

# Grassroots Organizing in the Digital Age: Considering Values and Technology Decision-making in Tea Party an Occupy Wall Street

## Abstract

Technology both supports and constrains different types of behavior, and so decision to employ a specific technology within a community is important as users may resist or adopt use of the technology based on these traits. In this study we explore the values, attitudes, and beliefs of Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street stakeholders as they relate to their use of technology. We employ Value Sensitive Design to examine stakeholder values, and potential sites of value tensions we use semi-structured interviews conducted with three distinct groups of stakeholders in Tea Party and Occupy: members with some type of leadership or facilitator position, technologists, and lay members. This study provides insight into the potentially complex decision-making processes involved in the adoption of technology within grassroots social movements, as well as any ongoing struggles movement leaders and members face as they try to sustain involvement using whatever tools are at their disposal.

## Keywords

Value Sensitive Design; technology decision-making; grassroots organizing; Tea Party; Occupy Wall Street

In this study we explore the values, attitudes, beliefs of Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street stakeholders as they relate to their use of technology. This study provides insight into the potentially complex decision-making processes involved in the adoption of technology within grassroots social movements, as well as any ongoing struggles movement leaders and members face as they try to sustain involvement using whatever tools are at their disposal.

Grassroots organizing through social media is a well-documented phenomenon, as political and social organizations implement digital tactics as components of their campaigns. Past research has offered insight into digital organizing in presidential campaigns (Chadwick, 2007; Hindman, 2005; Melber, 2010), the tactics and technical practices employed by grassroots organizers via social media (Howard, 2005; Kriess, 2003), and the interplay of online and offline structures in politically motivated campaigns (Chadwick, 2007; Foot & Schneider, 2006). Many groups have organized in online environments to achieve common goals—e.g., electing a candidate, drawing awareness to a societal problem such as inequality, or offering solidarity to those experiencing injustice. These groups are able to use the internet to organize and mobilize supporters, gather and distribute information, create a sense of community, make decisions, and show support for their cause. The tools used for these activities are abundant, including e-mail, chat rooms, discussion forums, blogs, instant messaging, quick-fire fundraising drives (Schneider & Foot, 2002), social networking sites such as Facebook, or micro-blogging sites such as Twitter.

Bringing supporters to the spaces where they can participate is necessary for a campaign's success. But technology both encourages and constrains different types of behavior, and so any decision to employ a specific technology within a community is important. When one considers this, the potential users and their values, ideals, and beliefs are of utmost importance in this decision-making process, and must be taken into account if the technology is ultimately going to contribute to the group's achievement of its social or political goal. For example, if the user community desires security in their online transactions, a fundraising tool that does not provide authentication of security will likely not draw many members to participate. Similarly, if confidentiality is highly valued by a community, a tool that requires the use of

real names to log in may become a barrier to drawing members to participate in that space. To be successful, any technology employed in digital campaigns should align with the values of the community.

We identified two grassroots campaigns in the U.S. have emerged that employ both online and offline organizing tactics: Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street. When social movement organizations such as Tea Party and Occupy integrate the use of technology such as social networking sites, e-mail, blogs, and wikis, they introduce processes and ways of communicating that may or may not align with the values, ideals and beliefs of their community. To better understand this tension, researchers must ask the following questions: What values are most important to the community? What affordances or constraints of technology are viewed as problematic or supportive of the community's values, according to its members? What may lead a user to either engage with or resist a technology? The goal of this paper is to determine underlying values of Occupy and Tea Party members and provide insight into their use or non-use of specific technologies, such as Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail. Our aim is to also speak more broadly to the use of technology within these two grassroots communities in light of their values.

In formulating our research questions and design, we draw on past research on value-sensitive design (VSD) (Friedman, 1996). VSD is a technology design approach that begins by examining the values of stakeholders who may be affected by the deployment of technology, whether directly or indirectly. VSD provides a lens to identify potential tensions between the values of different stakeholders and the affordances and constraints of a given technology. In this study we seek to not only understand the emergent values within the Tea Party and Occupy communities, but also to understand what, if any, value tensions may exist within the communities related to their use of technology.

To examine stakeholder values and potential sites of value tensions we use semi-structured interviews conducted with three distinct groups of stakeholders in Tea Party and Occupy: members with some type of leadership or facilitator position, members tasked with organizing and facilitating technology use in their community, and lay members. Most of our purposive sample is collected using snowball sampling, although we gained access to important groups such as the technical operations team in Occupy and national-level leadership in Tea Party. These in-depth interviews ask Occupy and Tea Party members to expound on their personal values, and describe how these values relate to their experiences with and opinions of technology. We ask how important three technologies—e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter—have been to interviewees' past participation in their respective social movements. Interviewees compare and contrast their experiences with these technologies with their experiences with face-to-face communication. Finally, we ask whether the interviewees have ever experienced tension within their organization as a result of technology use. We use emergent coding content analysis, an iterative method of identifying themes and patterns within transcriptions of the interviews, to better understand the underlying reasons for use and non-use of technology in Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street.

We contextualize our findings in an analysis of the various technologies we have inventoried that are used by Occupy and Tea Party. Employing digital organizing efforts, Occupy Wall Street's web presence includes more than 450 Facebook pages, more than 1,000 Occupy-specific Twitter accounts, and more than 250 Occupy-related websites (AUTHOR, 2012; Caren & Gaby, 2011).

At the time of this writing we are still collecting data on tools used by Tea Party, but we can present partial data here, including upwards of 100 Facebook pages and at least one official Tea Party website for 49 of the 50 U.S. states. The Tea Party also organizes through other online communities, such as TeaPartyPatriots.org and the teapartypatriots.ning.com community, both of which are home to hundreds of blogs and local websites. Interestingly, and importantly, members of both Occupy and Tea Party devoted energy to creating social networking sites for their community as alternatives to Facebook. Though Occupy's Global Square never took off, Teapartycommunity.com has gained traction; the site, which is remarkably similar to Facebook but touted as a "safe haven" for Tea Party members and other conservatives, boasts more than 100,000 members. These efforts can be understood as important

indicators of resistance to Facebook and as attempts to recreate the experience while adhering to the values of the community.

By incorporating the viewpoints of these three stakeholder groups, we establish some understanding of values from different perspectives within the community. This enables us to identify potential areas of contention surrounding technology-related decisions within the community. Preliminary findings suggest, members in leadership and technology positions are more concerned with creating community and identify inclusivity as an important value consideration when making technology decisions. On the other hand, lay members are more focused on personal privacy and confidentiality, and thus a value tension between the groups arises.

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