

## ISSUE 4

## We are Big Brother: Is social media surveillance a threat to our sense of community?

### ✕ NO

### Social Media for Social Cohesion: The Case of the Toronto G20

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## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the Internet, Web 2.0, and social media has enhanced the potential for community building online, which has increased dramatically as the interface between the digital and the social has become more user friendly. This, in turn, has enhanced the potential of online community building for strengthening community offline. While not uniformly tech savvy, activists have begun adopting and adapting a wide range of digital tools for their social justice work. During the lead up to the Group of 20 (G20) Summit in Toronto in 2010, community organizers relied upon email, texting (SMS), social networking (SNS), and the roster of Google products to mobilize opposition to the G20's economic austerity agenda. They engaged in **open source organizing**, eschewing security culture and using corporate digital technologies rather than the more security conscious online services and applications provided by tech activists.

This strategy of openness created solidarity among activists organizing both locally and remotely. But it also facilitated police infiltration of their groups, and led to pre-emptive arrests of “ringleaders” and the ensuing criminal charges, court cases, and jail sentences. From this perspective, social media appear to be a threat to community, and dangerous for political activists and dissidents critical of current governing and economic regimes. However, in the aftermath of the G20 weekend, which saw widespread civil liberties infractions and “virtual martial law” (Marin, 2010), as well as the largest mass arrests and the largest domestic spying operation in Canadian history, activists again turned to digital technology. Drawing upon the same social networks used before and during the G20, activists shifted from mobilizing the resistance to organizing jail solidarity, court support, legal defence fundraising, and other activities intended to rebuild community and create cohesion.

## **G20 ORGANIZING: USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ENGAGEMENT**

For several months prior to the Toronto G20 Summit (June 26–27, 2010), community organizers planned the G20 “Days of Action”—a weeklong series of protests and demonstrations. The Toronto Community Mobilization Network (TCMN) worked to engage residents of the city by educating them about the G20, its global economic agenda, and the negative impacts on local communities. The focus was not simply on organizing a protest but on “building community power” (Stimulator, 2010). Organizers did this “by holding community forums, free barbecues, free lunches and dinners ... going into immigrant communities, shelters, welfare lines and talking to people” (Stimulator, 2010). Facebook, a privately owned social networking service, was an important outreach tool for TCMN in the engagement process, used to announce the meetings and events and get people involved in the planning sessions associated with this advance organizing.

Preparations for the G20 Alternative Media Centre (AMC) also began in earnest several months before the summit. The Toronto Media Co-op, part of a network of grassroots online news outlets, provided the foundation for the AMC, hosting its web presence as well as the physical media centre. The AMC website, [www.2010.mediacoop.ca](http://www.2010.mediacoop.ca), was designed as a central hub for incoming social network feeds, gathering all posts from Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube tagged with the hashtag #g20report. This meant that as tweets, photographs, and videos were uploaded to the Internet, they would be aggregated in real time on the AMC site, which became a clearinghouse for breaking news during the G20. About a month before the summit, independent journalists from Montreal arrived in Toronto to help launch the media centre’s physical site. Throughout its weeklong operation, the AMC served as a convergence space for independent journalists from across North America, as well as a locus of news production. Google Groups, a discussion forum that operates as a listserv, and Google’s email service, Gmail, were key communication tools for AMC organizers, facilitating internal communication among dozens of volunteers, as well as external communication with more than 100 journalists seeking AMC accreditation.

## **TWITTER REPORTING: SOCIAL MEDIA FOR BROADCASTING**

As much as digital technology, particularly social media, was useful for activists preparing for the G20, it became more crucial as the summit weekend unfolded. “Twitter reporting” emerged as an important news source for both journalists and protesters. Twitter is a social networking service that allows users to send and read text-based posts, or “tweets,” to their followers. Hashtags are a key feature of Twitter, enabling users to mark key words or topics, thus categorizing messages in a way that makes it easy for other users to find and follow them (e.g., #g20, #g20report). During the summit, G20-related posts dominated Canadian Twitter feeds, acting as a conduit for information, misinformation, and likely disinformation. Twitter acted as a “gateway” app to the wider Internet, with embedded links pushing readers to Flickr, YouTube, and the blogosphere, as well as to established media outlets, where more information could be found. Thus Twitter acted as a broadcast medium, albeit one that facilitates audience response, allowing activists to disseminate news and information to potentially vast audiences, including other citizens, mainstream journalists, and politicians.

AMC journalists either tweeted their own reports from the streets or called them in to the media centre, where at least one volunteer was posting official AMC tweets under the Twitter account @2010mediacoop. Other activist organizations also provided regular Twitter coverage, including the Movement Defence Committee (@MDCLegalUpdates), a group of lawyers offering free legal advice to activists, and the TCMN (@G20mobilize). “Long after the network crews had packed up, hours after reporters had filed their stories, Twitter was there, providing real-time news plus links to videos from the protest frontlines” (Zerbisias, 2010). Twitter also served a practical function: by monitoring G20-related hashtags, alternative media journalists could find each other in the midst of actions that often turned dangerous. They could also hear about events as they unfolded, allowing them to deploy quickly to any given scene to provide live updates on the action. Twitter helped protesters to mobilize quickly for a particular action or to avoid “hot spots,” such as police kettles, mass arrests, or raids.

## G20 SOUSVEILLANCE: SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SELF-DEFENCE

The police presence for the G20 was the largest in Toronto’s history, comprising 20 000 public and private officers. The protest turned violent after about 100 activists using the Black Bloc tactic engaged in a vandalism spree in the city’s shopping district on Saturday, June 26. Police stood down, despite monitoring events live via video surveillance cameras that were part of the \$510 million security apparatus (Office of the Auditor General, 2011). They later swept through the downtown core, conducting illegal searches and detentions, including kettles; terrorizing and beating peaceful citizens; and arresting more than 1100 people.

Reacting to the police brutality, activists and onlookers alike used social media defensively. They did so by conducting “inverse surveillance,” filming instances of apparent unlawful police behaviour and uploading footage to social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube (Milberry & Clement, in press). According to Mann (2004), inverse surveillance involves “the recording or monitoring of a high ranking official by a person of lower authority” (p. 627). It is a form of “sousveillance,” a method of surveillance inquiry that engages in “watchful vigilance from underneath” (Mann, 2002). Inverse surveillance “intervenes in the process of surveillance and attempts to undermine or reverse the authoritative power associated with the technology” (Institute for Applied Autonomy, n.d.). Thus, it is a political strategy of individuals “who know very well that mediated visibility can be a weapon in the struggles they wage in their day-to-day lives” (Thompson, 2005, p. 31). Videos and photographs posted in real time to the Internet documented shocking police violence as well as blatant disregard for civil liberties and legal protocol during the G20. The infamous “Officer Bubbles” incident showed Toronto Police officer Adam Josephs threatening to arrest a protester and charge her with assault for blowing bubbles (Freeston, 2010). Captured on video and uploaded to YouTube, the piece went viral, receiving almost a million views and fuelling calls for a public inquiry into G20 policing.

Police abuse of power was not indiscriminate; it soon became clear that police were targeting journalists, both mainstream and independent. AMC journalist Amy Miller was arrested and held for thirteen hours in the temporary G20 jail after she filmed police detaining and searching a group of young demonstrators. “My press pass was ripped off me and I was throttled at the neck,” she recounts (“G20 Toronto,” 2010). Jesse Rosenthal, a freelancer for *The Guardian* and AMC affiliate, was punched in the stomach and back by police while covering a kettling incident. A member of

the Toronto Police Service (TPS) punched Real News Network and AMC journalist Jesse Freeston twice in the face after he filmed the violent arrest of a deaf man. Police seized his microphone, and when he demanded it back, a Toronto Police supervisor gave the order to “just give him another shot” (“Real News Network,” 2010). Familiar with police tactics of harassment and intimidation during protests, AMC journalists created an “emergency response plan” for the media centre in case of a police raid. Part of this plan included filming police with two cameras that stayed on site at all times. On Sunday, June 27, police made two visits to the AMC, and both times, activists filmed the police and streamed the footage live to the web using Qik, a mobile phone application. In one video, the police inform AMC journalists they are there owing to a complaint, to which one journalist responds, “You’ve been on a riot all over the city. And we’ve been documenting it. That’s why you’re here harassing us” (“Police Harassment,” 2010). Over the G20 weekend, at least nine AMC journalists were arrested (Dent, 2010).

## G20 AFTERMATH: THE FAILURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The footage gathered by mainstream and independent media, bloggers, protesters, and onlookers was widely posted on the Internet and circulated via social networking services. Some of it also became evidence in cases investigating police misconduct, including those of Adam Nobody (his real name) and Dorian Barton. Two years later, however, only two officers had been charged with offences relating to the Toronto G20, while multiple calls for an official public inquiry by the provincial government had been rejected (Leslie, 2011). This despite the fact that G20 policing was “at times, disproportionate, arbitrary and excessive” (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2011), resulting in what Ontario’s ombudsman called the “most massive compromise of civil liberties in Canadian history” (Marin, 2010).

Despite bringing about a “new visibility” in policing (Goldsmith, 2010), the use of social media during the G20 clearly failed to hold police to account, either by shaming or “outing” them, or by otherwise proving misconduct. Worse, in some cases, digital **data doubles**—shadows and trails created by activists using corporate social media tools—proved a boon to police surveillance operations, with some of the intelligence gathered becoming evidence used against them in court. In the high-profile trial of Byron Sonne, a computer security expert and alleged “G20 bomber,” police amassed his feeds from Twitter and Flickr, a photo-sharing website, as well as his personal blog postings to build their case against him (Balkissoon, 2011). Sonne was critical of G20 security spending and conducted a “white hat hack”—a benevolent probe—of the G20 security system, which he publicized across his social media networks.

Activists’ use of Facebook to plan the G20 resistance made it easy for police to infiltrate and monitor their groups. Many activists used unencrypted email and text communications via insecure corporate service providers such as Gmail, Hotmail, and Yahoo. Their vulnerability was heightened during the G20 weekend, when Twitter emerged as a key communication platform, creating streams of publicly available cached data regarding the activities, opinions, and locations of activists. The “open source organizing” that activists undertook on the premise that they were doing nothing illegal and thus had nothing to hide rejected the security culture that is common in activist circles, and that works to minimize exposure to harm by law enforcement. In hindsight, casual or careless use of social media seemed only to provide fodder for the “open source spying” conducted by the G20 Integrated Security Unit (Thompson, 2006).

## BEYOND THE G20: SOCIAL MEDIA FOR COMMUNITY COHESION

Nevertheless, the activist community turned to social media to rebuild their communities in the aftermath of the G20. The Toronto Community Mobilization Network, which had relied heavily on Facebook and Twitter for communication, public outreach, and information dissemination, took on a new role. Though the G20 Days of Action had concluded, there was much work to be done in terms of court support and legal defence fundraising, not to mention in mending the torn fabric of its community. Using the same mailing lists, email account, and web domain, the group re-formed as the Community Solidarity Network (CSN). They renamed their Facebook and Twitter accounts, keeping the same active member base. Shifting gears from mobilizing action to rebuilding community, communication efforts focused on informing members about upcoming court dates, including “bus to court” pickups, fundraising events, and ongoing news stories and press releases about G20-related issues. CSN has been successful in creating community cohesion by rallying around those who faced criminal charges as a result of their G20 organizing, and in keeping the spotlight on the court cases, some of which dragged on for nearly two years.

The Alternative Media Centre’s use of social media throughout the G20 convergence was novel, although it drew from a decade-long tradition of media making in the Global Justice Movement(s) (Kidd, 2003). The Independent Media Centre (Indymedia) innovated the open publishing model, which eschews editorial gatekeeping and allows anyone with an Internet connection to upload stories to its newswire. Indymedia also initiated the tactic of launching temporary media centres during protests to accompany the online presence. The AMC adopted other aspects of the Indymedia model, including a consensus-based decision-making process, a general commitment to social justice, and an overall **anarchist philosophy**. Where the AMC differed significantly, however, was in its use of social media to anchor its media-making project. The aggregation of social networking feeds alongside the unedited open publishing wire and featured stories was an important supplement to AMC reporting. Anything posted to YouTube, Twitter, or Flickr tagged #g20report was funnelled through the AMC website in real time. This meant that viewers could receive more information on G20 action faster than they could through traditional news outlets.

In the days following the G20 summit, the AMC disbanded: the website shut down and the media centre reverted to its role as an erstwhile farmers’ market. AMCistas—journalists associated with the Alternative Media Centre—returned to their various cities and communities, but the AMC Google group continued to function in much the same way as it did over the course of the G20 resistance. Although traffic is much lower than it was during the height of G20 action, g20altmedia@gmail.com still acts as a listserv for movement journalists covering G20-related issues and other resistance efforts, such as the Occupy phenomenon. Former AMCistas now use the list to stay in touch with one another, share information about upcoming media projects, and promote affinity-based events. Friendships and alliances developed during the G20 have evolved into a national network of independent and activist journalists who regularly collaborate on local, national, and international projects.

The jailhouse blog of Amanda Hiscocks, one of the G20 “ringleaders,” is another example of how activists have used social media to nurture a sense of community long after the conclusion of the G20. Hiscocks was one of twenty-one activists arrested for organizing G20 protests. Originally

charged with conspiracy, she and five of her co-accused accepted a plea bargain for the lesser charge of counselling to commit mischief in exchange for the withdrawal of charges against the other eleven co-accused. Hiscocks began blogging about her experience in jail: “We need to stick together. What we have are our smarts, our need for fairness and justice, our wide range of skills and experiences, our love for each other and the Earth, and our solidarity” (Hiscocks, 2012). *Bored but Not Broken* chronicles Hiscocks’s experience “on the inside,” mixing personal details along with political analysis, which she dictates over the phone or sends in letters to friends, who then post to the blog. It invites readers to stay in touch, posting information on writing letters, calling, and visiting. In this way, the blog achieves the broadcast function of old media and the interactivity of new media, both of which contribute to its capacity for community development. Typical of the interlinked, viral tendency of the social web, *Bored but Not Broken* reaches beyond its URL. Each new posting is circulated on Facebook and the CSN page, and on Twitter, as friends and supporters push the blog through their personal networks. Despite the emotional and financial strain jail terms have had on individual activists, their families, and their broader communities, they remain committed to one another and their causes. Says Leah Henderson, another jailed “co-conspirator,” in a YouTube video, “We emerge from this united and in solidarity” (“Regarding Our Plea Deal,” 2011).

## FINDINGS/CONCLUSION

There is ample evidence of the potential for community building online (Benkler, 2006; Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004; Rheingold, 1994; Shirky, 2010). Despite the Internet’s use in both promoting and contesting capitalism, its technical flexibility and continual reconstruction create openings. These openings are virtual spaces of hope in which community building and progressive social change can take root. Social media have contributed to the Internet’s metamorphosis from an information-sharing platform to a network that promotes participatory community building.

Social justice activists involved in the G20 resistance appropriated social media in three distinct ways. In advance of the summit, they used social media for engagement through open source organizing. The interactive nature of Facebook, with its “like,” “comment,” “share,” and “join” functions, made it a valuable public outreach tool, helping to engage activists and nonactivists alike. During the G20, activists used social media, especially Twitter, to report on events as they unfolded from within the action, in real time. While this broadcast function is a throwback to traditional or “old” media, it was reinvented for the social web as users re-posted, re-tweeted, and otherwise re-broadcast information about the protests unavailable anywhere else. As a gateway leading to the wider Internet, the blogosphere, and beyond, Twitter provided an alternative historical record to the one offered by the mainstream media. It was also an important communication medium for journalists and protesters alike, allowing them to move safely and strategically across the city. Finally, in addition to engaging communities and broadcasting information, activists and others used social media defensively by documenting police misconduct, tweeting eyewitness accounts, and using their digital cameras (and the implied Internet connection) as their weapon.

Despite social media’s usefulness for engagement, broadcasting, and sousveillance, their overall efficacy is questionable. The widespread police abuses during the course of the G20 summit remain inadequately addressed, despite their broad documentation and dissemination on social

networking sites. To date, only two police officers have been charged with G20-related offences. Further, the police infiltration and surveillance, along with the pre-arrests, house arrests, and ultimately criminal convictions, brought home to activists the danger of open source organizing. Data trails left by Twitter feeds, Facebook activities, Flickr postings, YouTube uploads, and blogs became evidence in court cases where activists faced serious G20-related charges. The “open source spying” conducted by police was evidently simplistic, consisting mainly of using the Google search engine, yet the information this method uncovered served to bolster government cases against G20 activists.<sup>1</sup>

The negative fallout of organizing online did not prevent activists from turning to social media to rebuild their communities. Once again, they reached out through Facebook (3000+ members) and Twitter (1700+ followers) to rally supporters around those arrested, charged, and jailed. This included important fundraising work that helped pay for lawyers and living expenses for those under house arrest, in pretrial detention, or in jail. It also included court support—getting people to attend bail hearings and trials—and jail support, such as letters, phone calls, and visits to those incarcerated. AMCistas remain connected through the AMC Google group and have built up a national community of independent media activists. This network is formally embodied in the Media Co-op, a national collective of online grassroots media outlets, and is maintained through informal networking on Facebook and Twitter, and ongoing collaboration on media projects. The Toronto G20 was an experiment in community, fuelled by social media, that withstood the failures of social media. This moment, still unfolding, showed that technology does not define contemporary movements for social justice; rather, activists adopt and adapt technologies for their movement goals in an ongoing process of community building and change making.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Author field notes, Byron Sonne pretrial hearing, February 2011.

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## Discussion Questions

1. What do you see as the main benefits and limitations of open source organizing for political activism? Discuss your answer by considering the difference between surveillance and sousveillance and explaining how these practices were put into use during the G20 summit.
2. In what ways did community activists and citizen journalists use social media sites like Twitter for public engagement and education during the G20 summit? Who do you think



were the intended audiences for activist social media “broadcasts,” and how might those audiences have used this content differently?

3. In what ways were social media used by community activists to strengthen offline relations and build community before, during, and after the G20 summit? What does this case tell us about the argument that social media foster only weak and superficial relationships between individuals and groups?

