



Contentious Branding. Reassembling Social Movements through Digital Mediators

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Summary

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This dissertation wishes to contribute to the sociological debate on protest movements by developing the notion of ‘contentious branding’ as a reflection emerging from the digital exploration of two empirical cases that challenge social movement theory: Occupy and Anonymous. The research was orientated by three interrelated questions operating at a methodological, empirical and theoretical level: How can digital research remediate the study of social movements? What sort of assemblages are articulated around the contentious brands Occupy and Anonymous? How does a branding perspective add to or amend traditional theories of social movements?

The argument is built on a complexity-orientated epistemological background, interweaving insights derived from assemblage theory, actor-network theory, socio-semiotics and second-order cybernetics. The empirical research has been undertaken by means of digital techniques: Application Programming Interfaces of popular social media (mostly, Twitter and Facebook) have been pulled for data; the #Occupy and #Anonymous hashtags have been employed as research devices to set the limit of the analysis; and the datasets have been explored mostly by means of network analysis and computer-assisted content analysis techniques.

The core contribution of the dissertation is to introduce and develop, within the field of social movement theory, the notion of ‘contentious branding’, to cope with the theoretical challenges highlighted by the empirical sections. A branding perspective on social movements not only fits these specific cases better: it intends to provide an epistemological and methodological device, to sustain a non-essentialist understanding of social movements, especially in the cases of digitalization of empirical phenomena and research methods.

Chapter 2 (‘**Social movements, signification and branding processes**’) presents a literature review of theories of social movements, semiotics and branding. The first section is a brief

historical review of the main families of theory that deal with social movements, highlighting their strengths and limitations, especially with respect to ‘digitally-mediated’ movements. This section starts by introducing earlier socio-psychological perspectives and rationalist models of collective action, then moves to ‘classical’ approaches that focus on resource mobilization and political opportunities, framing processes and collective identities in ‘new movements’. Subsequently, it presents the recent trends in the field, which emphasize emotions, geography and networks as key concepts. After this, a brief review of the relation between new movements and new media is provided. To conclude, the section develops the argument that the discourse on social movements is articulated around a divide between different approaches: in particular, what will be defined as the ‘means-oriented’ versus ‘meanings-oriented’ divide. The need to do away with dualist attitudes is justified by reference to both epistemological considerations and empirical observations.

The aims of the second section are the following. First, it introduces the basic semiotic definitions and processes relevant for the rest of the work; in particular, the distinction between the signifier and the signified, the nested character of signification and the idea of infinite semiotic chains, that together constitute sign systems as topologically recursive. Second, merging insights from semiotics with ecological communication theory, the section will introduce the idea of a ‘bending effect’ that media produce on sign systems. Finally, the relation between semiotics and politics will be discussed, highlighting both the inherent political character of signification processes and the symbolic dimension of power/counter-power dynamics.

The third section seeks to legitimize the translation of the process known as ‘branding’ to the field of social movements and contentious politics. Brands originated in the rise of mass production and have become crucial institutions in the context of global informational capitalism. While they can be denotatively defined as semiotic elements that allow for the recognition of something, their connotative definition is more controversial, because they are both the outcome of ‘top-down’ strategic devices of management and ‘bottom-up’ emergent cultural expressions of publics. Whereas branding is classically associated with products and companies, nowadays ‘place branding’, ‘political branding’ and ‘personal branding’ have become established fields of research: everything can be an object of recognition, thus everything can be branded. Given their peculiar ontological heterogeneity, openness and modularity, brands can be paradigmatically depicted as assemblages that capture and articulate diverse meanings. While the proposal to juxtapose branding and social movements may sound provocative, so-called ‘movement marketing’ already conceptualizes social

mobilizations as driving forces for market innovations and brands' success, while, more relevantly, theories of social movements have already started to transgress this semantic boundary.

The chapter ends by proposing a heuristic distinction between 'orders of contention', which will serve as a prism for the analysis of the empirical cases: the syntax, the semantic and the ethic of contention. A key proposition for the overall argument states that contentious branding highlights the role that the syntax of contention plays in shaping a blurred ethic of contention, thus articulating a potentially diverse semantic.

Chapter 3 ('**Occupy What?**') tries to analytically isolate the Occupy 'contentious brand' from the Occupy 'social movement', through the means of empirical data and examples. It argues that the peculiar relation between the means and the meanings characterizing this empirical case suggests this epistemological move, useful in order to have a better grip on the challenging fluidity of the movement's semantic, spatial and temporal boundaries. The research questions leading the analysis can be formulated as: *Occupy what?*

The first section presents an assessment of the associations of the Occupy brand, following three dimensions: semantic (Occupy what?), spatial (Occupy where?) and temporal (Occupy when?). First, it reconstructs the overall variations of the #Occupy meta-hashtag, showing that a marker related to a specific target and event undergoes countless processes of re-semanticization, following a number of dimensions. Then, it looks in-depth at the spatial properties of the movement/s, proposing various analyses of the complex geography behind and between the digital and the physical presence of Occupy. Finally, the section enlarges the temporal span in order to show the persistence of the contentious brand beyond the momentum of the specific movement, presenting some of the initiatives that have reiterated a reference to Occupy in recent years. The overall aim is to provide empirical evidence for the need to conceive of an abstract entity, 'contentious brands', that are analytically autonomous from what is commonly referred to as 'social movements'.

The next section presents and analyses the distinctive features of the Occupy movement/s, both in organizational and identity terms. The expression 'Occupy' here refers to the protest wave that, in late 2011, originated in Zuccotti Park, New York, and spread all over the world, bringing together a number of local networks sharing the following elements: the practice of the occupation of public spaces; the intensive adoption of social media; the project of identity ('we are the 99%'); loose claims of economic justice developing into much more

heterogeneous goals. After a presentation of the origins of the Occupy epidemic, each of these elements is covered in a specific paragraph; the argument, though, specifically pertains to the need to understand their inter-relatedness and the resulting subversion of the relation between the ‘form’ and the ‘substance’ of this entity, which is explicitly sought by Occupy activists.

This chapter aims at contributing to the debate on contemporary social movements, by suggesting the relevance of the dimension of branding for understanding the peculiarities of the ‘Occupy entity’ as a whole, as well as for tackling the challenges related to the analytical delimitation of the boundaries of the movement/s. The conclusion contends that Occupy manifests a rearticulation of the relation between the means and the meanings of protest. Local movements from all over the world have seized the opportunity to hook up flows of solidarity and visibility, replicating the same protest tactic directly denoted by the label ‘Occupy’, purposefully developed as an open container for yet-to-specify grievances.

The case that is the object of Chapter 4 (**‘Unfolding Anonymous’**) approximates to a greater extent the ideal-type of contentious branding. Scholars and commentators have adopted a plethora of expressions to refer to Anonymous, ranging from the more demanding terms to more cautious formulations: a ‘social movement’, a ‘hacktivist collective’, a ‘loosely associated protest network’, an ‘internet phenomenon’, and a ‘collective label’. Consequently, a straightforward question arises: *what is Anonymous?* The proposal of this work is to characterize Anonymous as a ‘contentious brand’, which means focusing on the connective potential related to its standardized semiotic repertoire. Methodologically, the chapter adopts a structural-relational perspective, involving exploiting Twitter data. The general goal is to show empirically the limits and contradictions related to conceiving of Anonymous as an individual social movement; the alternative proposal is to interpret Anonymous as a ‘contentious brand’ appropriated by and interacting with various mobilizations.

The first section of the chapter focuses on the structural properties of the network of interactions between users whose activity is branded as being related to Anonymous. The goal is to understand to what extent Anonymous can be analyzed as a single network, either maintaining a certain structure over time or involved in an overall process of evolution. This section focuses on the structural evolution of the network of interactions between users. It

concentrates on patterns of stability, compactness and centralization, showing how the network surrounding the hashtag #Anonymous on Twitter demonstrates oscillating behavior. The second section moves to the ‘semantic’ level of social movement goals and issues of concern, it elaborates on the hashtags included in the Twitter corpus already presented. In particular, the focus will be on the hashtags related to Anonymous operations. The aim is to understand whether a core mission of Anonymous can be isolated – e.g. the fight for internet freedom. The hashtags related to operations are mapped and aggregated in order to propose a heuristic categorization of the many, distinct ‘souls’ behind Anonymous activism, each characterized by quite divergent goals, targets and concerns. The observation of the dynamics of operations leads to the conclusion that there is no dominant issue, or set of issues, which is stable across time; conversely, Anonymous targets are always shifting, and users’ flows sometimes converge on specific issues, while at other times they diverge toward heterogeneous targets. The various operations are structurally connected due to a minority of users flowing from operation to operation, though each operation presents a largely independent constituency.

Anonymous has often intertwined its destiny with other organizations, mobilizations and causes, promoting campaigns that were found worthy of its endorsement. Interestingly, a number of more or less related offshoots have arisen. This section intends to shed a light on the peculiar process of ‘brand variation’, by assessing the structural relation between Anonymous as a whole and its many offshoots; this is meant to highlight the role of Anonymous as an ‘umbrella brand’ for largely autonomous mobilizations. Matching the dataset of users and hashtags for recurring matching sub-terms results in a list of ‘sub-brands’, some of which are minor variations of the word ‘Anonymous’ with a more connoted meaning, while some are external groups with which Anonymous has collaborated, and others are more ambiguous entities, partially distinct and partially overlapping with Anonymous. These offshoots re-brand themselves to mark their specificity, though they maintain a more or less direct symbolic reference to the Anonymous brand. The analysis of the users’ overlap reveals that whereas few broker users connect most of the offshoots together, these offshoots are largely independent in terms of the long tail of users. The focus on the Million Mask March offshoot shows that, despite its strong symbolic association with Anonymous, consistent modules of the Anonymous network have been almost untouched by the march of 5 November 2013, which took place worldwide. Altogether, these observations suggest the distinctive role of Anonymous as an ‘umbrella brand’ involved in a process of ‘brand differentiation’.

This chapter argues that it is problematic to try to observe Anonymous through the lens of categories that are classically associated with social movements, for many reasons – related to the complex and counterintuitive articulation of this entity. This work wants instead to put into focus the dimension of contentious branding: unfolding the assemblage traced by the ‘Anonymous signifier’, instead of uncovering the essence of Anonymous, allows us to have a better grasp of the ontological status of the entity named Anonymous.

The aim of Chapter 5 (**‘Dividing by zero’**) is to unveil the distinctive Anonymous identity by asking the following question: *who is Anonymous?* This question is answered by analyzing a vast corpus of Facebook pages, mainly by digging into the massive textual data they provide. The first section answers the question ‘who is Anonymous?’, focusing on the orientations that can be identified from the network of pages liked by Anonymous pages. It shows how Anonymous orientations are not only extremely heterogeneous, but also that they are often incoherent or even openly contradictory, manifesting a clear schizophrenic identity. To make this claim apparent, the involvement of Anonymous in the Ukrainian and Venezuelan political crises is briefly presented, showing how its brand is recalled from ‘both sides of a barricade’. To sustain this argument further, another part compares radical left-wing and radical right-wing manifestations of the Anonymous brand –RedHack and Anonymous Patriot– as well as the position allegedly expressed by Anonymous in support of, and against, the conservative and progressive US presidential candidates Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. The section concludes by presenting a radically counterintuitive aspect: not only are directly opposing utilizations of the brand documentable, but also the page-to-page network testifies that contradicting pages are indirectly connected through relationships of ‘likes’. The resulting ‘schizophrenic’ character of Anonymous orientations may be related to a ‘masking effect’ that the standard visual identity of the brand produces on the actual semantic content of its adoptions.

The second section focuses on the recurrent controversies present in the textual corpus, connected with the question of who – individual or collective actor – is ‘really Anonymous’ and can thus legitimately claim its identity, according to Anons’ own words. This means observing cases of discursive production of the boundaries of Anonymous and the recurrent inauthenticity claims. The first, oldest divide is between ‘oldfags’, loyal to a purely recreational adoption of the brand, and ‘newfags’, which redefined Anonymous’ mission as a fight for the good. Second, in order to be part of Anonymous, many Anons would say, you

have to give up your personal identity; but many Anonymous activists do not conceal their names and faces anymore, and temporary leaders have always emerged in Anonymous' history. One of the recurrent (non-)rules defining authentic Anonymous actions is to never attack the media, despite the media being a primal enemy and, indeed, often a target. Anonymous, for its own definition, does not have a fixed character; rather, it takes the emergent form that those who join wants it to take. Analogously, there are no standard procedures for joining: anybody can be Anonymous, without the need for approval or specific knowledge or skills. In a sense, thus, everybody is Anonymous and, at the same time, nobody is really Anonymous. The continuous allegations show, however, that sometimes someone is not Anonymous. For these reasons, nothing can be an 'official' manifestation of Anonymous, but the need to mark the authenticity of a group surrounded by dozens of 'imitations' leads many to adopt this label, with the paradoxical effect of attracting accusations of inauthenticity. The third and final part of this section, alongside presenting exemplificative cases, pulls the threads of the argument: it is the distinction between the authentic and the fake, the original and the copy, which fails when applied to an object like Anonymous.

The last empirical section intends to 'ask' the corpus of Anonymous' posts and comments for spontaneous declarations concerning its own ontological nature: who is Anonymous, in the sense of what are the constitutive elements of Anonymous' identity? Anonymous, first, is a legion: it is not properly one unified entity, nor simply the juxtaposition of many groups; rather, it manifests as the co-presence of different souls that refuse to be captured. Anonymous, however, is also a family: the many diverging opinions and the recurrent infights do not compromise a strong sense of 'we'-ness and unity, which is actively pursued and deemed as vital. Anonymous, in Anons' own words, has a peculiar ontological character, since it is not a group in the conventional sense, nor even something that really exists: it is an abstract idea that can be incarnated in different forms. Anonymous is, moreover, an incoherent machine: the heterogeneity and contradictions between its manifestations, as well as the systematic mismatch between its declarations and its behavior, are anticipated in its own definition. These dimensions altogether make evident how the essence of Anonymous lies in its inessential character.

This chapter's main contribution is to suggest that, from a cybernetic perspective, Anonymous counterbalances schismogenesis by explicitly defining itself in terms of tautologies and paradoxes, thus embracing a radical pattern of recursion. Anonymous' contentious brand, from this point of view, acts as a meta-level capable of integrating

contradictory orientations by anticipating its own schizophrenic character, turning the conditions of its dismantling into the conditions of its reproduction.

The conclusions pull together the arguments advanced in the previous chapters in three lines of reasoning: the analytical autonomy of branding from other social movements processes and its role in supporting a non-essentialist, material-semiotic understanding of social movements; the role of contentious branding in older, pre-digital movements and the specificity of digitally-mediated contentious branding; the relation between the connective and collective levels of organization and identity, and the recursive relation between the means and meanings of contention.

The concluding chapter's first section tries to bring conceptual clarity. It first assesses the relation between branding and various social movement processes studied in the literature and then ventures a definition of branding based on the idea of movements-as-multiplicities and on a material-semiotic understanding of social movements.

The chapter's second section asks whether branding is distinctive to the digitally-mediated contentious entities studied in this dissertation or more generally a part of social movements as such. I argue that Occupy and Anonymous foreground properties that, with a reflexive epistemology, can be seen in classical, pre-digital mobilizations as well. The role of digital media in foregrounding the branding process should not only be sought in the remediation of social movement dynamics but also, following a principle of epistemological symmetry, in the research affordances that digital tools provide to social movement research. The focus on branding generates two hypotheses that bear on the media-movement debate, to be developed and assessed in future work: the role of branding as catalyst and as refractor of contentious processes.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on how social movements are reassembled in the network society: moving from reflexivity towards recursion. Enabled by the affordances of digital media to bring their complexities to the surface, Occupy and Anonymous abstract a meta-level of contention to compensate for their ideological fragmentation and the non-intelligibility of contemporary forms of domination.