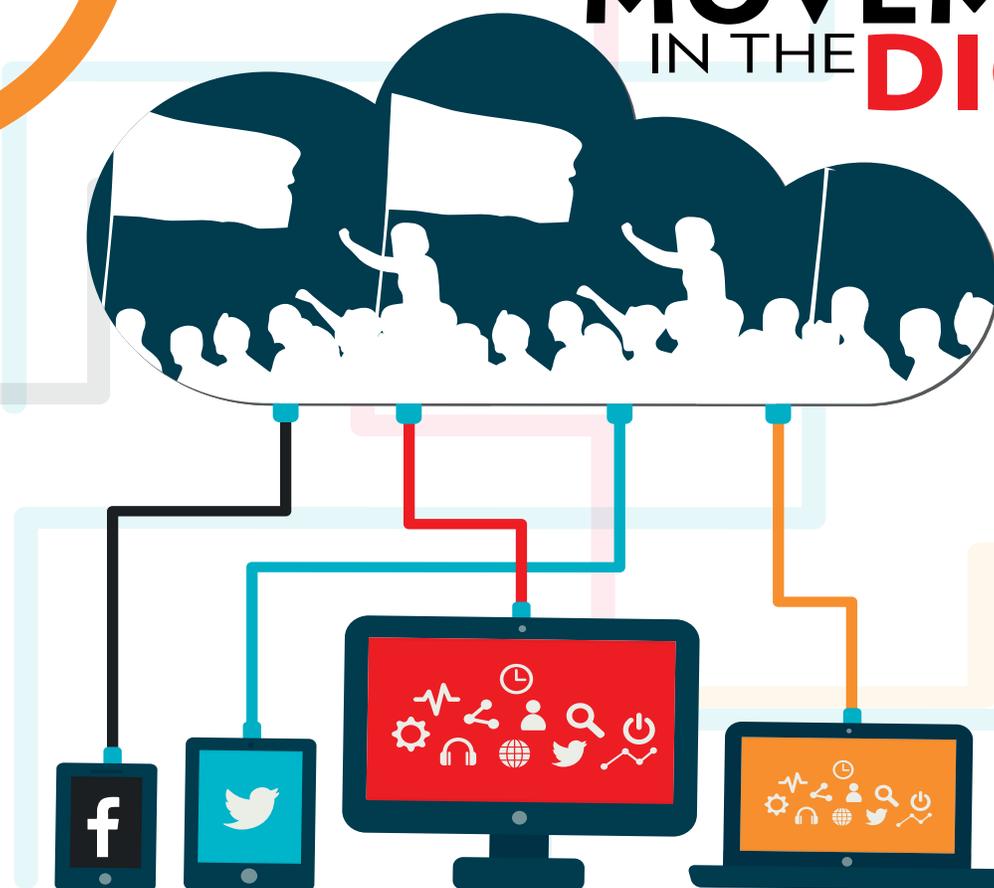


*Virtual
Dialogues*

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE DIGITAL ERA



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Social Movements in the Digital Era

The **Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona**, in collaboration with **Asuntos del Sur** and with the participation of the **University of Arizona's School of Journalism** and with the generous support of the **Confluence Center for Creative Inquiry** presents *Social Movements in the Digital Century* as part of the *Virtual Dialogues* series.

This event took place on April 1st, 2015 at the University of Arizona Student Union.

To watch this event online follow this link or scan the adjoining barcode:
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The Tyranny of Leaderlessness

How Occupy Stifled Its Own Direct Democracy

By Justin Wedes

One of the defining characteristics of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement was its rejection of elected or appointed leadership. This was evident in the general assembly and spokes-council models that developed in the major encampments, with rotating facilitation and a strict adherence to horizontalism: a mode of organizing that rejects hierarchy in favor of “self-management, autonomy and direct democracy.” This horizontal approach was often combined with prefigurativism, a term coined by Carl Boggs that denotes a desire to embody, “within the ongoing political practice of a movement . . . those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.” Essentially, the movement sought to conduct itself without political and economic hierarchies in order to mimic a future without political and economic hierarchies.

I argue that in this respect the movement ultimately failed. I claim this not as an outside observer of the movement, but as one of its steadfast adherents and promoters since the formation of its first organizing groups in the summer of 2011.

Let me be clear: I believe the Occupy movement to be a wildly successful cultural and political phenomena, one whose seeds are now bearing fruit across the country and around the world in myriad ways. New organizations and alliances have been forged, old institutions reinvigorated, new politicians elected, corrupt ones kicked out of office, natural and man-made disasters seriously averted, and there is serious conversation about the woman who called herself the intellectual godmother of OWS posing a primary threat to Hilary Clinton for the presidency of the United States.

Many of these successful outgrowths of OWS emerged and persist today not because of, but in spite of, the formal decision-making structures of the movement:

and that is exactly the point. OWS’s insistence upon “leaderlessness” created an unaccountable leadership class within the movement that stifled its noble attempt at truly direct democracy.

This is not to say that leaders didn’t attempt to assert leadership, nor that occupiers didn’t empower some amongst their comrades to take leadership. The eschewing of formal leadership structures did create space for bold, autonomous action: a call for a march on Wall Street, a rally in defense of a perceived threat of police eviction, or the promotion of a new technology for crowd-sourced decision-making. Many ambitious and outspoken individuals came down to the encampment and pitched their ideas and projects to group, but many left in frustration when they found no formal mechanism for gaining widespread adoption of their plan. It was as if everyone was open to hearing new voices, but nobody knew which of a thousand cacophonous, intermingling voices to listen to.

The Media Makes Leaders

The mainstream media – that is, those media entities which are run for profit by major corporations – did not wait for OWS to identify their official leadership to the cameraman: they took the liberty of choosing the movement’s spokespeople. Oftentimes, these decisions reflected already-existing relationships of power: reporters spoke with people who resembled them (overwhelmingly white people), looked like they were



Justin Wedes

asserting power (overwhelmingly male, well-educated), or already had some notoriety such as celebrities or elected officials. This had the effect of misrepresenting the already-vague aims of the movement, especially because many of the most marginalized communities participating in the encampments had a deep (and justifiable) distrust of the media and thus avoided or outrightly opposed their presence in the parks. When sympathetic celebrities and others spoke to the media on behalf of OWS, they often entered a disclaimer that they didn't speak, "for the movement, but with it." This spiked the ball of people's curiosity back to the movement, but with no appointed spokespeople there was rarely a coherent, unified response to the public's pressing questions.

To blame the media for misrepresenting Occupy's platform is to misunderstand the role of the mainstream media: at best its role is to foster a dialogue between the curious public and groups that aim to exert influence over it (government, social movements, corporations, etc.); at worst, it aims to subtly influence that dialogue by framing narratives in a way favorable to the interests of those who profit from it: advertisers, investors, and those seeking with their money and influence to be portrayed in a positive light. American mainstream media companies span this spectrum from mostly-benign to outright biased, but regardless of their impartiality one fact remains true in public relations: they can't misrepresent you if you don't let them. This is why major corporations run tight media ships, releasing only carefully-scripted and guarded statements from immaculately-operated PR firms that maintain insidious relationships with the outlets themselves. The result is a generally-predictable and favorable media presence.

Occupy's non-hierarchical structure made interacting



with the media extremely complicated. I helped to lead OWS's media working group which, alongside the separate and essentially autonomous PR working group, took responsibility for interfacing with the media. While the PR working group occupied itself with wrangling mainstream journalists, our group set out to bypass the mainstream using social media and blogging. Inevitably, however, the work would overlap as journalists took to Twitter and Facebook to try to extract some kind of official statements from the movement. When it became known in newsrooms that I operated the *@OccupyWallStNYC* account and co-lead a team to maintain its feed, many reporters sought me out for comment and background information on a regular basis – access that I usually denied them out of concern for the safety of my comrades. They understood the way that information flowed in the encampments, and that the internal media teams were



Reporters gathered around Occupy Wall Street demonstrations; Source: Wikipedia

often the best window into the internal politics and operations of the protest. In the absence of elected spokespeople, reporters embedded themselves inside the movement for an inside view that oftentimes led to less-than-glamorous coverage.

The PR working group had its own problems establishing legitimacy as a voice to the “outside” world. Many in the encampment questioned their motives, and in the absence of any formal leadership structures nothing really empowered them to speak on behalf of the movement. As often happened, this pushed the most adamant amongst them towards more autonomy: websites were established and press releases posted without much of any consultation process. Media interviewees were selected by a small group based upon existing friendships and trust. Leaderlessness again reared its ugly face: when we can’t agree upon who to entrust with the power to speak and act for us, those amongst us who would seek that power often seize it autonomously and without permission.

Consensus as a Tool to Wield Unaccountable Power

In small groups, consensus is a powerful strategy

for decision-making: it tightens up teams and builds collective ownership and investment in a project. It can also flatten inherited hierarchies of power that preference certain privileged people over other marginalized people. Consensus is additive and constructive, excellent for creatives and artistic groups. Where it falters is in the realm of politics, which is inherently messy and oppositional. Democracy demands that people consent to their own governance, but it does not promise that every decision will please everyone. When it works, democracy ensures that neither the tyranny of the majority, nor the minority, oppresses the whole. It balances the competing interests of parties. It facilitates the reconciliation of societal conflicts.

In all of these respects, consensus is a faulty tool. In the general assemblies (GAs) of OWS, it proved fatal. In its earliest incarnation in Tompkins Square Park, the consensus-based GA showed signs of dysfunction: at one contentious meeting, we argued about the color of the buttons on a proposed website for nearly 30 minutes until it was noted that we should empower a working group to make these fine-grain decisions. Without clear, stable leadership, instigators and mentally-ill people easily succeeded in taking

over meetings and derailing their agendas. A well-intentioned desire to hear all voices often devolved into a shouting match when weak facilitation led to vacuums of power in the assembly. While the die-hards repeated, “direct democracy is messy,” and shrugged it off, many newcomers left quietly in frustration or boredom.

Consensus became the enemy of direct democracy in the second and third month of the occupation. The increasing complexity of the camp and its myriad working groups, as well as the now-evident inability of the GA to responsibly manage finances, politics and the rest of the day-to-day operations of OWS, led to the creation of the OWS Spokes-council. This modified consensus process essentially aimed to bring some cohesion to the autonomous behavior of many working groups by bringing together representatives of these groups once a week for a meeting. To ensure that representatives were accountable to their groups, all members of each working group were invited to join their “spoke” at the meeting. By this time, a culture of reluctant leadership had begun to develop in the park. The spokes were often the most dedicated and hardest-working members of their working groups. They had “earned” the right to speak on behalf of their group. They were committed.

While a kind of meritocratic approach to leadership might, on its face, seem like a fair and impartial formal leadership structure, it was actually anything but fair. The reluctant leaders that emerged were typically white and well-educated, upper-middle class people that could afford to spend countless hours at the park working and networking. On top of that, they burned out quickly. Rotating the leadership helped to counteract this culture of workaholism, but led to instability and a lack of institutional memory: one benefit of having formal, accountable leadership structures is the ability to develop longer-term plans and a collective vision. Many of the most marginalized voices were absent in this precarious leadership class simply because they did not have the time to commit to endless meetings and networking. Their quiet charisma and deep knowledge was no match for the “get-shit-done” persistence and autonomy of the emerging de facto leadership of OWS.

The Leadership Leaves the Park

The failure of direct democracy under leaderlessness became evident in the final weeks of the encampment. People’s natural frustration with the endless GAs and Spokes-councils slowly pushed the most ambitious and driven occupiers, OWS’s de facto leader class, out of the park and into safer spaces for wielding power: office space obtained by labor partners for the movement, lower east side apartments, and bars/cafes in the area. This had the effect of privatizing direct democracy and further eroding any accountability mechanisms over the decision-making that would affect both the day-to-day operations and the long-term vision of the movement. Suspicion began to build in the vacuum of accountable power: what was happening to OWS’s money? Who was speaking to the media? Who was negotiating with the Mayor’s Office? Questions that would have received answers from an elected body could find no suitable address now.

A downward spiral ensued, wherein anyone suspected of exerting power over OWS was assumed to be complicit in the de facto leadership class. I myself became a target of this witch-hunt, though I had long sought to bring accountability to the movement through the power of media: I thought, perhaps naively, at the time that the solution to a lack of coherent, responsive direction was to simply make more information available to all people – so-called “radical transparency.” With my camera and my tweets I tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to bridge the gap between the decision-makers and the masses at OWS. What I didn’t understand until much later was that once a people’s trust in their (real or perceived) unelected leadership has been so deeply eroded, no amount of transparency can rebuild it. The only solution – ironic as it is the same macro-battle we were engaged in with Wall Street and the government – is outright revolution, regime change. Yet since there was no formal leadership structure in place, there were no leaders to revolt against. We had succeeded in becoming just like our enemies: destructive to each other, accountable to no one.

A ‘Constructive Failure’

My critique of OWS’s leaderlessness might appear overly-negative, almost vindictive. I aim with this piece not to shame or humiliate any of the participants: I

believe we all acted with the best of intentions in an imperfect world and without the benefit of hindsight. However, the bulk of the benefit of our protest has accrued to organizations much wealthier and more hierarchical and less visionary than our own and that eventuality could have been averted. The inability of OWS to transform into a potent political force of its own opened a vacuum for the Democratic party and its offshoots to co-opt our messaging. (Note: this is not entirely negative and is often how progress is made in society.) Today, OWS itself is a mere shell of its former strength and remains more as a diffuse remnant network than a coherent organization or institution.

In order to translate into a political and economic force of its own, OWS would have to embrace true direct democracy by seeking to expand its participatory approach into existing societal structures. Many Occupy offshoots have indeed engaged with political and economic groups like parties, labor unions, community credit unions, farmer cooperatives, etc. In this regard the movement can be considered partially successful. As a mass movement, however, OWS just did not cohere – at least not yet.

Many scholars have noted parallels between Occupy and the early development of other social movements, particularly the Populist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. In both of these examples, the groundwork laid by early organizing paved the way for a more robust mass mobilization down the road. In some ways, the advent of social media has stifled this evolutionary process: it is easy today for anyone with a compelling message to rally thousands of people into the streets with Twitter or Facebook, but this is mobilization without organization. It doesn't endure, and within about 2-3 months a protest mobilization fades out of sight and out of the media if it does not cohere into an organization that can support repeated mobilizations. In other words, the ease of communication in the digital age actually takes much of the hard organizing work out of planning a march or a rally – and with it the slow relationship-building process that makes groups cohere into institutions.

The ideologically-divided de facto leadership class of OWS failed to cohere into a unified organization that could claim any legitimacy, and eventually the police were able to demoralize and divide the protests' adherents enough to physically retake control of its

symbolic home base. Symbolism is everything in protest: think burning effigies of King George III or the fall of the Saddam Hussein statue. A purely-horizontal movement (if such a thing could even exist, which I doubt) with no formal leadership structure pails in comparison to the militaristic police state in its ability to both communicate compelling symbols and enact disciplined, effective action.

What will the next 3 years bring for the Occupy generation? It's impossible to predict with certainty, but I believe that an acknowledgement of the failure of purist horizontalism in the eyes of many occupiers will lead to a flourishing of new organizations with young leadership straight out of the protest encampments. Young leaders with an instinctive skepticism of traditional leadership in all its lackings: secrecy, exclusion, tit-for-tat transactional politics, and in general a lack of participation by, and active inclusion of, marginalized voices like blacks, latinos, immigrants, women, gays, atheists, anarchists, and more. With new voices come new perspectives, and I anticipate a new economic reality that looks more like Google and Tesla than Microsoft and GM: more open-source, distributed, flat in leadership style, and responsive to end users. Also, less hierarchical organizations can compete with traditional ones if they embrace accountable, distributed leadership. Think ballot initiatives instead of rigged budget bills. Think peer review over top-down hiring and firing. Think clusters instead of cubicles.

Leaderlessness leads to tyranny because leadership is an inherent element of all human interactions: we all desire leaders that are responsive to us. Denying that leadership exists in a group is simply refusing to acknowledge its real existence, and the benefit of that denial always accrues to those who already have power in society and don't have to ask permission to yield it. As the late, great British Labor Party leader Tony Benn told Occupy London in September, 2011:

“Make a demand for democratic government. That the laws are made by the people we elect, we can remove them... so the people at the top have to listen to the people over whom they exercise power. That is what democracy is about.”

It is not just a Revolution, It is a New Networked Renaissance

by Bernardo Gutiérrez

Revolution is getting too small for us. Its centenary semantic wall is crumbling. Indeed, the Internet launches a gunshot of questions to the heart of the meaning of revolution. Is revolution just “a forcible overthrow of a government or social order, in favor of a new system”? Does a new system emerge only after taking power? What if after revolution power, as in Egypt, falls in the hands of the military? Is the sequence of revolution, counter-revolution, and involution still valid? Could it be that the network is building, without taking power, a new system from new protocols and unlikely connections?

A few years ago, the Marxist thinker John Holloway, in his book *Changing the world without taking power*, brought a glimpse into the alternative ways of the new revolutions. Holloway, enamored with the Mexican neo-Zapatistas, fully questioned the meaning of revolution. Those masked people who built their own world outside the state in the Autonomous Zones of Chiapas, halfway between Hakim Bey’s pirate utopias and the indigenous culture of the commons, deeply inspired Holloway, “In this revolutionary struggle there are no models, no recipes, just a question terribly urgent. Not an empty question, but a question filled with a thousand answers.”

Perhaps we do not need a new and unique meaning for revolution. Perhaps it is enough to interconnect the multiple new answers.

Renaissance // Re-Birth

The writer / activist Douglas Ruskoff has another “Thesis That Questions the Revolution”. In his book *Open Source Democracy*, Ruskoff argues that the revolution has not arrived and what we are experiencing is a new renaissance. “Renaissances are historical instances of widespread recontextualisation. It is the rebirth of old ideas in a new context.

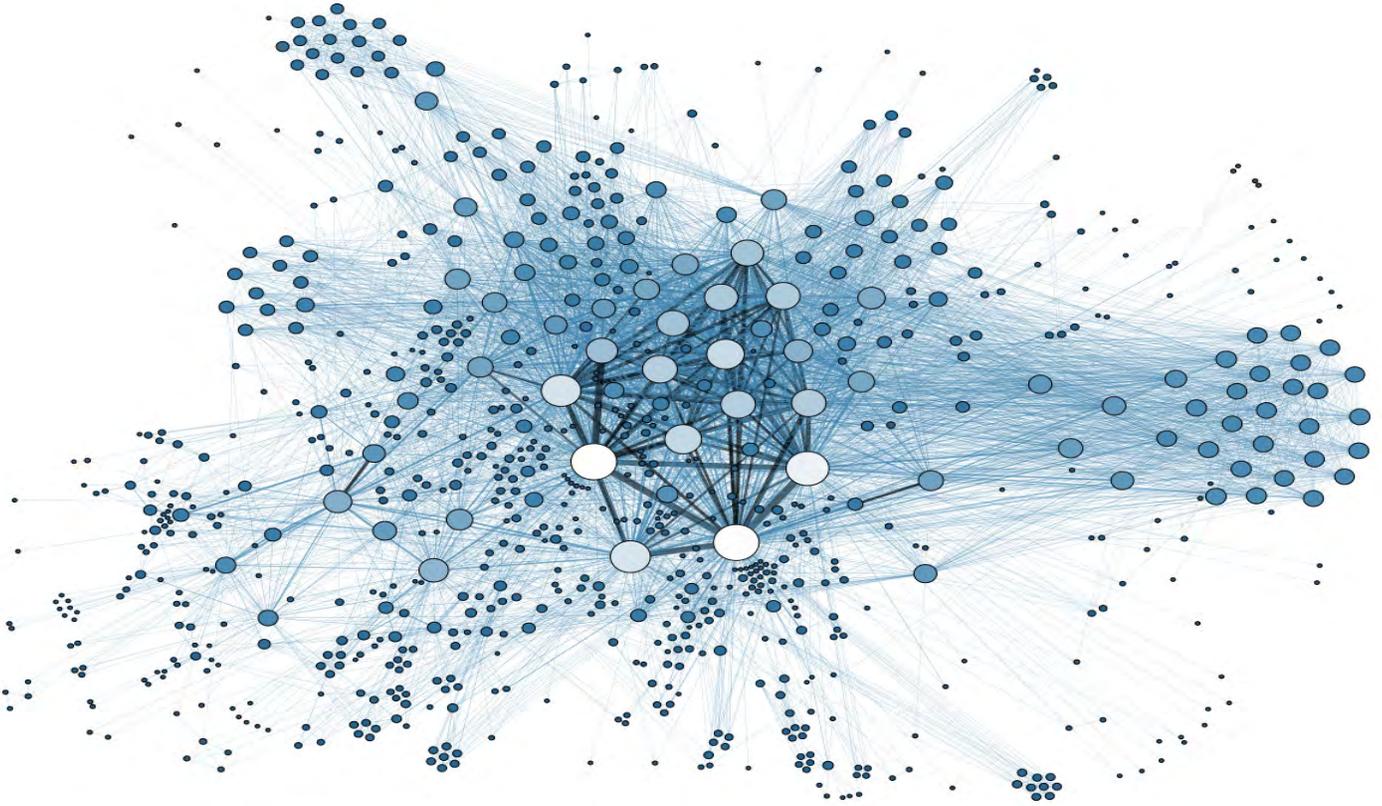
Renaissance is a dimensional leap, when our perspective shifts so dramatically that our understanding of the oldest, most fundamental elements of existence changes. The stories we have been using no longer work.” The Renaissance – this dimensional leap -- precedes revolutions. The perspective of the paintings of Piero della Francesca (among others) led to mathematical theory that ended the idea of a flat earth some centuries later. The movable type of Gutenberg’s printing machine changed the writer-reader relationship (and blew political structures). The network, connecting peers, reconfigures most definitions. From media to revolution, the meanings of the dictionaries do not readily fit into this new dimension.



Bernardo Gutiérrez

The Renaissance, according to the prestigious James P. Carse, was not an “attempt to promote another vision, but that alternative visions promise other visions.” The Renaissance was a new horizon -- more than just a set of answers. In the words of Carse, a new horizon willing to rise against anyone and with an open invitation for others to join.

Perhaps the revolution is not in sight. It could be that we are just in a deep process of Renaissance. And maybe we do not even need the revolution that has occupied much rhetoric and discussion. In fact, a pessimistic view of the three years of interconnected revolts that began with Tunisian Revolution in late 2010 present a grim picture. The army, at the helm of Egypt that toppled Hosni Mubarak; an exaggerated



Abstracted network theory visualization

neoliberal government in the Spain shaken by 15M movement – Indignados; neoconservative Enrique Peña Nieto ruling México after the #YoSoy132 explosion; Erdoğan, leading with an iron capitalist fist in post #DirenGezi Turkey. Changing the world without taking power?

The Network Created

“It is not what Occupy Wall Street has made, but the network that has been created.” These are the words of Joan Donovan, a member of InterOccupy, speaking at the Three Years of Interconnected Revolts summit, held in October 2013 in Barcelona. This statement casts a needed beam of light on the underappreciated and networked renaissance that is flourishing in the world. From Tunisia to Brazil, from Turkey to Spain, from Greece to Egypt, the so called #GlobalRevolution is in the details of the created network. #GlobalRevolution, more Enlightenment than revolution, more connections than achieved objectives, make sense looking at the different microcosms. There’s no need for that utopia of May 68, that inoffensive “Beneath the paving stones, the beach,” which never materialized. There’s no need for

it because interconnected revolts have built its own utopia: tens, hundreds, and thousands, of networked micro-utopias.

The prototype, a concept of digital culture, is an important facet of this new renaissance: “An early sample or model built to test a concept or process or to act as a thing to be replicated or learned from”. #GlobalRevolution is a system of micro-utopian prototypes, connected amongst themselves and (almost) in real time. Legal prototypes, communicative prototypes, political, urban, cultural, technological... And these networked collective prototypes, within this new, open, process-based world, are keen to replace any fixed model. Maybe we do not need a definitive model for revolution. Because of these inter-connected micro-utopias the forcible taking of power may not be necessary for a revolution if instead these prototype based micro-utopias continue taking hold in a gradual, inevitable fashion.

Pertinent examples of these networked micro-utopias include Spanish 15M lawyers – Legal Sol, TomaParte – posting their online documentation with free licenses and working for the commons. Similarly the Ativistas Advogados collective, focused on defending Brazilian protesters from police abuse hosts similar

information. These networked groups are banding together to facilitate anyone's struggle against larger powers. #GlobalRevolution are citizens building mass-communication of the self, as Manuel Castells theorizes. Spanish Indignado's TomaLaTele, Brazilian Midia Independente Coletiva platform (MIC) and the Turkish Gezi Occupy News are micro-utopias shaping a new communicative renaissance. #Globalrevolution is not just a social explosion. #Globalrevolution is the Athens Wireless Metropolitan Network building free connections in Athens, a music festival crowd funded thanks to #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico City or a digital, free library called Bookcamping.cc, born in the heat of Spanish 15M. #GlobalRevolution does not need rigid dictionaries or definitions. It could be a king of set-of-links, a reconnection of dispersed hyper localities. An infinite open game in which having a unified goal is not critical, but instead the impetus lays in finding the unified goal.

New Type of Movements

Traditional social movements are still alive. However, they don't seem to explain the explosion of revolts that have been shaking the world since the Arab Spring. It is an open secret that movements and mass organizations are not leading or convening the planetary wave of protests. But the identity-based movements that flourished in May 1968 (environmentalist, feminist and anti-military, to name a few) and the more recent anti-globalization movements do not have a clear leading role either. Interconnected occupations and revolts in recent years more closely resemble the concept of a 'network' than that of a 'movement'. Even the trite term 'community' does not explain the initial explosions of phenomena such as the 15M/Indignados in Spain, the Mexican #YoSoy132 or the Turkish #DirenGezi. The urbanist Domenico di Siena delineates clear differences between a 'network' and a 'community'. The network is "a social structure made up of groups of people who are connected by one or several types of relationships" and who share "knowledge or common interests." In contrast a network tends to work horizontally and, "is based on information and membership is flexible." The community, according to di Siena, is woven by "feelings of belonging and often works with a certain hierarchy." In a network there is "more freedom." Networks can generate communities. The interaction of communities can create new networks. Both terms build feedback flows and are not

mutually exclusive.

But there is a point where the differences between networks and communities and classic movements sharpen: the type of belonging. Networks are ruled by the concept of 'multiple belonging' used by researcher Mayo Fuster. These are liquid, specific, and multiple belongings. "One can be there without being there always," as the Dispersed Committee of Barcelona puts it. A person can belong emotionally to a network without participating in traditional militancy. One node can be part of many networks. Open networks with multiple links and weak social relationships are more likely to introduce new ideas than communities or movements with many 'inbred' ties. The network study based on the Twitter hashtag #ProtestoRJ, used during the wave of demonstrations in Rio de Janeiro, seems to confirm that weak network nodes can lead a revolt over a specific period of time.

The puzzle seems more complex than ever as the network model becomes gestalt with the sum of its parts exceeding what the individual elements individually provide. These are pieces that fit into other organisms, into other puzzles. Multiple belongings, collective identities spilling over the edge of traditional collective formats, cross-relationships that blur affective communities, movements that no longer identify as 'left' or 'popular', actions defined as 'tactics' rather than as 'movements' (like the Black Bloc that has re-emerged in the streets of Brazil), events (such as the Slut March in Quito) that define themselves as a 'space'. Gone are the lexicological boundaries that have defined revolutions in the past. What is happening in the global social ecosystem?

Clay Shirky spoke years ago about "organizing without organizations", Adrià Rodríguez, researcher at the Global Revolution Research Network (GRRN) of the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), uses the concept of a 'network system': "A network system is a complex network with multiple nodes which are organically linked in a form of constant change." The phenomenon of 'emergence', popularized by Steven Johnson and characteristic of complex systems, help understand the social processes of network systems. Emergence is the process driving a system that is not reducible to the properties of its constituent parts. Much as the revolutions witnessed today, this network model has not emerged without warning, but it is nonetheless new and unexpected.

Network systems, in the words of Brazilian researcher Rodrigo Nunes, are along those lines: “Network systems are not a mere aggregate of individuals; they are internally differentiated, with more dispersed areas and more dense, more organic and more organized nodes. The network system can host everything: traditional movements, parties, unions, small collectives, informal networks of friends, and individuals.” However, the theory of network systems might be insufficient. Couldn’t the US Tea Party, Al-Qaeda or the elites who use tax havens to plunder the planet be defined as network systems?

On the one hand, the concept of ‘techno-politics’ complements the concept of a ‘network system’. A techno-political network system, then, would be a set of citizen nodes that re-appropriate technology to reshape political participation and mobilization methods. On the other hand, speaking about ‘network movements’ represents a quantum leap. Adrià Rodríguez’s definition is one of the most inspiring: “Network movements go beyond the sociological category of social movements. They are articulated through the network, and they reach and involve a much greater number of nodes than traditional social movements.” Arnau Monty, another researcher at the GRRN, emphasizes the importance of practice over ideology: “The forms of cooperation of network movements no longer rely on big unitary ideological dogmas, but on connecting practices.” And what is it that defines the ‘network movement’ mentioned by Arnau Monty? What makes it different from the ‘network system’? Permanence over time, among other things, would justify the conceptual leap.

However, several studies by the 15MDataAnalysis group reveal an important detail: network movements are dynamic and often times hybrids of pre-existing concepts. In addition, there is a pattern that keeps repeating over time in techno-political network systems: the temporal distribution of leadership. Some nodes lead during a specific period of time, a certain action or campaign. They later give way to other nodes. And even later, after a latency period, they re-emerge, re-connected and multiplied. When many thought the Spanish #15M was dead, its network system was vital to the viral nature of the struggle in Gamonal, a working class neighborhood in the city of Burgos, as activists or network members fought a road construction project. The case of Spanish Citizen Tides

(las mareas ciudadanas), one of the most relevant transformations in the 15M-Indignados processes, is especially interesting. The organization of the Tides – where unions and political parties have failed to impose their methods – represents a radical change in collective organization. The Tide phenomenon could be defined as a networked post-trade unionism, or as a collective self-organization oriented towards the commons. For example, the White Tide, which has just blocked the privatization of public health services in the Madrid region, erases the boundaries between doctor and patient. With its aggregating architecture of participation, it transforms health into a commons. The collective action converging in the Tides network movement unconsciously preserves its shape, maintaining the life of the common social body.

#GlobalRevolution

This new system of imperfect and collectively improved prototypes is what sustains the network. When that Spanish Indignados movement was taken for dead, the human created network shaped a new urban self-governed space as El Campo de Cebada de Madrid, that won the prestigious European prize Golden Nica. GlobalRevolution provides a dense networked system that influences media and disperses information in a viral mode. That was the case of Gamonal’s riots when community members took a fervent stand against urban neoliberalism. This movement was visibly helped by the 15M ecosystem and proved successful in blocking private developments.

When many thought that Occupy Wall Street had ended, the latency power of the created network brought forth #OccupySandy, that after Hurricane Sandy, helped New Yorkers better than either the State or private industry. #Globalrevolution, more process than aim, resembles the unpredictable Guerrilla of T.E Lawrence that described Arab tactics that, escaping from the logic of classic war, defeated the Ottoman Empire between 1916 and 1918. #GlobalRevolution would be, paraphrasing Guerrilla, “an influence, something invulnerable, intangible, moving like gas”. It appears where it is not expected. It is the legion of students from #DirenODTU, replanting trees on the campus that Erdogan wanted to turn into a highway. It is the Rolling Jubilee linked to Occupy Wall Street, that is still buying private debts to forgive them. It is the

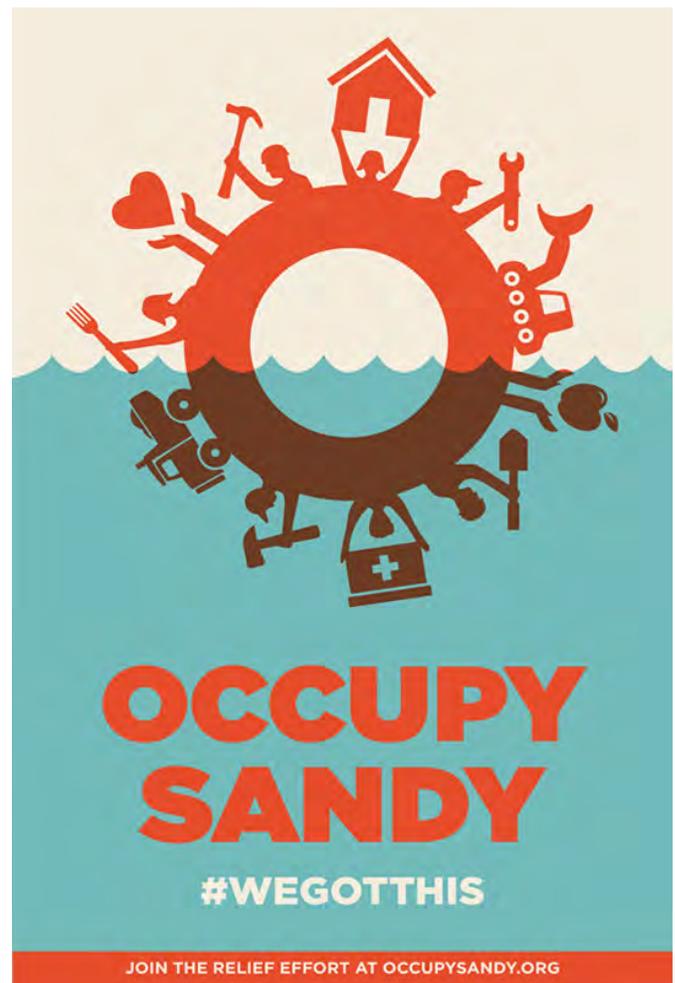
#EfectoGamonal campaign that exposes the Gamonal struggle to the world and complements the strategy of direct action and negotiation of neighbors.

Counter, lateral strike

GlobalRevolution: that guerrilla-gas, flees the classic strategy of the working class, its massive strikes. Without being antagonistic to that formula – some groups work in a self-governed strike of the 99% without unions – #GlobalRevolution does not find its strength in the stoppage, but in construction. Not in the boycott, but in the movement. In addition, its power is not just replacing the pieces of the system. Its explosive secret lies in the possibility of building its own pieces. Pieces-prototypes openly made in shared flows. Its sting is not, for example, blocking a port, but building an alternative port to replace the old one. Or better yet: to create a new system of urban gardens, parallel currencies, micro-ports, and a network of 3D printers to build objects that will make unnecessary the mega-port of the past.

“Don’t look at us, join us”, sing the Spanish Indignados. “Don’t beat the enemy, let them join you”, says Douglas Ruskoff. #GlobalRevolution is not just a social explosion. It is a lever that takes us to a new dimension in which the micro-utopias are replacing the old world, building new spaces, and new inclusive processes. Micro-utopias that are shaping a new connecting meta-utopia; simultaneously atmospheric and rhizomatic. Therefore, who needs the orthodox revolution that lives in old dictionaries?

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari used the concept of ‘rhizome’ – a type of root that can grow and multiply in unexpected directions – to describe the kind of grass roots and non-hierarchical organization found in social movements. However, the era of interconnected revolts, beyond rhizomes and organizational undergrounds, has more aerial traits. It is a landscape of floating roots and branches, like the ones imagined by architects Rahul Srivastava and Matías Echanove in their Airoots studio in Mumbai⁷. Philosopher Amador Fernández-Savater refers to the 15M-Indignados as a new “social climate”. In this metaphor there is an ‘atmosphere’ – not only ‘air’, but other properties analogous to temperature, humidity and so on – that lubricates social relationships.



That is why network movements are more than a transformation of social movements or network systems. Network movements are a new ubiquitous social atmosphere. They are a global atmosphere that imbues collectives, social movements, networks, political parties and trade unions. Those who do not adapt will have trouble surviving in this new, more inclusive, explosive and unpredictable social atmosphere.

Nothing better to complete this inventory of interconnected micro-utopias, this incipient meta-utopia, as a sentence that Douglas Ruskoff uses to define Occupy Wall Street: “The movement resembles the network in several ways. In part, because it is difficult to conceptualize, because of its peer-to-peer structure. Also, for its ability to tolerate that there is not an ending, but a set of connections. And every connection is a new beginning to something new, and unfolds and unfolds, as life itself”.

Social Movements in the Digital Age - Mexico: A Case Study

by Celeste González de Bustamante

There is a wealth of literature that has emerged, arguing that the advent of the Internet and online social networks have dramatically altered the power structures that are in place that have historically limited the potential for civil society to engage with various publics through the news media and other media (McKelvey et al, 2014; Geiger, 2009). To put it simply and succinctly, big media no longer control all forms of information that might be useful for fostering public understanding, and possibly inspiring social unrest or social action. Questions remain however, about the degree to which media systems and social activism have changed, and if these alterations are significant enough to effect structural change in society, which is ultimately what social activists attempt to achieve.

In the twenty-first century, with the proliferation of smart phones and the growing popularity of and increasing public participation in online social media, it would appear that the potential for unseating power relations – or changing the power dynamics of public discourse, that has historically remained in the hands of the few for the consumption by many (the masses) – is greater now than at any time in history. With the advent of so many distinct online communities, the mass media is becoming mediated by the masses. So, perhaps now more than ever, there is an increased ability to remap the dominant discourse. Certainly, the argument could be made that “manufacturing consent” is not as easy in 2015, as it was for much of the twentieth-century (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

Yet there is continued scholarly interest and tension between the reality of the fragmentation of audiences and the potential for increased civic engagement and participation in society.

Conceptual Frameworks

Before moving on to why Mexico serves as an important case for examining social movements in the digital age, it is important to think about some of the ways in which social movements can be conceptualized at this point in time. When the Internet took off in the 1990s, scholars found Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the “public sphere” to be useful in explaining a resurgence in public discourse beyond what was being disseminated in mainstream media. The problem was Habermas’s seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was originally published in German in 1962, and was not translated into English until 1989, and by then, Habermas’s theoretical position did not necessarily fit with the realities of the twenty-first century. By 2006, at the International Communication Association meeting, Habermas stated that “computer-mediated communication has little more than a ‘parasitical role’ to play in the public sphere” (Habermas, 2006) – mainly because the public is so fragmented.

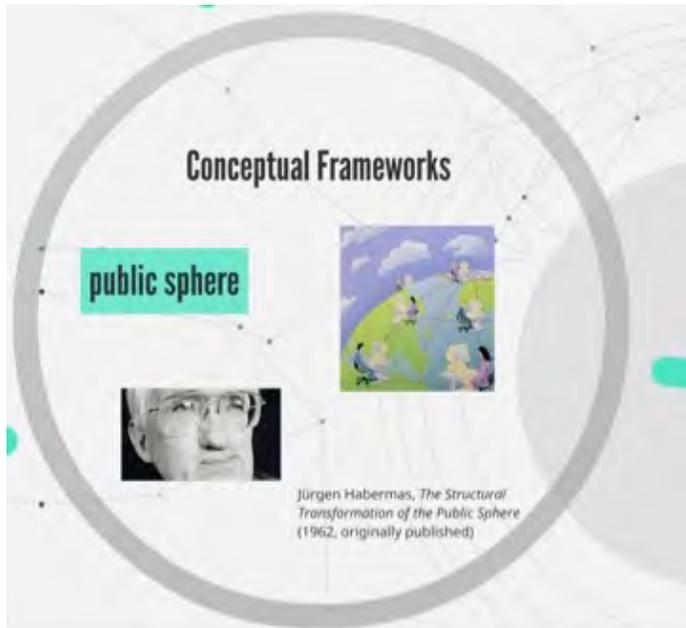
Habermas continued:

“The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers.” However, computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context: It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the



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world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large, but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines (Habermas, 2006, p. 423).



By 2014, the “issue publics” to which Habermas referred could be thought of as “Twitter publics” (McKelvey et al., 2014) Simply stated, while Twitter might have the potential to inspire activism, studies have shown that this can be difficult because there is not one public, but numerous publics that coalesce around various issues, thereby diminishing the opportunities for social movements to emerge on a grand scale and with a high probability of sustainability.

Why examine Mexico and social movements?

In 2014, 43 out of the 50 most dangerous cities in the world were in Latin America. San Pedro Sula, Honduras; Caracas, Venezuela; and Acapulco, Mexico occupied the top three spots respectively (*Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y Justicia Penal*, 2014). In 2009, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, was ranked the most dangerous city in the world (El Universal, 2009). Much of the violence has been attributed to warring organized crime groups, and former President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa’s decision

to deploy military troops to various cities to combat drug cartels. Since 2007, the country has experienced a sharp increase in the level of violence (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014). The result of this policy, which Enrique Peña Nieto has generally followed, has left more than 100,000 people dead, and tens of thousands disappeared (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Further complicating matters is the issue of violence against journalists and human rights activists - two groups that are pivotal for informing the public about government corruption and societal violence. According to Mexico’s Special Prosecutor for the Attention of Crimes Committed against Freedom of Expression, since 2000, more than 100 journalists have been murdered. More than 90 percent of the cases of murdered journalists remain unsolved. This scenario of violence and increased limitations on freedom of expression must be considered in any attempt to understand the potential for social movements in the digital age.

Despite the continued targeting of journalists and human rights activists and limits to freedom of expression, over the past few years, the country’s citizens have managed to rally numerous times around several causes that moved to national and sometimes international levels of activism. Two recent and well-known cases of social activism that gained support online through social media are illustrative.

#YoSoy132

The first happened in the spring of 2012, as the presidential campaign was in full swing. Then candidate, and now President Enrique Peña Nieto, arrived at the campus of the private Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City for what was supposed to be a standard stump speech by the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) front-runner. Instead, Peña Nieto was met by hundreds of angry and disenchanted students who ended up booing him off the campus.

As they have done in the past, PRI officials tried to paint the incident as one that was organized by outside agitators and not students. This further aggravated the students, who took to social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. In the first video

that students uploaded, each student recorded a statement sitting in front of the video camera while they mentioned their names, student identification numbers, and then stated that they were students of the Universidad Iberoamericana, and were not recruited by outside agitators. One hundred thirty-one students appeared in the video, which was viewed more than 20,000 times within six hours of upload (Gómez García and Treré, 2014). Soon after, online supporters began to say that they were “number 132,” hence the hashtag #YoSoy132 (#Iam132).



The movement traveled swiftly throughout the country where supporters formed similar #YoSoy132 online groups with hashtags representing different parts of the nation and world. Below is a short list of some of the hashtags that were created in support of the original 131 students:

#YoSoy132guadalajara
 #YoSoy132monterrey
 #YoSoy132chiapas
 #YoSoy132veracruz
 #YoSoy132SanDiego (from San Diego, California)
 #YoSoy132bayarea
 #YoSoy132losangeles
 #YoSoy132londres
 #YoSoy132paris

By May 2013, the Youtube video by Iberoamericana students had been viewed more than 1.2 million times

(Gómez García and Treré, 2014)

#AyotzinapaSomosTodos

A more recent example of online social activism in Mexico emerged after the disappearance of 43 students from the Escuela Normal (Normal School) in the rural town of Ayotzinapa on September 26, 2014, in the southwestern state of Guerrero. A group of students from the school went to the nearby town of Iguala to “borrow” a few buses that they planned to use to travel to Mexico City to participate in events commemorating the student movements of 1968 and the October 2 Tlatelolco massacre, which resulted in at least 300 students and bystanders being gunned down and killed by government troops.

According to news reports, the mayor of Iguala, José Luis Abarca ordered local police to detain the students because he did not want them to interrupt a public event that was meant to help his wife’s, María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa, political goals (Goldman, 2014). Witnesses stated that police opened fire on the students in the buses, killing at least three of them. A few escaped, and the rest were allegedly turned over to the regional crime group known as *Guerreros Unidos*, and soon after families and loved ones found out that forty-three of the original group of students had been disappeared.

Following the disappearance of “the 43,” hundreds of thousands of protesters marched in streets and plazas across the country. On Twitter, #AyotzinapaSomosTodos (We are all Ayotzinapa) and #YaMeCansé (I’ve had enough) became two of the most frequently used hashtags. Similar to the #YoSoy132 movement, the #AyotzinapaSomosTodos went viral, and protests erupted online and in the streets across numerous cities around the world such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Tucson and London.

Because the #YoSoy132 used only eight characters, it facilitated the creation of other hashtags that indicated support from other regions. In contrast, #AyotzinapaSomosTodos is 20 characters, making it difficult for supporters outside of the region to attach a suffix. Instead other hashtags have been used in conjunction with #AyotzinapaSomosTodos such as #NewYork.

Dark side of the Internet and social media

While these two cases offer evidence of citizen and popular participation in social activism using online social media, the Internet poses significant challenges and risks for those who choose to build networks and disseminate information online, especially in a country such as Mexico with high levels of impunity and corruption.

Whether they are using blogs, Twitter or Facebook, the lack of cyber-security among Internet users poses real threats to their personal safety. Bloggers have been brutally tortured and killed in places such as Nuevo Laredo, and Reynosa, Tamaulipas, after they posted information that was deemed “unfit” to publish. The owners of the Facebook site *Valor Por Tamaulipas* (Courage for Tamaulipas), which posts information about crime and dangers in the state, have been threatened publicly. In other cases, corrupt government officials have conducted online smear campaigns against journalists and activists in attempts to defame them (González de Bustamante and Relly, 2014).

In the digital age, we have the ability to move information instantaneously from one part of the planet to another, which dramatically increases the potential for social activism within and outside the boundaries of the nation-state. At the same time, however, the digital age has opened doors for the creation of other tools that enable governments and members of criminal organizations to spy on those within and outside of the country. In the digital age in Mexico, this potential seems to be matched equally by threat and risk, severely hampering the possibilities for structural change.



As seen in the image below, aside from #NewYork, the Twitter user included the hashtag #Ferguson, and in so doing broadened the discourse beyond abuse against youth in Mexico to police brutality in the mid-western United States.

The Ayotzinapa incident has become emblematic for the government’s inability to reign in powerful organized crime groups as well as its failure to reduce government corruption. Information about the case on Mexican mainstream media has decreased, but the Twitter account @AyotzinapaFeed continues to release information online.



Participant Bios

Justin Wedes

Justin Wedes is an educator and activist based in Detroit, Michigan. A graduate of the University of Michigan with degrees in Physics and Linguistics, Justin has taught formerly truant and low-income youth in subjects ranging from science to media literacy and social justice activism. A founding member of the New York City General Assembly (NYCGA), the group that brought you Occupy Wall Street, Justin continues his education activism with the Grassroots Education Movement, Class Size Matters. He founded the Paul Robeson Freedom School.

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Bernardo Gutiérrez

Bernardo Gutiérrez is a journalist, photographer, writer and consultant. He researches and writes on hacker culture, open code cities, networks, digital activism and world P2P. A graduate of the *Universidad Complutense de Madrid* and University of Coimbra in Information Sciences. He has worked for a diverse repertoire of publications including National Geographic, GEO, El País, Esquire, Playboy, Der Tagesspiegel (DE), Clarín (AR), and Milenio (MX).

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Celeste González de Bustamante is an Associate Professor at the University of Arizona's School of Journalism and affiliated faculty member of the Center for Latin American Studies. She researches the history and development of television news and media in Latin America, and more recently, violence against journalists in Mexico. She is the current head of the Border Journalism Network/*La red de periodistas de la frontera*, and head of the International Communication Division of the Association for Journalism and Mass Communication. She has covered U.S./Mexico border issues for more than 16 years.

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About

Virtual Dialogues with Latin America is a series of events organized by the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona with support from the Confluence Center for Creative Inquiry and Asuntos del Sur think tank. The goal is to provide an expository medium by which leading experts in Latin America can interact with students and faculty, not just at the University of Arizona, but world-wide as the events are streamed and make use of social media platforms. The dialogues address pertinent issues that affect Latin America today. Just as we rely on institutional support from the aforementioned organizations and institutions, we also work with and rely on partners throughout Latin America. Thank you to the Confluence Center for Creative Inquiry at the University of Arizona for being a major supporter as well as to Dr. Linda Green for her considerable time and resources in putting this together.

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