The Rise of the Network Labour Movement: the Case of OUR Walmart

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Abstract
Despite the fact that private-sector unionisation in the United States has reached a historic low, 2012 saw Walmart's first ever nationwide strike. This strike was not carried out by a union and the aim was not collective bargaining. Strikes and other collective acts sought to leverage ideological power, in order to cause symbolic, rather than economic damage. Mass self-communication networks, such as Facebook, connected geographically dispersed actions, transforming them into interconnected collective acts. This article elaborates on Castells' pioneering research by demonstrating that mass self-communication networks can enable the labour movement to adopt new organisational forms and repertoires of action that go beyond restrictive labour laws. These findings are drawn from six weeks of intensive participant observation of Californian Walmart workers' attempts at mobilisation, combined with 42 semi-structured interviews with 33 workers and union officials, and supplemented by an indicative media content analysis.

Key words
Castells, communication, internet, mobilisation, network, retail, union, Walmart

Introduction
The late 20th and early 21st centuries have been marked by an extraordinary decline in private sector trade unions across most advanced capitalist countries. Not only has membership and collective bargaining coverage declined dramatically but so too has the scale and scope of labour movement collective action - most obviously strike activity (Brown, et al 2009). Yet this decline in labour mobilisation has not been matched by a decline in other forms of mobilisation. In fact since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2009 mass mobilisations have gripped many parts of the world and in some cases have even toppled governments. Mass-self communication networks, such as Facebook, have been identified as having been of central importance to this recent upsurge in collective action (Castells, 2012). The aim of this article is to provide a case study which can illuminate the question of whether, mass-self communication networks can facilitate a resurgence of workplace mobilisations and what this would mean for labour movement renewal.

The decline in the private sector labour movement is due to the inability of unions to adequately respond to declining employment in unionised industries by successfully organising the growing non-union sectors (Blanchflower, 2006). This failure has also led to the acceptance by many social scientists of Castells (1997: 354) view that:

> 'torn by the internationalization of finance and production, unable to adapt to the networking of firms and the individualization of work, and challenged by the degendering of employment, the labour movement is weakened as a major source of social cohesion

and workers' representation.'

In fact Castells (1997) does not only argue that the labour movement is weakened, but also that it seems historically superseded. This is because contemporary capitalism has been transformed from an industrial society to a 'network society' where the systemic disjunction between the local and the global weakens civil societies such as the labour movement and strengthens defensive communal identities such as religion, nationalism and ethnicity.

In 2012, thousands of non-unionised workers did, however, join the labour movement through the Organisation United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart). Moreover, these workers then initiated the first ever national strike at Walmart. This strike, which took place on 23 November 2012, 'Black Friday' – the busiest shopping day of the year, mobilised 400 workers (Eidelson, 2013) and 30,000 supporters across the US (OUR Walmart, 2013). In the year that followed, further strikes took place involving around 200 workers, alongside a campaign of civil disobedience which led to over 250 arrests (Making Change at Walmart, 2014; OUR Walmart, 2014).

The fact that such an unlikely mobilisation took place raises questions of Castells' claim that the labour movement's decline in the network society is inevitable. Perhaps alternatively, in the network society it is not only capital which has the potential to be increasingly networked, but also labour. This article explores this question through an in-depth case study of the role of network facilitated 'mass self-communication' in the OUR Walmart mobilisation. In particular the social media internet sites Youtube, Facebook and Twitter, as well as online video conferencing facilities. Moreover, it is argued that the use of this technology could radically transform the field of workplace struggle. As mass self-communication is demonstrated to facilitate organisational forms and repertoires of action that enable workplace organising to go beyond restrictive legal frameworks and circumvent employer hostility.

Mass-self communication, networks and mobilisation

Sidney and Beatrice Webb's (1896) classic definition of a union is focused around collective bargaining. This focus on collective barging is, however, problematic for labour movement renewal. As Wright and Brown (2013) suggest, the internationalising of product markets and corporate ownership has undermined the possibilities for multi-employer bargaining while the intensification of competition and greater fragmentation of both labour and product markets has, in turn, undermined the possibilities for single employer bargaining. They therefore argue that alternative mechanisms by which employees can place demands on employers are required and that employers' increasing sensitivity to their public reputation provides such a channel. Moreover, Locke (2013) provides a detailed empirical account of the potential for reputational risks, in certain circumstances, to improve labour standards.

The Webbs also highlight how collective bargaining is dependent upon the collective threat of withholding labour through strikes. Strikes are conceptualised by Hyman (1989: 17) as a temporary collective stoppage in order to express a grievance or enforce a demand. Hyman goes on to distinguish between two forms of strike, 'the trial of strength' and the 'demonstration stoppage'. However, as will be demonstrated, the mobilisation at Walmart does not fit with expectations derived from this classic industrial relations literature. Castells' (2012) account of Occupy provides an explanation for why; as the critical importance of communication to the formation of collective mobilisations meant that mass self-communication technology directly influenced both the form and content of the mobilisation.

The potential for mass self-communication to transform the labour movement is not something which has been addressed in previous literature (Geelan, 2013). Castells (2009; 2012) provides no

sustained investigation of this issue[1]. In fact there are very few successful examples of the use of mass self-communication by the labour movement (Heckscher and McCarthy, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary that Castells' (2012) unique analysis of the role of mass self-communication in mobilisations be applied to the influential approach known as labour movement 'mobilisation theory' (Kelly, 1998; 2005) in order to elucidate potential ways in which mass self-communication may influence such mobilisations.

Kelly (1998) identifies five key components in the social movement theory of McAdam, Sidney and Tilly as being likely to influence workplace collective action. We will therefore, consider the impact of mass-self communication on each of these. Firstly, dissatisfaction at work, though necessary, is not sufficient to trigger collective action. It must first be transformed into a sense of injustice, defined as a 'breach of legal or collective agreement, rights or of widely shared social values' (Kelly, 2005: 66). Humans often put a low value on their worth and accept pain and degradation as justified, especially when this is perceived as inevitable (Moore, 1978). Workers, therefore, must pinpoint a tangible target for action by attributing blame to an agency, normally the employer or the government, rather than impersonal forces such as 'the market' or 'global competition'.

An individual's sense of injustice can be strengthened if shared by a substantial number of co-workers. Sharing this sense of injustice reinforces and legitimates it and crucially promotes the formation of collective interests. The formation of which requires a shared perception of being located in a particular group; distinct and defined in opposition to an out-group who have different interests and values (Kelly, 1998). Castells (2012) highlights the importance of both horizontal mass self-communication and physical networks for creating autonomous spaces in which injustices can be shared and a sense of togetherness formed. Activists may frame issues so as to aid the process of collective construction of a sense of injustice, focusing blame, and encouraging group identity formation. Activists also play an important role in persuading co-workers that the costs/benefits are worthwhile.

For mobilisation to translate into actual action there must be an organisation that can provide the necessary resources. This suggests a need for what Simms et al. (2013) term ‘managed activism’ - the commitment from the leadership to building ‘strong membership-led organising campaigns while coordinating strategy and structural change from the centre’ so as to ‘deliver sustainable increases in workplace power… for workers’ (Simms and Holgate, 2010: 165). Mass self-communication by providing autonomous communication spaces can increase interaction and social network density. Moreover, mass self-communication networks are de-centred and lack defined boundaries making 'expansive networking' easier and increasing the opportunity for movements to go 'viral' (Castells, 2012).

The formation of networks, argue Heckscher and Carré (2006), represent a solution to the inability of contemporary labour movements to mobilise large numbers of workers into large centralised and disciplined organisations. In mirroring the network form taken by contemporary employers, labour, it is argued, could mobilise wider individuals and groups. This network form is necessary as communication and transport technologies have increasingly led social interaction to be upon the basis of large numbers of weak social ties rather than a smaller number of strong ties (Heckscher and McCarthy, 2014). Mobilisation theory then, given the expansive nature of networks, pays too little attention to the connection between workplace and community mobilisation. However, it must be noted that Heckscher and Carré (2006) warn that networks also have weaknesses, in that they can fragment, splinter and lose strategic unity over time, especially as unions have tended to privilege organisational independence.

Networks, when combined with a high level of communication technology, also enable 'swarming' collective action – the strategic pulsing of action from all directions (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2000). Swarming which is argued to be a tremendous force multiplier could provide labour with an effective means of undertaking collective action (Heckscher and Carré, 2006). For the network form to be successful it cannot, therefore, be hierarchical and centralised, nor allow total autonomy (Heckscher and Carré, 2006: 619), instead it requires an 'orchestrator' (Heckscher and McCarthy, 2014) which can provide 'topsight' (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2000). Therefore the 'most fundamental element is a system by which members of the network can share information' (Heckscher and Carré, 2006: 619). Importantly swarming is also seen by these authors as being well suited to reputational damage.

Finally, for action to take place there must also be an opportunity structure or channels through which demands can be placed (Kelly, 2005). Mann's (1986: 22-27) 'Ideological, Economic, Military, Political (IEMP) model of organised power' provides useful ideal types for understanding the power sources available to various 'power networks'. Ideological refers to control over concepts and categories of meaning, societal norms and aesthetic and ritual practices, economic to control over circuits of production, distribution, exchange and consumption – but we should also add reproduction, military to control over the use of violence and political to control over the use of state institutions and regulations. Though Mann rejects any one source as having a general historical primacy, as corporations have specifically economic aims (capital accumulation), it is reasonable to assume that it is this source of power which corporations will, ultimately, be most responsive to.

The account put forward so far is largely unidirectional and is, therefore, clearly inadequate. Employers will typically seek to counter the development of movements which challenge their interests. Mobilisation should be seen then as a dynamic site of contestation between differing interests. Foucault (1977)[2] provides some specific ideal types for how employers can act to counter mobilisation. The 'enclosure' and 'partitioning' of bodies, can be utilised to prevent solidarity and community from emerging through dividing individuals from each other. However, it is surveillance, which is argued to be most effective, as this does not need to be constant, for if people are unable to distinguish whether they are being watched, they will behave as if they are, and thus external surveillance of bodies is transformed into self-regulation. These mechanisms come together powerfully in Foucault's use of the 'panoptican', the principles of which, he argues, operate not only in the organisation of prisons but also in workplaces. If mass self-communication networks are to benefit workplace mobilisation then they will have to be able to contend with such mechanisms.

Method

The above literature generated the following research questions:

1. To what extent can mass self-communication networks explain the OUR Walmart mobilisation?
2. To what extent can mass self-communication networks provide a path for labour movement renewal?

In order to answer these research questions, a broadly ethnographic approach, combining both participant and non-participant observations with semi-structured interviews, was used according to the extended case method developed by Burawoy (2009). California, particularly the Los Angeles Area (LA Area) and the San Francisco Bay Area (Bay Area) were identified as having the highest concentrations of mobilisation and therefore chosen as primary research sites. However, the research sites may have economic, political, demographic and cultural factors that make labour mobilisation in these areas unrepresentative of the US. Demographically, both areas have large

Latino communities, which Milkman (2011) convincingly argues, to be particularly receptive to mobilisation. Secondly, both areas have a strong labour and left wing political history. Especially important for the Latino community is the legacy of Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers (Shaw, 2008). Furthermore, historically, the Bay Area was a union stronghold with a density of 51% in 1955 (Milkman and Rooks, 2003) and unionisation rates for both areas remain 50% above the national average (Tomassetti et al., 2012). This suggests that workers in these areas may have atypically positive dispositions towards collective organisation and action, and a greater pool of potential allies and supporters.

Data collection took place during two intensive fieldwork trips; the first of these took place between mid-February to mid-March 2013. This fieldwork was timed to allow reflection on the 2012 Black Friday strikes, as well as observation of mobilisation attempts for a mass two week-long strike to coincide with the annual share-holders' meeting on 7 July 2013. The second took place for two weeks at the start of December 2013, timed to allow reflection on the 2013 Black Friday protests and direct actions. The field work involved immersion with OUR Walmart in the LA and Bay Areas. This field work included participation in and observation of organising drives at six stores - these store visits also proved an excellent opportunity to speak with workers who were not mobilised - and also included attendance at two weekly union organiser meetings, two worker activist meetings, two worker activist national video conference calls and three community ally meetings. This experiential and observational data was supported by 42 semi-structured interviews with 33 informants consisting of 24 non-managerial hourly employees (four of which had recently been terminated), one recently terminated salaried assistant manager who was active in OUR Walmart and seven United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)[3] union organisers and one senior UFCW official. Additionally, union organising drives at six stores and two union meetings were observed. Documentary data, such as the staff policy handbook, and Facebook posts were also collected. The research was not covert and all participants gave informed consent. Not only is this ethical but also the extended case's foundation upon 'reflexive science', sees the researcher's intervention not as noise that impairs reliability, but as creating 'perturbations' that can benefit the research (Burawoy, 2009). All names have been anonymised.

A selective but indicative quantitative analysis of OUR Walmart's performance in the media was also carried out. Although far from comprehensive, this provides an indication of the relative success of OUR Walmart's tapping of ideological power sources. A search of the terms 'Walmart' and 'Wal-Mart' in the online archives of the New York Times and Los Angeles Times was undertaken for November of each year between 2009 and 2013, the title and first few lines of each article were read and those which were deemed likely to either comment on the mobilisation or the poor terms and conditions at Walmart were then fully read and the number of words regarding these issues recorded. Restricting the analysis to November allowed for easy comparison across years, as this was the month during which Black Friday took place each year and thus saw OUR Walmart's biggest and most concerted attempts at action. The Los Angeles Times was chosen as it is the Californian newspaper with the largest average week-day circulation - over 650,000 (the fourth most in the US). The New York Times was chosen as it is the national newspaper with largest Democrat voter readership (Pew Research Center, 2012) - why this is important will become apparent below - and has an average week day circulation approaching 1.9 million. (Alliance for Audited Media, 2013).

The case study: OUR Walmart

This mobilisation was remarkable because Walmart is the world's largest private sector employer with a global workforce of 2.2 million, 1.4 million of whom are hourly workers in the US (Walmart,

2013a) and the biggest US corporation by revenue (Fortune 500, 2013). Moreover, Walmart is one of the most hostile corporations to workers' collective organisation (Lichtenstein, 2009). Human Rights Watch (2007) even goes as far as to report that Walmart 'violates [US] workers' internationally recognised right to freedom of association.' OUR Walmart provides a useful case with which to study the potential for the networking of labour through mass self-communication, because it encapsulates many of the difficulties facing the labour movement in the network society. For example, Walmart workers lack scarce skills, are drawn from loose labour markets and cannot easily disrupt Walmart's operations or other strategic sectors of the economy, meaning that they have little access to structural economic power (Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003). Moreover, workers cannot easily compensate for this lack of structural power through associational power (Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003) as Walmart, has from its inception, been extremely active in countering unions. Walmart was a major pioneer of the anti-union legal tactics which have come to be such a barrier for the US labour movement (Lichtenstein, 2009).

Networking perceptions of injustice

In order to assess the role of mass self-communication during the mobilisation it is analytically helpful to analyse its major impacts under three themes: collective injustice and identity formation, organisational form, and collective actions and opportunity structures. In order to gain an understanding of the role of mass-self communication in the formation of perceptions of collective injustices and identity, it is first necessary to provide a brief account of the major perceived injustices. There were three major injustices which were articulated by the informants: the pay was unfair – given the high intensity of the work and the large profits which Walmart made, they were being treated unequally due to manager favouritism, and those who were not favourites were being disrespected and abused – both through verbal bullying and the arbitrary use of disciplinary measures.

The formation of these injustices developed out of the framing of Walmart's pay levels, culture and policies. This required organisers and activists to emphasise the disparity in Walmart's profits, the owners' wealth, and the executives' pay relative to that of the workers as well as comparing the workers' pay and conditions at Walmart to those of workers at unionised retailers. Moreover, Walmart attempted to counter tendencies towards perceived injustice through a strategy of ideological agenda-setting. The average pay of an associate was stressed as being well above a living wage, and by highlighting the claimed pro-worker values of Walmart as personified by the deceased founder Sam Walton. Managers additionally sought to reduce opportunities for organisers to undertake this framing by having them ejected from stores, in some cases by the police. Therefore, online spaces, or what Castells (2012) refers to as the 'space of flows', played an important role in facilitating this framing. OUR Walmart's Facebook group[4] had 22,000 likes in May 2013 and proved especially well suited to the framing of injustices. This extract provides an example, of how this process worked:

> '23 April 2013
> You have to be kidding. That's 1,000 times what an average Walmart Associate makes…
> [link] Walmart CEO's pay jumps 14.1 percent to $20.7 million
> 130 likes, 97 comments, 512 shares'

Mass self-communication networks also provided a discursive space through which individual injustices were transformed into a sense of collective injustice, along with two others common to mobilisations: discussions in the workplace and meetings outside of the workplace with other workers from the local area. Despite all of the informants having joined following some face-to-face discussion with either organisers or workplace activists, a common theme of the interviews was the importance of the space of flows in complimenting theses physical discussions. Akira a

recently terminated worker who was working as an organiser explained this process particularly clearly:

> ‘It is basically an outlet for, not only, frustration but also networking… seeing… what Walmart is doing now to other associates and comparing our similarities… just being there for one another so you know that you’re not the only one going through what you're going through and spreading the word about trying to change Walmart and get others to join in.’

Tim, an activist in his late twenties, explained the profound effect of this realisation that a sense of injustice is shared by a wider collective:

> 'You’re used to dealing with your individual store and then when you see it is nationwide and you’re talking to other people - it kinda blows your mind away. A lot of workers think that the problems they are experiencing are just this store or it’s just that manager, but everything else is great. But when they… hear or see the same problems they are dealing with being expressed by people in Washington State or New York or Texas they are just like wow.’

Mass-self communication thus enabled workers to discover that their sense of injustice was not confined to their own store and the number of workers who shared it was larger than the small group of OUR Walmart members in their store – a minority, even in the strongest stores. An example of how Facebook can be used to achieve this is provided by the following extract:

> ‘30 December 2013
> Reina from Texas writes, "After 7 yrs service to Wally World [Walmart] I left making $9.45 and doing the work of 3 persons." Like if you can relate to Maria.
> 1077 likes, 109 comments, 58 shares’

Walmart attempted to place barriers upon the formation of collective interests through enclosure and partitioning. Activists would be physically isolated from each other, by being moved to work on their own. Activists were disallowed from speaking to other workers while working and from taking breaks with particular co-workers. This isolation was enforced through an atmosphere of surveillance, generated by accentuated managerial presence on top of the high levels of routine managerial, camera, computerised task-management, customer and co-worker observation of work. This surveillance formed a major barrier to mobilisation, as workers were fearful to talk about OUR Walmart in the workplace, as illustrated by the following extract from my field notes:

> 'I spoke to an East Asian male in his 40s but he said “I can't talk to you about that, my manager is just over there and he'll hear me” - his body language clearly showed he was extremely scared.'

Surprisingly, the enforced isolation of workers and perception of surveillance did not extend into spaces created through mass self-communication networks such as video conferencing and Facebook. Though it would have been easy for managers to observe workers on the open pages of social networking sites such as Facebook, what is significant is not whether they were being surveilled or not, but whether they felt they were. Foucault (1977) makes clear it is the perception of potential surveillance that enables control, at least in terms of day-to-day activities, rather than the actual act of surveillance itself. Moreover, this sense of freedom from surveillance could be heightened by the use of more secure online spaces such as video conferencing and private local Facebook pages (both of which required an invitation to join in order to participate). This sentiment was clearly expressed in the interview with Becky - an organiser who was a recently terminated worker:

> '[Facebook] really opens up a line of communication because Walmart isn't monitoring the Facebook page, so you might feel a little more open to talking to someone on like a personal level over Facebook than you would if I went into your store and was talking to you and your manager is standing over here staring at you, you know.'

A sense of collective injustice crystallised into a sense of collective identity and the articulation of collective interests. Initially this collective identity was that of being workers exploited by the 'greedy' and 'criminal' owners and directors of Walmart. This can be seen particular clearly in Pamela's statement that:

> 'Walmart has been lying to them [the workers] because their slogan is 'Save Money to Live Better' but who's actually living better? The Walton's not their associates.'

However, following a series of strikes by fast food workers, which started just six days after OUR Walmart's 2012 Black Friday Strike, this identity coalesced into being a part of a wider 'low wage workers' movement.' This common theme of the interviews was elucidated particularly clearly by a worker called Andre:

> 'They are living the same fight that we are living, where I mean if you go to Walmart… you can't make a living… just like a fast food worker… So that's why we are sticking together with each other because we know the struggle…That's what the fight is and that's why we have their backs and they have ours because it's pretty much the same… Corporate America is making thousands [of dollars] an hour or thousands a day but here it is if you work in retail or fast food… you might make a hundred a day, if you're lucky, so that's why we're sticking together in solidarity and fighting this fight.'

Facebook facilitated this spreading of a collective sense of injustice and a commonality of interests, first specifically as Walmart workers, and then more generally as low wage workers. This was because these networks are easily accessible to those not yet active, as they lack defined boundaries making them well suited to the 'expansive networking' of collective interests.

A mobilisation for 'different times'

Once a shared sense of collective identity and interests exists, an organisation which is capable of coordinating actors and providing necessary resources is needed to stimulate collective action. Above it was theorised that mass self-communication enables network organisational forms to replace hierarchical ones. The mobilisation at Walmart was facilitated by two officially separate organisations: a union - the UFCW - and a workers' association - OUR Walmart – but in practice, the two organisations operated in tandem. Not dissimilar to the situation of Japan's McUnion (Royle and Urano, 2012). The exact number of workers who have joined OUR Walmart is confidential but was claimed nationally to have been in the thousands, across 700 stores (each with an average workforce of 300). The interviews suggested that in California there were over 1000 members. OUR Walmart's handful of strongest stores in the LA and Bay Areas were reported as having a membership of around a hundred workers. However, more commonly the most active stores had a membership in the range of a dozen to fifty workers and there were many stores with only a handful or less of members.

The UFCW provided the majority of financial resources, as well as organisational and legal expertise and experience. For example, in the LA Area, the UFCW funded 10 organisers, meaning that the UFCW was committing hundreds of thousands of dollars in wages to mobilising Walmart workers in the LA Area alone. Yet, the UFCW was not trying to mobilise workers to join it, but only OUR Walmart. This was in part because US labour law requires unions, but not associations, to hold formal workplace certification elections, even if a majority of workers have already joined the union. A recurrent theme among the union organisers was that any attempts to win elections would result in failure. Therefore, the mobilisation explicitly did not seek to engage in the collective bargaining which is central to the classic conceptualisations of trade unions. The mobilisation cannot even be understood as a 'pre-union' campaign (Heckscher and Carré, 2006) for even if OUR Walmart was able to create a sustainable organisation there was no realistic likelihood of translating this into union recognition. UFCW organiser Ali explained:

> 'It's just a very strict process [union certification]... there is just no way that we would be able to organise on the scale that we are doing right now if we were going about it the traditional way, it's not possible and it's not sustainable, we're building a movement... a lot of traditional organising is "here's a contract now let's work to uphold that contract"'

A similarly experienced UFCW organiser, José, expounded how:

> 'We have to look for new and fresh ways to organise. We cannot depend on elections, we have to find a way to organise on a bigger scale, and it may not necessarily be at first a unionisation drive because we have to look at things differently because we are living in different times.'

Being an association also provided a discursive platform from which, by stressing the fact that OUR Walmart is not a union but an association, they could circumvent the prevalent anti-union prejudices of much of the workforce. OUR Walmart not only differed from unions but also traditional 'worker centres' which lack a developed worker membership base (Milkman, 2014) and 'quasi-unions' (Heckscher and Carré, 2006) which lack strong ties with the labour movement and lack formal membership mechanisms.

Much of Walmart's counter-mobilisation efforts went into de-legitimising the association by equating it with a union. Some of the main tools highlighted by the informants were poster-boards and power-point screens placed above the time-clocks and video displays in the staff rooms claiming that OUR Walmart is a front for 'the unions'. The displays included photos of OUR Walmart rallies pointing out union officials. This bridging was important as all workers underwent training on unions, in which unions were portrayed as outsiders attempting to take away workers' voices as well as their pay. Managers also tried to play down worker involvement by arguing that OUR Walmart either no-longer existed or that it was only a few disgruntled workers being misled by union outsiders.

Managers had a number of approaches by which they attempted to increase the perceived costs of joining OUR Walmart. Workers reported being told by their managers that if the store became unionised or if large numbers joined OUR Walmart the store would be shut down. This was despite doing so constituting an illegal threat. Other workers revealed that their stores' managers had told workers that they had lost their bonus because OUR Walmart had damaged the store's sales. Most importantly, workers reported individual acts of retaliation, principally the cutting of hours, but also three of the participants, along with 20 other workers, were fired in between the two fieldwork trips. These firings followed participation in a two week strike in June 2013 - at the time of writing Walmart is appealing a ruling by the labour board that these firings were illegal. Disciplinary procedures were also reported as having been utilised against members for minor infringements

The organisational strength necessary for small groups of workers to overcome this counter-mobilisation was significantly increased through mass self-communication (in particular Facebook). Facebook allowed dispersed workers, either spatially in different stores or temporally on different shifts, to connect with each other, even though they may have never met face-to-face. Through engaging in discussions over Facebook, workers were able to learn from each other by sharing information about what was happening at their store and what had worked well. They were also able to provide each other with practical and emotional support. Online video conference calls brought workers from across the country together in order to discuss major issues, provide feedback and make decisions. Videos uploaded to Facebook and YouTube of speeches by charismatic leaders and talismanic actions at stores where OUR Walmart was strong connected the strength of these stores to weaker ones where workers were inspired to emulate them. These connections were possible despite being geographical dispersed across a vast country. Bill, a senior UFCW official, explained how mass self-communication massively expanded social interaction and social network density:

> "It's been transformative… there's thousands of conversations happening every day amongst members of OUR Walmart…It's totally widely open, people are building their own groups they are learning from each other, they're supporting each other… this campaign wouldn't have been possible five years ago, it wouldn't of… achieved what it has and that is thanks primarily to Facebook but also Twitter… it breaks down the barriers and the walls that people face in life and it's also a place where people can support each other whether they are in the same store or across the nation and lastly it's got a natural way that people can become engaged."

Activists and organisers also reduced the impact of managerial threats by downplaying cases of victimisation and highlighting their ability to end it through collective action or by filing legal charges. At the same time activists emphasised that the threat of arbitrarily being a victim of managerial discipline remained high even if a worker did not participate. OUR Walmart also operated a hardship fund for workers fired due to their involvement. This fund provided workers with between one and two months of replacement wages. Meanwhile the UFCW helped workers find alternative employment at unionised firms. Nevertheless, given the high level of surveillance, fear of retaliation continued to be seen as the major barrier to greater levels active participation, with workers reporting their stores having many silent members and free riders. This means that even if a more traditional union structure was seen as superior, it seems unlikely that OUR Walmart would be able to take such a form in the foreseeable future. For better or for worse, mobilisations taking place in similar contexts to OUR Walmart may have to adopt network forms as the only realistic manner in which organising is possible. The big question, then, is whether such networks can undertake effective collective action despite low density and a lack of structural power?

New opportunities for collective action

Walmart workers lacked structural power and OUR Walmart had only managed to mobilise a fraction of the workforce into active support for collective action – largely due to the fear of retaliation. The mobilisation lacked the traditional economic (strikes) and political (state enforced recognition) sources of power, which the US labour movement has traditionally relied upon. Therefore, if this network form were to be effective then new channels through which demands could be placed were necessary.

As Walmart had reached market saturation in its traditional markets, reputational damage had the potential to hit it particularly hard. For Walmart, the continued expansion into the metropolitan markets, which in the past it avoided because of the presence of unions, was crucial, especially as same-store-sales have been declining in recent years (Lichtenstein, 2009). Yet this expansion can be delayed and even blocked by concerned local authorities. For example, this has resulted in there being no Walmart stores in New York City (Greenhouse and Clifford, 2013). Constraining Walmart's growth into these areas provided a channel through which the mobilisation could seek influence. This required that OUR Walmart marshal ideological sources of power, which could then be translated into a political source of power through forcing Democrat politicians into believing that it would be untenable for them to support Walmart's growth. This could then provide OUR Walmart with an economic source of power to wield over Walmart. As UFCW organiser Jenny explained the aim of the mobilisation was:

> 'Is not to go to election and then represent but to get Walmart to publicly commit to a certain standard.'

This reliance upon ideological power led to an emphasis upon confrontational direct collective action rather than attempting to utilise the political sources of power provided by labour law. This was summed up by UFCW organiser, Ali:

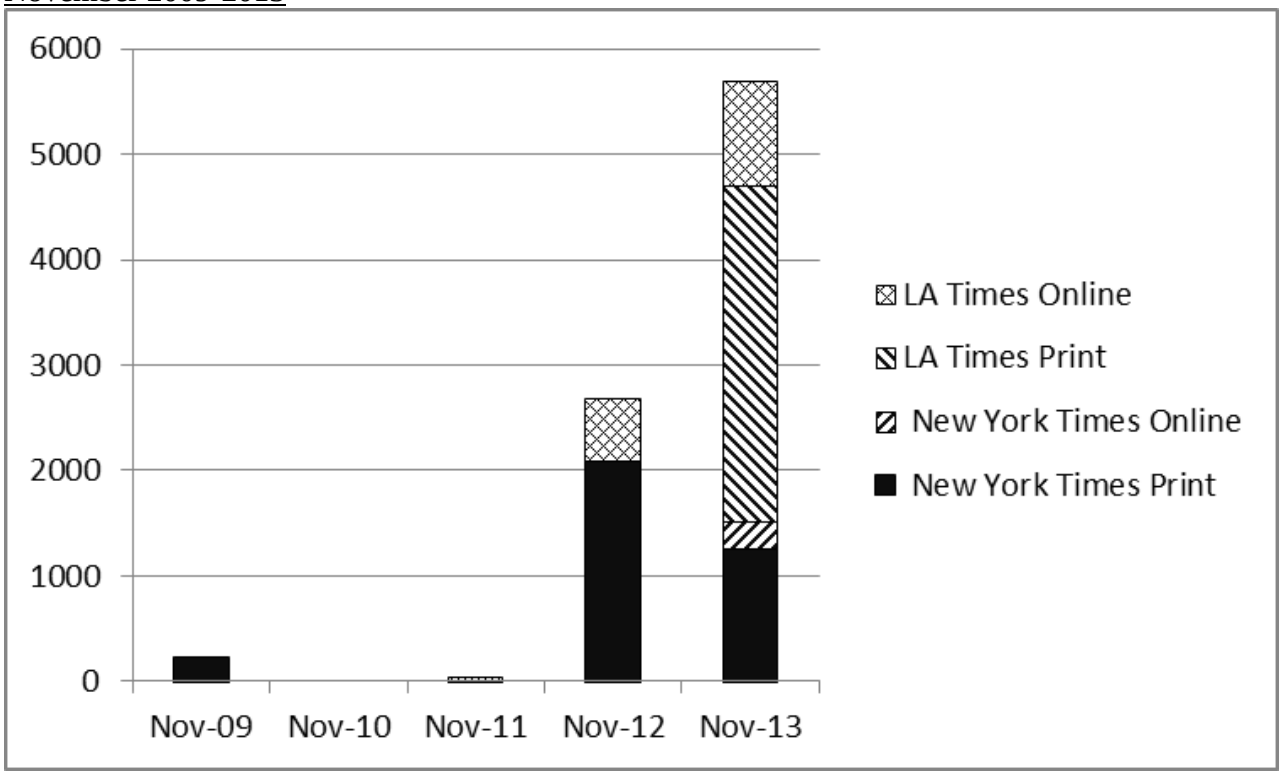
> 'It’s a very frustrating process when you involve the law... we are much more about taking direct action, and just because the law isn't going to cover you and have your back doesn't mean that OUR Walmart isn't going to have your back and you’re not going to have all of your peers, whether that's at your store, or in your market or even the community, you know we are taking action now and doing something about it now rather than waiting for the law to do something.'

However, as the aim of such action was ideological, it did not take the form of a typical strike aimed at having an economic impact at the point of production. Hyman (1989) states that strikes are by their very nature collective, but when Walmart workers took strike action it was as part of a small workplace group of around five workers at a maximum and sometimes even as individuals. It is only through their interconnectedness through mass self-communication networks, particularly Facebook, that it is truly a collective act. Moreover, as most strikes lasted only a day and involved only a fraction of the workforce on one-side, and one of the wealthiest entities on the planet on the other, it cannot be considered as fitting Hyman's 'trial of strength' category. On the face of it the strikes seem more congruent with Hyman's alternative category of 'demonstration stoppage'. However, this category is conceptualised as being both spontaneous and quickly settled, whereas the Walmart strikes were planned well in advance, and were the first major act of a long-term confrontation. Therefore a new understanding of strikes is needed for the information age.

The strikes' power was not in their effect on Walmart's profits, but rather in creating symbolic damage to its reputation. Moreover, the ideological power of the strikes was aimed not at bringing Walmart to the bargaining table but instead at bypassing bargaining altogether, by directly influencing Walmart's behaviour. These strikes, which were personally risky for those who undertook them, were by their nature dramatic. The other major form action utilised was similarly dramatic civil disobedience which ended with workers and supporters being led away in handcuffs. The first time this tactic was utilised was during the 2012 Black Friday strike when LA Area workers, family and clergy supporters blockaded the road outside a store for two hours before being arrested. The spectacle of these direct actions was heightened by the presence of large numbers of supporters.

Mass self-communication played two crucial roles in regards to these actions. Firstly it was an effective means for spreading word of the disparate actions through Facebook ‘Events’ while the lack of rigid organisational or communicative boundaries enabled the expansive networking of support for these actions. This support included other low wage workers and labour and community groups and meant that significant solidarity was mobilised both physically and financially. For example, the informants reported that the 2012 LA Area actions were supported by 1000 labour and community allies who joined the picket. Furthermore, the 2012 national strike raised hundreds of thousands of dollars. This supports the need to elaborate Kelly’s (1998; 2005) account of mobilisation theory to encompass how workplace mobilisations can emanate out into wider networked community mobilisations. Secondly, mass-self communication, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Youtube all enabled traditional and self-generated coverage of these actions to be widely disseminated. For example, OUR Walmart (2013) claims there were over 300,000 posts on Facebook and 60,000 tweets on Twitter about the 2012 Black Friday Strike.

Figure 1. Coverage (words) of the mobilisation and poor terms and conditions at Walmart each November 2009-2013



The swarming nature of these actions and their representation through mass self–communication amplified their ideological power by multiplying media interest. This, nonetheless, represents a form of 'managed activism' as a degree of centralised coordinating is necessary so as to bring together the actions effectively and strategically. The Black Friday strike, for example, involved a relatively small number of workers stopping work for a relatively short amount of time, but gaining, as demonstrated by Figure 1, a significant increase in the level of media coverage for issues which cause Walmart reputational damage. In fact, according to a senior UFCW official, the print and website coverage alone generated by OUR Walmart was the equivalent to $24 million in 2012 and $31 million in 2013 of advertisements. As Michael Bender (2012), President of Walmart West put it: 'Walmart had its best Black Friday ever last week, and yet the media coverage created the illusion that Walmart's associates were protesting instead of serving customers.' This supports the view that reputational damage is a potential channel by which collective bargaining could be replaced. Moreover, mass self-communication networks may aid such an approach; however, there must be channels by which the ideological power of reputational damage can be translated into economic power.

Conclusions

It is impossible to predict whether the OUR Walmart will, in the long-term, be successful because power is always contingent and orthogonal (Mann, 1986). However, these findings highlight that mass-self communication did play a central role in the formation of injustices and spreading of collective identity among Walmart workers. It also enabled a network organisational form which provided the mobilisation with associational power despite the organisation having extremely low density both across the workforce as a whole and in most workplaces. This network form was an effective means by which workers were able to leverage power against their employer, however, the source of this power was only indirectly economic and instead was reliant upon ideological power

in form of reputational damage.

This article, therefore, demonstrates that mass self-communication networks can have a similar impact on workplace mobilisations as Castells (2012) demonstrates them having for protest movements. This suggests that in the network society it is not only capital which increasingly has the potential to form networks, but so too does labour. Importantly, mass self-communication networks enabled workers to circumvent their employer's strategies for counter-mobilisation. This was achieved by going beyond the restrictions placed on labour organising by the law, creating a new network organisational form not focused upon collective bargaining, and developing symbolic acts which leveraged ideological power. This demonstrates that mass self-communication can provide tools for overcoming the challenges which led Castells (1997) to argue that in the information age the labour movement is inevitably weakened in its ability to provide representation for workers' interests. Therefore, mass self-communication networks may provide a path towards labour movement renewal. However, given OUR Walmart's continued low density it seems unlikely that a networked labour movement would resemble the labour movement of the mid-to-late 20th century. Rather it would be more likely to closely resemble the US labour movement of the early 20th century as argued by Milkman (2013).

Notes

1. This is unsurprising considering Castells' (1997) theoretical presupposition that the labour movement will be historically superseded in the network society.
2. This article does not seek to make use of Foucault's general framework of power as discourse – see Edwards (2005) for an exposition of why doing so would be problematic.
3. The UFCW is made up of more than 1.3 million people working primarily in retail stores, and food processing and meat packing industries
4. As of May 2014 this has increased to over 48,000 likes, a growth of over 2,000 likes a month https://www.facebook.com/OURWMT

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