

Web-Enabled Protests Are Producing a New Breed of Leaders—Us

by Brian Fung, MSc

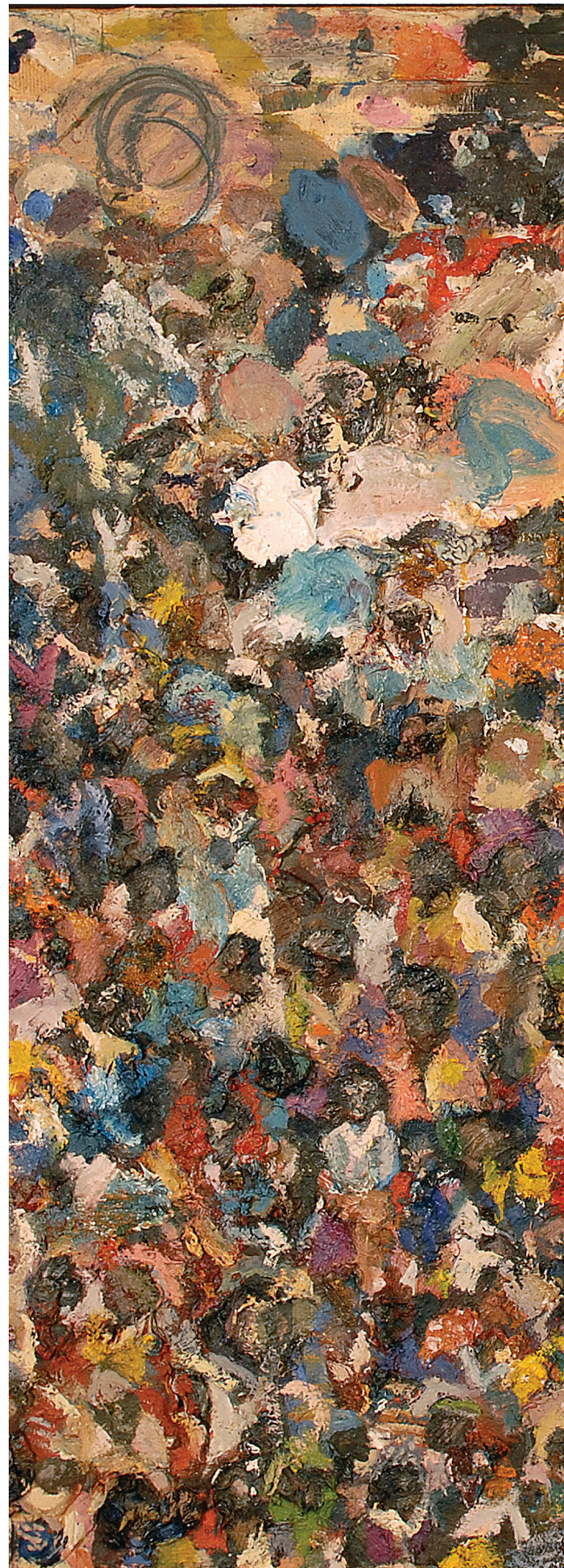
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A GENERATION FROM NOW, TODAY'S CHILDREN might well remember *The Lorax* less as a colorful page-turner than a cheerfully animated feature film. An irritable mustachioed gremlin may still speak for the trees and rage against Thneeds, but the experience will have become very different indeed.

By then, it might also be an anachronism to think that social and political protest could look anything like it does in Dr. Seuss's classic.

More than a story with a message, *The Lorax* and its eponymous character are an argument for

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a particular style of protest leadership. The Lorax is a singular figure, unique in manner, appearance, and deed. He speaks on behalf of the disempowered, because they lack the means to represent themselves. He can be moralizing and judgmental but also earnest and forthright. His purpose is to overturn the status quo and to recruit readers—er, viewers—to his cause. And, of course, he is the only one of his kind.

Many of the last century's protest leaders fit this model. Women's suffrage had such iconic trailblazers as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. The battle for civil rights had Martin Luther King, Jr. The environmentalist movement traces its roots to Rachel Carson. We remember these advocates not only because of their unique style but also because, in some ways, their groundbreaking leadership *was* the movement. Without them, someone else could (and likely would) have filled in, but the larger point is that the role needed playing at all.

What's going on today in the world of public demonstration is at least more ambiguous, if not entirely different.

In the past year, we've witnessed mass uprisings in the Arab world whose defining features were their very leaderlessness and contagious potential. Other viral democratic movements include the Occupy Wall Street protests, the rise of "black hat" Internet hackers, and the ordinary netizens who united to kill off two ominous-looking Internet bills in Congress—not to mention managed to convince the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation to reverse its decision to defund Planned Parenthood—in a matter of weeks.

It is sometimes said that a leader is only as good as his or her followers. But what happens when leaders and followers become indistinguishable from one another? Not only does it pose predictable organizational challenges for the group, it also raises larger questions about who in the movement is qualified to speak for it—and, in turn, whom the movement can legitimately claim to represent.

On their own, these aren't new problems, but they do get more complicated in an era when amorphous, decentralized modes of demonstration have become the norm.

If the recent history of the Internet has anything to teach us, it's that the social web empowers ordinary people to represent themselves online in a way that would have been extremely costly just decades ago. As critics of the Internet sometimes point out, this trend toward self-representation often manifests at a trivial level.

We post videos of ourselves singing along to bad pop music. We cultivate imaginary plots of farmland as entertainment—often giving up real money for the right to do so. We share pictures in real time to illustrate the frustrations attending our imaginary day-to-day lives, which we also broadcast to anyone who will listen. We give thumbs-ups to Hitler parodies and we down vote the inane comments on said parodies. At times the whole business can feel like so much waste.

But, much as the civilian interstate system is meant to accommodate troops at a time of military crisis, in rare cases entire online communities such as Facebook can be deputized in pursuit of a larger goal. And it works precisely because it's a platform we all know and use for other reasons.

The new trend toward self-representation has kicked off a freewheeling debate among public intellectuals about what the Internet is doing to us. There are debates about the impact of social networks on political action. There are debates over whether social media strengthens or weakens societal bonds. There are debates about the extent to which the web allows individuals to translate online social power into more traditional forms of power.

Fortunately, we don't need to dig into those debates very far to grasp the link between self-representation and leadership.

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It's a curious evolution of the traditional understanding of the leader-follower relationship. Today, we are all leaders—and all followers.

There were no Loraxes spearheading the January fight against the Senate's Protect IP Act (PIPA) and its sibling in the House, the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA). No single man or woman emerged to pave the way toward defeating the measures or to speak for the crowd. The crowd spoke for itself.

That isn't to say leadership, as an activity, was absent. Congress proved unusually responsive to the public outcry over the bills. A number of the legislation's co-sponsors, in particular, proved invaluable to the movement when they changed positions. Major web entities took the lead, too. Reddit, Google, Mozilla, and others all spread the message about SOPA and PIPA with a day of blacked-out service, simulating what a stripped-down Internet might look like under the proposed rules.

For the Internet protesters, collective leadership—not one charismatic individual—won the day.

Collective leadership can work as well internally, as an organizational principle, as it does externally, as a political strategy. To outsiders, Occupy Wall Street sometimes seemed anarchic and directionless; reports from the inside, however, revealed a kind of lightly managed chaos. Racial minorities and individuals from other underrepresented groups often got to speak first in group settings. White males, the traditionally privileged demographic, had to wait. Protesters adopted a system of hand signals that they used to indicate support for ideas in decision-making circles. Official decisions had to be approved by an extraordinarily high nine-tenths majority.

No single person was responsible for creating and propagating these practices—instead, the practices were remarkable (if inefficient) examples of group leadership and self-governance.

At its most abstract, collective leadership can lead to national-level cultural shifts. Just as the broader struggle for civil rights changed American discourse about race and privilege, so too are groups like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street responsible for changing how we talk about national spending and inequality.

That said, even the most nebulous protest

groups have retained certain control structures. Earlier this month, the FBI announced that it had arrested five members of the Internet hacking organization LulzSec, thanks to the help of the group's ringleader, Sabu. What's surprising about Sabu's involvement with LulzSec isn't that he was in charge, but that the group needed somebody to fulfill a leadership function at all when its reputation is so dependent on the image of a classless, decentralized army of code masters.

But if Lorax-like leaders are generally going out of style—as Occupy's exercise in near-direct democracy and demonstrations over Congress' web legislation seem to imply—it also complicates the question of representation. Who speaks for the group?

In an ordinary social movement, one or two organizers might naturally take on the role of spokesperson, offering a single point of access to a much broader campaign. Mass leadership—or, more precisely, the trend toward self-representation and individuality associated with mass leadership—makes the business of public relations much more complex.

The problem isn't simply cosmetic. A movement's ability to attract new members depends in part on how it lays claim to that support. Who does the group speak for? For Occupy Wall Street, rhetoric about "the 99 percent" makes for strong, inclusive slogans. It also belies the group's aspirations to become a mouthpiece for nearly all Americans, whether they like it or not.

The same could be said about hacktivist movements that generally use cyberattacks as a way to undermine government and corporate structures, all on behalf of the world's oppressed. The risk in making such universal representative claims is that a group's credibility suffers when any fraction of the people it claims to speak for turns against it.

The hacker collectives behind LulzSec and Anonymous discovered such pitfalls when their attacks against Sony, the Arizona state police, and the global research firm Stratfor led to the release of sensitive personal information—acts that heightened scrutiny from the media as well as from the very people the group claimed to represent.

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Self-representation can be extremely powerful in the right context, but it can also mislead. It can encourage movement members to think that their base is broader and deeper than it is. It can convince them that their magnitude of support gives them license to speak for an even larger constituency. And it can create a kind of negative feedback loop that skews members' perception of themselves.

Which brings us to one of the murkiest issues surrounding Internet-enabled protest: the function of these movements as a way to delineate in-groups and out-groups.

Historically, protest movements have been as much about providing a safe haven for like-minded individuals as they have been about opposing some perceived injustice. Building internal cohesion depends partly on routines and rituals, or jargon and code words.

This is hardly controversial. Affinity groups offline, regardless of their size and political leaning, tend to rely on such devices, too. Consider summer camps, or religious groups, or industry associations. Or entire national cultures, for that matter.

It's no surprise, then, that movements like Occupy are also subject to these forces. As Matt Stoller, a fellow at the Roosevelt Institute, observed back in September:

What these people are doing is building, for lack of a better word, a church of dissent. It's not a march, though marches are spinning off of the campground. It's not even a protest, really. It is a group of people, gathered together, to create a public space seeking meaning in their culture. They are asserting, together, to each other and to themselves, "we matter."¹

They're not alone. Anonymous and LulzSec take care to establish norms of their own that govern member behavior and enhance group solidarity. Among these is the use of seemingly nonsensical Internet slang, much of it drawn from the online forum known as 4chan.

Beyond these cultural signifiers, becoming a hacker generally requires a modicum of technical skill and a working knowledge of the underground web, which raises the barriers to

entry for most people. The result is a culture at odds with its image of itself—one that, despite its claims to represent the bulk of humanity, is fairly exclusive and undemocratic in terms of accessibility and transparency.

What sets the latest round of Internet protests—the ones targeting SOPA, PIPA, and the Komen Foundation—apart is that they operated largely unselfconsciously, with very little attention to in-group/out-group dynamics and image control. Perhaps it was a function of their short-term goals to challenge a one-off threat rather than to pursue fundamental changes to the governing system, but at no point in January's campaigns did protesters stop to ask, "Who are we?"

To believe that the age of in-groups and out-groups is over, or that movements unconcerned with creating an affinity group will do a better job, is to fall victim to a fallacy. That said, it may well be that we've reached a turning point in which distributed, amorphous protests taking place in real time, at great distances over the Internet, are becoming increasingly common compared to the kind of structured, leader-centric movements of the twentieth century.

These movements are being bolstered by the impulse to free—and, more importantly, personal—expression that comes along with the social web. As users have grown accustomed to representing themselves on the Internet in particular ways, it seems only natural that they would translate that to the physical world. Granted, whether it necessarily leads to real political power is still an open question. But if what we've seen over the last year is any indication, it won't be long before we have an answer.

NOTE

1. *Naked Capitalism*; "#OccupyWallStreet Is a Church of Dissent, Not a Protest," blog entry by Matt Stoller, September 29, 2011, www.nakedcapitalism.com/2011/09/matt-stoller-occupywallstreet-is-a-church-of-dissent-not-a-protest.html.

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