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InterOccupy: Toward a Global Democratic Communications Commons

The Commons as a New-Old Paradigm for Governance, Economics and Policy

## InterOccupy: Toward a Democratic Global Communications Commons

by Michael Badger

### The Emerging Occupy Movement

The world is in need of adopting a radical new operating system. The challenges are vast. The sobering reality is that not a single person knows the best way through to greener pastures, or even if such a world is attainable.

Most of us readily give our own personal power over to bosses, colleagues, family, governments, corporations and the mainstream media, or we tend to marry our own point of view, become outspoken and adopt positions of power in our communities. Those with amenable rhetoric and the ability to help us achieve security and status tend to be the leaders. Although competition, individualism and unhealthy hierarchy have been valued over collective thought and action, 'following the leader' has not solved our global challenges.

We need the emergence of a new narrative that can shift us to a collaborative, courageous and sustainable society. Emergence is a phenomenon in which something new evolves. Then a concurrent shift happens simultaneously in many different domains, sectors or locales. When these shifts connect to one another, a network forms that generates new results, and significant global change becomes possible.

How will we create structures and new ways of engagement that will encourage and enable emergence? That is a question that InterOccupy—a communications collective that emerged out of Occupy Wall Street—has focused on since the autumn of 2011. The Occupy encampments can be seen as an emergent phenomenon. The culture that surrounded them had a radically different way of interacting and collaborating than what most of us are used to.

In *Using Emergence to Take Social Initiatives to Scale*, Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze describe the lifecycle of emergence:

In stage one, a network is formed. Networks are based on individuals choosing to come together out of self-interest. They tend to be fluid as people easily come and go. This is where Occupy was when we first established the encampments and InterOccupy was established to foster more cohesiveness in the network.

In stage two, Communities of Practice are formed. Individuals make a commitment to stay within the community together. They intentionally advance the knowledge of the group and extend that knowledge to others. By providing the structures through which relationships and communities could continue to be maintained, even beyond the time of the encampments, InterOccupy played a critical role in the evolution of the Occupy network into a Community of Practice.

In stage three, the Community of Practice becomes a System of Influence. It becomes a leader in its field with real power. Occupy Sandy, which utilized the InterOccupy system extensively, has been acknowledged as a leader and first responder in the Sandy relief effort, primarily due to its ability to self-organize quickly in multiple locations at the same time.

A key factor in supporting the journey from Network to Community of Practice to System of Influence is the fact that with InterOccupy, the Occupy movement has been maintaining a healthy and active communications commons all along.

None of us expected Occupy to perform such a function, but we have now witnessed the emergence of a new spontaneous expression of the Occupy community.

Through that system, the network has strengthened and community agreements have been established.

### InterOccupy: The Need for a Principled, Democratic, Global Communications Commons

In the first weeks of Occupy, the Declaration of the Occupation of New York City (see page 12) was articulated through direct democratic decision-making. This document provided the broad direction from which a new narrative could emerge without anyone prescribing specific strategies or what exactly should be done. The agreements made within the Occupy culture encourage people to actively create and participate in systems of collective decision-making based upon embodying the values of courage, compassion, caring, dignity and social justice. These agreements also value collective creativity that is informed by multiple individual viewpoints. This has led to a highly creative culture that continues to explore new possibilities and out-of-the-box solutions. InterOccupy has nurtured those Occupy agreements into a comprehensive organizing and communications system that can effectively support the stewardship of new ideas and strategic action.

We initially formed InterOccupy in order to uphold communication channels among the Occupy camps. Like them, we would adhere to 'direct democratic and horizontal decision-making processes.' At each phase of our development, we have been guided by a set of non-negotiable values, and yet we have also retained enough flexibility to change our course as the community that has been using the platform we developed shifts its needs.

We have been committed to creating neutral yet fertile containers for collaboration within an extended system of supportive, open participation. Through maintaining a democratic communications



The Occupy West Coast Port Shutdown, organized over InterOccupy.

commons that is based on principled active participation, we are enabling conditions under which emergence for a new narrative can unfold.

InterOccupy is now working actively with other movement groups worldwide, including the Zapatistas, Indignados, 15M, Take the Square, Via22, GlobalNOISE, Idle No More and others. Together we are working to design a shared platform to support the growth of a principled, democratic, international movement communications system. A similar culture of direct democracy and non-hierarchical decision-making has been established simultaneously in other parts of the world. Members of these groups are now collaborating to strengthen and nurture these fertile grounds for cross-national, cross-movement communication and organizing.

Maintaining a global democratic and horizontal communications commons that is open to all is an essential element to creating the conditions under which global solutions may be found. For some, this may seem to be an insurmountable task. For us, it is a task already in progress.

### Honoring the Collective: Building a Movement-Based Communications System

On October 24, 2011 twenty of us huddled in a small office in the financial district in Manhattan that we had been granted to use for an important nationwide conference call. Most of us were members of the Movement Building Working Group of Occupy Wall Street that had started meeting two weeks earlier in order to design a strategy to build a large-scale movement out of the spontaneous proliferation of encampments inspired by Zuccotti Park. We wanted to support the self-organizing movement that was already underway. We realized that if we were going to build

strategically, we first needed to have a means of communication with all of the other Occupations.

We spent days trying to figure out exactly how these communications would happen, which systems we would use, and who we should invite to the virtual meetings. One of our biggest challenges was the sheer numbers; there were over a thousand Occupy encampments around the world that had used public space to express solidarity with the Declaration of the Occupation of New York City. They had sprung up in under five weeks and we had no idea who any of these people were.

At some point during the planning, we realized that by setting up a means of communication, we were in effect making a decision for the network without its input. Perhaps people in Occupy preferred to act independently from the other encampments and thought that a communications platform would be counterproductive. What if we were actually doing a disservice to the 'leaderless' movement with our well-intentioned plans? We didn't want to actively step into a traditional leadership position by dictating a choice for the network.

Instead, we provided a catalyst that would allow the network to make its own choice on the matter. We set up a structure through which we posed a single question to the other Occupy encampments: *Do we want to have a means of communication among us, and if so, how should we go about setting it up?* We published an open invitation online, asking people from the movement to join us on a conference call to give us their opinions on the topic. We then used all the social media platforms on which we had been building a following for Occupy Wall Street in the past month to get the word out. We asked people in Occupations to gather together with their local group to use a single call-in number. Even with that request, the hundred lines that were available were not enough. People gathered



left to right. InterOccupyp at Franklin Square during the first anniversary of OWS; Idle No More at Vallejo, CA, February 2013

around the country in groups of five, ten, even twenty and quickly filled the hundred spots. We don't know exactly how many people showed up on that first call, but it was well into the hundreds.

As the call started, we went through the list of callers and asked everyone to introduce their group. This took a significant amount of time since it was the first time in the Occupy movement that it had been done. The excitement over hearing firsthand just how wide and diverse our movement had grown was incredible because what had brought us all together was an honest desire to make a positive impact on the world. When we asked the key question that had brought everyone together, the answer was unanimous; we all wanted open channels of communication among us.

This may have been the obvious outcome, but asking the question rather than prescribing the answer was a critical choice on our part and indicated that we were adhering to one of the main principles of the movement—open, democratic decision making. We had taken the first step in garnishing the trust we would need in order to become a valid movement-based communications project, rather than simply a service offered to the movement by a small group of people.

It is clear that this choice put us on a path towards building a system that would be recognized as legitimate by the movement. As such, we gave the creation of fertile containers for emergence primacy over prescribing unquestioned individual viewpoints.

We scheduled another call a few nights later that was specifically for people who wanted to work on creating communication channels with us. That second call included members of Occupy Philadelphia, Occupy Portland, Occupy Denver, Occupy Los Angeles, Occupy Kalamazoo, as well as Occupy Wall Street and others. We have been working together ever since.

### A New Culture: Direct Democracy Based on Human Values

At the beginning, we identified our mission and guiding operating principles. InterOccupyp would be a neutral conduit of information for the movement. It would also provide structures and systems that people in the movement could utilize in order to collaborate and make decisions together across distances. Anyone could join us in the development of our communication channels, and we would use a consensus-based model for making our decisions. All of this was drawn from the basic guiding principles of the Occupy movement at large.

For many, being involved with the encampments themselves was an eye-opening, inspirational and life-changing experience. People would arrive at the parks and try to find guidance as to how and where they could fit in. They often wanted a job to be assigned to them or otherwise get told what to do. At a certain point, a shift would occur when they realized that there actually was no one at the helm of the operation. The culture in the parks was such that if you saw a need and it was something that you wanted to fulfill, the best thing to do was to just start doing it of your own volition. Often, you would find others who were interested in the same thing and a Working Group would form around that task or issue. This was how the parks became natural expressions of the communities that populated them and inspired a culture of creativity and participation that actually shifted how people worked together. Developing innovative solutions to community and global problems became the modus operandi, and due to the open, creative nature of the groups, they attracted seasoned professionals and inspired newly dedicated individuals.

Eventually, certain agreements formed which became suggested guiding principles of how these groups would function. Most of those agreements were aimed at dissolving the hierarchies that we normally tend to establish. One such agreement that is often evoked in our meetings is called 'Step Up, Step Back.' It is a very simple idea in which individuals who are used to speaking often and having their opinion heard are asked to step back and listen, while individuals who tend to remain quiet are asked to step up and speak. Not only do we believe that everyone's voice matters, we actively encourage the more marginalized voices to make their opinions known to the group.

Another concept that we work with is called 'Generative Listening.' Generative listening is listening to others with the willingness to let your own world-view shift. Taken together, these two concepts contribute to a culture in which ideas that would normally never even be voiced are expressed to a community that is listening with a consciously chosen potential to change its point of view. They also encourage voices that have been historically marginalized in our culture to actually influence the decisions for the matters at hand. This is a very different societal choice from the one we are used to. It creates the ground from which new creative concepts can emerge.

These kinds of agreements and structures have been imbued in all of the choices we have made while developing the InterOccupyp system. We have taken the culture that evolved within the parks,



left to right. GlobalNOISE, Barcelona, Spain; At the Occupy National Gathering organized through InterOccupy

and created a platform that allows that culture to thrive and grow despite no longer being in physical spaces together. The result is a new kind of networking platform that is based around issues. It allows individuals to express their creativity and wisdom while connecting with others to collaborate and build shared leadership towards a just world. The system is designed to encourage direct democracy based on an unwavering commitment to basic human values.

In “Contemporary Leaders of Courage and Compassion: Competencies and Inner Capacities” (*Kosmos Journal*, Spring/Summer 2012), Dr. Monica Sharma describes the emerging action elements that are currently contributing to a new worldwide transformational narrative. Some members of InterOccupy have worked with Dr. Sharma’s methodologies that contributed to the design and resulting success of the system. One key tenet of Dr. Sharma’s work is that we must “recognize the invisible, multiple patterns and systems that shape society and planetary situations and actions, (and) recognize interdependence.” InterOccupy inherently draws connections between various initiatives that were previously seen as independent. It makes these invisible patterns more visible by using an issue-based networked platform to propagate the ideas that are born from individual creativity and face-to-face collaborations.

Another of Dr. Sharma’s action elements is that we must “generate action from the ground of being,” rather than only looking for common ground. By maintaining the core Occupy agreements, InterOccupy supports a culture that encourages individuals to express and act upon their inner wisdom, values and principles, thus encouraging action from the ground of being.

New ideas and points of view are offered to the collective and the group acts upon the ones with the greatest potential. Information derived from the results is distributed across the entire network—thus shaping subsequent creative impulses, which inspire new action, thus building continual forward momentum.

### Open, Democratic Conference Calls with Principles of Accountability

For the first nine months of InterOccupy’s existence, our primary function was to facilitate large-scale conference calls. Towards the beginning, we held movement-wide resource-sharing calls every Monday night for a number of months. These calls became the main way that the encampments would express needs and offer

support to one another. If Vancouver needed fifty warm sleeping bags and Tampa happened to have them on hand and unused, that connection would be made on the Monday night InterOccupy call and the appropriate resource distribution would occur.

It soon became clear that more specifically purposed calls were needed, and we began hosting multiple calls per week that connected analogous Working Groups to one another. The first major regional action organized over InterOccupy was the West Coast Port Shutdown on December 12, 2011, which involved coordinating local actions simultaneously in Texas, California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, Colorado and Alaska. What is remarkable about this is that those of us who had created InterOccupy were not involved with the Port Shutdown calls. We had effectively created a system that did not need to be spearheaded by the New York City group that initiated it. Instead, it could be used by others following guidelines that were developed over time by a consensus process.

At that time, we had anywhere from twenty to two hundred people on our calls. Conference calls with more than just a handful of people can get unwieldy. A few people will tend to dominate the call while others recede in the background. We became skilled at managing large calls to include as many voices as possible and to move the group towards taking action. Through our own consensus process, we developed a Code of Conduct and Principles of Accountability that would apply to our calls and meetings. Those principles are designed to hold individuals accountable for treating each other with dignity and respect. They also provide a code to which we refer when there are disagreements within the group or when someone is disrupting a productive call. The processes and principles developed for these calls mimic the Working Group culture from the parks and support concepts such as Step Up, Step Back and Generative Listening.

The conference call system that we utilize allows participants to use their telephone keypads to send signals to the facilitator. One example of how we use this is to show support or lack of support for ideas as they are being offered to the group. When an idea is suggested, we often take a quick straw poll to gauge participants’ responses to the suggestion. The facilitator asks everyone to press 2 if they agree with what is being said, 3 if they don’t or 5 if they’d like to ask more questions about it. Using techniques such as this one, we can assess the general opinion of the group, and therefore discover the group’s desired outcome and actions with more ease and efficacy.



from top. Occupy Sandy Community Meeting; Occupy Sandy volunteer and distribution center at Jacobi Church; InterOccupy at Washington Square Park during the first anniversary of Occupy Wall Street

The conference calls and their associated structures and culture will continue to be at the heart of the InterOccupy system. We continue to develop new ways to make them as democratic and participatory as possible. *There are currently no other institutions available for people to participate in direct democratic processes across wide distances. We believe that direct participatory democracy is an essential requirement for our society's evolution.*

## Decentralized, Open Source Online Organizing Platform for Campaigns and Projects

Creating a different kind of space to gather became an important priority when we were forced to leave our encampments in the parks. In July 2012, we launched a new organizing platform at InterOccupy.net that is designed specifically for the new phase of the movement. The online platform is built around campaigns and projects, rather than around local Occupations and Working Groups. One of the main strengths of Occupy is that it organizes in many different places in many different ways. We designed our platform specifically so that it would neither be directed by our actions nor become a replacement for other online spaces in which people were already organizing. Any group can now initiate a presence for their project on InterOccupy.net. We call this creating a 'hub.'

When a group starts a hub on InterOccupy.net, it aggregates the information from the other independent groups organizing around the same initiative. The organizers can continue to maintain their own websites, post to Facebook or Twitter or use other online properties, and all of that information can be shared with the rest of the network. The hubs have dashboards, where anyone can post updates, minutes from meetings, submit events or find schedules of upcoming conference calls. These hubs act as independent containers that people can use to gather and collaborate, without creating a centralized organization.

We use open source tools and code wherever possible. Wikipedia defines open source as a "philosophy that promotes free redistribution and access to an end product's design and implementation." This is important for a few reasons. First, what we are doing is for the common good. It is not owned by any central group or organization and it allows the platform to be utilized by others. Second, by using open source tools and technology, we open up the possibility for collaboration to a common resource that is owned by all. Hence, people are more inclined to collaborate than if we were using a proprietary system, where we would be vulnerable to decisions made by private owners. Finally, by using open source technology we are free to develop it as we choose.

## News Distribution System, from the Ground Up

InterOccupy.net also sends out a weekly newsletter for the movement. Adhering to the principle of being a neutral channel of communication, we have never written any of the content that we distribute. Anyone can submit materials that are pertinent to the wider movement or to the public. In addition, hubs can submit news of their projects directly to our newswire. As soon as an item is posted, it gets distributed immediately to hundreds of thousands of Occupy Facebook and Twitter followers. Some International groups, such as Take the Square, also voluntarily distribute our news to their lists.

We have created a means by which information can bubble up and be distributed from all of the different Occupy groups. We don't censor, other than obviously inappropriate content. Our Code of Conduct and Principles of Accountability are documents that guide us in determining what content is inappropriate for publication. Through this lightly managed system, we are able to support a healthy and growing flow of information for the movement.



GlobalNOISE: protesters in front of Casino, Madrid

## Impact of InterOccupy for Decentralized Global and Local Organizing and Communication

InterOccupy has now been used by over one hundred different groups to highlight hidden problems through direct action and to actively create solutions to crises. It has proven itself to be invaluable for building initiatives across the world such as GlobalNOISE and Occupy Sandy.

*GlobalNOISE:* On October 13, 2012, a global day of protest against austerity measures brought hundreds of thousands of people out into the streets. GlobalNOISE was organized using its own central website, numerous local websites and Facebook pages. An InterOccupy hub was established for communications between the various groups, which included protests in Rome, Paris, London, New York, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Tunisia, Malaga, Melbourne and many others. GlobalNOISE is a prime example of the potential of utilizing a central base such as InterOccupy for decentralized organizing and communication.

*Occupy Sandy:* InterOccupy has also been utilized for organizing incredibly detailed local projects that involve diverse groups. After Superstorm Sandy devastated the East Coast of the United States, Occupy Sandy rose to build a community of mutual aid and support for the storm victims. Because we already had a network that was accustomed to utilizing the InterOccupy tools, we immediately created an ad hoc system of volunteer registration and dispatched volunteers to affected communities. InterOccupy organized and communicated with a base of over 50,000 volunteers that were able to get aid to people in need days, and in some cases weeks, ahead of FEMA or the Red Cross. Not only was the Inter-Occupy system used for relief work in New York where we already had a strong Occupy network, but also to organize in New Jersey where no network was established. This was the true test of the system. It was a huge success. People from a diverse range

of groups, including FEMA, the Red Cross, multiple church groups, various unions, and even the Black Panthers came together to use the open democratic system of InterOccupy to build a relief network that crossed boundaries between established organizations and grassroots networks.

## Moving Forward

We are currently engaged in building a system that can be utilized by the wider global and environmental justice movements. We are contributing to the development of a technology commons that can support the establishment of a global democratic communications commons. We are working with non-Occupy identified movement groups in the United States, as well as a global group made up of individuals from across many of the popular movements around the world. We plan to attend international conferences in order to build relationships with others who are interested in maintaining and developing the global communications commons.

## Conclusion and Key Insights

We have discovered a few key insights through our work in building InterOccupy.

First, we must value individual wisdom and creativity by providing safe, principled spaces that allow new opinions to be expressed and courageous action to be taken. Through an unwavering commitment to universal human dignity, we open the possibility for individuals to discover and express ideas that otherwise may never have been entertained.

Second, we must adopt a new kind of leadership that understands the importance of supporting what is

emerging with purpose, rather than prescribing individual viewpoints. When we give too much importance to individual rhetoric, we stymie the potential for truly unique solutions to emerge. *When we create new ways of principled communication and support structures that encourage everyone to participate and act, we gain a collective point of view that is far wiser than that of any individual.* To encourage this kind of leadership, we focus on asking the right questions that allow innovative answers to emerge.

Third, we must create structures that allow individual creativity to thrive through the inclusion and encouragement of all voices. Insights must be filtered and integrated through a lens of collective creativity and understanding and then acted upon at scale. New information from those actions must be distributed widely so it can contribute to subsequent ideas that will be subject to the same process of filtering, integration and action. By operating in this way, we honor the individual as well as the collective and we continually hone the process by which action ideas are allowed to emerge.

Fourth, we must honor the concept of the collective commons by developing our work through the use of open source technology and tools. By working with and contributing to the open source community, we help build upon the knowledge base and resources that are owned by all and allow the legacy of our work to continue to be built upon indefinitely.

Finally, we must use technology to support initiative and action, but not at the expense of person-to-person collaboration. Direct human interaction is still the ground in which the most brilliant ideas form and trust is established. Creating a global technological network in order to allow ideas to rapidly be brought to scale is vital, but only in so much as it continues to support more traditional forms of collaboration and organization.

The establishment of a global, principled, democratic communications commons is a step-by-step process that will take years to build. But it is also necessary in order to support the emergence of individual and collective wisdom from which solutions to the monumental challenges facing humanity will emerge. This work requires continual attention to developing a global culture of participation and deep democracy that will have the power to move us powerfully toward global and environmental justice.

Please join us in our work. Visit [InterOccupy.net](http://InterOccupy.net) or email us at [info@interoccupy.net](mailto:info@interoccupy.net).

**Michael Badger** is a founding member of InterOccupy, and is primarily engaged in developing the technical vision and implementing communications strategies. He currently works with Glocal, a worker-owned cooperative that evolved from InterOccupy, where he contributes to designing, building and facilitating organizing platforms for groups and organizations focused on social and climate justice.



## Declaration of the Occupation of New York City September 29, 2011

As we gather together in solidarity to express a feeling of mass injustice, we must not lose sight of what brought us together. We write so that all people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world can know that we are your allies. As one people, united, we acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members; that our system must protect our rights, and upon corruption of that system, it is up to the individuals to protect their own rights, and those of their neighbors; that a democratic government derives its just power from the people, but corporations do not seek consent to extract wealth from the people and the Earth; and that no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power. We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments. We have peaceably assembled here, as is our right, to let these facts be known.

- They have taken our houses through an illegal foreclosure process, despite not having the original mortgage.
- They have taken bailouts from taxpayers with impunity, and continue to give Executives exorbitant bonuses.
- They have perpetuated inequality and discrimination in the workplace based on age, the color of one's skin, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation.
- They have poisoned the food supply through negligence, and undermined the farming system through monopolization.
- They have profited off of the torture, confinement, and cruel treatment of countless animals, and actively hide these practices.
- They have continuously sought to strip employees of the right to negotiate for better pay and safer working conditions.
- They have held students hostage with tens of thousands of dollars of debt on education, which is itself a human right.
- They have consistently outsourced labor and used that outsourcing as leverage to cut workers' healthcare and pay.
- They have influenced the courts to achieve the same rights as people, with none of the culpability or responsibility.
- They have spent millions of dollars on legal teams that look for ways to get them out of contracts in regards to health insurance.
- They have sold our privacy as a commodity.
- They have used the military and police force to prevent freedom of the press.
- They have deliberately declined to recall faulty products, endangering lives in pursuit of profit.
- They determine economic policy, despite the catastrophic failures their policies have produced and continue to produce.
- They have donated large sums of money to politicians, who are responsible for regulating them.
- They continue to block alternate forms of energy to keep us dependent on oil.
- They continue to block generic forms of medicine that could save people's lives or provide relief in order to protect investments that have already turned a substantial profit.
- They have purposely covered up oil spills, accidents, faulty bookkeeping and inactive ingredients in pursuit of profit.
- They purposefully keep people misinformed and fearful through their control of the media.
- They have accepted private contracts to murder prisoners even when presented with serious doubts about their guilt.
- They have perpetuated colonialism at home and abroad.
- They have participated in the torture and murder of innocent civilians overseas.
- They continue to create weapons of mass destruction in order to receive government contracts.\*

To the people of the world,

We, the New York City General Assembly occupying Wall Street in Liberty Square, urge you to assert your power. Exercise your right to peaceably assemble; occupy public space; create a process to address the problems we face, and generate solutions accessible to everyone.

To all communities that take action and form groups in the spirit of direct democracy, we offer support, documentation, and all of the resources at our disposal.

Join us and make your voices heard.

*\*These grievances are not all-inclusive.*