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Public Protest 1.0

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Posted By [Timothy Zick](#) On October 12, 2011 @ 11:49 am In [Civil Rights,Culture,Current Events,First Amendment](#) | [2 Comments](#)

The “occupation” of wall street and other spaces across the country originated online, and the protesters have set up their own media camps to disseminate videos and other information to the public. These are some of the unique features of contemporary protests. But what has been striking so far is the extent to which these protesters have relied on older forms of contention and information dissemination.

Like previous protests, this one has claimed public space in order to make a public statement — of discontent and dissatisfaction so far, and perhaps a more affirmative statement in the days to come. (Interestingly, the most prominent space in lower Manhattan — Zuccotti Park — is privately owned, and thus not technically one of the quintessential public forums open for public assembly and debate.) The occupation is physical; like other demonstrations, a substantial part of its power derives from the visual solidarity of its participants and the disruption the occupation is creating (of course, these things may have downsides and costs in terms of the efficacy of protests). The occupation is relying on traditional protest repertoires such as marches and sit-ins — indeed, the Wall Street occupation is in one sense an extended outdoor sit-in. Many of the protesters, though tech-savvy, carry makeshift placards and signs. Some dress in costumes. Some sit in drum circles. Some advocate anarchy. They have trouble finding suitable bathrooms, and have clashed with merchants. To this point, the protesters have sought to move by consensus — a method of organizing that has led to frustration in past movements. They even have their own [newspaper](#)^[1], which they circulate to passersby and others (who says the traditional press is dead?). The press and police have dutifully played their roles too — the cops have used escalated force and the media have demonstrated conflict reporting biases.

This reliance on traditional forms of public contention should not come as a complete suprise. Technology is undeniably useful to protest movements. It can facilitate organization and dissemination of information. It can help protesters bypass media filters, at least to some extent. It can even facilitate sousveillance, or surveillance from the bottom. But as I argued in [Speech Out of Doors](#)^[2], online protests simply do not have the same communicative impact as those that take place out of doors. That impact derives from their physicality, their presence, their human dimension. As one veteran journalist observed with respect to the fledgling newspaper: “[N]ewspapers convey a sense of place, of actually being there, that digital media can’t. When is the last time somebody handed you a Web site?” In a broad sense, that is what traditional protests provide — a sense of place.

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[1] newspaper : http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/10/business/media/wall-street-protesters-have-ink-stained-fingers-media-equation.html?_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y

[2] Speech Out of Doors: <http://www.amazon.com/Speech-Out-Doors-Preserving-Amendment/dp/0521731968>

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