

## Caio Castro Mello

### #OccupyEstelita

The Emergence of Identity as Part of Political Performativity in the Use of Facebook Events by Social Movements



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# #OccupyEstelita:

## The Emergence of Identity as Part of Political Performativity in the Use of Facebook Events by Social Movements

Many people who joined the Spanish 15-M, Occupy Wall Street, and the Brazilian #OccupyEstelita movements rejected the word *activist*, arguing that it did not reflect their activities: online participation supporting Facebook Events – sharing information about the movement online, and inviting friends on Social Media to join the demonstrations.

This project investigated the following question: How is the perception of political self-identity affected by the use of Social Networks? The main object of study was the use of Facebook Events by manifestants from the Occupy Estelita movement in Brazil. We conducted in-depth interviews and questionnaires with the movement's supporters to understand how they perceive their online activities as part of a social mobilization aimed at physical presence on the street.

### Introduction

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, activism is “the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019), while the *Oxford Dictionary* defines it as “the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). Both therefore define the word *activism* as an action that aims to achieve something. The *Oxford Dictionary* is more specific in defining this ‘something’ as “political or social change”.

Searching for the word *activism* on Google Images brings up on the screen many groups of people shouting on the streets. We draw on Google Images as it is a site of reference for many people, one that provides users with a fragmented representation of reality (Mello, 2017). This inherent characteristic of physical presence on the streets is frequently contrasted with the increasing use of the Internet for political protest. The use of Facebook Events by supporters of the protests in Tahrir Square was something that Tufekci (2017) commented on ironically:

A popular Facebook page, created to decry the beating to death of a young man by the Egyptian police, had been the forum for organizing the initial Tahrir uprising and had mustered hundreds of thousands of supporters. An Egyptian friend of mine would later joke that this must have been the first time in history when a person could actually join a revolution by clicking on “I’m Attending” in response to a Facebook e-vite (Tufekci, 2017, p. 22).

Many supporters of the Occupy Estelita movement in Brazil clicked on ‘I’m going’ on Facebook Events without converting this message into physical presence in demonstrations. We have analyzed this phenomenon, which we call Online-Performativity (Mello & Figueiredo, 2018). Drawing on John L. Austin’s theory of speech-acts (1975), we conducted an analysis of the multiple motivations behind the act of clicking on ‘I’m going’ on Facebook Events. We concluded that it did not necessarily mean that people were registering

their interest in attending the event physically, but that it was usually a way for many activists to use the platform to support and spread the idea online. However, this difference between online and offline protest becomes a very important issue when we consider social movements like the Occupies, which are based essentially on physical presence in public spaces. The sense of the concept *public space* is not limited to physical territories, though.

Arguing against Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler (2015) has discussed what makes a place a public space in relation to how people construct their alliances in public assemblies. Butler's approach is extremely important to this study, since she writes about a performative right to appear that transforms the body when it comes into contact with others. It is important here that Butler (2015) included virtual public spaces in her reflections. Despite the philosophical question related to the problematic use of the word *virtual*, it is interesting to consider this bodily demand on what we intend to call online platforms. Butler considers as bodily demands all those demands related to the individual that seeks better conditions of life through the exercise of the right to appear, and that are expressed performatively by the body.

Although many scholars have discussed conflicts between online and offline presence both exhaustively and sometimes pejoratively (by labeling the act on online platforms as *slackactivism*), this study seeks to comprehend what supporters of the Occupy Estelita movement think about their own attitudes online and how their auto-perception of political self-identity is affected by online-performativity in contrast to offline demonstrations.

## Conducting in-depth interviews

As a case study, we conducted in-depth interviews with supporters of the Occupy Estelita movement in Recife, Brazil. Occupy Estelita is a movement of urban intervention that emerged in Recife in 2012 with the aim of fighting to protect a wide public area: the Estelita Pier. This area is of great value to the city because of its history, architecture, culture, and landscape (Lyra, 2015). The area was bought by a consortium, which intended to replace the warehouses from the nineteenth century with twelve corporate towers along the coast.

Occupy Estelita used Facebook Events to invite people to join the demonstrations. But, as the authors have already pointed out in previous studies (Mello & Figueiredo, 2018), there was a very significant contrast between online and offline presence. Many people clicked on 'I'm going' but did not necessarily attend the events in person. We now wish to investigate how this Online-Performativity affects the auto-perception of political self-identity.

As an example of political self-identity, we want to describe how people perceive themselves in relation to the movement. We take into account not only people's self-designation as 'activist', but also the relation between the motivations for using Facebook and the intentions to provoke disruption or not behind this use.

We conducted in-depth interviews through a semi-structured questionnaire, which means that we reproduced some previous questions that could be customized according to people's answers. According to Boyce & Neale (2006), such interviews "are useful when you want detailed information about a person's thoughts and behaviors or want to explore new issues in depth" (Boyce & Neale, 2006, p. 3).

First of all, we accessed the Facebook Event page from Occupy +5 and randomly selected eight users that had attended the event by clicking on 'Going' to make the first contact. After sending each one some messages through the Facebook Messenger, we received feedback from some of them. We then initiated a conversation to explain the purpose of the interview, always being cautious to avoid anticipating subjects that would be dealt with later. It was important to avoid talking about Occupy Estelita before the interview so that participants would not consult any source in preparation for the interview. As we did not receive feedback from all eight people that we had contacted, we continued the process until we had eight participants.

The method of in-depth interviews does not allow the researcher to generalize results. However, the eight interviews can provide us with some material to analyze each person's internal motives, which in turn can help us to elaborate some hypotheses about the phenomenon. All the interviews were conducted in December 2017; they were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

## Results

We initially asked people to talk about themselves – where they live, their age, and occupation. Among them were people from Recife or towns around the capital, and even one person from São Paulo (southeastern Brazil). Most were young (between 15 and 26) and used the Internet heavily and for diverse reasons during their everyday lives. The participants will remain anonymous. Although they support the movement and show their support through Facebook, none said that they considered themselves activists. Even Interviewee-7, who used to be a member of a communication team working as a designer for the Occupy Estelita movement in 2014, said he no longer considered himself an activist.

This has also been verified by Rubén D. García (2014) with regard to the Spanish 15-M and Occupy Wall Street movements, which are social movements similar to Occupy Estelita. According to García, supporters of the Spanish 15-M considered themselves a social movement of persons, rather than activists or militants, terms associated with the “old way of doing politics” (García, 2014, p. 208). When asked about their political orientation, the respondents did not simply answer ‘right-wing’ or ‘left-wing’ but tried to explain what they thought about several themes, and even sometimes bringing together opposite concepts.

**Interviewee-5** – I am black, a woman, feminist and a mother. My principles are all based against any type of prejudice. I am against homophobia, lesbophobia and racism.

**Interviewee-7** – I am left-wing, but not anti-capitalist. Maybe more allocated near to the center.

According to Castells (2012), a majority of Occupy Wall Street supporters did not consider themselves anti-capitalists, either. Fuchs (2012), however, has criticized Castells’ hypothesis, arguing that, when Castells uses the expression ‘the movement’, he is referring to supporters that participated in a survey who are not necessarily activists themselves. “The group of activists that participated in the survey is a subset of the group that designates itself as movement supporters” (Fuchs, 2012, p. 791). The questions that emerge here are: Should movement supporters not be considered as an expressive part of the move-

ment? Can only activists represent social movements? When we refer to the role of web flows in potentializing activists’ voices, are we not referring exactly to the participation of supporters sharing and producing content for their networks?

During the interviews, we could see that some of the participants believe that their manifestation of virtual presence by clicking on ‘going’ or ‘interested’ can help to expand the movement’s visibility. However, the fact that they do not consider themselves activists was also sometimes connected to the fact that supporters believe that actions online are not activism or occupation. As an example, it is possible to read part of the answers of Interviewee-8 below:

Do you consider yourself an activist?

**Interviewee-8** – I think that I am doing nothing. I think that internet is not enough. I support millions of movements, like feminism, or even those for the city rights. But, today, I feel myself too distant.

So, do you think that you are doing politics only on Internet?

**Interviewee-8** – I think I am not. I am very conservative about it. I don’t feel myself doing politics on internet, because I am not doing politics with my body. When people have occupied the public schools I was there, offering workshops and participating in meetings. But today, I think I am doing nothing because I am just acting on internet.

Although Interviewee-8 attended Occupy Estelita in person, she does not consider herself an activist. She believes in politics only when her body participates in the process. Although she says that showing support on the Internet does not contribute to the movement, she also believes that she is helping to propagate the movement’s ideals through her actions online.

Drawing on Butler (2015) and her statements on embodied speeches, we propose understanding the use of Facebook Events to show support for social movements as part of the construction of an identity online. It means the desire not only to be recognized as a supporter, but also to be connected to all the symbols that make up the concept as an expression of the self. To be a pro-Occupy Estelita person is also to be anti-racist, pro-feminist, and so on. Although many researchers

have shown that the way that people express their political orientation has changed, Facebook remains a place where users must determine who they are and what they stand for. It helps users to be recognized as owners of a coherent profile and therefore as part of a community based on their beliefs.

## Preliminary Conclusions

While people think that they are not occupying through Facebook, they also believe that they are contributing by showing interest in events. It seems that Facebook simulates a territory where people can 'go' online. And they 'go' when they click on Facebook Events. However, they do not consider this territory as being identical to the place offline, and they also do not consider this act of 'going' as being the same action as others perform when they physically attend the event.

Although it is not the same place, and therefore not replaceable, the use of Facebook Events to engage people in social movements is subject to the heterogenic appropriation of its significance, with people using the platform to perform their presence in a virtual territory. Although this territory refers to a real offline space, it is of course not the same. While the performative act of clicking on 'Going' or 'Interested' occurs on all Facebook Events, for those analyzed here it seems to be a subversion of the sense of Occupy, since Occupy needs people in contact in territories offline.

Even though Facebook Events can contribute by sharing information and reaching more people 'for free', it should not be the main strategy used by social movements to engage people. According to the interviews and all of our analyses, the act of attending a Facebook Event is extremely performative in itself, and it has no direct effect on supporters' engagement in real spaces, which is very important for Occupy movements. No direct effect, however, does not mean no effect at all. We cannot measure how efficient this tool can be, but we can attest that people's performance of attendance on Facebook has no relation to their presence physically. Even when they do both (i.e. attending online and offline), they are doing two different things. Butler (1997) has stated that "saying something will produce certain consequences; but the saying and the consequences produced

are temporally distinct; those consequences are not the same as the act of speech" (Butler, 1997, p. 17).

We could add that they are not only 'temporally' but also 'spatially' distinct. Moreover, as a preliminary conclusion, we understand that this process affects how people understand themselves in the political landscape. The virtualization of the action changes the responsibilities that they believe they have as manifestants, and also how they perceive themselves as part or not part of the movements. It seems that there is a limit between both concepts – supporters and manifestants – regarding the opinions of the users interviewed. However, it is also possible to say that these users feel free to move from one to the other with a certain fluidity depending on their momentary interests.

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