Social movement communications in the Year of the Monkey

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First, congratulations to the editorial team on this inaugural issue. As I write, in early February, it is the lunar New Year in San Francisco, California, an auspicious time to launch an international journal. The Year of the Monkey is expected to bring offspring with intelligence, curiosity and playfulness; I have just witnessed those qualities in some complex media power plays that intersected residual, dominant and emerging alternative, community, commercial and social movement media.

Last week, the city of San Francisco hosted the National Football League’s (NFL) Super Bowl (although the game was played in Santa Clara at a new stadium that targets the Silicon Valley wealthy). An extravaganza of corporate sport and communicative capitalism, the Super Bowl is known as much for its expensive advertising featuring the wares of Silicon Valley, and extravagant half-time entertainment, as it is for the championship of US football. This year, it also provided a rich moment to reflect on social movement communications.

I first heard about the protests on the Pacifica community radio station KPFA-FM. Homeless people, activists and their supporters had set up tents next to Super Bowl City, the gated exhibition centre for commercial sponsors and fans, not far from the Occupy site of 2011. They were protesting San Francisco Mayor Lee’s choice to spend $5 million of public money for a commercial sporting event, and forcibly remove homeless people, given the fact that 10,000 of the city’s 800,000 residents live without housing in one of the richest cities in the world. On Wednesday, 3 February, activists marched under the twitter handle #tacklehomelessness. Timed to take place during one of the largest US commercial media events, the report of the protest was circulated by activist organisations, and commercial, community and citizen journalists alike. By Thursday, 4 February, the framing of the larger tale of shameful inequality, between very rich and very poor, not only appeared in activist social media, but on local, national and global commercial news sites.

In our study of local social movement and citizens’ communications (Barker-Plummer and Kidd, 2009), we interviewed the primary spokespeople, the Coalition on Homelessness, and with my students I’ve been following its work ever since. Soon after the Coalition’s founding in 1987, it realised it was all but shut out of the dominant commercial media, and set up its own in-house alternative newspaper, the Streetsheet, and a few years later launched a volunteer-run website (http://www.cohsf.org). Although the shift to digital communications, and especially social media, has made the Coalition’s media work slightly easier, like many residual citizens’ media – even in San Francisco – it faces considerable communications challenges. Media-making labour time is still enormous for small under-resourced citizens’ organizations, and the intractable digital divide means that much of the Coalition’s constituency does not have regular access to digital screens – 16 per cent of the US population still does not use the internet (Pew

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However, very soon afterwards, the media power of a new cycle of social movements was revealed.

Escaping from town to avoid the game, I caught up on Monday. Jon Caramanica (2016), the New York Times music critic, framed Beyoncé’s half-time show as an upstaging of Coldplay. Dave Zirin and Amy Goodman (2016) of Democracy Now, a program started at Pacifica Radio, broadcast a much fuller account of the import of Beyoncé’s performance to the Bay Area’s social movement history: Beyoncé had provided a moving tribute to the Black Panther Party, a media-savvy movement born in Oakland in the East Bay 50 years ago, and to Black Lives Matter. Afterwards, the dancers left the stage with their fists in the air, recalling the Black Power salute by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics. (Smith and Carlos had attended San Jose State, just south of the stadium.)

Surfing the web, another back-story emerged. Two Black Lives Matter activists, Ronnisha Johnson and Rheema Emy Calloway, told through their twitter feeds, amplified by articles in The Washington Post (Wang, 2016) and The Guardian (Levin and Wong, 2016)] of how they had approached the dancers to support their campaign for Mario Woods, the African-American man who had been killed by San Francisco police on 2 December 2015. Five of the dancers then posted a photo on Instagram holding a sign reading ‘Justice for Mario Woods’.

#BlackLivesMatter represents a new wave of social movements. It first emerged in 2013 with the Twitter hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, protesting the acquittal of George Zimmerman following the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin in Florida. Since then, through a decentralised non-formal structure, it has campaigned against violence towards black people in many different locales in the United States and Canada. It has publicly challenged the police, judicial system, politicians and governments via a panoply of communications tactics, intersecting face-to-face direct action and street demonstrations with social media, and meet-ups with potential youth allies at colleges and universities with interviews with the corporate, alternative and independent media. Before Beyoncé, it had won support from other African American sports and entertainment celebrities.

The story I have sketched begs a much deeper analysis. I am very happy to know that the editors of this new journal will provide a space for social movement communications, an approach that I think is the most robust in order to explain the complex, longitudinal shifts in media power. Starting with social movements at the centre would transcend the technology-determinist and commercial media-centric shortcomings of previous research, while also closely examining the dominant political economy and role of technology. It will also require a thorough intersectional study of media power and inequality (of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and global location, among others) between social movements. Finally, I am confident that the international editorial board will help to grow a journal that provides longitudinal, trans-local and transnational accounts of media power within the shifting historical composition of social, political, cultural and economic power.

References

