through this project. Interested readers might even be inspired to explore communication opportunities in other fields outside of journalism such as sociology and political science. Other readers whose backgrounds are based primarily in sociology and humanities might also gain many benefits from this study, helping them to understand the importance of media resources and social interaction as they relate to social movements. Perhaps even action-oriented readers from the Occupy community will have the chance to read this report and be able to refine their own tactics as well as develop new methods for accomplishing movement goals. While it cannot be predicted what outcomes might result from this research to solve specific problems, the quality of data within the project might result in many possible directions, leading to growth in many areas.

## Findings and Discussion

RQ1 asked what types of alternative media participants in Occupy Denver use for engaging in mobilization activities. The interviews revealed a wide variety of online alternative media sources ranging from the Occupy Denver website, social media and blogs to nationally known alternative news websites and streaming video feeds. All of the participants who were interviewed identified Facebook as a prime alternative medium for mobilization activities, with several participants also indicating Twitter as a popular network for diverse topics of communication. Participants 2, 4, 6, 9, 10 and 12 mentioned the use of user-uploaded and streaming video through websites such as UStream and YouTube, which were used to document many of Occupy Denver's activities and demonstrations. Text messaging was also identified as being used in conjunction with email lists and social media for various purposes. Similar to the discussions by Phillips (2007) as well as Poell and Borra (2011), the responses by the participants indicated that most social media was perceived as being alternative media due to interactivity and control.

Some forms of alternative media that were described by participants as being used during the early beginnings of the movement are now not currently used by Occupy Denver as a group. Participants 2, 6, 10 and 12 discussed a blog on tumblr.com that was established by activists in September of 2011, covering various events by Occupy Denver. A few participants also identified at least two alternative media print newspapers. Participant 9 discussed the production of one of these newspapers saying, "there was the newspaper that was produced by two college students here in Denver called Occupy the Press that had sort of journalistic articles and analysis...that was just passed out at marches." He also mentioned the past existence of an



Occupy Denver TV spot, which broadcast coverage of marches and educational discussions known as “teach-ins.” Participant 7 displayed a copy of the *Occupied Denver Post* newspaper for the researcher to review. However, the participants were unable to provide any other samples of historical alternative media used by Occupy Denver.

Several participants remarked that in many incidences, the press committee as well as other members of Occupy Denver were known to engage with local, independent newspapers as well as nationally known alternative news websites. These publications were not produced by Occupy Denver, but many of them can be classified as alternative media by description of content (Dowmunt & Coyer, 2007). Participants 3 and 5 identified the Washington Park Profiler, a local newspaper from the Denver area, as a paper that often printed news and events relating to Occupy Denver. Online alternative news websites that were named by participants as engaging with Occupy Denver included Democracy Now!, Infoshop, Submedia TV, Alternet, Think Progress, RT, Global Revolution TV, Anon News, Adbusters, and Salon.

To summarize, the interviews revealed the following types of alternative media used by Occupy Denver:

- Social media networks, including Facebook and Twitter
- Streaming video through YouTube and Ustream
- Websites, including the Occupy Denver and the Occupy Wall Street websites
- Alternative news print publications, including the Washington Park Profiler and the now discontinued *Occupied Denver Post*
- Alternative news websites, including Democracy Now!, Infoshop, Submedia TV, Alternet, Think Progress, RT, Global Revolution TV, and Adbusters

## **Mobilization Through Multiple Online Channels**

RQ2 sought to investigate how Occupy Denver used alternative media in order to engage in consensus mobilization. As discussed by Klandermans (1984), this type of mobilization involved telling the story of the movement in order to build support among the population for participation. A majority of the participants considered the Occupy Denver Facebook page as one of the most effective online tools for engaging with people in order to gain support for Occupy. Participant 9 had been involved with Occupy Denver since its first demonstrations in September 2011. As a graduate student himself, he had also been engaged in developing Occupy Denver's general assembly and education committee, as well as various other consulting and educational outreach programs around the Denver area. He discussed Facebook as well as Twitter as both being effective tools for accomplishing not only consensus mobilization but also many other activities:

(Facebook) has been like a really important tool for us to just continue to keep people's attention and keep people aware that one, the movement is still happening and that two, these things are actually problems, that like whether or not you're involved, like, you should be aware of... There are a lot of ways that we used Facebook and Twitter specifically to communicate about what's happening with the movements and to educate people and, you know, give people a portal in which to interact and sort of get involved.

Participant 9 also mentioned how the Occupy Denver Facebook page has the potential to measure quantitatively the number of supporters, or people who "like" the Facebook page, which he estimated as being 25,000 during the time of the interview. By May 2013, the number of Facebook fans on the page was over 27,000.

Regarding specific features of the Facebook page that made it an effective online tool, Participant 10 shared much of her experiences managing the Occupy Denver Facebook account.

She was a member of the Occupy Denver social media committee who first learned about Occupy Denver through the group's Tumblr blog, and she has since become a content creator for Occupy Denver's Facebook and Twitter profiles. She remarked how the Facebook page tended to be very visually appealing, saying, "Twitter does visual aids, but I think Facebook more accomplishes that because like people want to see it." A brief overview of the Occupy Denver Facebook page shows several images and video posts, making it more visually engaging as opposed to simply text. Participant 10 went on to discuss how the interactive interface of Facebook allowed activists of Occupy Denver an open, user-friendly medium to network with individuals and other activist organizations.

Participant 3 was a coordinator for Occupy Denver's education committee. She had spent much time in collective groups who operated through horizontal decision making systems, which was what inspired her to become involved with Occupy Denver. Although she was not an avid user of social media, Participant 3 made a comment similar to that of Participant 10 regarding how the Facebook page served as a hub for news and conversation, stating:

a lot of people do go to the Facebook even almost before the website to like check out what's going on and what not. In terms of networking with other people and groups...it's kind of interesting. I feel like Facebook is probably the most significant for that.

Twitter was identified as being a similarly effective tool to the Facebook page. Some participants described how Twitter enabled them to be informed about Occupy through news and information generated directly by Occupy Denver, Occupy groups from various cities, and sister activist organizations via personalized Twitter feeds. Participants 6 and 8, both members of Occupy Denver's social media committee, mentioned how a majority of the news they read about Occupy and activist movements was delivered to them through their Twitter feeds. As Participant 8 described, "I look at...just like certain people's feeds and stuff like people I know

who are on it. Like different Twitter feeds. AnonNews is a great one on Twitter. It's definitely about the information flow and like what feeds you're sitting on." Like several of the other participants, Participant 8 mentioned that he was drawn to Occupy Denver because of the horizontal, consensus-based decision making that the group advocated. He therefore looked to integrate his skills working with media to support Occupy Denver by working to build a stronger network with journalists, photographers and videographers covering the movement.

The open, interactive interface of Twitter also seemed to allow users to easily network for engaging in action later. Participant 6 became involved with Occupy Denver due in part by his experience as a musician running his own record label. He was actively involved in the social media committee, but he also mentioned that he worked on several other projects with affinity groups who supported Occupy Denver. For Participant 6, Twitter seemed to be one of the most effective channels for educating people on issues, as well as sending calls to action. He used the Tar Sands blockade, a demonstration involving the blockade of the Keystone XL pipeline, as an example and discussed the process by which he was able to extend his network of activists to engage with other actors through "tweeting":

The Tar Sands blockade and all these Denver people got arrested in the streets... So what we did was we held this fundraiser where we're selling T-shirts and we got the T-shirts super cheap and so if you donated, you know, \$25, you got a free T-shirt. And so what was happening was people were donating hundreds of dollars. And what we did was... I contacted all my friends, so I got Atmosphere and Immortal Technique and Sage Francis and Faded Gray, (who) were all these pretty famous artists to tweet out and help us promote this fundraiser, and doing it, we raised thousands of dollars and got our friends out of jail. But on top of it, it also raised awareness because a lot of these artists are not political at all.

The example of the Tar Sands blockade activity given by Participant 6 demonstrated the use of Twitter both as a publicity tool for understanding the movement's motives as well as an action tool closely related to RQ3, which asks how alternative media is used to engage in action

mobilization. These abilities appear to be present on both Twitter and Facebook, used often by activists of Occupy Denver to post about events and allow opportunities to build support for the collective. Participants 3 and 5 talked about how they were able to create several “events” on the Occupy Denver Facebook page to publicize teach-ins and social forums, accomplishing much of the same purposes in a similar way.

Participant 2 described many positive features of using Twitter for mobilization. As an original organizer of Occupy Denver, she first learned about the Occupy movement through Twitter feeds communicating about Occupy Wall Street, which then inspired her to initiate a protest at the State Capitol in Denver. Participant 2 explained that Twitter was instrumental at not only getting the word out about initiating Occupy Denver but also for sharing updates and pertinent information from other supporters who were not physically at the protests. However, she offered a word of caution about relying on Twitter too much for mobilization. As she described it:

It was working for me in communicating with New York and Denver and that kind of thing. But when I came to Fort Collins, nobody in Fort Collins used Twitter, so it wasn't helpful even though that's my preferred means. You know it only works if the people around you are using it.

She went on to discuss how Twitter contains a specific dialect through links and hashtags, implying that users must first learn how to communicate through this language before they can actively use Twitter.

Websites were identified by many participants as being strong consensus mobilization tools, particularly for people who are looking to learn more about the Occupy movement. Participants 2 and 7 recommended that users first go to the original Occupy Wall Street website in order to learn the most about the fundamentals of the movement, including the process of consensus decision-making and general assembly. Participant 7 explained that he spent much of

his time examining these core fundamentals of horizontal, consensus decision-making as part of his career as a professor, which he integrated into his classes focusing on the Occupy Movement. A brief look at the Occupy Wall Street website reveals a section featuring a brief history of Occupy Wall Street, the principles of solidarity, and the Declaration of the Occupation (Occupy Wall Street, 2011).

Several participants mentioned the Occupy Denver website as a widely used alternative medium, but there were very few comments that explained in-depth how this website aided specifically in consensus mobilization. Rather, participants explained that the website served more as an informational archive for events and activities organized by Occupy Denver and sister groups. Participant 3 discussed how event listings for teach-ins and reading groups were posted in a chronological, blog-style format on the Occupy Denver website. These listings illustrated some background information for the social issues that Occupy Denver sought to resolve, as well as specific dates and locations for discussion of these issues and networking with activists. Additionally, these same events would be listed on the Occupy Denver Facebook page and Twitter feed.

A strong area of mobilization talked about by participants was the use of online and streaming video to document various Occupy events. Participants 2, 4, 6, 8, and 9 through 12 identified several different websites that enabled users to upload and stream live video of events. These sites included YouTube, Ustream, and Global Revolution TV. Several participants explained that the primary purpose of these videos was to document an event as it happened in order to give prospective participants raw visuals of what Occupy Denver and other Occupy groups were doing. Participant 6 explained how he observed a digital video taken by participants during a particularly violent protest event make its way through various video live streams and

social media sites. Known as “The Day of 1000 Tents,” Participant 6 explained how the video and news of the activity went viral:

We were piped in with Global Revolution TV, which probably played a larger role in building up Occupy than almost any media outlet...Occupy Oakland was just tweeting it out, Occupy Wall Street was tweeting it out, Global Revolution was, and so we had 12,000 people watching live on our live stream as [military] armed riot cops came in to take down tents and beat the shit out of us...the live stream played a huge role in showing people what was actually happening.

Participant 6 noted that videos like these were what originally mobilized him to take an interest in the Occupy movement; he explained that watching videos of the original Occupy Wall Street protests gave him an indication that social change was happening.

The findings for RQ2 can be summarized through the following key points:

- Social media is often used for posting content on various issues recognized by Occupy Denver and for initiating discussion among users.
- Posts on specific issues through social media networks can be complemented by calls to action in which users can actively interact and participate, as seen with the Tar Sands Blockade.
- Websites provide background information and an archive for past events.
- Streaming video gives viewers raw visual access to an event, which can also be shared through social networks.

### **From Closed Groups to Open Mobilization**

RQ3 asked how participants of Occupy Denver used alternative media to coordinate the execution of action mobilization. The researcher looked to explore the coordination of action

mobilization in depth through the interviews with participants, starting with the conception phase of specific types of action and leading to the publication and execution of direct action events.

Interviews with several participants revealed that much of the conception process for direct action is done through discussion at Occupy Denver's general assemblies (GAs). Participant 11 had a developed professional background in information technology and worked much with Occupy Denver's press committee, website committee, and social media committee. For him, Occupy's direct democratic process drew him to the movement, and he explained how the GA served as a central space for individuals and groups to propose actions:

Denver is one of the few places in the country that actually has a functioning general assembly still, and it's always been the decisions...people bring proposals and then we have a direct democratic discussion and then you know...if the proposal gets passed, it's passed by 90% consensus...I view Occupy as more of a process than a goal. It's a group of citizens getting together and practicing direct democracy and then passing activist related proposals.

Participant 11 explained that proposals could be generated by nearly anyone who attends the GA, whether they are heavily involved with Occupy Denver or are part of other social movement organizations and need support. As proposals are passed through the GA, Participants 6, 7 and 9 explained that committees or working groups would often coordinate the planning and recruitment for specific, direct action. These groups were described as being more closed than the GA, with interested participants being invited into the groups or signing up at the GA. Some committees were formed shortly after the conception of Occupy Denver and still existed to the present day, while others were formed based upon a specific issue.

Regarding communication within working groups and committees, several participants said that a combination of email threads and face-to-face meetings were implemented to coordinate the action. Participant 7 explained that email threads would often be used as a supplemental tool for further coordinating various actions that were discussed face-to-face,



saying, “there was always sort of live face-to-face meetings... which a lot of the details get hammered out and then email was just used as a means of, you know, promotion or, you know, like fine tuning, you know, some of the like other details.” Participant 9 expressed that while email threads were great for connecting a lot of people, it would often make having a coherent conversation very confusing, as many email threads would have over 90 different responses at a time and would make things difficult for participants to come to consensus over ideas and discussion. Participant 8 stated, “if you can meet face-to-face and not have to rely on an email thread, like that’s probably the better way to go about it.”

For larger actions that were done in conjunction with Occupy groups and other organizations across multiple cities, a conference line known as InterOccupy was used by a select number of activists. Participant 2 said that she was an active user of InterOccupy, which she described as being a teleconference service when it began and has since evolved into a website with a newswire and calendar of events. She discussed her communication with activists in other Occupy groups centering around the protests during the Travon Martin shooting and the physical response that it produced:

We got word of this happening, and so in our InterOccupy crew through email first, we started organizing, “hey this is happening. Should we do something about it?” And then we started getting more people who were involved in InterOccupy around the United States to talk about what’s happening, and within 24 hours... *24 hours*, we had Travon Martin marches across the United States.

In this situation, a combination of email lists and conference calls seemed to be used to plan and coordinate amongst many different groups that were separated geographically. Participant 2 explained that most kinds of action would initially be announced through email lists and then conference lines would form to discuss the planning details using a similar consensus process as the general assemblies.

After a direct action would be planned, the process of promoting and recruiting participants for the events was one that utilized a very diverse set of open mobilization tactics. Several participants said that the Occupy Denver website, Facebook page, Twitter feed, and email lists were used the most often to announce events that were planned by committees and working groups. Very often, a particular event such as a march or a rally would be communicated simultaneously over every online channel controlled by Occupy Denver's press, website and social media committees. As Participant 6 described it, "the GA maintains control of the Facebook, and so I think the Facebook is actually the best organizing tool that we have," suggesting that many actions could be immediately announced through Facebook upon reaching consensus at the GA. Participants 4 and 9 both identified how Facebook event announcements in particular were very useful in measuring the engagement with the local populace in that people could RSVP to events and the entire list of people attending could be visible to other users.

Participants 2, 4, and 8 mentioned that mobile texting was also used very liberally to announce direct actions as well feed updates in near real-time to participants regarding actions. Participant 4 described an example of how text would be used to mobilize people very quickly to take part in occupations during the beginning of Occupy Denver:

I remember one time in the early days when they had a... physical occupation...I was at home and got this mass email that the physical occupation was being torn down by the police. Now we knew that they were coming at some point but we didn't know when, right? So I get this text that says, 'Come down to the protest because the cops are here right now,' and I was there in a half hour.

While many types of direct action would be announced through Occupy Denver's own alternative media network, some participants mentioned that traditional tactics of mobilization through print media were also used. Participants 3 and 5 talked about how press releases would be sent about upcoming events to local newspapers in the Denver area such as the Washington

Park Profiler, which they described as being somewhat radical and supportive of Occupy Denver's activities. Participant 6 described how fliers were also used for certain big events, saying, "it seems to me the biggest actions we had were eventually (posted fliers) for... We made sure that we promoted them good around town and got the local (stores) to hang our posters up a couple weeks in advance." Participants 2, 4 and 7 also mentioned that during the first occupation events, the *Occupied Denver Post* would be used to post upcoming events in addition to providing a space for letters and editorial columns.

In addition to sending press releases to alternative media outlets to announce an event before it took place, there were a few instances in which press releases were sent out following the aftermath of an event. Similar to how live streaming video was used by alternative media networks to give audiences a glimpse of the activity on ground, press coverage following a specific event also provided a means of measuring the success of that event. Participants 3 and 6 discussed how an occupation in Idaho Springs, Colorado to resist a home foreclosure received heavy coverage through nationally known alternative media news networks. Participant 6 said that a combination of user-produced media and press releases "went viral," giving way to coverage of the event by Democracy Now!, The Pete Santilli Show and the Alex Jones Radio Show.

Participant 4 said that he became involved with Occupy Denver because he witnessed several major protest movements throughout his life and felt that Occupy gave him the best opportunity to participate. He spent much of his involvement moderating Occupy Denver's GAs and also conducting research with fellow activists on the demographics and activities of the GAs. Participant 4 brought up an interesting point of how live, streaming video also provided an open opportunity for activists to "digitally" participate and network with other users. He discussed his

involvement with recording video of the Idaho Springs protest in late 2012 saying, “Personally I think giving people the opportunity, even if it’s not the same as being there, but if they can kind of participate just by watching it, and of course they can comment on other stuff too.” This leads to an interesting idea of how online participation can be just as influential as physical participation, similar to activity seen a decade before with virtual sit-ins during the WTO protest (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004).

The process of action mobilization can be summarized through the following flowchart displayed in Figure 1:



**Figure 1: Occupy Denver’s process of action mobilization**

### **Conflicts with Mainstream Media**

RQ4 asked if alternative media is the most preferred method for Occupy Denver to engage in mobilization. Through the course of the interviews, a majority of the participants expressed a much greater preference towards using alternative media to mobilize support for

Occupy Denver as opposed to engaging with mainstream media. When the researcher asked why such an attitude existed towards mainstream media, many participants commented about how the corporate ownership of many mainstream media outlets would influence the content delivered to audiences about the Occupy movement, leading to distortion and suppression of factual information. Participant 1 described how he became involved with Occupy as a result of being irritated by the tent occupations in downtown Denver. After viewing political commentary by Bill Maher and researching various websites, however, he said that the Occupy movement began to make sense to him, and he decided to attend several Occupy Denver events. Participant 1 expressed his non-preference towards mainstream media saying, “I’d rather watch Occupy alternative media any day... All the (mainstream) media that you see is pretty much filtered through six corporations. And that is definitely a central control of information. Emotional, intellectual information.”

Among the responses by participants, there appeared to be discussion of a theme of suppression through mainstream media towards Occupy Denver. One of the strongest forms of suppression seemed to be mainstream media outlets simply ignoring coverage of any of Occupy Denver’s activities. Participant 2 stated, “the mainstream news was virtually ignoring these protests happening in the United States, and it didn’t matter that thousands and thousands and thousands of people were taking to the streets. The news was not reporting it.” However, she then described how she researched a set of search statistics through Google Analytics and found that a significant quantity of users were searching for Occupy over a long period, even though it was not being covered in the mainstream media.

When Occupy Denver did receive coverage by mainstream media, the outcomes were described as doing more harm to the group than good. Several participants gave firsthand

examples of how they witnessed mainstream media journalists covering the activities of Occupy Denver, which then resulted in what they thought was a biased, inaccurate portrayal of the movement's purpose and its people. For instance, Participant 8 talked about how he was interviewed by *Westword* during a march against the Denver Police, telling how the *Westword* journalist "wasn't accurate. She paraphrased me and put words in my mouth." He also added how he thought *The Denver Post* reported information that was completely false about the occupations:

The *Denver Post* put out an article that everybody at Occupy Denver's camp had scabies, you know, which was total bullshit...The point of the media is supposed to be for people to tell the truth, like so that people like have discussions about what's really going on. And, you know, the problem isn't like that's not what's happening anymore.

Participants 7 and 9 gave multiple anecdotes of how they also witnessed this and several other events that were covered by mainstream media. The result, they viewed, was an unfair framing of the Occupy Denver activists as either "rich, white, snobby kids" or "hippy-like, homeless dropouts."

One mainstream media publication that was mentioned by multiple participants to have covered Occupy Denver frequently was *Westword*. Participant 12 said that he engaged with *Westword* on several occasions. As a long-time political activist, Participant 12 had traveled to multiple foreign countries and had taken action on several political issues, including homelessness, media democratization, food justice, and the legalization of marijuana. Known by other activists as one of the more prolific personalities in Occupy Denver, he had been featured by journalists from *Westword* and *The Denver Post* mostly because of his conflicts with the Denver Police Department. Participant 12 explained that although *Westword* has been known to historically publish alternative content among its articles, he did not consider it an alternative media source due to its ownership by Village Voice Media. He and a few other participants

described the articles published by *Westword* focusing too much on the controversial aspects of the occupation during the beginning of Occupy Denver. Participant 12 said that he thought the coverage by the *Westword* acted as a “double-edged sword” affecting Occupy Denver, creating what he believed to be exposure for Occupy Denver on one hand and increasingly negative public perception on the other. As he stated:

It kind of personalized us in one respect, but on the other respect it gave people and news media a propaganda campaign that was focused on this. It gave them more excuses to classify people as troublemakers or anarchists or whatever they wanted to continue their propaganda campaign.

Participants 3 and 10 explained that while the *Westword* was not intentionally malicious towards Occupy Denver, they viewed the coverage as very limited in scope and not fully representative of the entire movement. Participant 10 described her disagreement with the articles and personality profiles written by one particular *Westword* journalist, saying, “she covered this person who is a complete idiot, but it didn’t seem like she actually wanted to focus on the good things that we did. Like for toys for tots or like sending food and clothing for the homeless down there.”

Due to these conflicts with mainstream media, participants expressed that the general perceived attitude in Occupy Denver towards engaging with mainstream media is to refuse to do so. Participant 5 told how she had deep roots in activism beginning from her experiences in the Middle East. Since moving to the United States, she has been involved with activist issues focusing on universal healthcare, ending wars in the Middle East, and eliminating monetary debt and educational injustice. She compared her experience with media to the conflicts she experienced under authoritarian regimes and discussed her refusal to engage with mainstream media news sources as she stated:

I don't even approach *The Denver Post* or anything like that because it is useless...It's bought and paid for by corporations, and they're not going to vouch you because they want to continue to get money for their papers. They're not going to side with the truth – they're going to side with money.

Similar comments by other participants seemed to contribute to a general attitude of discontent and distrust of the mainstream media as a means of mobilization, as the many firsthand examples given by participants illustrated how this tension was built between Occupy Denver and the mainstream media. Throughout the interviews, these examples also tended to be tied back to the perception that such conflict was influenced by the corporate ownership of the media.

Despite these tensions, not all activists in Occupy Denver were quick to write-off opportunities for mobilization through mainstream media. A majority of the participants believed that one of mainstream media's most effective strengths is its ability to reach a wide audience. Participant 2 explained that while she supports alternative media, she also supported efforts to continue engaging with mainstream media as it provided an opportunity for Occupy to reach the people who need to hear its message; sticking only with alternative media would not enable this kind of reach. Participant 12 mentioned how having an opportunity to be interviewed on a mainstream media source would help to boost exposure and credibility through alternative media as well. Because mainstream media has a high magnitude of reach and reputation, he explained that posting and reposting a video of the interview through SNSs would hypothetically bring much more attention and conversation to that particular issue.



## Beyond Alternative Media

In terms of preferences towards alternative media, there were a few major theoretical and practical aspects identified through the interviews that contributed to that preference. For some participants who were part of Occupy Denver during its inception, the formation of alternative media was not only symbolic of the anarchist or collective form of society that Occupiers sought to develop, but it was also the only avenue that provided any opportunity for communicating about the movement. Participant 7 conceptualized how an alternative media network was symbolically aligned with the fundamentals of forming a new society:

Part of like the anarchist ethic that started Occupy and I think, you know, influenced a lot of people was this idea of like DIY...like making your own zines, like making like your own Occupy newspaper...If you're not on these generated sites, if you're not creating your own blogs, if you're not distributing your own newspapers, if you're not engaging with alternative forms of communication that are currently available, then you can't exist as a movement."

Although Participant 7 supported a strong alternative media network, he did suggest that in order to have more credibility, Occupiers use more commonly used forms of alternative media rather than focus solely on creating brand new ones, as he stated occupiers should "at least have somewhat of like a public image to what's going on because there is a sense that engaging more mainstream methods normalizes it."

For practical advantages, the most commonly mentioned aspect of alternative media was that it gave the producers more control over the messages that were communicated. Participant 4 said,

We have so much more control over alternative media. It means that we have so much better access to alternative media that it's our best outreach tool...compared to something like *The Denver Post* that hasn't really written anything about Occupy in months.

Participant 9 described that social media tools in particular provided the most control for members of Occupy Denver to generate their own messages in an accurate way:

We could prefer the sort of independence and that like, you know, the fact that like we could tell our people and social media, “hey, this is what we want you to say,” and that is what they would say, and you don’t have to play games... a lot of ways it was also a matter of just the accuracy, the level of trust that we could have that what we tried to say would actually be what people heard from whatever media source, and a lot of the mainstream media became highly untrustworthy.

Another major preference towards alternative media that was discussed by multiple participants is that most alternative media platforms provide an open, interactive environment that nearly anyone can join to learn about and become part of the movement. Participant 1 expressed that Occupy Denver’s alternative media sources provide a space for both ideas and people, as he stated, “It’s helpful for communication, and it establishes the ideas... it’s a tangible place to network, which is a powerful thing. You can go and meet people and know that you’re not alone. And begin doing something else.” Participant 6 discussed how not only Occupy Denver’s alternative media but also any kind of alternative media provides opportunities for individuals to become citizen journalists and share coverage of activities and events from his/her point of view without being filtered through an editing room:

It’s unfiltered man. It’s like there’s no denying what happened, like you’re watching it... They’re not even journalists. They’re fucking activists. Sometimes they’re live stream, but for the most part it’s just on-the-ground activists who talk about what’s happening in their city. You know, what the politics are. So it’s like the articles I read come from those people.

Additionally, Participant 6 mentioned how many of these activist citizen journalists had a presence on Twitter, with some of them having over 5,000 followers on their account. This provided further insight into a way that support and engagement can be measured through alternative media.

Despite these preferences for control and interactivity through alternative media, not all participants identified it as the absolute best method to mobilize people into participating with Occupy Denver. Some participants commented in the interviews that they thought much of the consensus and action mobilization steps could be accomplished just as effectively through face-to-face meetings and physical participation. For multiple participants, the general assembly was perhaps the most effective setting for mobilizing the movement. Participant 1 considered this to be a great way to network with other activists and build support for the movement, with alternative media serving as a supplement to that network, as he described, “it’s word of mouth and you begin to meet other people who are involved in these organizations and they of course use the internet to communicate as much as anyone else.” Participant 2 stated very simply, “You just have to show up on the ground and find out when their GA is and go. And that’s the best way to get connected.” Participant 8 considered alternative media important for sustaining communication, but that he thought that it didn’t have as much of an impact as actual participation on a specific project, as he said:

I would say if you can meet face-to-face and not have to rely on an email thread, like that’s probably the better way to go about it...go outside and meet some people who are on the same page, you know, and go like, you know, make it happen.

Summarized are the major findings from the interviews to answer RQ4:

- Nearly all participants identified a preference for alternative media over mainstream media sources.
- Several participants described greater opportunities for interactivity and control through alternative media as reasons for this preference.

- Conflicts with mainstream media (inaccuracy, corporate ownership, strong arm for state authorities, denial of coverage) appear to contribute to most participants' preference towards alternative media.
- Some participants mentioned a need to still engage with mainstream media due to its greater audience reach.
- Radical participants argued for physical action (general assembly, occupations) as best mobilization tactic.

### **Mitigating Vulnerabilities and Accepting Risks**

RQ5 asked what types of vulnerabilities exist in the use of alternative media by Occupy Denver. As revealed through the interviews, there were some vulnerabilities that existed due to the platform and ownership of the alternative media being used, which were largely out of the participants' control. Other vulnerabilities were identified as resulting from various activities conducted by users through alternative media. With both aspects, alternative media posed a potential risk of creating undesired outcomes for the group as a whole, which most participants acknowledged but accepted.

A major vulnerability in alternative media identified by a majority of participants was the threat of surveillance by law enforcement. This vulnerability seemed to be tied mostly to online activity, and participants tended to perceive it as being a particular threat on social media platforms. Participant 8 explained that engaging with Occupy Denver through Facebook posed a privacy risk due to the website's storage of personal information, as he explained:

Facebook saves all your information and 'like' posts and stuff. And the way it's been explained to me is, is as far as Facebook goes, if you're subpoenaed, then 'like' a certain comment, then anyone else who comments on that comment can also be subpoenaed.

Participant 8, along with participants 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, and 10 through 12, also commented on how the Denver Police Department and the FBI were rumored to have conducted regular surveillance on Occupy Denver's Facebook page and other social media accounts. Due to the openness of these media, it is very easy for anyone to monitor daily activities over these channels in order to collect intelligence for possibly disrupting the movement. Participant 9 explained this idea, saying:

We were being observed and (monitored) by the State and by DOD for hints and tips about like what we were going to do next and how, and then they would take that information and use it to prevent or disrupt or lessen whatever it was that we were planning.

Participants 11 and 12 concurred with this idea, and both commented on how this type of intelligence collection could have also contributed to a cooperative campaign between state governments, federal agencies and corporations to effectively suppress the Occupy movement in many major cities in the United States. Participant 12 identified a public online source that revealed a collection of government documents explaining how this campaign was developed (Partnership for Civil Justice Fund, 2012).

Another vulnerable area of Occupy Denver's alternative media discussed by participants related to money and ownership of various alternative media. From domain ownership to money budgeted for placing advertisements on SNSs, the amount of money contributed towards building and maintaining an alternative media network played an important role in sustaining the movement. However, due to corporate organizations contributing their own money to increase visibility over the same networks, it is possible for a social movement to be suppressed by being unable to compete with things such as paid advertising and search engine optimization.

Participant 11 specialized professionally in analyzing the purchase of online advertising space, and he identified this challenge of competing with larger corporate entities for visibility particularly on Facebook:

Facebook pages have something called Ad Rank, and what Ad Rank does is essentially decides who gets to see your content and who doesn't. Like whoever is a fan on your page, only a percentage of those people ever see what you post. And that's based on Ad Rank: how many times they connect with you, how interested they appear to be with your page, and so the way to really go around Ad Rank is to pay for promotion, and then it extends it to a lot more people on your page. And this is a devastating blow to social movements because it means that you know, not only are corporations favoring people with marketing dollars, you know again it sort of allows the wealthy to communicate and the marginalized not to.

Participant 11 continued by saying that this same type of system is being integrated on Twitter and most search engines, essentially posing the possibility of larger corporations being able to buy the same space that Occupy Denver relies on for mobilization. In addition to competition through paid promotion, the fact that the search engines, SNSs, and website domains are not owned proprietarily by Occupy Denver also poses a threat. Although users have great access to online alternative media, Participant 4 explained in a theoretical sense that these tools could be easily taken away by government authority or the owning entities of those media, saying, "we rely on Google and Google products so much...if Google decided to cut off Occupy Denver, like it would be, it might not be a death blow, but like it would radically change everything that we do because we use those things so much." These challenges could very well be correlated to some of the reasons why some members of Occupy Denver prefer to mobilize participation offline through the general assembly and direct actions.

Audience reach was identified as a weakness by about half the participants interviewed, but it did not appear quite as severe vulnerability as surveillance or paid ownership. As identified by some of the participants who still supported some engagement with mainstream

media, alternative media definitely seemed to be perceived as having much less of a reach. Part of this could have been contributed by some of the methods of paid promotion and combined campaigns by larger, wealthier entities. However, a few participants explained that this limitation of reach might be by choice due to ideologies or actions by users. Participants 1, 3, 4, 6, and 8 through 11 revealed how a separate Occupy Denver Facebook group existed that was separate from the page seen by public users. Participant 8 explained that this was more of a closed, internal discussion group for very active participants. However, Participants 4 and 7 viewed this kind of group as being “insulating” and not aligned with the ethics of a horizontal organization as it was generally closed to public visibility. Participant 7 explained this as a potential danger across multiple forms of alternative media, saying:

The more you kind of like push yourself underground to more you become underground...you can choose to include or exclude, you know, some person from an email or you could have moderators on the site that are like heavy-handed in taking dissenting views or whatever off.

Other factors that were mentioned by a few participants as hindering audience reach were generational and economic stratification within the collective of Occupy Denver and the audience in which they sought to reach.

In some cases, the strength of having ease of access in an alternative media network can also be viewed as a weakness if consensus is not achieved. Participants 2 and 6 explained how people have the ability to sometimes go “rogue” and conduct their own activities while taking resources from the collective. Participant 2 shared an example of how a particular individual had a disagreement with an Occupy committee and decided to leave the group. In effect, as he also controlled access to the group’s email listserv, he took over 250 email contacts with him, which severely decreased the committee’s ability to communicate with users. Participant 6 shared an anecdote of how people can also tend to ignore the entire consensus process through the general

assembly, but still do things under the banner of Occupy Denver. He described a time when one individual went against the consensus at a particular general assembly and organized a disruptive demonstration during the Denver Homeless Vigil in 2011. This individual was also known for organizing his own demonstrations through alternative media, which were completely independent of Occupy Denver. The demonstration received very negative coverage through *The Denver Post* and dealt a major blow to Occupy Denver as a collective, thus demonstrating how the actions of one person can severely affect the group. Additionally, as Participant 2 explained, since people can come and go through such an open mobilization platform, it is very difficult to hold a person accountable when a crisis occurs.

A few participants talked about ways in which members of Occupy Denver would use alternative media tools to protect the group from things like surveillance, invasion of privacy, and subpoenas by law enforcement. Participants 1, 8, 9 and 11 talked about several security approaches developed through technical and activist channels that are being integrated into alternative media networks to make them more secure. These methods include using file encryption, using BitTorrent files for sharing information, using steganography for communicating messages, and even shutting down all electronic devices for specific committee meetings. Participant 11 identified some online tools that integrate these security methods, including Tor plugins and Hushmail, an encrypted email service. While he did not share specifically how integrated these tools were with Occupy Denver, he did imply that these tools are somewhat new to many members of Occupy Denver:

Many activists don't have a strong security conscience about the Internet. I mean I think that that's just because so many people are just use to using Facebook and Twitter and all these things that...they don't think that everything you send on a wire has actually been saved, stored by the NSA you know for data mining on a future date.



Streaming and uploaded video was also identified by some participants as playing a role in protecting members from wrongful accusations by police. Not only did live streaming video play an important role in achieving mobilization goals, but it also served as documented footage of particular events involving activists and law enforcement. Participants 4, 10 and 12 discussed how mobile devices were carried by activists at nearly every single direct action event and were then used to record video of any conflicts between activists and law enforcement. Participant 4 explained how activists recording streaming video helped to maintain security during and after each direct action event, saying, “It’s a matter of security because police and protesters happen to behave a little bit better when they know there’s like a dozen cameras out. And of course that doesn’t mean anything if you’re not posting it afterwards.” Participant 12 viewed this method as being especially effective during violent incidents, as to him it was a more than a means of documenting evidence of only one particular incident; it was also a way of sharing with users the kinds of rights and protections that are at stake in society.

While some methods are being used to protect activists’ engagement with alternative media, participants expressed that for the most part, the majority of Occupy Denver’s members seem to be willing to accept the risks inherent with an alternative media network and conduct their activities. Participant 6 seemed to approach this from the perspective that Occupy Denver would face resistance from government or corporations whether they operated in a secure way or not, stating:

I mean we were never very smart about security culture... We just like felt like we’re not doing anything wrong so who gives a shit? Let’s talk about it on Facebook. Let’s talk about it on our forums. Let’s talk about it under these surveillance cameras.

Participant 9 viewed this acceptance of risk in a similar way as he argued that Occupiers were simply exercising their freedom of speech. “It was just a kind of like acceptance that we

were going to be monitored,” said Participant 9, “and it was, in a lot of ways, just like specific acknowledgment of like that is fine because we are not doing anything illegal.” The general consensus revealed in the interviews appeared to be that nearly any kind of activity conducted through Occupy Denver or any other activist organization could be considered a risk, but without taking those risks then Occupy Denver would not be able to be sustained as a movement.

The findings in the interviews reveal some very interesting points of exploration related to RQ5, and these findings can be concluded with the following:

- Vulnerabilities exist in alternative media due to the design of the media as well as by the actions of the users, which can lead to issues concerning privacy and surveillance.
- Lack of audience and segmentation by age and economic status were identified by some participants, but these were not mentioned to be as severe as vulnerabilities related to privacy.
- Much concern was expressed over lack of accountability regarding users’ actions over alternative media, with several examples illustrating how the actions of one user can have a negative impact on the collective.
- Security culture is developing among Occupy Denver’s alternative media users, with participants mentioning several methods of securing communication through file encryption. Video files also serve as records of evidence in the event of wrongful accusations by police.
- Many participants choose to accept all risks associated with alternative media, viewing it as one of the only logical means for the Occupy movement to be sustained.

## Implications

The researcher's intention with this study was to determine how alternative media resources were used by Occupy Denver to mobilize participation. Using the lens of resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Jenkins, 1983) to examine the alternative media used by Occupy Denver, the findings harvested from the interviews suggest that the fundamental process of resource mobilization is being used in many of Occupy Denver's communications through alternative media. The specific concept of mobilization seems to still be following Klandermans' (1984) two-part model of consensus and action mobilization. Occupy Denver's communication through alternative media seems to be pushing towards consensus and action mobilization simultaneously in many cases, particularly through online promotions of direct action. The ability to post information on an issue and inspire users to engage in direct action all through the same medium means achieving mobilization through alternative media can happen extremely quickly.

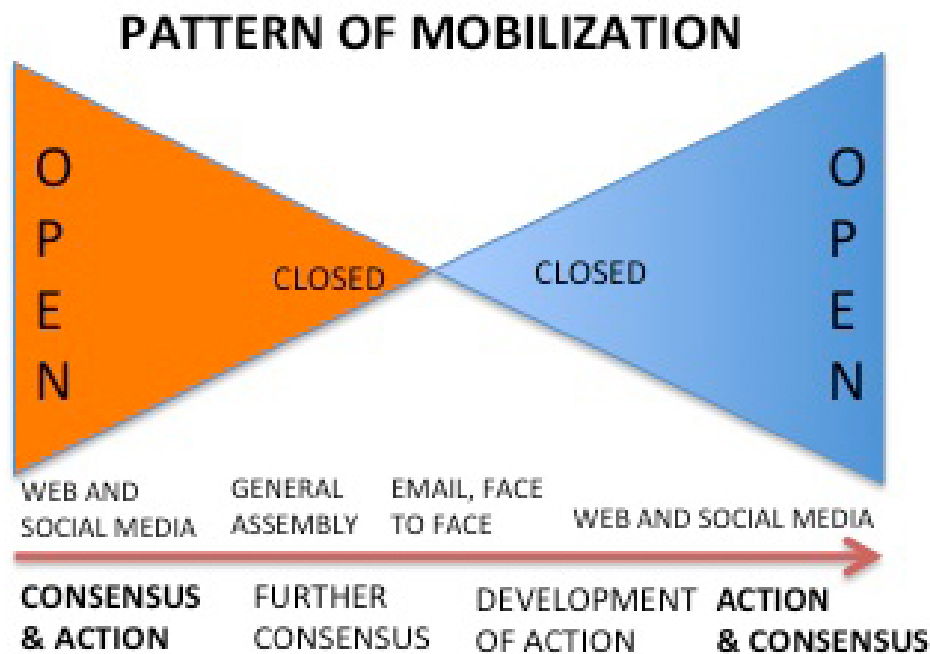
What makes this process of mobilization a bit ambiguous, however, is that the consensus mobilization stage for Occupy Denver is in a rapid and constant state of change; as multiple participants explained, there are no central goals of Occupy Denver except for ones that are brought to the GA by participants. This can make it easy for a handful of members to develop short-term goals, gain consensus mobilization for those goals, and then inspire action mobilization. On the other hand, building long-term consensus around the overall purpose of Occupy as a movement can be difficult if it is purely participant-driven. The participants revealed many issues that Occupy Denver has taken action towards, including usury, healthcare, education, the environment, and political corruption. While most of these issues could be tied

under a larger umbrella concerning the redistribution of wealth in society, there is still difficulty determining whether this is actually the general consensus among the collective.

It is possible that this difficulty in achieving a macro-level consensus is what has positioned Occupy in a state of transition in the past year. Through the course of the interviews, many participants shared their thoughts of how Occupy would eventually become a collection of affinity groups dedicated towards specific projects. These groups include Strike Debt, Denver Homeless Out Loud, The Colorado Foreclosure Resistance Coalition, and nationally focused projects such as Occupy Sandy. Participant 11 explained this transition clearly in that having more focused groups helps activists to perform better quality work. Others, such as Participant 12, argued that Occupy was never meant to be a single-issue group in the first place; rather it served more as a tactic or a brand for various activists groups to network with and resource their own movements.

Regarding the methods of mobilization, it seems that alternative media network of Occupy Denver follows closely with Walgrave and Klandermans' (2010) patterns of open and closed mobilization. When these patterns of open and closed mobilization are aligned with the Klandermans' (1984) two-part definition of mobilization, it appears that the methods of mobilization through alternative media follow a specific cycle. During the consensus stage, many types of open and interactive alternative media were identified as being used, such as websites, SNSs, and streaming video. As consensus was achieved and development of action began, these open forms of media appeared to taper into more closed forms of mobilization; for example, email threads and conference calls were either invite only or shared with a limited group of participants by word of mouth. The action mobilization phase would generally seem to be reached once a direct action was ready to be executed by a committee or subgroup, and then

the mobilization pattern would open back up into methods of recruiting through the Internet and print publications. In some ways, the direct action events themselves could even be perceived as their own form of open mobilization due to their visibility and networking opportunities. This pattern of mobilization can be outlined in the Figure 2:



\* Based on Klandermans (1984), Walgrave & Klandermans (2010)

**Figure 2: Occupy Denver’s Pattern of Mobilization**

An important finding among the types of alternative media used was that SNSs appeared as a convergent, all-in-one tool for conducting nearly every type of mobilization activity. Of the SNSs identified by participants, the Occupy Denver Facebook page appeared as the most preferred online medium for mobilization activities; while other sources such as websites and streaming video played important roles as well, these media could be directly embedded onto the Occupy Denver Facebook page, making the page a fully comprehensive source for

understanding everything about Occupy Denver. Perhaps the only weakness of the Facebook page that would prevent it from being one of the most effective online mobilization tools is that inability to reach prospective participants who do not use Facebook. At the same time, this appears to be another reason why Occupy continues to operate offline through GAs and physical direct action events.

As a preferred means of mobilization, the participants that were interviewed all expressed that alternative media was much more preferred than any efforts to engage with mainstream media. Although mainstream media was perceived as having a definite advantage in terms of audience reach, the majority of participants seemed to prefer alternative media for practical as well as ideological reasons. A major theme that emerged from the interviews was the idea of a horizontally structured society as a binding system behind the Occupy movement. According to several participants, the design of most modern alternative media sources enables users to achieve this horizontal way of operating. Also, when juxtaposed with mainstream media resources, there appears to be a relationship similar to that identified Gitlin's (1980) accounts of media coverage during the 1960s; the generally negative coverage by mainstream media symbolically represents the hierarchical society that asserts its authority to protect itself, while Occupy's alternative media network symbolically acts as an extension of the horizontal, collectivist society developing to replace the current system.

The researcher has concluded the following implications from the findings:

- Given current alternative media technologies, social movement participants can accomplish consensus and action mobilization nearly simultaneously, enabling mobilization to occur very quickly.
- Social media is becoming a convergent tool for most mobilization functions.

- Macro-level consensus over goals and issues is difficult to achieve due to high interactivity; individuals appear to ignite support and action around single issues.
- The concept of mobilization is strongly aligned with a cycle of open and closed tactics (Walgrave and Klandermans, 2010).
- There is a growing presence of affinity groups originating from the Occupy movement, including groups such as Strike Debt, Denver Homeless Out Loud, and the Colorado Foreclosure Resistance Coalition.
- Alternative media serves not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic representation of an alternative, collectivist society that contrasts the current state.

### **Limitations of the Research**

The researcher acknowledges that there are some limitations in the research of Occupy Denver and the alternative media network. Some limitations existed in the design of the research, while other limitations existed due to other resources such as time and availability. First of all, the approach of using qualitative interviews to explore the activities of Occupy Denver was limited in that it could only capture the perspectives of a very small segment of the collective. The unique perspectives of the individuals who volunteered to participate cannot be easily generalized or directly correlated to other individuals who might be associated with Occupy but did not participate. On the other hand, the interviews aided to uncover a diverse set of perspectives related to the area of alternative media in the movement. The backgrounds and

experiences of each participant were able to shed light onto how members of Occupy Denver interacted through alternative media and why certain choices were made relating to media use.

The minimum sample size was difficult to achieve in some respects. While the researcher already had prior contact with some members of Occupy Denver to participate in interviews, the researcher had lesser success in relying on these participants to help recruit other prospective participants through the snowball sampling scheme. Participants would often name colleagues who they thought would be interested in being interviewed, but contacting these prospective participants proved to be a difficult task many times for the researcher. Also, given the short period of time that the researcher had available to recruit participants, the researcher chose to cease recruitment of participants once an emergent degree of saturation was apparent during the coding process. Had the researcher chosen to extend the period of time to recruit, he might have been able to uncover even more perspectives through the interviews that could have helped to either strengthen or lessen the level of saturation.

While interviews were a great method for delving into personal experiences and revealing answers to the research questions, this method alone would not be the best for measuring the level of success or failure of alternative media to mobilize participation. Interviewees could only give claims as to whether they viewed success or failure in mobilization based on their own personal perspectives or by identifying thoughts or ideas they perceived as existing among the collective. Some participants could provide quantitative numbers or interested users for online alternative media. However, to say that the number of hits or likes that a webpage has cannot be easily translated into a claim that mobilization was successful. This would require integrating other methods into the research such as web analytics, observations, or more in-depth case studies of specific Occupy events and how alternative media was used with those.



## **Areas of Further Research**

The wealth of information harvested from the interviews opens a door to several different areas of emphasis that can be studied. As all participants shared their knowledge of a variety of alternative media sources used by Occupy Denver, this comprehensive collection of sources can perhaps be followed up with case studies of each of these types of alternative media and what kind of role each one plays in mobilization. As Caren and Gaby (2011) did with their content analysis of Occupy's Facebook presence, more case studies on Occupy specific media such as the website, SNSs, print materials, and even the GA can help to better define the purpose of each source and help determine which media are best for accomplishing specific goals or actions.

A second possibility for future research endeavors is to conduct a case study on a specific event coordinated by Occupy Denver. As revealed through the interviews, there were several different events including meetings and direct actions that all integrated open and closed patterns of mobilization at the consensus and action stages. Some events resulted in mass participation, while others appeared to only reach a limited audience. Conducting a case study analyzing the alternative media use towards a particular event from its conception to its promotion and action would provide a possibility of illustrating patterns of communication among members of Occupy Denver, identifying perspectives of types of media, messages, and the qualities of participants who communicate through those media.

Regarding the relationship of alternative media to mainstream media, there are many avenues that can be taken to analyze the effects of mainstream media coverage on the Occupy movement and how this influenced many members' choices to operate through an alternative media network. Looking at historical cases of social movements and protest, there are many

similarities to Gitlin's (1980) analysis of media coverage on the SDS, as well as the coverage of the WTO Protests (Houston, 2004; Baasanjav, 2005). Themes of conflict, suppression, marginalization and distrust have emerged as common trends through the interviews, and in order to fully explore these trends it would be necessary to conduct separate research into the relationship between mainstream media and alternative media use for the Occupy Movement. A content analysis of media coverage from mainstream media, as well as analysis of alternative media coverage, might help to identify trending themes and the sources that might be influencing those themes. Additionally, a case study with interviews of mainstream media journalists who covered Occupy Denver might also harvest some findings related to the relationship of mainstream media and Occupy Denver.

Finally, some research into the demographics of participants, particularly those who actively use alternative media, would give an opportunity to understand the composition of the people who make up Occupy Denver's alternative media network. The participants recruited for the interviews came from very diverse backgrounds and affiliations, and each one commented that since Occupy Denver was such a diverse collective that opinions and perspectives on a particular aspect, in this case media use, would vary greatly from person to person. What is apparent among the participants who were interviewed is that opinions on media in general vary based on their direct interaction with either alternative media or mainstream media. Those who were moderately involved with Occupy Denver's alternative media tended to be generally supportive of the alternative media, while others who interacted directly with mainstream media and were also involved on press and social media committees seemed to have a much stronger stance for certain methods of communication over others. Perhaps taking a deeper look into

these participants' experiences and involvement with Occupy and other activist groups might help to further explain why such opinions and beliefs might be formed.

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## Appendix A: Research Cover Letter

Department of Journalism & Technical Communication  
Colorado State University, CD1785  
Fort Collins, CO 80523

February 19, 2013

Dear Participant,

My name is John O'Connell. I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the Department of Journalism and Technical Communication. We are conducting a research study on alternative media used by Occupy Denver. The title of our project is *The best alternative? The use of alternative media in the Occupy movement*. The Principal Investigator is Jamie Switzer, Ph.D. from the Department of Journalism and Technical Communication, and I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

You are invited to participate in this research because you are at least 18 years old and have been involved with Occupy Denver. We would like you to take part in a one-on-one interview so we can learn about your experiences using alternative media as part of Occupy Denver. The interview will take place either by telephone or Skype, or in-person at the Denver Public Library or an alternate location of your choice in Denver, CO. The interview will be 30 to 45 minutes in length. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may choose to stop participating at any time without penalty.

Your personal information will be kept separate from your interview responses, and your name will not be included in any recorded materials. Your responses will be combined with responses from other participants in this study. We may publish the results of this study, but we will keep your name, other identifying information, and any information that you would like to share "off the record" private. In other words, your comments or quotes from you will not include any identifying information. The Institutional Review Board of Colorado State University may inspect these records.

You have the choice to have your interview audio recorded or not. The researcher will keep the privacy and confidentiality of your responses by deleting all audio files and encrypting all interview transcriptions. The researcher will destroy these files after three years.

While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on social movements and alternative media networks.

The researcher does not see any risks to you for volunteering in this study. The researcher has taken great care to control possible risks. If you feel uncomfortable at any time or make comments in the interview that you would prefer that we not share, please let the researcher know.

If you have any questions, please contact John O'Connell at [john.oconnell@colostate.edu](mailto:john.oconnell@colostate.edu), (703) 474-0645 or Jamie Switzer at [jamie.switzer@colostate.edu](mailto:jamie.switzer@colostate.edu), (970) 491-2239. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, at 970-491-1655.

Sincerely,

Jamie Switzer  
Ed.D, Principal Investigator

John O'Connell  
Co-principal Investigator

## Appendix B: Interview guide

### Interview Questions:

1. How did you get involved with Occupy Denver?
2. What do you specifically do as part of Occupy Denver?
3. What do you perceive are the central goals of Occupy Denver since you've been involved?
4. How familiar are you with Occupy Denver's development and use of alternative media?  
**[If they do not understand what alternative media is, the researcher will identify it for them using Coyer's (2007) definition.]**

PROBE: Can you name some specific types of alternative media used by Occupy Denver?

5. What kinds of alternative media do you use as part of Occupy Denver?

PROBE: Tell me more about your use of these media. Why do you use these media?

PROBE: Do you have a preferred type of alternative media that you use?

- a. *If yes:* Why is it your preferred media?

6. Do you think that building support among current and prospective participants is important for Occupy Denver?

PROBE: *if yes,* Why?

PROBE: *if no,* Why not?

7. Have you observed Occupy Denver use alternative media to gain support of prospective participants?

PROBE: How was this done? Can you give any specific examples of how Occupy Denver inspired support among participants?

PROBE: Are these alternative media the most preferred by Occupy Denver for building support? Why/Why not?

8. Do you think that communicating to plan and coordinate direct action is important for Occupy Denver?

PROBE: *if yes*, Why?

PROBE: *if no*, Why not?

9. Can you tell me about any specific examples of direct action?

10. Have you observed Occupy Denver to use alternative media to coordinate specific, direct action by participants?

PROBE if yes: How was this done?

PROBE: Are these alternative media the most preferred by Occupy Denver for coordination of action? Why/Why not?

11. Does Occupy Denver prefer using alternative media as opposed to engaging with mainstream news media?

**[Note: If question is unclear, the researcher will give a situational example, such as, “Does Occupy Denver prefer to use its own media to communicate messages for building support rather than speaking with a journalist from a mainstream news channel to do this?]**

PROBE: *if yes*, Why?

PROBE: *if no*, Why not?

12. Do you prefer using alternative media as opposed to engaging with mainstream news media?

PROBE: *if yes*, Why?



PROBE: *if no*, Why not?

13. Do you perceive any risk or vulnerability in your use of alternative media to conduct your activities of building support and coordinating action?

PROBE: *if yes*, Why? What kinds of risks or vulnerabilities?

PROBE: *if no*, Why not?

14. Overall, do you think alternative media has been successful at helping to build support and coordinate action for the movement?

PROBE: *if yes*, Why?

PROBE: *if no*, Why not?

15. Is there anything else you would like to talk about regarding OD's use of alternative media?

## Appendix C: Interview Codebook

**1. Types of Alternative Media:** “any kind of media that’s used and produced by marginalized groups of people, and runs contrary to the mainstream media institution.” (Coyer, 2007) examples of print or electronic media given by participants. Various types include email, blogs, social media, print newspapers, websites, news networks, videos, mobile devices

**2. Consensus Mobilization:** “method by which the social movement attempts to gain support from a population to adopt its viewpoints and ideology. The story of the struggle and the demands of the social movement are thus communicated with an aim at reaching people rationally and emotionally, offering arguments and narratives that illustrate the perceived collective benefits of supporting the social movement” (Klandermans, 1984). Statements that identify alt media use to build support for the social movement. Includes examples of publicizing the social movement in general and creating awareness of the issues and goals advocated by the social movement – intended to get people interested in supporting the movement.

**3. Action Mobilization:** “the social movement communicating with the supporting population to participate in direct action” (Klandermans, 1984). Statements that identify alt media use to communicate with participants to engage in direct action; includes communicating to plan and coordinate action, as well as methods of publicizing specific activities to persuade people to participate

**4. Preference towards alternative media:** statements that identify the participant's preference for engaging with alternative media as opposed to mainstream media. Example: mainstream media edits news stories heavily, so activists prefer to engage with alternative media because it tells a more complete story.

**5. Preference towards mainstream media (MSM):** statements that indicate participant's preference to engage with MSM as opposed to alternative media. Example: activists seek ways to pitch press releases to MSM news outlets because they have potential to reach more readers than alternative media publications.

**6. Preference towards other communication medium:** statements that indicate a preferred means of communicating that is not MSM or alternative media. Examples: direct action, rallies, boycotts, general assemblies

**8. Vulnerabilities of alternative media:** statements that indicate that alt media use will lead to undesirable outcomes for individuals or for the group as a whole. Statements might include lack of control, problems with decision making or forming collective consensus (Bennett, 2003)

### Emerging Themes

**9. Horizontal structure:** themes and statements that discuss horizontal, consensus decision-making, collaboration, equality among participants, anti-hierarchy. Can apply to both structure of movement and structure of alternative media

10. **Factions:** statements that discuss the formation of separate activist groups, either before or after Occupy Wall Street, that stand in solidarity with similar issues and viewpoints but do not retain the title of “Occupy.”

11. **Self-Security:** statements that discuss alt media use to protect individuals and reduce risks of involvement in social movements. Examples: using mobile camera phones to record police brutality for evidence in court, developing more secure networks, etc.

12. **Cycle of protest:** statements that discuss ideas of society being in an era of social and political contention, inspiring the uprising of social movements

13. **Media training:** statements that discuss participants’ development of methods to talk with mainstream media in order to prevent negative frames of Occupy movement