



Photograph: Andrew Burton/AP

CRITICAL MOMENT

SNAPSHOT OF A COMMUNICATIONS TURNING POINT
OCTOBER 10 2011

A young man stands before an American flag, a dollar bill taped across his mouth. It is one of many images that capture the frustration and impotence that drives the “Occupy” movement.

Before the first protests at New York City’s Zuccotti Park, deficits and spending cuts dominated political discourse. Joblessness, tax fairness, and the squeezed middle class got short shrift.

Not anymore. With a simple slogan (“We are the 99 per cent!”), arresting visuals (thousands of demonstrators crossing the Brooklyn Bridge), and the reach of social media, the Occupy movement has pushed economic inequality on to the political agenda and TV screens around the globe. Copycat movements have sprung up in dozens of cities, from London to Taipei.

The result is a new conversation. A Pew Research Center poll in January 2012 found that some three-in-10 Americans see “very strong” conflicts between rich and poor.

This is the largest proportion reporting that view in the 24 years that people have been asked. Occupy isn’t the only factor, but it has made it harder for politicians and business leaders to ignore the growing wealth gap.

With the eviction of encampments from Zuccotti Park, London’s St. Paul’s Cathedral and elsewhere, Occupy has lost some visibility. Unlike movements such as the Tea Party – another populist phenomenon that has captured America’s attention – Occupy doesn’t aspire to participate in politics, at least not in traditional ways.

Still, the movement has shown how quickly modern technology allows disparate people to form powerful connections. For some Occupiers, that’s good enough. As Justine Tunney of *occupywallst.org* told *The New Yorker* in November, “We can’t hold on to any of that authority. We don’t want to.” In many ways, therein lies the movement’s power.

STEPHEN POWER —

Director, Brunswick, Washington, DC