TWEETS AND THE STREETS

Social Media and Contemporary Activism

Paolo Gerbaudo

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Introduction

Ok so #Tahrir anyone?
@Sarahngb – 15 October 2011

On the 29th of July 2011, I happened to be witness to the brutal eviction of the protest camp at Tahrir square in central Cairo. Erected on the 8th of July, the camp was the third in a series of mass sit-ins that had re-occupied the square since the fall of Hosni Mubarak, each publicised by its own Twitter hashtag carrying the date of its beginning: #Apr8, #Jun28 and #Jul8. Observing the scene from behind one of the green metal fences encircling the square, I saw platoons of soldiers trashing the tents erected on the roundabout. A group of around 200 protesters re-gathered on the side of the square nearest to the Mogamma, the grey headquarters of Egyptian bureaucracy, their bodies densely packed on the asphalt. After a few minutes the troops advanced in square formation and made their way into the crowd, their wooden sticks swinging in the air. The protestors resisted the first onslaught. But then came a second, and a third. The crowd began dispersing, fleeing the soldiers alone or in small groups.

A few metres to my left I noticed a young Egyptian woman standing by the fence. She was in her early twenties, with long curly black hair and a pair of designer glasses. I guessed she was from an upper-class area of Cairo like Maadi, Mohandessin or Nasr City. She seemed as distressed as I was at witnessing the attack without being able (or daring enough) to raise a finger to stop it. Reaching into her bag she extracted what I immediately recognised as an HTC phone, the kind with a sliding keyboard, a sort of weird marriage between an iPhone and a Blackberry. She aimed the phone's camera at the square and snapped a picture of yet another violent arrest. Then she started tapping her fingers on the keyboard. She stared for a second at the screen before clicking the 'enter' button and then furtively put the phone away as though worried she might be noticed and targeted. At that point a group of protesters ran towards us, fleeing from a group of military policemen chasing them. We both vanished from the square, running in opposite directions.

While writing this book I have often thought back to this scene. It seems to encapsulate so much about the contemporary protest experience, with its intersection of 'tweets and the streets', of mediated communication and physical gatherings in public spaces. I never quite managed to track down the tweet the young Egyptian woman sent that day. So I was left wondering: What might she have written in her message? Was she simply reporting what was going in the square? Or was she inciting her 'tweep'[1] comrades to join in a counter-attack against the police? Or suggesting the best way to elude security when approaching the square? Or was she just recording a protest souvenir to show off to her friends? Who would be reading her tweet, and how would they be reacting? Would they be inspired to join the protests, or would they be scared away? Who was she anyway? Some kind of 'leader', or a 'follower'? And did all this tweeting and re-tweeting really matter when it came to influencing collective action, mobilising and coordinating people on the ground? Or was all this just an activist delusion: a way of feeling part of the action while in fact always standing on the sidelines?

These and similar questions have haunted me during the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the course of researching this book. Visiting the places in which different social movements blossomed during 2011 – earning it the label 'year of the protester', as celebrated by *Time* magazine[2] – from Cairo, to Madrid, Barcelona and New York, I have witnessed manifold manifestations of activist's use of social media. Within these 'popular' movements – popular because they appeal to the 'people' (Laclau, 2005) as the majority of the population in their home countries – activists have made full use of that 'group of Internet-based applications ... that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content' (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 60). Where self-managed activist internet services like Indymedia and activist mailing lists were the media of choice of the anti-globalisation movement, contemporary activists are instead shamelessly appropriating corporate social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Commenting on this enthusiastic adoption of social media, pundits and journalists have readily resorted to expressions like 'the Facebook revolution'[3] or 'the Twitter revolution'. Yet, this celebration of the emancipatory power of communication technologies has not been much help in understanding *how* exactly the use of these media reshapes the 'repertoire of communication' (Mattoni, 2012) of contemporary movements and affects the experience of participants. One danger when approaching the

field of social media is the possibility of being overwhelmed by the sheer abundance and diversity of the communicative practices they channel. As we will see in the course of this book, uses of social media among activists are almost as diverse as their venues. They are often used as a means of representation, a tool of 'citizen journalism' employed to elicit 'external attention' (Aday et al., 2010), for example in the use of web live-stream services like Bambuser,[4] or YouTube videos documenting episodes of police brutality. Yet what is more interesting, and what has possibly brought them so much attention, is their 'internal' or 'local' use: their use as *means of organisation* of collective action, and more specifically as *means of mobilisation* in the crucial task of 'getting people on the streets' (Lievrouw, 2009: 154).

The mobilising role of social media, which constitutes the topic of this book, has already been duly noticed by a number of pundits and journalists commenting on the popular movements of 2011. Tweeting on the 27th of January about the Egyptian revolution, American author Jared Cohen cited one Egyptian activist summing up activist media use as follows: 'facebook used to set the date, twitter used to share logistics, youtube to show the world, all to connect people'. In his flamboyant account of what he calls the 'revolutions of 2009–2011', BBC journalist Paul Mason listed the functionalities of the 'full suite of information tools' used by contemporary activists:

> Facebook is used to form groups, covert and overt—in order to establish those strong but flexible connections. Twitter is used for real-time *organisation* and news dissemination, bypassing the cumbersome 'newsgathering' operations of the mainstream media. YouTube and the Twitter-linked photographic sites—Yfrog, Flickr and Twitpic—are used to provide instant evidence of the claims being made. Link-shorteners like bit.ly are used to disseminate key articles via Twitter. (Mason 2010: 75)

But what difference do social media really make to the ways in which participants are mobilised and protest is organised, besides trivial operations like 'fixing dates' and 'opening groups'? Is their importance merely 'technical', as quotations like this one seem to suggest?

To understand the social significance of media practices and of social media in particular it is helpful to historicise things, contrasting contemporary forms of communication with past

ones. In a way, modern media have always constituted a channel through which social movements not only communicate but also organise their actions and mobilise their constituencies. One need only think here of Lenin's classic description of the Party newspaper as 'propagandist', 'agitator' and 'organiser' of collective action (Lenin 1902/1969: 156). Social media can be seen as the contemporary equivalent of what the newspaper, the poster, the leaflet or direct mail were for the labour movement. They are means not simply to convey abstract opinions, but also to give a shape to the way in which people come together and act together, or, to use the metaphorical language that will be adopted in this book, to *choreograph* collective action. With its hierarchical and centralised structure the Party newspaper appeared a perfect reflection of the Leninist vanguard Party. So what do social media like Twitter and Facebook, with their constitutive evanescence and multiplicity, tell us about the movements that have adopted them as key means of communication? How do the communicative practices constructed through them reflect the forms of organisation of contemporary social movements?

To explore these questions, I will undertake a qualitative analysis of activist use of social media in the popular movements of 2011, focusing on their role as means of mobilisation of collective action. The volume proceeds chronologically, beginning with the Arab Spring and the use of social media during the Egyptian uprising, and looking in particular at the role played by the cosmopolitan 'Facebook youth' as the leading force in the mobilisation. It then goes on to discuss the adaptation and transformation of the 'Tahrir model' in the context of the 'indignados' in Spain, documenting the way in which organisers used social media before and after the watershed protests of the 15th of May (15-M). Finally, I will discuss the use of social media in the mobilisation of the Occupy movement in the US, and the tortuous interaction between online communication and on-the-ground organising which characterised the emergence of this movement. These different social movements are analysed diachronically, tracing the different stages of their development, reconstructing the role played by social media in each of them, and looking at their interaction with other forms of communication.

Empirically, I draw on a body of ethnographic research comprising 80 interviews with activists and many observations of public gatherings mainly conducted in Egypt, Spain and the US. This methodology allows an appreciation of the use of social media,

not from the 'God's-eye view' offered by quantitative research with its surveys of participants' media use and its info-visualisations of Twitter traffic, but from the 'ground-level' view of the activists and participants using these tools. The book was initially set to incorporate case studies from Greece, Tunisia and the UK, where I have also conducted fieldwork. I eventually decided for reasons of space to drop these additional case studies. However, the interviews conducted in these countries have been used as background data to verify the general applicability of the claims I am developing, and I will refer directly to some of them in the comparative Chapter 5.

Here in the introduction I will explain the gist of my approach to the study of social media and activism – an approach developed in opposition not only to the unbounded techno-optimism of social media theorists such as Clay Shirky, but also to the techno-pessimism of commentators like Evgeniy Morozov and Malcom Gladwell. I argue that both positions are characterised by an essentialist vision of social media as being automatically either suitable or unsuitable as means of mobilisation. These approaches tend to look at social media in the abstract, without due attention to their intervention in specific local geographies of action or to their embeddedness in the culture of the social movements adopting them. I propose that the crucial element in understanding the role of social media in contemporary social movements is their interaction with and mediation of emerging forms of public gatherings and in particular the mass sit-ins which have become the hallmark of contemporary popular movements. My claim is that social media have been chiefly responsible for the construction of a *choreography of assembly* as a process of symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical *assembling* of a highly dispersed and individualised constituency. Together with the stress on the imbrication between media and locality which animates this book, my key contention is that the introduction of social media in social movements does not simply result in a situation of absolute spontaneity and unrestrained participation. On the contrary, influential Facebook admins and activist tweeps become 'soft leaders' or choreographers, involved in setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold.

BEYOND TWITTER FETISHISM

During the clashes between protesters and police in central Cairo in December 2011, not far from where I witnessed the first

scene portrayed in this book, I noticed some graffiti in which the Twitter blue bird was overlaid by a red back-lashed circle. Below it figured the script 'the revolution will not be tweeted', a pun on Gil Scott-Heron's famous song-title 'The Revolution Will Not be Televised', the last verse of which proclaims that instead 'it will be live'. It is not hard to understand why many activists in Egypt and beyond feel the need to reiterate this opinion regarding tweeting (first uttered by techno-pessimist Malcom Gladwell [2010]), given the extent to which the Egyptian revolution has been banalised as a 'social media revolution' by news media obsessed with the latest technology fad.

At least since the anti-globalisation movement's adoption of the internet as a major tool, news media have constantly approached the emergence of any new movement in terms of the technology defining it. This discourse reached a climax with the blossoming of the Arab Spring in 2011. From CNN to the BBC, 'Facebook protest' or 'Twitter protest' became obsessively repeated catch-phrases during the 18-day revolution that brought down Mubarak. After Mubarak fell, Egyptian bloggers and tweeps like Gigi Ibrahim and Sandmonkey were instantly cast as the celebrities, or 'micro-celebrities', of an otherwise supposedly 'leaderless' social movement, while new shows like Al-Jazeera English's *The Stream* were created to applaud the emancipatory power of social media.

The celebration of the social media revolution also reached the higher echelons of politics. The long-awaited and duly prophesised emergence of a 'Facebook revolution' was read as a confirmation of the good work done by the US State department and its 'internet freedom' agenda. Topping the wave of self-congratulation in June 2011, Alec Ross, Hillary Clinton's senior adviser, called the internet the 'Che Guevara of the twenty-first century'. Thanks to the rise of new media, 'hierarchies are being levelled', he declared, in a tone that would not have been out of place coming from an anarchist. 'People at the top of those hierarchies are finding themselves on much shakier ground.'[5] The message was clear: the revolution had been made in Cairo, but it would not have taken place without the latest technologies engineered in Silicon Valley. Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook CEO) and Jack Dorsey (Twitter CEO) may not themselves have been on the barricades, but they were operative in the virtual supply lines, as it were.

No one has contributed more to this techno-celebratory discourse within academia than NYU professor Clay Shirky. Reading his books *Here Comes Everybody* (2008) and *Cognitive Surplus* (2010),

one is drawn into a passionate apology for everything technological. Shirky argues that social media are *new* tools enabling *new* forms of group formation. These new tools are making our lives easier; making our communication faster and faster, that is, invariably better: 'as more people adopt simple social tools, and as those tools allow increasingly rapid communication, the speed of group actions also increases' (Shirky, 2008: 161). In Shirky's world, transaction costs are lowered, obstacles to collective action removed, new more efficient forms of coordination created. Now that, thanks to these new tools, 'group-forming has gone from hard to ridiculously easy, we are seeing an explosion of experiments with new groups and new kinds of groups' (Shirky, 2008: 54).

Commenting on the events in Tunisia and Egypt, Shirky has further emphasised the almighty power of social media as a means of collective action. In an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, he affirmed that 'as the communication landscape gets denser, more complex, more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action' (Shirky, 2011). Here, more information is seen as automatically entailing more possibilities for collective action. This view is also exemplified in Paul Mason's account of contemporary activism: 'one fact is clear: people know more than they used to ... they have greater and more instant access to knowledge, and reliable ways of counteracting disinformation'. 'Why should a revolution in knowledge and technology not be producing an equally dramatic – albeit diametrically opposite – change in human behaviour?' Mason asks (2012: 147).

Not everyone agrees with this seamlessly optimistic vision of the influence of social media on contemporary social movements, according to which more information automatically translates into more collective action. If Shirky is king of the techno-optimists, Belarusan scholar Evgenyi Morozov is the prince of techno-pessimists. Morozov, who had himself initially contributed to the celebratory discourse on social media, has more recently vigorously denounced the risks of 'slacktivism', or activism for slackers. For Morozov slacktivisim is 'feel good activism that has zero political or social impact' but creates 'an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group'.[6]

In his book *The Net Delusion* (2011), Morozov has further attacked the idea that the diffusion of communication technology

made in the United States will automatically bring democracy to each and every corner of the world. He criticises techno-optimistic visions holding that 'technology empowers the people who, oppressed by years of authoritarian rule, will inevitably rebel mobilising themselves through text messages, Facebook, Twitter, and whatever tool comes along each year' (Morozov, 2011: xii). As Morozov notes, social media like Twitter and Facebook are mostly used for entertainment purposes, for sharing one's own daily doings rather than for political organising. Moreover, he rightly alerts us to the fact that social media can create serious risks for activists, given the increased possibilities for monitoring by state security apparatus.

This kind of critical analysis of the impact of social media on activism has also been taken up by the *New Yorker* writer and best-selling author Malcom Gladwell, whose argument may be summed up in the Cairo graffiti formula 'the revolution will not be tweeted'. Radical political actions, Gladwell argues, require strong ties, like those identified by Stanford sociologist Doug McAdam among participants in the Freedom Summer of the 1960s in the Jim Crow South, where many were killed by segregationists (McAdam, 1988). Social media at best provides weak ties and is therefore unsuitable for revolutionary action, Gladwell argues. His position has been ridiculed by many theorists after the evidence of the role played by social media in the Arab Spring. However, at least he and Morozov have had the courage to go against the tide of boundless optimism spawned by the likes of Shirky.

In and of itself there is nothing wrong in asserting the importance of communication technologies in social movements. Scholars of the calibre of Sidney Tarrow (1994) and Benedict Anderson (1991) have eloquently discussed the influence of print technology on the rise of modern social movements. In fact, it would be hard to talk about such movements without mentioning all the technologies involved in publicising and organising their actions: flyers, posters, megaphones, banners, television, newspapers and the like. Furthermore in a society that has turned technology and science into a sort of secular religion (Ellul, 1964), it is hardly surprising that social movements are eager to experiment with the latest electronic gadget and to cast themselves as drivers of innovation.

The problem comes though, when social media are turned into a 'fetish' of collective action; in other words, when such media are endowed with mystical qualities that only obscure the work of the groups and organisers using them. When this happens, the techno-visionary discourse on social media appears as the reflection of a

neoliberal ideology, incapable of understanding collective action except as the result of some sort of technological miracle fleetingly binding together egotistical individuals. Morozov and Gladwell are right to be suspicious of the excessive optimism of Shirky and his acolytes, and of the neoliberal politics which underlies it. Yet they risk committing the opposite error, assuming that a certain technology is inherently unsuited for becoming a channel of mobilisation. In so doing, they disregard the fact that the process of mobilisation cannot be reduced to the material affordances of the technologies it adopts but also involves the construction of shared meanings, identities and narratives (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995).

To elucidate these aspects of the problem, in this book I propose a cultural and phenomenological interpretation of the role of social media as means of mobilisation. Rather than being concerned merely with the efficiency or otherwise of different communication technologies, I pay attention to what activists actually do with them, to the concrete and local 'media practices' (Couldry, 2004) activists develop in their use. This approach to the study of social media allows us to recuperate so much of what gets lost in contemporary techno-deterministic accounts. In particular, I devote much attention to the role played by identity and emotions in the process of mobilisation, and their contribution in the symbolic construction of a sense of togetherness among activists. The role of emotions has been a highly neglected topic in social movement studies (Goodwin, Jasper, Polletta, 2001) and in new media studies alike (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). Nevertheless, as I will show, this aspect is crucial to an understanding of the way in which social media contribute to the process of mobilisation in contemporary popular movements, as a reflection of their 'personal' orientation, and of the importance of sustaining an imaginary of 'friendship' and 'sharing' in their use.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND OCCUPIED SQUARES

In order to overcome the abstraction and essentialism underlying the contemporary debate about social media, we need to leave these 'new tools' aside for a moment and foreground the larger picture. It is impossible to understand the role of these media as means for mobilisation without an appreciation of the ways in which they intervene on specific social movements and of the way in which their use among activists reflects and enacts the values, identities and narratives which typify these movements. For this purpose we need to develop a situated analysis of social media practices paying

attention to their interaction with other forms of communication and with the particular physical geography of those cities within which social movements have manifested themselves.

The social movements analysed in this book – the Egyptian uprising, the Spanish indignados and Occupy – are marked by a huge diversity in terms of culture, social composition and the nature of the political system in which they operate. It is evident for one thing that given the level of repression encountered by participants and the intensity of the mobilisation, the Egyptian revolution has little in common with the movements that tried to imitate it in the West. Likewise, between the indignados and Occupy the differences are huge, despite the fact that both movements target the economic crisis and the politics of austerity and have adopted similar tactics and organisational forms. Given the extent to which these movements are more national than global, they necessarily reflect the specificity of their national cultures. Notwithstanding these differences, however, there are also remarkable elements of commonality, which will allow us to see them as part of a common protest wave, sharing similar cultural traits.

First and foremost, all three social movements considered in this book are 'popular' movements: movements which appeal to the 'people' (Laclau, 2005) as the majority of the population. This feature is perfectly condensed in the Occupy slogan 'we are the 99%', but is also well represented in the Egyptian uprising with its slogan 'we are one hand', and in the indignados claim to represent 'normal' Spaniards. This majoritarian character has been clearly reflected not only in the discourse and imaginary of each movement, but also in the diversity of its constituency, encompassing many people outside of the metropolitan and idealist middle-class youth who in recent years have constituted the 'mobilisation potential' of so-called 'new social movements' (Kriesi et al., 1995). The majoritarian character of contemporary movements registers a clear difference from the anti-globalisation movement. The latter was marked by a self-conscious minoritarian identity famously expressed in Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos' statement: 'Marcos is all the exploited, marginalised, oppressed *minorities* resisting and saying "Enough"'.[7] This minoritarian orientation of the anti-globalisation movement, with its emphasis on diversity and autonomy, has also had a strong influence on the scholarly analyses of new media practices in social movements, which have seen the internet as a means of producing autonomy and diversity. Arguably, however, we need to question many of the concepts developed in these analyses of the anti-

globalisation movement's use of the internet, since they can be shown to have little purchase on contemporary popular movements. In fact, as we will see in the course of this book, in contrast to the 'logics of networking' (Juris, 2008) of the anti-globalisation movement, contemporary popular movements are marked by a stress on unity and the adoption of practices of 'centring' which strongly resonate with Laclau's description of 'populism' (Laclau, 2005).

The most evident manifestation of this stress on unity has been the tactic of the mass sit-in, the physical occupation of public space which often evolves into a semi-permanent protest camp. This has led some to refer to the contemporary forms of protest as 'take the squares movements'[8] or 'occupy movements'.[9] These movements have all been involved in a struggle for the 'appropriation of public space' (Lefebvre, 1974/1991), reclaiming streets and squares for public use and political organising. If Egyptian activists managed to capture the attention both of their fellow citizens and of the world at large, it was thanks less to their Facebook pages and tweets than to their physical occupation of Tahrir square in central Cairo. Inspired by that example, on the 15 May 2011, Spanish activists angered at the 'politicos y banqueros' managed to earn the respect of the majority of Spaniards, and to trigger the euphoria of thousands of 'indignants', by peacefully occupying Puerta del Sol in Central Madrid, holding it for one month, and inspiring hundreds of other occupations across the country. After the 'Arab Spring' and the 'European Summer', the 'American Autumn' has also seen a revival of the importance of public space, through the actions of the Occupy movement, whose very name carries an incitement to take back the streets from which people had been kept away during the long years of the neoliberal consensus. These occupations can be understood as *rituals of popular reunion* in which individuals are 'fused' (Alexander et al., 2006: 38) into a collective subject going under the name of the 'people' (Laclau, 2005).

The importance of the struggle for public space in contemporary social movements invites us to rethink the way in which we understand the role of new media and social media in particular. For a long time theoretical analysis has located these forms of communication in another space, a 'cyberspace' or online space as opposed to offline space. This perspective is well exemplified by Manuel Castells description of the internet as a 'network of brains' (Castells 2009), which will be fully examined in the next chapter. Counter to this disembodied view we need to understand media in general and social media in particular as processes responsible for

're-cast[ing] the organisation of the spatial and temporal scenes of social life' (Barnett in Couldry and McCarthy, 2004: 59) rather than as involved in the construction of another 'virtual' space bereft of physical geography.

It is evident that at this level there is a deep contradiction between the spatial relationships intrinsic to the two practices which have become the trademarks of contemporary protest culture: social media and protest camps. Social media like Twitter and Facebook are means of facilitating interpersonal connections across a distance. They appear as a perfect reflection of the condition of individualisation (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) of contemporary societies, allowing us to deal with others while not having to engage fully with them. From a spatial perspective, the experience of the protest camp, with its density of bodies in close physical proximity, appears as precisely the opposite of the kind of 'virtual proximity' (Bauman, 2003) facilitated by social media. Protest camps are sites of an intense communitarianism, as seen in the context of assemblies, and the day-to-day experience of collective eating, sleeping, cleaning and defending the space, which at first sight seems to have little in common with the experience generated by social media. What are the practices involved in connecting these two contradictory poles of contemporary collective action? How are Facebook users and tweeps transformed into 'occupiers'?

AN EMOTIONAL CHOREOGRAPHY

In this book I argue that social media have indeed had an important impact on the social movements of 2011, but that this impact is far more complex and ambiguous than gurus like Shirky would allow for. Their main contribution, among the different roles that have been assigned to them, has been at the level of the creation of what in this book I call a *choreography of assembly*. This has to be understood as a process of symbolic construction of public space, which revolves around an emotional 'scene-setting' and 'scripting' (Alexander et al., 2006: 36) of participants' physical assembling. This practice is made visible in the use of social media in directing people towards specific protest events, in providing participants with suggestions and instructions about how to act, and in the construction of an emotional narration to sustain their coming together in public space. Thus, contrary to those authors who see social media and new media generally as creating an alternative virtual- or cyber-space (for example McCaughey and

Ayers, 2003), I stress how social media use must be understood as complementing existing forms of face-to-face gatherings (rather than substituting for them), but also as a vehicle for the creation of new forms of proximity and face-to-face interaction. Countering the spatial dispersion of contemporary societies, Facebook messages and activist tweets have contributed in constructing a new sense of social centrality, focused around 'occupied squares', which are thereby transformed into *trending places*, or venues of *magnetic gatherings*, with a great power of emotional attraction.

At the same time, I also highlight the risk of seclusion that the use of social media can create, when their use is not accompanied by street-work and interaction with those on the other side of the digital divide, who, to use a recurrent activist expression, 'do not have a Facebook account'.

The adoption of the term 'choreography' crucially serves to indicate that the process of the symbolic construction of public space, for all the participatory character and techno-libertarian claims of protest culture, has not been entirely 'spontaneous' or 'leaderless' – as many pundits, journalists, activists and academics alike have suggested.[10] In a theoretical frame, my main target throughout the book is the discourse of 'horizontalism' (Juris, 2008) informed by notions like 'networks' (Castells, 1996, 2009) and 'swarms' (Negri, Hardt, 2000, 2005), which will be discussed and criticised in the following chapter. I argue that far from inaugurating a situation of absolute 'leaderlessness', social media have in fact facilitated the rise of complex and 'liquid' (Bauman, 2000) or 'soft' forms of leadership which exploit the interactive and participatory character of the new communication technologies. Influential Facebook admins and activist tweeps have played a crucial role in setting the scene for the movements' gatherings in public space, by constructing common identifications and accumulating or triggering an emotional impulse towards public assembly. Just like conventional choreographers in the field of dance, these core organisers are for the most part invisible on the stage itself. They are reluctant leaders or 'anti-leaders': leaders who, subscribing to the ideology of horizontalism, do not want to be seen as leaders in the first place but whose scene-setting and scripting work has been decisive in bringing a degree of coherence to people's spontaneous and creative participation in the protest movements.

As I will show in the course of the book, this choreographing role of social media cannot be reduced to a purely *instrumental* activity, as a quasi-military form of tactical coordination (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Rheingold, 2003) allowing activists to become

'as free as dancers, as quick-witted as football players, as surprising as guerrillas' (as prophesied by Magnus Enzensberger in Hands, 2011: 50). Instead, and crucially, it entails the *symbolic* construction of a *sense of togetherness* and the fuelling of an *emotional tension* extending from distant mediated connections to the 'effervescence' of physical proximity (Durkheim, 1912/1965: 162). The form of 'soft' leadership conjured up by the notion of choreography is one which exploits the personal character of social media and their everyday use as a means of maintaining diffuse spheres of friendship and intimacy characterised by a vibrant emotionality. Facebook messages, tweets and blog posts have constituted not simply channels of information but also crucial *emotional conduits* through which organisers have condensed individual sentiments of indignation, anger, pride and a sense of shared victimhood and transformed them into political passions driving the process of mobilisation. These and other social media have been used to create a sense of commonality among participants essential for the mobilisation of a spatially dispersed and socially diverse constituency.

This emotional character of the choreography of assembly fundamentally reflects not simply the nature of the media used but also the popular character of these movements. Contemporary protest culture is sustained by a narrative of *popular reunion*, which revolves around a re-composition or 'fusion' of individuals in a collective subject with majoritarian ambitions. In this context, social media have acted as a means of collective aggregation, facilitating the convergence of disparate individuals around common symbols and places, signifying their unity *despite* diversity. Naturally, the downside of this construction of unity against a corrupt and brutal system is a tendency to elide the differences among participants. This is an issue which has understandably troubled some anti-authoritarian activists, especially those who 'grew up' during the years of the anti-globalisation protests around the turn of the millennium.

Having teased out the general argument to be put forward in what follows, it is worth making explicit an important political *caveat*. This book is written from a perspective highly sympathetic to the social movements under discussion. Nonetheless, one of my key concerns is to avoid becoming merely an apologist for their actions. This is in my view an error often made by activist researchers, who risk turning academic work into a celebratory homage to collective action, which neither adds a great deal to our understanding nor serves as effective movement propaganda. To the contrary, throughout the volume I am constantly concerned

with identifying the contradictions, obstacles, and risks faced in the development of collective action and in the use of social media. This critical approach derives from my conviction that only by unearthing such negative elements can we hope to gain a better understanding of contemporary protest culture and thereby to aid activists in their development of new forms of communication and organisation.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 1 develops a theoretical framework within which to analyse the significance of social media practices for contemporary popular movements. It begins by critically assessing dominant understandings of collective action, and in particular the concepts of 'swarms' and 'networks' advanced by authors such as Manuel Castells and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. I argue that by putting the emphasis on spontaneity and irreducible multiplicity these notions tend to obscure the lines of force inherent in the process of mobilisation, and to neglect the fact that it involves the creation of a sense of togetherness and a common identity. This is particularly relevant in the case of contemporary popular movements, as spectacularly illustrated by their creation of physical centres in public space. Counter to Castells and Hardt and Negri, I rescue the importance of the construction of a sense of unity at the core of the process of mobilisation. I propose to look at mobilisation as a process of symbolic and material gathering or assembling, staged against the situation of spatial dispersion which characterises post-industrial societies. This process is not only physical, but also involves complex forms of mediation, which I endeavour to capture through the idea of a *choreography of assembly*.

Chapter 2 discusses the role of social media in the 2011 revolution against Mubarak in Egypt. The Egyptian revolution was characterised by the protagonism of the cosmopolitan internet-connected youth, the so-called *shabab-al-Facebook* (Facebook youth). Social media, and in particular Facebook pages like Kullena Khaled Said (We are all Khaled Said) were instrumental in instigating the coming together of the movement in public space by facilitating an emotional condensation of people's anger at the regime, and acting as a springboard for street-level agitation. Once the movement hit the streets, however, these media became less important than face-to-face communication. Tahrir square, with the bodily density it attracted, came to constitute a physical

beacon for the coordination of the movement, which was why the communication blackout imposed by the Mubarak regime had only a limited effect. Apart from the *shabab-al-Facebook*, I also discuss the role of another section of the movement, the activist elite of the so-called 'Twitter pashas', highlighting the risk of isolation from mainstream society entailed in their obsessive engagement with the micro-blogging site.

Chapter 3 discusses the use of social media in the indignados protest in Spain in 2011. I show how organisers used the participatory imaginary of social media and the internet to 'harvest' the individual frustration of many Spaniards who did not feel represented by any organisation, and to transform that frustration into a collective political passion made visible in public space. In the second part of the chapter I turn to the use made of social media in the attempt to sustain the protest. I argue that the occupation of Puerta del Sol, and the social media messaging radiating out of it, created a symbolic centre and focal point for maintaining a diffuse sense of participation. Twitter feeds and live-streaming video in particular generated an attraction to the square, facilitating the mobilisation of supporters and sympathisers towards this symbolic centre.

Chapter 4 analyses the use of social media as means of mobilisation in the Occupy Wall Street movement in the US. It argues that here, in contrast to the protests in Egypt and Spain, the use of social media initially failed as a rallying point for *emotional condensation* and as a symbolic springboard towards participation. The original call launched by *Adbusters* failed to secure the mobilisation of a large number of participants, and it needed a long and laborious phase of organising on the ground before the movement found some degree of coherence and a common identity. Only once activists had occupied Zuccotti Park did websites like the 'We are the 99%' Tumblr blog contribute to the construction of a popular identification and the gathering of a diverse constituency beyond the activist community. In the case of Occupy Wall Street, social media for the most part featured as an extension of the actions which were taking place on the ground. Using Twitter, activists entered into emotional conversations with sympathisers, sustaining a diffuse sense of solidarity. Only a few of these sympathisers actually joined the occupation, however, testifying to the difficulties involved in turning sympathy into actual participation.

Chapter 5 develops a comparative analysis of the use of social media as means of mobilisation and their role in the construction of a *choreography of assembly*. It highlights the fact that social media

are used as the conduits for liquid organisational practices developed against the negative backdrop of bureaucratic organisations. However, this liquid and informal character of contemporary movements does not mean that they are leaderless as they often claim to be. In fact, the use of social media is paralleled by the emergence of new forms of indirect or 'choreographic' leadership, making use of the interactive and personal character of social media. In this framework, Facebook and Twitter are assigned different roles. While Facebook is used as a recruitment platform to bring new people in, Twitter is mainly employed as a means of internal coordination within the activist community. The role of both websites as organisational means is further elucidated by looking at the way in which they are used in constructing an emotional tension, creating an impetus towards and attraction to places of gathering.

The Conclusion draws together the findings emerging from the previous chapters and discusses their implications. It highlights how within contemporary social movements social media have been employed to generate a new experience of public space, staged against the background of a society of dispersion. Here I look at some of the more problematic questions emerging from the preceding discussion, including the tensions between the tactical and emotional uses of social media, between organisation and spontaneity, and between evanescence and continuity, and the question of the sustainability of contemporary social movements in their current forms.

Finally, in the Appendix, the reader will find a list of the 80 interviewees whose testimonies have been used in the book, alongside a description of the sampling and interviewing methods adopted in the course of the empirical investigation. All unattributed quotations in the text are drawn from these interviews.