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## *World on Fire: Waves of Protest Transforming Communities*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Occupy, Idle No More, the Quebec student movement and the mobilizations around Ferguson are wildly different. However the mobilizations each involved existing social networks, rapid acceleration, social media, the diffusion of key tactics and symbols, and a gradual dispersal, slowing and consolidation. How can we use analyses of past waves of protests to help us to understand the most recent waves of protest? How might these insights help activists to build movements that spread further, last longer and make deeper change?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Lesley Wood is Associate Professor of Sociology at York University. She is interested in how ideas travel, how power operates, how institutions change, how conversations influence practices, how people resist and how conflict starts, transforms and ends. She received the 2013 Porter Tradition of Excellence book award for her book *Direct Action, Deliberation, and Diffusion: Collective Action After the WTO Protests in Seattle*, and recently published *Crisis and Control: The Militarization of Protest Policing*.

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## **World on Fire – Waves of Protest Transforming Communities**

First of all, I want to acknowledge that I am on Treaty 6 territory. I am grateful to be here.

The title of this paper is *World on Fire: Waves of Protest Transforming Communities*. From what I understand, Sorokin wouldn't have been impressed by this title. Having lived through the Russian revolution, and been imprisoned both by the Tsar and by the Bolsheviks he was wary of "worlds on fire." He was suspicious about moments of rapid social change and what they inspire in people (1925). Indeed, he might worry about the current moment and its volatility. In the last few years, those of us who are rooting for deep transformative change in the world have been riding a rollercoaster. Some days it feels like the world is erupting. And then other days, it feels like a great big hangover. How do we understand these dynamics?

In this paper, I'm going to bring together two projects. First, I will discuss how we can understand the waves of protest that we've seen in recent years. These include Occupy Wall Street, Idle No More and Black Lives Matter. Second, I will offer a model for understanding how these waves change organizations, movements and individuals.

### **Waves of Protest (Cycles of Protest)**

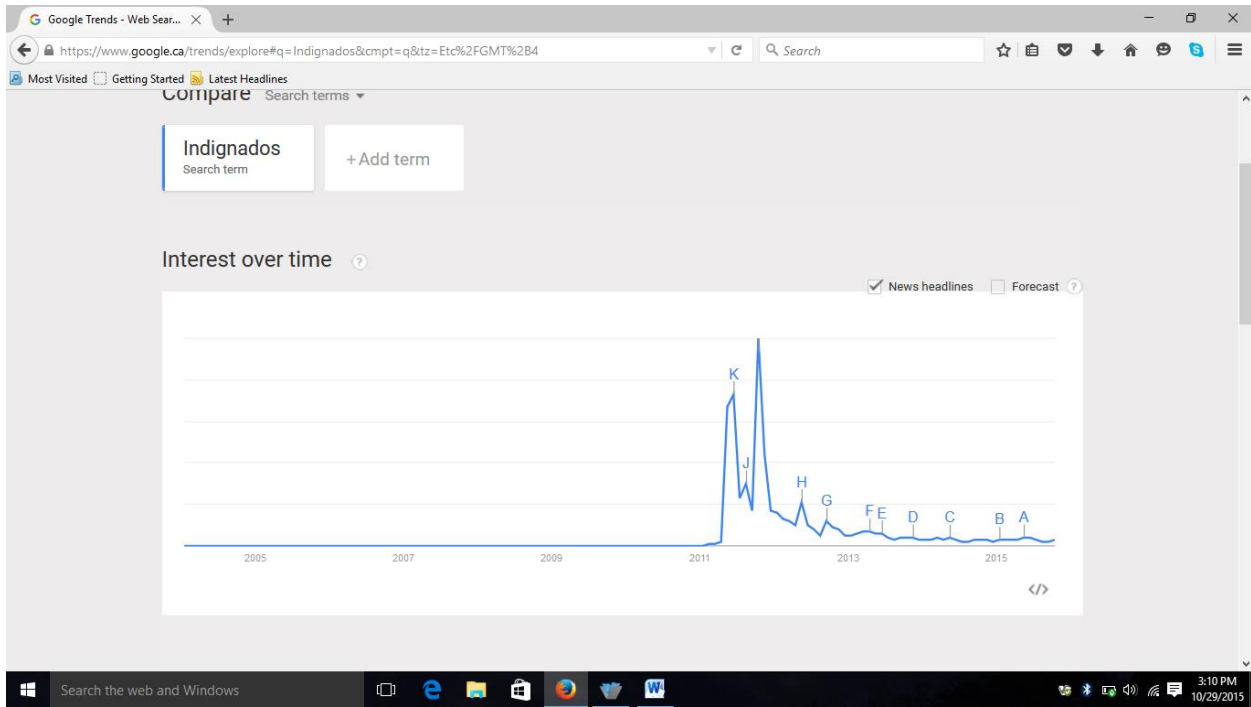
Sidney Tarrow (2011: 199) defines a protest cycle as "a phase of heightened conflict and contention across the social system". At the most basic level, such cycles or waves rise and fall. Particular processes are tied to each phase. To begin, interactions amongst activists and between activists and authorities accelerate as small groups challenge the status quo. Sometimes these formations use a new or revitalized symbol, frame or tactic, like "Occupy Wall Street", the round dance of Idle No More or the frame of "Black Lives Matter." Such innovations gain attention from both authorities and sympathizers. News of these innovations diffuses to new participants and to new sites, disrupting existing protest routines. New people are attracted to the activity and as they arrive, new and experienced activists express feelings of shared solidarity and speed up their interactions, utilizing high levels of energy. New coalitions, alliances and initiatives appear possible and uncomplicated.

In this way, the wave builds until it peaks. The high point may last for a day, a month or longer, but will not last forever. One or more of a number of things will happen. Police or other authorities will repress the movement, or counter-movements may confront the mobilization. Other authorities, pundits or observers may begin to undermine the legitimacy of the movement, calling into question its goals or strategies. Disagreements amongst participants around the best strategy, identity, goals, tactics, or form of organization for the movement become more intense, leading to factionalization and splits.

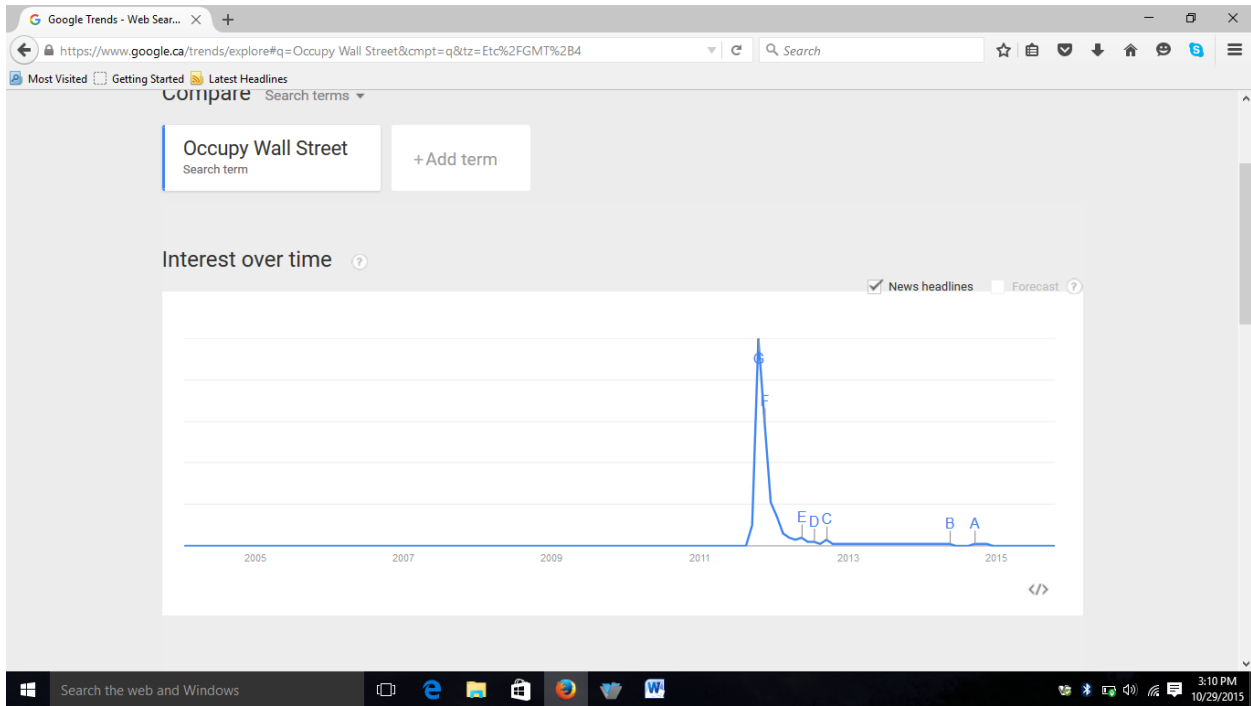
While repression can and does escalate the wave further, over time, these different challenges drain momentum. Newer and less-central activists are particularly likely to pull away first. Such fracturing drains energy away from external issues and targets. Attention from media may exacerbate this tension. Out of the debates around tactics and strategy, and the drain on resources that result, some sections of the movement may push to institutionalize while sometimes, others sections may work to make their tactics or strategy more militant (Klandermans 1997, Tarrow 1998, Zwerman and Steinhoff).

Mapping this pattern raises methodological challenges. The intensity and pattern of micro-interactions that make up activist mobilizations are ephemeral and complicated. As a proxy for understanding waves of protest, researchers often use newspaper and media coverage on protest events and arrests. A different quick-and-dirty tool that traces the number of google searches on a topic can offer a slightly different lens. "Google Trends" data appears to loosely correlate with the number and size of protest events, and the reaction to these by the media, police and authorities. While recognizing that the keywords used to search can shape the results, one can use this tool to trace the ups and downs of online public engagement in four recent waves; the indignados (2011), Occupy Wall Street (2011), Idle No More (2012), and Black Lives Matter (2014). The images are taken from searches done in October 2015.

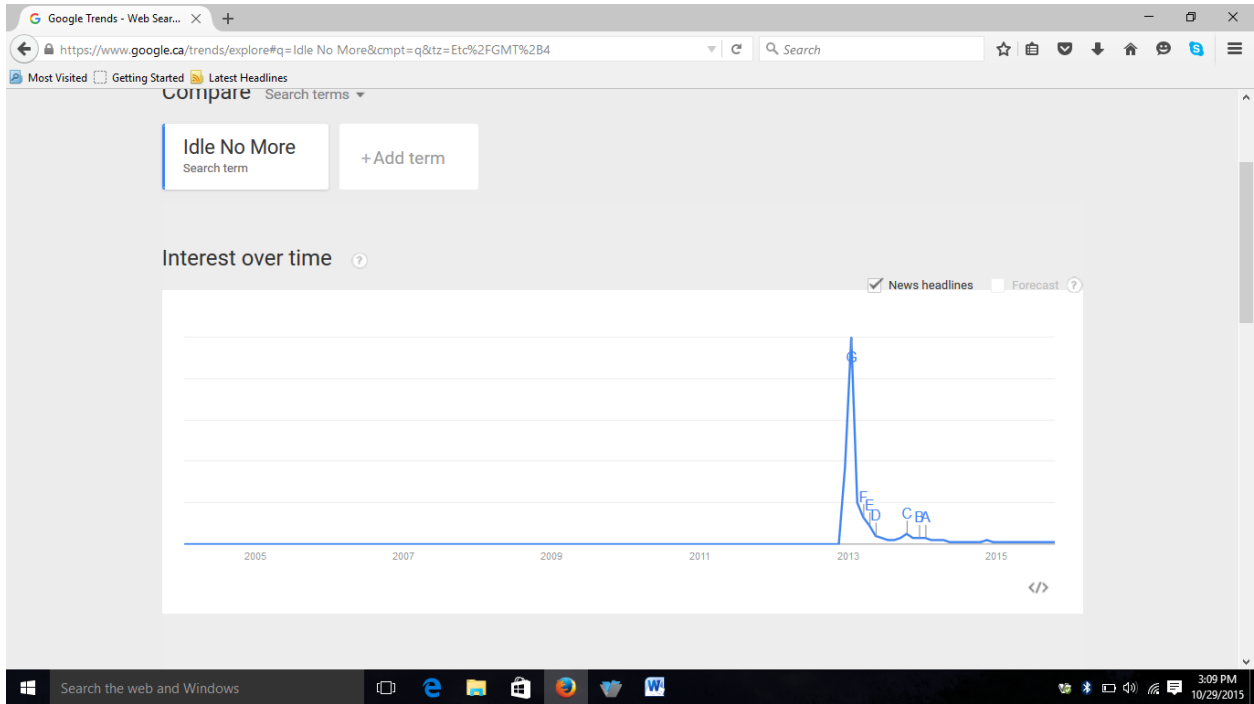
# Indignados



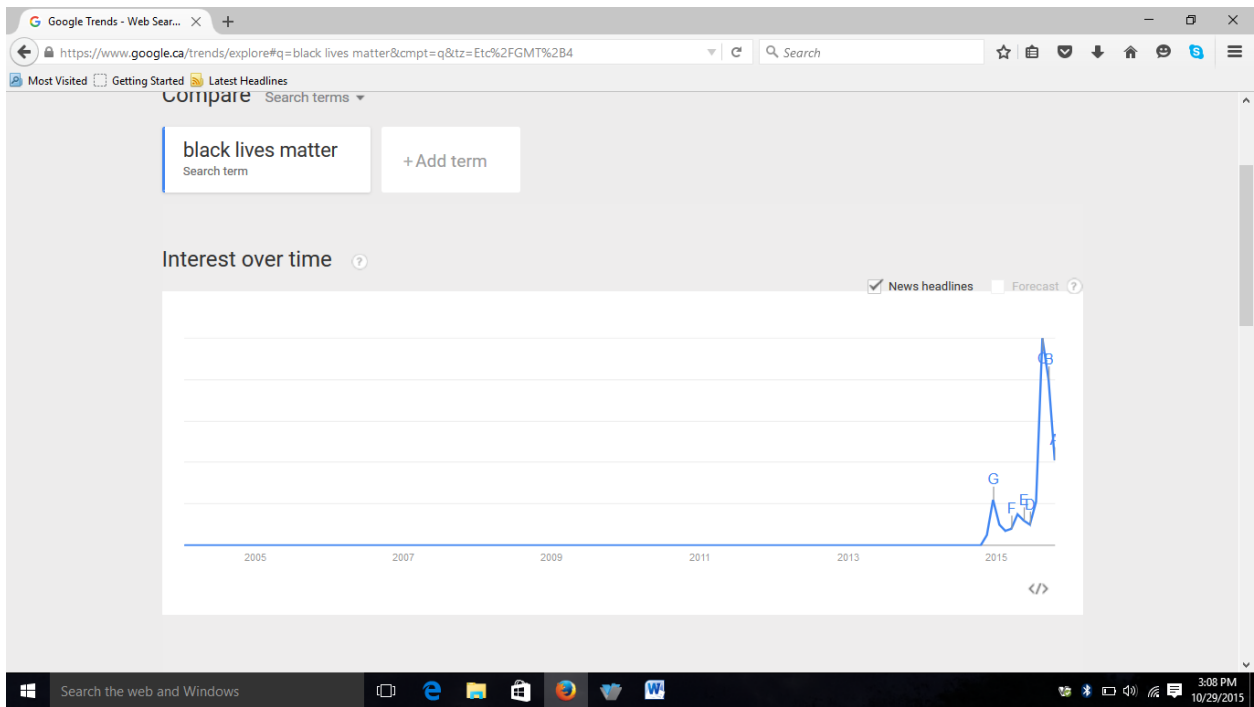
# Occupy Wall Street



# Idle No More



# Black Lives Matter





Although these images outline the fluctuations of attention, one must look much more closely to see what is behind this shadow. Let us begin with Occupy Wall Street. The story of this mobilization is well known. In the summer of 2011, United States and Canadian based activists were observing the massive uprisings in Spain and Greece and in North Africa. The Canadian magazine *Adbusters* published a call to “Occupy Wall Street” on September 17, 2011. The complaints included corporate-rule, dissatisfaction with the government, youth unemployment, foreclosures and the economic crisis more generally. Activists in New York began to discuss how they might respond to the call (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014). They recognized that an actual occupation of the highly policed and extremely small Wall Street seemed unlikely, but developed a number of locations that they might occupy. Then on September 17, 2011, hundreds of people marched and rallied, and then moved to occupy Zuccotti Park. There was very little coverage in the mass media, and many experienced activists believed it to last at most a few days. However, the word spread and people continued to arrive on the square. On September 24, 2011, the Occupy activists marched uptown, and in response, the NYPD arrested 80 people and pepper sprayed a clutch of young women. The electronic activist group Anonymous begins to stream the protests online and the footage of the police use of pepper spray circulates in the mainstream media. The mobilization grows quickly and then on October 1, 2011 the group moves onto the Brooklyn Bridge. The police arrest 700 people.

By October 9, 2011 the Occupy Wall Street identified protests and their tactic of occupation had spread to over 600 cities in the US and elsewhere. The earlier indignados wave centred in Spain had identified October 15, 2011 as a day of action celebrating the five-month anniversary of their first occupation of the square in Madrid and Barcelona (?). The Occupy Movement reinforced that call and as a result there were mobilizations in 950 cities in 82 countries (The Guardian 2011).

A month passes and as the weather cools in many cities where Occupy movements were busy. The logistical challenges of maintaining the occupation sites intensify. So too do the debates around the importance of maintaining the occupations, and the identity, strategy, and the goals of the movement. Then in the middle of the night on November 15, 2011, the New York Police Department evicts Zuccotti Park. Over the next week, police evictions of

Occupy sites accelerate, and after the evictions are complete, public attention wanes. Despite ongoing projects like Occupy Debt, Occupy Homes, and Occupy Education, the public attention to the movement and its public manifestations waned.

We can see some similarities between the shape of the Occupy wave and the Idle No More mobilizations. The hashtag Idle No More first appeared at the end of October 2012, as four women organizers were promoting a November 2012 teach in against Bill C-45, a proposal by the Canadian federal government that would have significant negative consequences for indigenous sovereignty and the protection of water and land. The emerging movement built through existing ties amongst indigenous communities and non-indigenous allies and called for a national day of action on December 10, 2012, the UN Day for Human Rights.

On that day, fifteen rallies and marches were held associated with Idle No More. The following day Attiwapiskat Chief Theresa Spence began a hunger strike outside of the Parliament buildings in Ottawa. The media coverage increased, even though the Bill passed on December 14. Then on December 17, indigenous activists held a round dance in the Cornwall Centre Shopping Mall in Regina Saskatchewan. The footage of the event was widely shared in YouTube, diffusing the dance to other sites, and triggering other round dance protests. Four days later, on December 21, there were Idle No More affiliated events in 79 locations, mostly in Canada but also in the US. The movement continued to expand, with another day of action in January. As the winter ended, public attention and the scale of protests declined, with bursts of renewed attention on days of action such as the one on October 7, 2013, when there were 63 protests and actions across Canada, and solidarity events in another twelve countries (Schwartz 2013).

Public attention to waves of protest is always brief. Particularly when the authority being challenged is strong and the movement's demands are not easily resolved through policy change or simple inclusion. The Google Trends data illustrates this brevity, but also illustrates that there is variation in the shape of such waves in terms of the number of fluctuations – often tied to innovations in tactics of repressive incidents, the level of attention at its peak and the duration of the wave.

To understand why the wave is sharp and singular for Occupy, or a slower curve for Idle No More, we need to look at the social processes within and around the movements. We can begin with three things. First, we need to examine the social networks that connect activists, and the ones that connect the communities that activists are drawing from. Second, we need to understand the media that movements are using to communicate to each other and to new audiences and third, we need to examine the social processes that underlie the diffusion of ideas, innovations and identities.

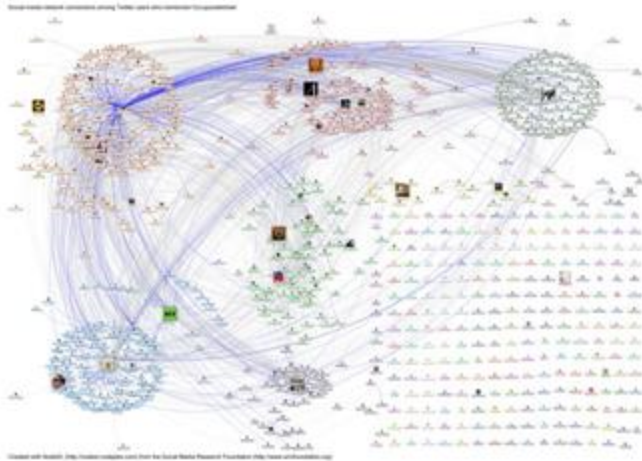
### **Social Networks**

I'll start with the question of social networks or patterns of connection that link activists and their communities. The question of who connects with whom, and who collaborates with whom is shaped by histories of struggle and the successes and failures of movements; as well as by colonialism and capitalism and repression and how these play out on categories of race, class, immigration status and gender. These different experiences will affect whether or not potential activists will have an opportunity to know about a movement and its ideas; whether they will identify with a movement and see it as relevant and whether or not they are connected to others with whom they can discuss the ideas, and adapt the ideas to their local context and experiment with them (Wood 2012). The social networks matter and shape the spread of a wave of protest. As Mark Granovetter (1973) points out, ideas and innovations travelled best in social systems where there are clusters of strong ties linked by weak ties. Clusters of activists, or family, or friends or colleagues are sites of much dense activity. They are the sites of deliberation that can facilitate or block the spread of movements and their tactics and symbols.

These networks are partly visible through social media traces. One can see who retweets who. And who follows whom on Twitter. We can see variation amongst different waves of protest even using this limited data.

# OWS Twitter Networks

## Nov. 15, 2011



### **Social Media and Diffusion**

Social media like Facebook and Twitter make the transference of messages across weak ties faster and cheaper. Like any new media, they connect people in particular ways, shaping diffusion and thus the wave of protest (della Porta and Tarrow 2004; Tilly and Wood 2012). Each social media platform does this differently in terms of the distinctive populations that it links. Facebook is much more popular than Twitter. Each platform facilitates certain social processes in particular ways (Renzi 2015). Facebook relationships require that both people consent to the relationship. In contrast, one need not be friends to follow them on Twitter. Most users follow others far outside of their social circle. While Facebook allows more complex storytelling and dialogue through its platform, and has a relatively slower pace, Twitter is constructed to share information quickly and in real time.

Facebook is better at facilitating diffusion of symbols, tactics and identities because it uses the offline, bilateral relationships amongst people as its structure, increasing the trust people have for the information and its source. In addition, Facebook offers spaces in 'walls' and in 'groups' for potential participants to discuss ideas collectively, adapt them to the local context and propose and organize experiments with them. The platform's likes,

shares, comments and joins; facilitate the social processes of certification, identification, deliberation and adaptation – spreading a cycle of protest. By understanding that pre-existing social networks are mobilized by people using social media, and that social media platforms are interacting with social processes of identification, deliberation that underlie diffusion, we can better understand the variation in the waves and how these waves play out in and on local communities.

### **Waves on Communities**

How do these waves of protest transform communities, movements, organizations and individual activists? As activists, many of us ask ourselves as the intensity of a wave of mobilization eases, “Did we succeed?”, “Did we fail?” However, we know that the answer cannot simply be one of yes or no. There is a great deal of research on the effect of social movements on policy change or leadership change. However, there is far less systematic work done on the wide ranging ways that a wave of protest might transform the movements and their base communities themselves.

It is clear that waves of protest transform social structures and process. They transform cognition, identities, emotions, biographies and institutions. The complexity and multiple scales of such dynamics are difficult to capture. I haven’t yet made such an attempt. The closest my own work has come is through studying the outcomes of large scale protest events on activist communities. Such summit protest events are ‘eventful’ in William Sewell’s terminology. Sewell (1996:271) notes that events can transform social relations through “constituting and empowering new groups of actors or by re-empowering existing groups in new ways” *and these processes are contingent, discontinuous and open ended*. This idea reinforces Suzanne Staggenborg’s research on the multiple categories of outcome that need to be considered when studying social movements.

Donatella della Porta’s (2008) work on the outcomes of summit protests against institutions like the WTO and the IMF. She argues that such events create mutual knowledge, trust and friendship, and feelings of solidarity that facilitate shifts in identity, networks and practice. Such events also create spaces for debate and conversation and how they can strengthen movement communities. One can observe these outcomes if one looks

at the G20 summit mobilizations in Toronto and Pittsburgh and how they played out. I am collaborating with Suzanne Staggenborg, Glenn Stalker and Rachel Kutz-Flammenbaum on a project that looks at the outcomes of the G20 summit protests that occurred in 2009 (Pittsburgh) and 2010 (Toronto). While summit protests are distinct from waves of protest, in that they are concentrated in a single site, often involve massive repression, tons of guaranteed media attention and large numbers, they do offer some clues into how we might think about outcomes. The outcomes of Toronto's G20 protests are multiple and ongoing. The research on these mobilizations is grounded partly in my engagement as an organizer who kept fieldnotes and partly as a researcher who collected surveys of over 300 participants and 20 follow up interviews with activists involved in the mobilization (Wood and Stalker 2011).

When the site of the 2010 G20 summit was identified as Toronto, a swath of experienced grassroots activists were both dismayed and excited. They had criticisms of the model of summit protests, which highlighted spectacular confrontations, often at the expense of longer term organizing. As a result, these activists in the Toronto's Community Mobilization Network made their central goal for the mobilization, the building of stronger coalitions amongst grassroots activist organizations and communities in the city. The week was set up with different themes, including climate justice and the funding for the tar sands, queer liberation, indigenous sovereignty, and violence against women. Activist working groups organized to provide housing, food, childcare, transportation, communication, media relations and legal support to the mobilization. Half way through the Toronto summit, I noted in my fieldnotes that those involved in organizing felt that the mobilization was achieving its goals of building networks and coalitions, changing the media frame and the public awareness of the connections between the G20 and local realities. However by the end of the summit, activist perceptions of outcomes were dominated by the stories of property destruction, and the police repression of activists including 1100 arrests, conspiracy charges against organizers, and a great deal of fear. The story had changed.

### **Outcomes of the G20**

Four years later, Glenn Stalker and I, with the assistance of our research assistant Sarah

Rodriguez, asked 20 organizers about the effects of the summit organizing. We found that activists talked about the impact of the mobilization on themselves, their organizations and on their local political networks. Toronto activists identified 88 different types of outcomes. These can be grouped in terms of who was influenced. First of all, individuals were affected by the mobilization. The outcome was both cognitive and emotional. Alas, the most common effect of participation for the Toronto activists was trauma (12), burnout (7) and increased fear (6). There were also changed perspectives on strategy (7), and the gaining of new skills (5). On a less conclusive note, 8 individuals said that the summit mobilization led to them changing the focus of their individual activism – some towards an increased emphasis on healing or creativity, and others, a turn towards organizing around police and prisons.

As della Porta (2008) suggests, the mobilization transformed the membership of organizations. Respondents noted that the G20 brought new people to their organization (5), even as it caused their organization to lose capacity to integrate new people (4). While no one suggested that the protests had any impact on the policies or the decisions of the G20 summit leaders themselves, respondents did note that the mobilization was successful in affecting some elements of the external context, including educating the public on police abuses (9), the content of news media coverage (5), affecting public awareness of the G20 (5), on subsequent police strategy (4) and on police legitimacy (2).

The G20 mobilization was also understood to affect the movements in Toronto more generally. Indeed, 16/20 activists argued that the G20 led to new coalitions, relationships and networks amongst activists in the area. The G20 also affected participation in the larger movement – with 11 arguing that it had mobilized new activists, and the same number noting that it had demobilized activists. Eight activists argued that the G20 had radicalized activists; and built new skills (7), and increased energy in the movement overall (6). At the same time, five argued that the movement had lost momentum and capacity, and the same number argued that there was more fear in the movement. Finally, activists argued that the G20 summed led to new campaigns; for police accountability (8), prison justice (4) and the anti-austerity coalition “Stop the Cuts” (5). Clearly the G20 had a range of outcomes on the individuals, organizations and movements in Toronto, transforming,

sometimes in contradictory ways the political context – thus influencing subsequent mobilization.

## **Discussion and Implications**

What do such findings suggest about the effect of waves of protest on communities? The G20 research gives us only a starting point for answering this question. Waves of protest are distinct because waves of protest start somewhere and end many places – each with their own dynamics, networks and targets. Also, waves of protest are shaped by the way that diffusion operates through social networks.

In order to understand the way that waves of protest play out on the activists, organizations and movements themselves, we would need to look deeper than social media. Caren and Gaby (2011) suggest that the social media ties formed through Occupy Wall Street didn't last. But such work is only a starting point. To understand the effect of a wave of protest like Occupy or Idle No More on the individuals, organizations, movements and communities, we would need to do the following. First, we would need to look at the pattern of social ties that connected activists to each other and to activists in other cities before, during and after the wave of protest. Second, at the same time periods, we would need to examine the social processes of identification, deliberation, adaptation, and experimentation, both online and offline that were helping and hindering people from connecting, coordinating and participating. Third, we would need to examine the way that the wave of protest affected the individuals, organizations and movements that engaged – changing their emotions, skills, knowledge and the patterns of relationships.

Clearly, waves of protest connect people in new ways, and may put tension on existing relationships. They also allow individuals and organizations to consider different ideas, sometimes leading them to experiment with ideas, practices, and symbols. Waves of protest can strengthen or weaken organizations, and may transform the perspectives, skills, and emotions of individual activists. The outcomes of the Occupy wave of protest are distinct from those of the Idle No More wave, or the wave associated with Black Lives Matter because of the ways that local historical ties affect the uptake of the wave and its spread.



Each wave transforms existing relationships, knowledge and feelings; affecting the reception of the subsequent wave. For example, in Toronto, the organizing in the 1990s against neoliberal cuts to social services affected the local manifestation of the global justice movement, which affected the organizing against the G20 summit, which affected the Occupy mobilization, which played out on the Idle No More organizing, which affected Black Lives Matter. By breaking these histories down into their component mechanisms, we can better understand how and why this happens.

To conclude, this attempt is part of a long tradition of trying to understand the patterns in social change. Like Sorokin, I recognize that waves of protest have some similarities, because of the recurrent social processes at play. But I must side with William Sewell (1996) when he suggests that the waves and their outcomes are contingent and open.

Waves of protest are creating crises for the status quo. Sometimes this leads to changed leadership and policies; but even when they don't, the waves transform individuals, organizations, movements and communities. As analysts, there is a great deal of work to do if we want to understand the ways that network structure and social processes intersect in time and across space. As activists, recognizing that waves of protest are likely to follow particular shapes can allow us to be more strategic about how to maximize our connections, be more thoughtful in our uses of social media, and be more intentional about our work and how to move forward in ways that build our movements. Knowing these patterns, we can better think about how to minimize trauma and burnout, and increase the likelihood that our movements and communities are grounded and creative as we work to be part of creating a better world. Because that, of course, is the point.

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