The Future of Protest According to VICE

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During the fall of 2011, when Occupy Wall Street inhabited a chunk of New York's Financial District, many of us reporters found ourselves especially fascinated with the media center on the northeast end, a huddle of laptops and generators surrounded (at first) by a phalanx of bikes. I spent a lot of time there myself. After the christening of Tahrir Square as a "Facebook revolution" a few months earlier, this was the place where one would expect to find The Story, the place where the hashtags were being concocted and the viral videos uploaded. From #OccupyWallStreet to #BlackLivesMatter, it has become customary to name our movements after hashtags, and to thank our smartphones for bringing us together and into the streets.

Continued below.
As Occupy blew up around me, and as I tried to figure out what to write about it [1], I was lucky to have the guidance of Mary Elizabeth King, who worked for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the Civil Rights era and went on to become a scholar of movements around the world. I was editing a column of hers then, which gave us an excuse to check in regularly.

"Social media alone are not causative," [2] she wrote in one of her columns around that time. "Nonviolent movements have always appropriated the most advanced technologies available in order to spread their message." This was something she told me again and again. Which is to say: Don't be distracted by the technology—it's not as big a deal as everyone thinks. She helped me listen better to the people themselves, to their ideas and their choices. Such meatspace-centrism also helped me understand why much of Occupy's momentum was lost when police destroyed the physical protest camps.

We're often told, especially by those who profit from them, that the latest gizmos change everything, that they spread democracy as a byproduct of their built-in disruptiveness [3]. But whenever a Facebook-driven protest fills Union Square, I think of the May Day photographs from a century ago, when the same place was just as filled, or more so, by protesters in ties and matching hats—no Facebook required.
Power is still power, and a lot of the techniques for building it and challenging it from the past aren't going away—unless we let ourselves forget them. And I worry that the gizmos many of us depend on are too good at helping us forget.

What online social media excel at is getting an idea out to a large number of people really quickly—but only for a brief period of time. They're great at spurring bursts of adrenaline, not so much at sustaining long-term movements. This shouldn't be so surprising, because the developers of social media networks optimize them for rapid-fire advertising. A labor organizer working with low-wage workers recently lamented to me that many of those she works with are using Instagram—which is even worse on this front than some other popular networks.

"There's only so much you can do by sharing photos," she said.

The problems that viral media present are not entirely new. They're akin to what happened in 1968 in France, when students and artists filled Paris with their slogans and provoked an uprising that nearly brought down the government. And then the unions stepped in—at first, they supported the students, but then, by negotiating with the government and wielding their economic power, the unions took the gains for themselves. A similar story unfolded in the wake of Egypt's "Facebook revolution": The young, tech-savvy liberals may have instigated the uprising's early days, but when the fairest election in the country's history came around, they didn't stand a chance against the Muslim Brotherhood, who had spent decades organizing through neighborhood mosques and
If a viral, revolutionary rupture were to happen in the United States right now, who would be best poised to benefit? Walmart? The military? I doubt it would be the self-styled radicals loosely organized across the country. Whenever I’m in a meeting of anarchists talking about how they’d be stronger if they provided childcare, I think of the evangelical megachurches I’ve been to that are actually doing it, big time.

Effective resistance movements depend on networks that are flexible, durable, and can adapt their strategies to changing conditions over time. They need to provide support to members and would-be members who want to ditch the institutions that prop up the current system. And they need to develop alternative institutions that build a new world in the shell of the old. None of these are things that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat do terribly well—though, in principle, they could.

DemocracyOS (http://democracyos.org/), built by Argentinian activists, and Loomio (http://loomio.org/), built by Occupy veterans in New Zealand, are open-source tools that facilitate collective decision-making; both are already being put to use by a new generation of internet-based political parties. CoBudget (http://cobudget.co/), a new add-on for Loomio, helps groups allocate resources collaboratively. Another open-source project, Diaspora (https://diasporafoundation.org/)—a Facebook-like network that
allows users to control their own data instead of entrusting it to a corporation—works well enough that [CoWorker.org](https://www.coworker.org/) is a platform that helps workers connect with each other and mount campaigns to improve their conditions. Movement-friendly technologies like these, however, tend to be far less market-friendly than their competitors, and don't attract the private investment that commercial platforms use to build a critical mass of users.

Smartphones, meanwhile, make it easier than ever before to document police abuse and blast the evidence out everywhere. Organizations like [Witness](http://witness.org/) are equipping activists to be even more sophisticated in putting mobile cameras to good use. But these phones also come at the cost of perpetual surveillance by increasingly sophisticated—and militarized—police forces; there are times when they are better left at home.

If you look beyond devices and apps, there are lots of reasons to be hopeful about the future of protest and activism. Never before has there been so much knowledge available about what makes protest effective, or so many [opportunities for getting good training](http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/8-skills-of-a-well-trained-activist/). Researchers like Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan ([https://cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-15682-0/why-civil-resistance-works](https://cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-15682-0/why-civil-resistance-works)) have been sifting through data on past movements to determine what works and what doesn't. Historians, meanwhile, are [rediscovering forgotten stories](http://recoveringnonviolenthistory.org/) of popular uprisings that shaped our world. The [country's first program in civil resistance](http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/meet-stellan-vinthagen-head-first-university-program-civil-resistance/), at
the University of Massachusetts Amherst. It offers hope that someday schools teaching people power may be more plentiful than war colleges.

One thing that struck me over and over during my time among the Occupy encampments was the amnesia. The young activists' familiarity with protest movements even a decade or two before theirs was scattered and piecemeal compared to their knowledge of celebrities, wars, and empires. Perhaps this is why so many participants succumbed to despair when the movement didn't succeed quite as wildly as they'd hoped after just a few months. Perhaps, too, this is why so many people have given up on the Arab Spring after the horrors of Egyptian military rule and the Islamic State. We forget that the French Revolution underwent similar throes in its Reign of Terror and the rise of Napoleon; paradoxically, it was through Napoleon's autocratic conquests that democratic ideas spread. In the United States, critics of Occupy fault it for not becoming more mixed up with electoral politics, like the Tea Party, but they rarely notice how it enabled the rise of progressive politicians like Bill de Blasio and Elizabeth Warren.

That protest may be over, but the movement is not. I hope that those fighting the racist justice system today keep a longer view in mind than Occupiers generally did.

If there is one thing I have learned from covering protests, it is not to trust anyone's predictions—including my own. Movements will always surprise us. But I think we know enough now to stop expecting some killer app to come along and change the world for us. That's something we'll have to do ourselves.