The grid helps us visualize the strengths and weakness of each movement. The next two chapters will delve more deeply into lessons from the Outside Game, using the lens of swarm theory. The final chapter of this section will explore the Heart Space and expose the surprising narrative pattern that Obama 2008, the Tea Party, and Occupy Wall Street all share.

**The Grid Helps Us Visualize**

The big question is whether the broader 99% movement can evolve to embrace messaging and the tactics beyond outrage, protests, and encampments.

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**5**

**Swarms**

*The Outside Game Revisited*

The Outside Game is the home of mass action and is fueled by passion. In this domain, I was surprised to discover that the same underlying mechanisms functioned within all three of the movements we are studying. The Obama phenomenon, the Tea Party, and Occupy Wall Street—although coming from varying, and even opposing ideological backgrounds—share many parallels and overlaps. The more we can demystify these movements and understand their mechanics, the better we can apply the knowledge and experience as we move forward.

The first approach, then, is to consider all three movements in light of a kind of network theory known as swarm theory. All three of these movements can be understood as different kinds of "swarms."
Biologists who have studied the collective intelligence of insect colonies, flocks of birds, and schools of fish provided the inspiration for describing the human social phenomenon as we know it: swarms are groups in which no one individual is in charge and each individual is free to take action on her own, following certain simple guidelines. As it turns out, staggeringly complex situations can be mastered and benefit the collective when individual members are empowered in this way.

In 2008, technology writer Clay Shirky inspired many with his analysis of the power of crowd-sourcing, also known as collaborative production, in Here Comes Everybody. Online social tools, he argued, now enable individuals to join forces and achieve things together without needing an institution to organize them. The creation of Wikipedia is one such example.

Decentralized, self-organized groups can be trickier to start, but they are less resource-intensive to maintain than old-fashioned bureaucracies. The traditional, top-down structures suffer from what Shirky calls the “institutional dilemma”: the “institution lives in a kind of contradiction: it exists to take advantage of group effort, but some of its resources are drained away by directing that effort . . . because an institution expends resources to manage resources, there is a gap between what those institutions are capable of in theory and in practice, and the larger the institution, the greater those costs.”

But, as we shall see, institutions themselves can also be subsumed into a swarm superstructure, functioning as mere nodes in the network.

Despite appearing chaotic at first glance, the swarm structure has multiple benefits. Because intelligence and decision-making power is spread throughout the system, swarms are highly adaptive and resilient. With no leader or headquarters to target, a swarm is very difficult to destroy. And the fact that each node has decision-making power means that the swarm can react and pivot quickly and nimbly as new situations arise.

By way of example, swarm mechanics are evident in this description by Johann Hari, writing in the Nation magazine about UK Uncut:

The old protest movements were modeled like businesses, with a CEO and a managing board. This protest movement, however, is shaped like a hive of bees, or like Twitter itself. There is no center. There is no leadership. There is just a shared determination not to be bilked, conned by tweets. Every decision made by UK Uncut is open and driven by the will of its participants.

Swarms reproduce and mutate as well. In The Starfish and the Spider, another important book on network theory, authors Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom point to the Alcoholics Anonymous twelve-step model. It has been adapted in countless settings beyond alcohol treatment, not just without resistance from people in the original network, but with their blessing. Spinoffs are seen as a sign of a healthy entity, rather than competition to be squashed.

A new era is being defined by the emergence of technology-enhanced swarms that aim to impact or change the political system. Political swarms are special. They are a subset of the larger phenomenon of swarms, but they face particular challenges to becoming relevant and effective. For one thing, they must exist in relationship to the reigning political structures, which are top-down, highly
bureaucratic, and generally resistant to non-elite inputs or influence. At a national level, political swarms must attract significant popular support and unleash tremendous energy to even register inside the Teflon dome over Washington, DC, which defecates virtually anything thrown its way. Yet, while the goal is to impact the political system, political swarms do not originate from within the normal political process. A political swarm succeeds only when it comes from the outside and exists independently.

My analysis of the mechanics of recent political swarms uncovered three key components that were crucial to the success of each: (1) open source brand, (2) support center(s), and (3) media attention.

Open Source Brands.

Open source brands do not function like ordinary “proprietary brands.” Most regular organizations use a proprietary brand—one that is trademarked and can be used exclusively by that single organization. Such organizations then attempt to build up their brand by soliciting members, attracting donors, and gaining name recognition through the press. This process is laborious, expensive, and time consuming. It also throws the organization into de facto competition with every other group with a similar mission. As a result, much of the professional “do-gooder” space functions as a warzone, with rival organizations in the same field duking it out over turf, funding, and air time in the media. This “battle of the brands” consumes a great deal of time and energy in the field of social change advocacy, both on the right and on the left.

On the other hand, nobody owns an open source brand. It can be used by anyone who likes what the name stands for, without that person having to seek prior permission from anybody. Anyone who likes the brand, anybody who identifies with the brand, can use the brand. On the front end, the exact properties that will make an open source brand successful are hard to describe or make predictions about. But when an open source brand “catches on,” millions of people rush toward it. Its creators do not have to chase people down and beg them to join in the fun.

Even existing organizations that already have their own proprietary brands may also want to affiliate with the new, open source brand, declaring themselves a part of the growing phenomenon. As we shall see in the following examples, this affiliate branding model lets the open source brand spread even more rapidly—and it saves resources by creating an umbrella that allows the existing groups to connect and echo each other in new ways. Numerous individuals and institutions can then affiliate under a unifying banner without having to give up their own identities. It is the ideal way (and probably the only way) to label a true swarm.

In some ways, in 2008, the word “Obama” actually functioned as an open source brand. First of all, those three syllables did not mean “the surname of a black guy from Chicago who wants to be president.” His name itself became a brand, invoking a whole series of lofty and aspirational values. More importantly, the Obama brand took on an “open source” quality, through MyBarackObama.com. Anyone who wanted to support Obama could sign up and affiliate himself or herself with the Obama brand, create special Obama subgroups, and publicly badge himself or herself with the “Hope” logo. We saw people proudly walk the streets, wearing shirts and buttons that identified them as a lesbian for Obama, or a steelworker for
Obama. They could be whatever they wanted to be, keep their own identity, and yet affiliate with the Obama brand. I sometimes refer to "Obama" in 2008 as a meta-brand because it pulled in so many brands.

The name “Tea Party” also functions as a brand. Today that term represents more than a distant, historical event; it means more than a pleasant outing for little girls or senior citizens. It is a political brand that invokes a right-wing, tax-cutting, anti-Obama sensibility. At a deeper level, it invokes the patriotic principle of liberty (more on that in the next chapter). It also has an open-source quality. Nobody owns it. And it is more resilient than the Obama brand because it does not hinge on a personality, a politician, or even an actual political party. Its equity rests on the principles and values it invokes. Anyone who agrees with the basic principles in the Contract from America is entitled to call herself a Tea Partier and affiliate with the brand. Thousands of organizations—most of which already operate under proprietary brands—also fly the Tea Party flag to proclaim membership with the swarm.

Occupy Wall Street has gone beyond both of its predecessor swarms in creating an open source brand. It has generated the most decentralized, widely applicable brand yet. The Tea Party may not have a director sitting in headquarters, but most everyone can point to key spokespersons. This is not the case with Occupy. Anyone anywhere in the world who shared the frustration and outrage of the original Occupy Wall Street group has been empowered to take action in Occupy’s name. There are no centers and no contract that must first be embraced. So we now see Occupy Student Debt, Occupy Congress, Occupy Colleges, Occupy the Media, Occupy Marines, and Occupy Design, among countless other invocations.

It may also be worth noting that brevity is a shared feature: Obama, Tea Party, and Occupy are all only three syllables long. All three movements utilized brands that are short, memorable, and open source.

Support Centers

Despite how spontaneous and decentralized the grassroots populist swarms may seem, none of these political swarms could gain traction without at least one entity functioning as what once could call a support center. A support center does not have to be a formal headquarters; it is rarely a fixed site of central leadership or decision making. The support center provides the swarm with sustenance.

During the 2008 Obama phenomenon, the support center was, in fact, a single, physical hub: the Obama for America campaign headquarters, which collected and distributed resources from logo caps and T-shirts, to donations to keep the phones and lights running in the network’s nodes.

The Tea Party once again improved on the model of the Obama campaign. Rather than having only one support center, at least ten major organizations stepped forward to play the role. Many of these groups—such as FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity—are alleged to have funding ties to the Koch brothers. These organizations gave sympathetic, local volunteers some much-needed technical support, media training, conferences, and other help. Having multiple support centers would logically increase the swarm’s resilience.
Occupy Wall Street has the least visible or centralized set of support centers yet, but they are there. For example, the magazine _Adbusters_ originally propelled the Occupy Wall Street meme into the public domain; unions and community organizing groups turned out thousands of people for major rallies and marches; and when Mayor Bloomberg attempted to clear Zuccotti Park in October 2011, labor unions, social justice groups, and even national organizations such as Moveon.org turned out their members in large numbers to defend the site. When Occupiers have needs—sleeping bags, warm socks, coffee, pizza—they put out calls on Twitter and Facebook, and the support flows in, not just from individuals, but also from institutional sympathizers.

**Media Smarts**

All three of the recent swarms have effectively engaged the media. The Obama campaign attracted favorable, mainstream media coverage on a massive scale and used e-mail and YouTube to go around the media when it needed to. The Tea Party enjoyed the dedicated, round-the-clock support of a single network, _Fox News_, plus the aid of the right-wing blogosphere and talk radio echo chambers. Occupy broke through the mainstream media firewall by the sheer staying power of its encampments, and it also easily established a dominant presence in the independent media and social networks of Twitter and Facebook.

Table 5.1 shows some of the features that seem to be present in political swarms that succeed.

But it must be noted, nobody has a precise formula for creating a successful swarm. In fact, at the time of their inception, these phenomena universally tend to fly in the face of conventional wisdom. A black guy with a Muslim name, campaigning to be the president of the United States against the invincible Clintons and Karl Rove's GOP? Angry, old white guys, wearing tricorn hats, vowing to "take back" the government from the invincible Obama? Disheveled youth creating tent cities and sleeping outdoors to oppose the invincible mega-banks? Few would have thought that any of these notions would engage and excite millions of people—and make history—before they actually took off.

The only thing that can be said for sure is that the business of making change is itself changing. The old, vertical hierarchies are being forced to share the stage with new, more horizontal forms of organizing and mobilizing people. What is interesting is that the swarms are not flattening the existing hierarchies or replacing them; more often, they are capturing, subsuming, repurposing, and
using the old institutions in exciting, new ways. One might, therefore, predict that the political parties and professional advocacy organizations will survive. But the ones that will thrive will be those that learn to function as nodes in energized, branded networks that seem, at first, to come out of nowhere.

The Heart Space Revisited

The Heart Space is the home of narratives that arouse the emotions and touch the soul. Compelling narratives are more important in politics than are facts, policies, or data points. People are moved rarely by facts. We live in a world where people can find facts on their own facts; if someone believes that vaccines cause autism, he or she can find a bunch of facts to support that conclusion. If someone believes the opposite, she can find a bunch of facts to support that conclusion, too. Facts are fickle and forgettable.

Stories, at their best, are not. Stories are how humans have passed along values and information for millennia. In politics, the side with the best stories almost always wins.

Communications maven Nancy Duarte writes in her book Reonate,