

# Media Justice and the 99 Percent Movement

## How net neutrality helped Occupy Wall Street

It all started with one message posted on a blog on July 13, 2011. The magazine **Adbusters**, a not-for-profit, reader-supported, 120,000-circulation magazine that combats corporate consumerism, issued a call: “On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months. Once there, we shall incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices.” Thanks to the Open Internet which telecom and cable giants like AT&T, Verizon Wireless and Comcast want to control we can speak out.

On September 17, a thousand people marched to Wall Street, and then hundreds stayed to occupy Liberty Plaza in New York’s Financial District.

Even after a solid two weeks of this Occupation, corporate media largely blacked it out. What coverage there was depicted protesters as drug-abusing hippies (the **Fox News** spin—**Hannity**, 10/10/11), or, in the “liberal” version, as directionless naifs with no message (**New York Times**, 9/23/11). As the OWS Declaration in New York City put it, the 1 percent “purposefully keep people misinformed and fearful through their control of the media.”

But grassroots, independent media outlets like **Democracy Now!**, **Pacifica Radio**, the **Indydependent** newspapers and public access TV channels, with a combined audience of millions, covered the Occupation from the perspective of the people—the 99 percent.

These independent outlets provided a platform for protesters to talk about why they were supporting the Occupation—speaking out about rising unemployment, declining wages, diminishing quality of life, foreclosures, education budget cuts, lack of healthcare and unjust wars, just to name a few.

What elevated the activism to a national and global movement, though, was the sophisticated and widespread use of social media. Independent mediamakers, citizen journalists, everyday people with camera phones were capturing the voices and faces of this burgeoning movement and uploading them to **YouTube**, **Facebook** and **Twitter**, mostly within minutes of being captured. Group text-messaging was used to share information and media quickly.

These tools for instant communication not only helped to mobilize thousands to marches and events, but also captured police brutality toward the protesters. It was only when images were disseminated of a senior New York City police official pepper-spraying peaceful women protesters, temporarily blinding them, that corporate media began paying attention. The pepper-spraying incident was documented by fellow protesters and uploaded to **YouTube**—where it was viewed more than 2 million times—then posted on **Facebook** and tweeted to be shared with the world.

In the age of digital media, anyone with an Internet connection can watch OWS’s General Assembly meeting on the livestream of the Occupy website. They can share an Occupy update on **Facebook**, or tweet it on **Twitter**—providing an ongoing venue for people to show support and participate

virtually in the protests. One **Tumblr** site houses the stories of thousands of supporters who share why they are a part of the 99 percent, holding up handwritten signs and telling their stories.

Of course, human, face-to-face interaction and relationship-building is irreplaceable. Social media have helped get people out of their nests and into the streets of Liberty Plaza and elsewhere, to attend a General Assembly or a working group meeting. In New York, the working groups, many of them self-organized, have grown from 10 to over 70, largely through outreach done on the Internet. People in nearly 900 cities formed MeetUp.com groups, using the OccupyTogether.org website as their central hub.

**The democratization** of media-making tools, particularly an open and unfettered Internet, has made all this possible. Right now, though, this open access is under threat. Network neutrality is the principle that requires Internet service providers to treat all content equally, guaranteeing a level playing field for all websites and Internet technologies.

Since the invention of the Internet, net neutrality has facilitated democratic participation, allowing social justice organizations, cultural workers, citizen journalists, artists and small businesses to create, share and receive information freely. Right now, the livestream of Occupy Wall Street downloads just as quickly as the website of Goldman Sachs. Without net neutrality, small businesses, nonprofits and individuals who can't afford high-speed services would have their ability to reach a mass audience online severely limited.

The telecommunications corporations that provide Internet connections, like **AT&T**, **Verizon** and **Comcast**, want to increase their already mammoth profits by controlling websites, video, content and applications. These corporations want their own sites and services to be easily available to the public, while slowing down access to those owned by their competitors—or by independent groups who can't afford to pay the gatekeepers' tolls.

In December 2010, the Federal Communications Commission issued new rules on net neutrality that were a devastating blow to media democracy. Labeled “fake net neutrality” by media justice advocates, the new regulations have no real enforcement mechanism. Worse yet, they provide zero protection for wireless devices—the mobile devices that have been so vital in the OWS movement for documenting police misconduct and spreading the word. As **Extra!** went to press, the Senate was considering a “resolution of disapproval” that would effectively remove all existing protections for Internet users and give unrestricted power to corporations like **AT&T**, **Comcast** and **Verizon**.

**The communities** that will be most affected by the lack of wireless net neutrality provisions are low-income and people of color. A recent Pew Center study ([7/7/10](#)) showed that nearly two-thirds of people of color, mainly Latinos and African-Americans, access the Internet through their phones.

One of the biggest media justice fights now is to break up the emerging duopoly between **AT&T** and **Verizon**, potentially controlling 80 percent of the mobile market. In March 2011, **AT&T** announced plans to acquire **T-Mobile USA** for \$39 billion. The loss of a low-cost wireless carrier like **T-Mobile** threatens to limit affordable mobile broadband access and stifle competition in the broadband market—making the absence of net neutrality protections for wireless devices even more problematic.

It's clear how vital the mobile Internet has been to Occupy Wall Street and the flourishing global Occupy movement. But an open Internet is also a basic communication right. In a 21st century digital age, access to jobs, healthcare, housing, government assistance and education require Internet access.

This is not just an isolated issue about media policy—it is a social justice, civil rights and human rights issue. This is about the lives of the 99 percent.