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Movements as multiplicities and contentious branding: lessons from the digital exploration of #Occupy and #Anonymous

Davide Beraldo

Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper wishes to contribute to the debate on digitally mediated movements by developing the perspective of ‘contentious branding’. The empirical research has followed the #Occupy and #Anonymous hashtags around popular social media, reconstructing their highly heterogeneous adoption. A branding perspective on contentious politics is aimed at highlighting the diverse and sometimes contradictory appropriations of the ‘semiotic repertoires’ of protest movements, particularly apparent within digital networks of communication. A contentious branding perspective on social movements not only tries to fit these specific cases better: it intends to provide an epistemological and methodological device to sustain a non-essentialist understanding of social movements in general, and to face the challenges and opportunities of digital social movement research in particular. The first section of the paper briefly discusses the concepts ‘social movement’ and ‘branding’, characterizing the proposed idea of ‘contentious branding’. Some insights derived from a broader digital exploration on the uses of the hashtags #Occupy and #Anonymous then serve to emphasize their variable, incoherent and at times contradictory utilization: few of the several reiterations of the brand Occupy, deviating from its original use, are presented, and a heuristic categorization of Anonymous’ diverse issues of involvement is proposed. Based on this, the discussion further develops the concept of contentious branding, clarifying its analytical boundaries *vis a vis* neighboring approaches in social movement theory. The conclusion discusses some of the epistemological and methodological implications that contentious branding bears for the study of social movements in the digital age.

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Introduction

On 17 September 2011, a crowd gathers in Zuccotti Park, close to the New York Stock Exchange, and sets up an encampment, as planned by the Occupy Wall Street campaign.

CONTACT Davide Beraldo  d.beraldo@uva.nl  Department of Media Studies (University of Amsterdam), Turf- draagsterpad 9, 1012XT, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

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On 15 October 2011, inspired by initiatives in the United States, hundreds of marches around the world end with an occupation, giving rise to ‘Occupy movements’ in hundreds of cities. The complex network of protest events and groups raise their voice against, among other issues, economic inequalities. On 2 January 2012, demonstrations take place across Nigeria to protest the abolition of a government fuel subsidy. A sustained campaign against the cost of fuel and government corruption begins, and adopts the name Occupy Nigeria. In May 2012, the Italian television channel DeeJay TV launches a music show that interacts with publics on Twitter and Facebook, named Occupy DeeJay.

On 7 April 2013, a coordinated cyber-attack labeled OpIsrael targets hundreds of Israeli websites, initiating a campaign launched in the following years by diverse groups, many of them affiliated with the entity known as Anonymous. The proclaimed goal of the operation is to ‘wipe Israel off the web’. After 7 January 2015, as a response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, a large-scale online campaign emerges named OpISIS. The anti-jihadist operation launched by Anonymous aims to delete the Islamic State from the Internet. On 27 February 2015, an important Turkish Twitter account associated with Anonymous asks its followers to join the OpISIS campaign by reporting ISIS-related accounts. On the very same day, the same Twitter account applauds a successful OpIsrael cyber-attack that ‘defaces’ an Israeli website. The target’s homepage is replaced with a banner showing, alongside the notorious Guy Fawkes mask symbolizing Anonymous, the slogan: ‘Khilafah [the Caliphate] will transform the world’.¹

Notable in the first snapshot is an entity that survives the specific movement from which it emerged. ‘Occupy’ began to denote a protest movement of people gathering in parks and squares to protest the political influence of corporate and financial power. The ‘Occupy’ label soon evolved into a marker associated with diverse political goals and orientations, adopted for purposes that bear loose or even non-existent relations to its original meaning. The second snapshot highlights another distinctive property of what this paper labels ‘contentious branding’: the adoption of these labels can be so open that even opposed groups can appropriate them.

Social movements are generally far from being unified, coherent actors, and social movements theory offers a number of analytical lenses to look at diversity and contradiction. Framing processes, for example, are characterized by a number of dynamics, such as bridging and master framing (Snow et al., 1986), that allow for a great deal of dissonance among participants’ overall orientations, goals, and sense-making practices. Nonetheless, what is peculiar about the cases discussed -and highlighted by the contentious branding perspective- is that their element of one-ness does not emerge out of a contradictory multiplicity in virtue of some *general*, shared theme or interpretative framework – as a framing perspective would have it; rather, it can be recognized in the *abstract* layer traced by the surface of semiotic processes, transcending the layer of content associated with meanings and orientation of experience.

The production of collective identities is always a continuous process, where negotiation, contradiction and conflict are more the norm than the exception (Melucci, 1996); nonetheless, it is evident how contemporary digitally-mediated movements sometimes display a ‘connective’ component, powered by the spread of highly relatable, meme-like ‘personal action frames’, over digital networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013). Whereas this ‘connective action’ framework provides important tools to appreciate the contribution of digital media to give rise to a more personalized, post-ideological engagement with contentious

politics, it shifts the look away from the persistence of the ‘collective’ dimension (Kavada, 2015; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015), especially because, while insisting on the individualization of meaning-making processes, it leaves out the standardization of ‘packaging’ / branding ones. This paper argues that the connective and the collective are both important elements of social movements, and that whereas the connective gained more visibility in digitally-mediated movements, the collective can still be recognized by moving the observation to a higher degree of abstraction: from the one of the content traced by personalized meaning-making processes, to the one of the surface traced by the branding of contention. ‘Contentious branding’ is defined here as the process by which the ontological multiplicity of a social movement is differentiated into one recognizable entity, by means of a standardized semiotic repertoire. This perspective is not necessarily in contradiction with a connective action framework; however, it shifts the point of observation from the personalized nature of framing processes to the shared nature of branding ones – thus bringing the collective back into the picture.

It is important to stress that the argument is not about borrowing the conceptual toolkit of the marketing literature to study social movements; the reference is instead to critical approaches to consumer and organizational studies (e.g., Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2009; Mumby, 2016), according to which branding – a process of connecting / collecting heterogeneous elements through / under recognizable signs – is a flexible device of contemporary capitalism, overflowing the domain of markets, and operating as a resource for identification and organization. Focusing on contentious branding, I argue, might help to put in the spotlight an overlooked dimension of contentious entities; to be faithful to a non-essentialist conceptualization of social movements; and to address the opportunities and challenges of digital research.

The first section of the paper will briefly discuss the concepts ‘social movement’ and ‘branding’, characterizing the proposed idea of ‘contentious branding’. Some insights derived from a broader digital exploration on the uses of the hashtags #Occupy and #Anonymous will then serve to emphasize their variable, incoherent and at times contradictory utilization. The discussion further clarifies contentious branding’s analytical boundaries *vis a vis* neighboring approaches in social movement theory. The conclusion raises some of the epistemological and methodological implications that contentious branding bears for the study of social movements in the digital age.

Social movements and (contentious) branding

Social movements as multiplicities

‘Social movement’ has different connotations in the literature. More exigent definitions presuppose the existence of a definite set of values and opinions (McCarthy & Zald, 1997) or common purposes (Tarrow, 1994). Other definitions, in line with a constructivist approach, emphasize the processual and relational nature of social movements (Diani, 1992; Melucci, 1996). The present paper is not questioning the validity of existing definitions of social movements; nor is it discussing the extent to which the cases discussed should or should not be conceived as social movements. Whereas the argument of contentious branding primarily speaks to the field of social movement studies, it is agnostic about the question of whether or not the presented cases could be properly defined as social movements.

Digitally mediated movements have been already regarded as highly heterogeneous in composition and orientations. Easy-to-personalize frames are strategically deployed to attract a large and diverse base of supporters, who can relate to those symbols, slogans and memes by bringing in their own personal experience, without the pressing need to share a uniform interpretation of those (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). This, however, does not imply that ‘a sense of we’ does not emerge in these movements, as testified by the organizing outcomes and the discursive persistence of collectivity within these ‘crowds’ (Kavada, 2015). This (non-)synthesis of heterogeneous components crucially depends on the recognizability of a set of signifiers that bring a variety of actions, people, issues under the same umbrella(-brand), without the need to align individual or sub-group meaning (Snow et al., 1986).

To be sure, in some cases this semiotic repertoire provides also a clear, albeit general, framing (e.g., ‘Black lives matter’ is an issue frame signaling opposition to anti-black violence); in other cases, however, the framing becomes extremely open-ended (e.g., ‘Occupy’, simply denoting a generic call to action against whatever target) or even utterly opaque (e.g., ‘Anonymous’ is not providing any specific clue as of the orientation of a certain action branded as such; it does provide, however, signals of the adoption of a certain *format*).

Both Occupy and Anonymous can hardly be conceived as unified entities, if the elements that define individuality are drawn, as typical, at the level of their organizational structure or of the meanings being produced. They nonetheless present an element of definite individuality: that of the names, labels, symbols, and other recognizable elements. Focusing exclusively on the connective level, that of online network structures and loose personalized framing (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), would overlook the collective element that still emerges from loosely connoted, but very well denoted signs, (re)producing some kind of ‘sense of we’ (Melucci, 1996; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015).

Whereas signs strive to be coherent and stable, reality is irreducibly complex and changing. What counts as ‘one’ and what counts as ‘many’ is a matter of different points of view: ontologically speaking, any entity is not a unit, nor a multiple, but a multiplicity (DeLanda, 2002; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This general consideration applies to social movements as well and is coherent with the more complexity-oriented understanding of social movements as non-essential entities (Chesters & Welsh, 2005; Melucci, 1996; Uitermark, 2017). However, social movement participants, scholars, and commentators alike are generally forced to put this sensitivity towards complexity into brackets from the very moment in which they assign recognizable, specific, and unitary labels (or icons) to much more blurred, abstract, and multiplicituous objects.

Despite social movement theory having discussed at length the fluid and oddly bounded character of its objects of study (Diani & McAdam, 2003; Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015; Melucci, 1996), implicit delimitations are always drawn in the practice of empirical research and in the development of theoretical models, sometimes challenging the most authentic reflexive epistemological premise.

Contentious branding and the conditions of recognizability

An authoritative source in the field of marketing defines a brand as ‘a name, term, sign, symbol, or design which is intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors’ (American

Marketing Association, 1960). While emphasizing the role of differentiation, this definition reflects a rather firm-oriented, top-down perspective (Smith & French, 2009). Other approaches in marketing place greater emphasis on consumers, defining a brand as ‘a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer’ (Feldwick, 1996, p. 4), arguing that branding is not only about centralized, top-down management strategies, but also (and crucially) about distributed, bottom-up identification dynamics.

Critical perspectives in consumer and organizational studies understand branding as characterized by relationality, openness and indeterminacy (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Mumby, 2016). Whereas brands rely on a recognizable set of signifiers (labels, icons, but also more abstract signs), they produce an affective bond between a product or a company and a variegated set of desires, aspirations, imaginaries (Mumby, 2016), ultimately acting as sources of belonging and identification for consumers (Arvidsson, 2006). In other words, a brand acts as an interface across distinct domains, setting up open-ended relational spaces where heterogeneous and dynamic connections are established (Lury, 2004). This implies that a brand does not fix a determinate constellation of significance but works as a ‘flexible system of capture that is constantly adjusting to shifting meanings, identities, and affects’ (Mumby, 2016, p. 9).

This paper looks at the critical conceptualization of branding beyond its marketing definitions, drawing a parallel between the aforementioned characteristics of branding in contemporary capitalism and the relation between social movements and their semiotic repertoire. It emphasizes the role of branding as a process of differentiation, understood as the production of the ‘conditions of recognizability’ of a social movement; moreover, it acknowledges its contentious character, the controversies surrounding the adoption of a contentious brand and the contingency of attempts to control it.

Branding in itself is not synonymous with semantic diversity; ‘to brand’ something sometimes means to capture the specific universe of significance of a defined target. The adjective ‘contentious’ that qualifies the term brand in this paper highlights the open and contested character of this process – a characteristic of branding in general (Lury, 2004; Mumby, 2016), exacerbated in the less managed realm of social movements. This linguistic choice not only suggests that contention is an object of branding, but also that branding is an object of contention. The Occupy and especially Anonymous brands are at the center of continuous controversy (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015), in that their definitions are highly contingent, shifting and often conflicting. The highly diverse adoption of the same set of digitalized signifiers sets the stage for a methodological shift, as it enables the mapping of a vast social movement surface that could otherwise be erroneously considered more homogeneous and / or circumscribed.

Brand new movements?

While extreme cases such as Occupy and Anonymous bring the branding dimension of contention to light, other examples abound.

To generate awareness around the condition of precarious workers, the Italian collective Chainworkers developed an iconic figure named ‘San Precario’, a parody of a Catholic patron saint. The explicit aim was to express an emergent identity that could bring together the fragmented struggles against post-Fordist capitalism, through what has been sometimes referred to as a ‘meta-brand’ (Chainworkers Crew, 2006; Mattoni,

2016). Occupy Wall Street has already been termed a brand – not without controversy – by both commentators and some of its activists (Yardley, 2011). One of the animators of the Egyptian chapter of the Arab Spring explicitly conceived of the movement's Facebook page as a brand (Poell et al., 2016). It has thus become increasingly common to talk about branding and political contention in the same breath. Nevertheless, we have yet to see a purposeful attempt to focus on the implications of the branding of contention for the study of digitally mediated movements.

Social movements have always relied on symbolic repertoires in order to articulate, condense and express organizational identities. Moreover, this process has always been, to various degrees, open and contested. USSR and China have harshly confronted each other's despite sharing the national banner of the red flag and other references to the 'communist brand'. While we can refer to 'feminism' as a movement fighting for the improvement of women's conditions, radical lesbianism shares politically little with the women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century. Again, some branches of the LGBTQ+ movement place same-sex marriage rights at the top of their agenda, while others reject marriage as a heteronormative institution. Nonetheless, communism, feminism and LGBTQ+ are all labels around which a galaxy of social movement networks is continuously assembled.

The relation between movement and branding processes, however, is not fixed. For the sake of clarity, we can distinguish between different ideal-types of movement-brand relation:

- 'derivative', when branding is merely an extension of a well-connoted mobilization (e.g., the semiotic repertoire of the communist movement);
- 'instrumental', when branding is a tool strategically deployed / adopted for a specific purpose (e.g., Occupy as a modular label to mark a variety of mobilizations);
- 'conflated', when branding appears the only plausible element for the definition of a movement as an analytical unit but does not provide a specific connotation (e.g., Anonymous as an undefined contentious entity).

The point of departure for defining movements approaching the latter ideal-type cannot be elements of their 'content' (goals, ideologies, participants, etc.), otherwise even the less exigent definition of social movement would likely fail; rather, the conceptual and methodological operation of tracing the boundaries of these entities should rely on their 'surface' (labels, icons, slogans). Commonly considered a matter of packaging, branding becomes in this case a constitutive element of the contentious processes to which it relates; in semiotic terms, it denotes more than it connotes. Not only such a subversion of the relation between form and content is coherent with a non-essentialist epistemology of social movements; it actually follows the trajectory of branding in the conceptualization of capitalism, from a mere extension attached to a commodity to the main stake of contemporary economy (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004).

#Occupy and #Anonymous as universal markers of contention

This section presents a brief extract from a broader digital exploration of the uses of the #Occupy and #Anonymous hashtags. It is important to stress that, whereas the results of

this analysis are not the focus of this paper, the idea to depart from more classical frameworks on the study of social movements is an outcome of the epistemological and methodological challenges encountered in the research process and related to its focus on digital traces. The reason to focus on both Occupy and Anonymous is that they approximate the ideal-type of, respectively, ‘instrumental’ and ‘conflated’ movement-brand relation; the first case illustrates how existing mobilizations had the strategic interest to (contentiously) brand themselves after Occupy Wall Street; the second case exemplifies how the only plausible definition of what is Anonymous should rely on its contentious branding.

The #Occupy and #Anonymous hashtags have been followed on Twitter, via the public Streaming API, in the time range October 2011 – March 2013 and December 2012 – November 2015 respectively. Public Facebook pages including the stem ‘occupy’ and ‘anon’ have been crawled and scraped for comments, between March and April 2016. Whereas these time ranges are rather arbitrary, and thus a different selection could have resulted in a different overview of the cases, the goal of the following sections is simply to showcase the extreme diversity of the many more iterations of the two contentious brands. The resulting datasets have been analyzed with network analysis and computer-assisted text analysis techniques. A variety of samples, both based on measure of content popularity and randomized ones, have also been generated for close reading.

As mentioned, presenting the empirical results of this research is out of the scope of this conceptual paper. What matters here is that great part of the research process has been confronted with the challenge of arbitrarily setting the conceptual and empirical boundaries of ‘the Occupy and Anonymous movements’ within hashtags-delimited datasets.

The overview of Occupy and Anonymous presented in the following sections do not constitute any sort of representative outlook. The selection process followed a purposive sampling (Palys, 2008), since the goal is to provide evidence of extreme traits in order to make a more general theoretical point.

Occupy what?

The expression ‘the Occupy movement’ usually denotes a network of mobilizations, already composite and complex, which arose in late 2011, sharing the practice of occupying squares or parks, in the name of the loose master-frame and the project of identity condensed in the ‘we are the 99%’ meme (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Schneider, 2013). The unsustainability in the long term of the encampments and the failure, or refusal, to turn the experience into a classical, more institutionalized social movement organization, led to the decline of the protest wave. By the beginning of 2012, a large part of the occupations had either been raided or evicted by the police, or spontaneously dismantled by the protesters. Nonetheless, spot occupations and events, as well as direct spin-offs of the movements, continued to pop up here and there: starting with Wall Street, a countless number of other institutions, locations, events, issues and items became the suffix of the Occupy (meta-)brand in the following weeks, months and years.

Some of these reiterations have more or less clear connections with the original Occupy Wall Street event, while many of them represent more distant or even unrelated

mobilizations, ranging from few high-resonance cases to supposedly thousands, more or less relevant and very heterogeneous initiatives that, in recent years, have reiterated the contentious brand Occupy.

On 1 January 2012, the Nigerian federal government decided to remove a subsidy on petroleum products, spurring a drastic increase in the fuel price. The next day, protests took place across the country, with thousands of people flooding the streets, shutting down petrol stations and blocking the traffic. Solidarity events took place in other countries as well. This episode signaled the emergence of an enduring national movement, involved in protesting a wider range of local concerns, like corruption and poverty. This movement came to be known as Occupy Nigeria (see <http://eie.ng/occupynigeria>; <https://twitter.com/occupynigeria>; <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Occupy-Nigeria>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Nigeria). This episode clearly shows how a mobilization that developed out of very specific local conditions ended up branding itself after what was perceived as the most successful contentious brand of that moment.

At the end of October 2012, the massive Hurricane Sandy hit the Atlantic coast of the United States, spreading death and destruction in many areas, especially New Jersey and New York. In the aftermath of the disaster, former Occupy Wall Street members and newly recruited volunteers set up an extended disaster-relief network. Occupy Sandy organized distribution sites, fundraising and neighborhood empowerment projects, and made a contribution to the recovery that was comparable to that of much more resourceful charity organizations (see <http://occupysandy.net>; <https://twitter.com/OccupySandy>; <https://www.facebook.com/OccupySandyReliefNyc>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Sandy). Whereas the Occupy Sandy initiative partially developed out of the existing Occupy Wall Street network, it manifests the strategic attempt to re-purpose the visibility and reputation of a well-established contentious brand for a radically different purpose than that of protesting Wall Street.

During the Italian presidential elections, in April 2013, the Democratic Party (PD) experienced harsh internal turbulence, due to the way the majority of the party dealt with the process of proposing a candidate. The latent tension within the party, between the ruling class and the left-wing area, exploded in a series of protests and parallel party initiatives, which labeled themselves 'OccupyPD'. The mobilization turned into the establishment of an internal lobby, pressuring the party to change its plans for an alliance with the right-wing and taking a more clearly left-wing position (see <http://www.occupypd.it>; <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyPd>; <https://twitter.com/OccupyPD>). This example shows a rather ironic engagement with the Occupy brand, in a context (Italian intra-party politics) that nothing has to share with its original connotations, demonstrating how the contentious brand has taken up a life of its own, capable of expressing a fundamentally different type of contention.

On 17 March 2015 a group of students and staff occupied an administrative room of the prestigious London School of Economics (LSE), to protest against the neoliberal character of education and working conditions. The example of the LSE activists was followed by a number of actions in other institutions, such as Kings' College and Goldsmiths College, and the protest groups all took up the 'Occupy' name. OccupyLSE, OccupyKCL, and OccupyGoldsmiths, among others, together set up a national movement of Free Universities, establishing direct connections with similar struggles going on in the Netherlands and Quebec (<http://occupylse.tumblr.com>; <https://twitter.com/GoldOccupation>; <https://>

www.facebook.com/OccupyKCL). This wave of protest is an example of how as of 2015 – four years after the Occupy uprisings proper – a countless number of entities of all sorts, sometimes rather disconnected with the original protests, still exhibit a reference to the brand Occupy.

Whereas in many cases a variation of Occupy has been used to simply name a direct branch of the original movement/s in a specific city (e.g., #OccupyBoston, #OccupyLA, #OccupyLondon) or to signal its involvement with a specific issue (e.g., #OccupyTheHood, #OccupyTheFed, #OccupyHomes), in the following years several adaptations started to brand quite independent contentious instances, ranging from major uprisings all over the world to Italian intra-party politics (or even TV shows).

Anonymous who?

The origins of Anonymous are rooted in the Internet platform ‘4chan’ (Coleman, 2015; Olson, 2013), a simple bulletin board where anyone can post images and comments under the nickname ‘anonymous’. Started around 2004 as a collective noun adopted to brand a number of pranks and harassment episodes, Anonymous evolved in a few years into a proper actor of political contention, making the unexpected transition ‘from the lulz to collective action’ (Coleman, 2011). Its name and iconography have been since then associated with countless initiatives, operating on – and offline, involved with disparate social movements’ issues. Notable is the recognizability of Anonymous’ aesthetics, in particular its iconic symbolism: the headless man in suit and the popular Guy Fawkes’ mask. Dozens of spin-offs (LulzSec, Million Mask March, AnonGhost, to name a few) have rebranded themselves to mark their specificity, though maintaining a direct reference to Anonymous’ symbolism and often claiming to be part of the wider ‘Anonymous family’. Whereas conceptualizing Anonymous as a social movement might be considered controversial, this entity has been involved or evoked in countless mobilizations, protests, and activist groups – thus its relevance for the field of political contention largely speaking is beyond doubt.

This section presents a exert from a heuristic categorization of the social movements’ issues associated with the complex trajectory of the Anonymous’ brand. The list is based on the analysis of three years of activity on Twitter (1 December 2012–30 November 2015), collected by exploiting Twitter Streaming API, following the hashtag ‘#Anonymous’. The resulting dataset corresponds to 6,754,197 tweets, which have been inspected focusing on so-called Anonymous operations, in order to grasp which issues have been covered by the Anonymous brand. An Anonymous operation is a sustained campaign that is concerned with a specific issue or target. Tweets related to a specific operation generally include a hashtag in the form #Op[name of the operation]. In order to assess the macro-issues involved in the activity of Anonymous associates, the list of 911 hashtags related to relevant operations (comprising at least 50 tweets) has been clustered according to patterns of co-occurrence.

The theme of Internet freedom is a candidate for being considered the master issue of Anonymous’ heterogeneous components, since the web is often represented as their homeland. On the one hand, champions of this cause such as Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Aaron Swartz have been a direct inspiration for a number of crucial operations. On the other hand, many unrelated targets attracted the interest of Anonymous

precisely because of their violations of the principal of transparency and information freedom.

In quite a strong contrast to the common picture of Anonymous, however, the numerically most consistent area of intervention in the date range analyzed is the fight against the state of Israel and in support of the Palestinian cause. Having originated in 2012, as a response to the Israeli threat to cut off Internet communication in Gaza, #OpIsrael turned into a sustained operation, with a consistent Islamist background, converging on 7 April as a date to 'wipe Israel off the web'. The operation has also attracted criticism in relation to alleged anti-semitic currents.

Despite ending up associated with radical Islamist groups via the common cause of anti-zionism, the Anonymous' operations that gained greater media visibility is the wave of actions launched against the Jihadist galaxy online. In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and following the Islamic State supporters' offensive in Paris in November 2015, Anonymous' most visible target became the self-proclaimed Islamic State, and the Jihadist universe more widely. #OpISIS provided unprecedented visibility to Anonymous on mainstream media and contributed to a general reframing of its reputation. However, it also created two opposite sources of controversy, involving the close relation of some of its offshoots with either Western intelligence or the radical Islamist world.

Since its debut with #OpTunisia and #OpEgypt, Anonymous became a constant presence in scenarios of uprisings against authoritarian regimes all over the world, attacking government websites and accounts, as well as providing support to protesters. The list of interventions includes the civil war in Syria, the Gezi protests in Turkey, the street demonstration in Venezuela, the 'umbrella revolution' in Hong Kong and the 'Euromaidan' protest in Ukraine. In some of these scenarios, Anonymous operations emerged both in support and against the protesters.

The Ku Klux Klan overtly threatened the protesters during the 2014 Ferguson protest against police violence and racism. As a response, Anonymous launched a huge effort directed toward 'unhooding' KKK members. Similarly, other operations have targeted white-supremacist and Nazi organizations, as an expression of an openly anti-fascist Anonymous branch.

Among the variegated ideological orientations of Anonymous affiliates, a conspicuous cluster engages with themes that would be generally framed as part of a conspiracy theory orientation. The related operations include campaigns against chemical trials and geo-engineering projects, which are accused of manipulating the climate and causing natural disasters, as well as against the plan for a New World Order endorsed by the powerful Masonic clique, the Illuminati.

It is worth reminding that these examples are just a selection based on relatively popular operations, while the long-tail of operations (the overall analysis counted as many as 911 distinct ones with more than 50 tweets) covers a span that (out of metaphor) approximates the whole spectrum of issues a social movement could be possibly involved with. While some of these issues are rather compatible, plain contradictions abound. Whereas sectors of the anti-jihadist component have been flirting with US intelligence,² the anti-zionist one seems to accommodate a minority of ISIS sympathizers. Whereas Anonymous Ukraine has backed the EuroMaidan protesters, Anonymous statements appeared denouncing the fascist nature of the newly established pro-NATO government. Whereas anti-racist operations have a clear far left-wing orientation, anti-conspiracy

ones are markedly conservative. This list could include dozens of other striking, at times bizarre contradictions emerged from the exploration of Anonymous' digital traces.

Contentious branding and other social movement processes

This section examines the relation between contentious branding and neighboring approaches. It argues that the traditional conceptual toolkit of social movement theory falls short in accounting for the extreme semantic heterogeneity detected; not much because it lacks analytical value in general, but rather because it does not account for the role of (digital) signifiers in assembling the heterogeneous social movements' surfaces that (digital) social movement researchers normally explore.

Organizational approaches to social movements have made use of concepts derived from economic and organization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). But because 'social movement organizations' generally have well defined boundaries, structures and goals, the approach seems poorly suited for understanding phenomena such as Anonymous: the authenticity of its actions is constantly challenged (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015), its ideological references contradictory (Fuchs, 2013) and the spectrum of its goals, as shown here, is virtually infinite. However, the complementary, broader notion of 'social movement sector' also fails to describe entities with definite (proper) names, recognizable logos, standardized slogans and common imaginaries.

The organizational dimension of branding reveals itself in how standardized repertoires of contention (Tilly, 1986) are transmitted across locales – not so much through inter-organizational contacts or complex isomorphic processes, but through the spread of organizational packages, forms of 'cloud protesting' (Milan, 2015) condensed by symbolism flexible enough to adapt to heterogeneous circumstances (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). While the idea of the modularity of repertoires is not new (Tarrow, 1994), contentious branding considers the role of surface and 'packaging' – more or less beyond the content – in fostering trans-local spillovers. Occupy presents a vivid example of this spill-over effect: The tactic of occupying public space for extended periods; the 'We are the 99%' slogan used to express identity; and the opportunities presented by hooking up to the #Occupy (meta-)hashtag, all spread to hundreds of local contexts around the world. But the sudden, far-reaching scale-shift of Occupy was not due to a linear process of diffusion (McAdam et al., 2001). Rather, the synchronous branding strategies of local choreographers – coevolving with the growth of a public of supporters (Gerbaudo, 2012; Kavada, 2015) – fueled the recognizability and success associated with the Occupy brand, the emergence of the 2011–2012 global protest wave, and the reiteration of the brand over the following years in mobilizations such as Occupy Nigeria or Occupy Central.

The perspective of contentious branding shares with framing approaches to social movements the focus on processes of signification (Benford & Snow, 2000). The similarities are clear when we consider that frames are interrelated and sometimes combine in 'condensing symbols' (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) that act as short-cuts to invoke chains of associations. Nevertheless, there are substantial differences between the two processes (Poell et al., 2016): Whereas framing is a matter of semantic convergence, branding is a matter of surface convergence, thus leaving room for extreme levels of semantic incoherence (Mumby, 2016). Occupy and Anonymous are signifiers that do not necessarily provide shared orientations and meaning, which are commonly

understood constitutive elements of framing. The Occupy signifier has fluctuated between radical, progressive and libertarian orientations, while Anonymous symbolism has been invoked to fight for and against the very same cause. The role of a symbol condensing struggles as different as defending internet freedom and exposing the Illuminati conspiracy cannot convincingly be interpreted in terms of 'frame alignment', a process that assumes a link between diverse interpretative frameworks (Snow et al., 1986).

Whereas Occupy is commonly linked to the 'master-frame' (Snow & Benford, 1992) of protesting economic inequality, this frame has itself been framed with distinct connotations. The range of mobilizations adopting the Occupy brand quickly moved beyond this frame, ultimately losing reference to it. The presence of the marker Occupy simply denotes that 'a protest is going on' – hardly a 'master-frame' but a 'meta-frame'. Whereas a master-frame is a matter of degree of generality, a meta-frame is a matter of degree of abstraction. The same applies to the Guy Fawkes masks still appearing at many street demonstrations.

A crucial debate over digitally mediated movements concerns the applicability of the concept of collective identity, a construct adopted by social movement theory with rather different connotations (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). The relation between Occupy and Anonymous and this notion is ambiguous. According to some interpretations of highly diverse social movements, incoherence questions their collective dimensions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; McDonald, 2002). But these same entities can also manifest a strong sense of unity and 'we-ness' (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Kavada, 2015), not only implied by their adoption of a standardized set of semiotic tools, but explicitly seen in their documents and slogans. 'We are the 99%', 'Occupy Together', 'We are Family', 'United as One' – the pervasiveness of such rhetorical devices shows the relevance of collective identification processes.

Whereas collective identity is often associated with homogeneity and coherence, its proper definition specifies that identity is to be understood as the processual outcome of negotiation and even conflict (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Melucci, 1996). Contentious branding, however, operates on a different degree of abstraction than that of identity: whereas identity is a matter of recognition, branding is a matter of conditions of recognizability; it refers to the semiotic materials that allow for different layers of collective identification to emerge. Again, in the analyzed cases, this process relies less on *semantic* connections and more on *surface* connections. Who Anonymous' *is* is not just the performative co-construction of interacting definitions, but also an explicitly underdetermined property of this entity. The identity of the 'collective' Anonymous is thus inherently contingent and paradoxical. The tension between the poles of unity and diversity is clear in the analysis of Anonymous' counterintuitive self-definitions, oscillating between the open recognition of diversity and its constant denial, the recurrent attributions of inauthenticity and persistent references to unity (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Processes of differentiation among its offshoots, moreover, constitute Anonymous as a sort of 'umbrella-brand', a meta-layer of identification among largely independent sub-identities.³

The point of a contentious branding approach is that identification processes are deployed at different degrees of abstraction some relying on distinct symbolic elements without much reference to the meanings contingently associated with them (e.g., from local instances, sometimes relatively and / or temporarily cohesive, to a higher layer

entailing plenty of contradiction). The shared orientations constituting a ‘sense of we’, on a higher level of abstraction, are largely drawn by the surface of the Anonymous brand rather than from the cacophony of its semantic.

Conclusion: connecting and collecting

The framework that has gained most traction in the interpretation of digitally-mediated movements is the one developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2013), according to which digitally-mediated movements are governed by a novel logic of connective action, largely made possible by the diffusion of individual action frames through personalized communication channels. This model has great value in highlighting distinctive dynamics that govern digitally networked protests, including their diversity, spillovers, and network aspects. However, there is more to contentious branding than the connective, framing and personalized aspects of digitally mediated movements. As argued above, #Occupy and #Anonymous are not necessarily less conducive of a collective logic than other contentious entities; collectivity seems to still unfold at different levels of abstraction – from the local to the global, and at various fractional intersections. Their unifying element, and their identifying label in particular, can hardly be conceived a shared frame; it does not guide the production of meanings (ideology, targets, issues), as testified by their role as universal marker of protests. Moreover, their style of communication is not necessarily personalized; rather, what we observe is a process of standardization of communicative practices, associated to highly diverse groups and motives, around an already-recognizable set of signifiers. The connective action model explains how individual participants mobilize for their own motives, but not how this assembly process works at different levels (individual, local group, coalition, protest wave, etc.), sometimes providing a (more or less) loose, general framing, but other times simply manifesting a paradoxical, abstract branding. While the connective model focuses on the personalization of the content, contentious branding recognizes the standardization of the format.

The puzzle introduced by Occupy and Anonymous lies at the intersection of semiotic and ontological considerations: phenomena connected through / collected under a singular set of signifiers showcase contradictory properties that challenge their attributed individuality. Brands are interfaces that generate continuous surfaces across discontinuous domains (Lury, 2004): Similarly, contentious branding produces a uniform surface (e.g., symbolism, labeling and naming) that bridges and, at the same time, wraps diverse content (e.g., issues, targets, ideologies). On the one hand, contentious branding ‘connects between’, brokering otherwise largely disconnected entities – an aspect captured by the connective model. On the other hand, contentious branding also ‘collects under’, wrapping the semantic diversity of an array of items into a recognizable surface – an aspect that the connective model leaves out.

The difference between connecting and collecting depends on one’s point of observation – probably the reason why the connective / collective debate eludes resolution. Not by chance, approaches that emphasize organizational dynamics prefer the connective element (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), whereas those that emphasize identification processes defend the properly collective character of movements (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Contentious branding invites to look at the organizational and the identity

level in the same breath – similarly to the way branding is a mode of organization leveraging on sense of affection and belonging (Arvidsson, 2006; Mumby, 2016).

The problem of the collective and the connective can be understood as a matter of point of observation, similar to the problem of the whole and its parts (Latour et al., 2012). Following Occupy or Anonymous digital traces, as opposed to engaging ethnographically with their more prominent instances, does not lead to isolate a semantic core; rather, it leads to trace a tremendously diverse assemblage of struggles inhabiting the same social movement surface on a higher degree of abstraction. Digital media can be exploited by social researchers as devices that materialize social processes and contentious branding invites a shift in the focus of observation, suggested by the digital nature of the traces left behind by social movements. To take contentious branding as an analytical unit means exploring a novel ‘social movement surface’, equating the arbitrary boundaries of the analytical object to the (digitally) objectified boundaries of the empirical one. This strategy proved useful for Occupy and Anonymous because, within their digital datasets, the continuity of the empirical spectrum between ‘the original social movement’, its ‘diverse derivations’ and ‘illegitimate appropriations’ (as well as the many intersecting layers of these multiplicities) made the drawing of boundaries based on other definite criteria a daunting task. It must be noticed that social movement scholars are themselves often key contributors in branding a social movement as such, conventionally delimiting and / or labeling an ontological multiplicity, thus converting an undifferentiated contentious process into a differentiated social movement.

Given their inherent porousness (Diani & McAdam, 2003) and non-essentialist properties, identifying the boundaries of movements is always an analytical act (Melucci, 1996). To focus on the branding of social movements means bringing to the surface the process by which an unbound, relational, complex assemblage comes to be perceived as ‘one social movement’. As a conceptual device, contentious branding makes explicit properties of social movements that would otherwise remain (at best) implicit or (at worst) neglected: that movements are multiplicities, non-essential entities with under-determined boundaries and qualities (Chesters & Welsh, 2005; Melucci, 1996; Uitermark, 2017), but with sometimes quite visible and distinctive semiotic properties. Focusing on contentious branding allows us to bring to the surface the complexity of social movements, avoiding the risk of essentializing – being that due to naive epistemological assumptions or due to merely practical reasons. Contentious branding, then, is a distinctive vantage point that exploits the research affordances (Weltevrede, 2016) of digital devices. The contribution of a contentious branding perspective is to provide grounds to the analytical process of boundary-setting, while being faithful to a non-essentialist view on social movements – a strategy that becomes much more feasible following the digitalization of social movement processes, and much more useful considering their growing complexity.

Notes

1. The episode was reported by the Italian journalist Bruno Ballardini on the newspaper ‘Il Fatto Quotidiano’ (<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/03/01/anonymous-colto-disorpresa-dallisis/1463946/>). For sake of clarity, the seemingly pro-ISIS message was posted in the name of the Islamist hacker group AnonGhost, not in the name of Anonymous.

Despite often associated, the two ‘groups’ have recently stated their mutual independence. However, both the name and the most common logo of AnonGhost makes a direct reference to the Anonymous brand.

2. See for example the case of CtrlSecGroup: <https://mic.com/articles/129679/anonymous-vs-isis-how-ghostsec-and-ghost-security-group-are-targeting-terrorists>.
3. Several groups (such as LulzSec, RedHack, AnonGhost, etc.) have felt the need to further qualify their identity, although without cutting references to the Anonymous umbrella-brand.

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Notes on contributor

Davide Beraldo is a Lecturer in New Media and Digital Culture at the Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam. He holds a PhD (cum laude) in sociology from the University of Amsterdam and the University of Milan, and a master (cum laude) in social sciences. He is currently working on investigating political biases in recommendation systems of popular social media and on developing a Social Movement Studies framework for the conceptualization of data activism. In his PhD dissertation, he explored the epistemological and methodological implications of the digital mediation of social movements, investigating large datasets of social media data related to the Occupy and Anonymous protest movements. His research interests include digital sociology, social movements, algorithms, irony politics, and epistemology of complexity. [email: d.beraldo@uva.nl]

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