This is what Democracy Looks Like: An Online Campaign for Action during the Occupy Nova Scotia Eviction

It is Remembrance Day, and many Haligonians woke up this morning prepared for a day of quiet reflection and reverence. The day has turned into anything but. At noon, police descended on the Occupy Nova Scotia encampment in Victoria Park to carry out an eviction order issued by Mayor Peter Kelly earlier in the morning.

Since October 15, 2011, Occupy Nova Scotia demonstrators have camped at the Grande Parade, located in the political heart of downtown Halifax, in order to promote the separation of democratic values from capitalism. Last week, the group met with City Hall and agreed to relocate to Victoria Park for one week in order to accommodate the city’s annual Remembrance Day ceremonies. However, the group was taken by surprise this morning when local law officials arrived at the park with an eviction order and began making arrests. Within half an hour, a firestorm of debated erupted across social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr.

In the park, protestors chanted the world is watching and this is what democracy looks like, which turned out to be an accurate description of what was taking place in the digital arena. In the past, coverage of events have been limited in perspective, as it is often the privileged few who are provided with an exclusive public platform to express opinions. The voice of the majority is often absent from debate. However, as today demonstrated, social media and web 2.0 technologies have changed the game. Not only do all individuals have a voice, but calls for action are being heard and answered.

Minutes after police arrived at Victoria Park, information dissemination began on Twitter under local hashtags such as #OccupyNS and #Halifax. Discussion quickly turned into calls for immediate public action. For example, #OccupyNS promoted an “emergency rally [in] Victoria Park right now! Police vans ready to evict. We need the entire community to come down and support us.” Locals responded by organizing a “rally today at Victoria Park at 3pm. Come get wet for freedom of assembly and expression!” As community members arrived and formed a human chain around demonstrators (see photo above), tweeters continued to express their disappointment and disbelief in the situation using politically charged hashtags like #evictmayorkelly. One local tweeted that “protester eviction on Remembrance Day undermines very rights & freedoms veterans fought for.” Another answered that “watching the footage of the #OccupyNS arrests is giving me terrible flashbacks to the G20 arrests. This is not my city, what has happened?”

On Facebook, opinions were divided. Some argued that the eviction was a violation of the Charter of Human Rights, particularly the right to peaceful assembly. Others were of the opinion that the matter came down to a by-law violation and was not a human rights issue at all. For example, one user stated that “[demonstrators] weren’t evicted for protesting. They were evicted
for living in a park. It's illegal. Don't call it a right.” Another user answered that “it’s a bylaw, not a criminal code offence and as such could result in, at most, a ticket. What the police are doing right now is, on the other hand, a violation of the Charter.” Despite the differences in opinion, many Haligonians questioned whether or not the decision to evict demonstrators had been made outside of council chambers. Again, Occupy Nova Scotia called the community to action via Facebook and encouraged citizens to email Mayor Kelly regarding this issue. Within twenty minutes, thirty individuals had responded by either liking the comment or stating that email had been sent.

It remains to be seen what resolutions or deals will be struck, but the day serves as an interesting case study regarding how social media tools are used to mobilize a community and debate significant issues that are occurring in real time. The core of the Occupy Nova Scotia movement lies in the struggle for democracy and today, free and open democratic speech was achieved across a variety of social media platforms. All individuals were provided with the opportunity to share their unique perspective on the situation, and most importantly, were given a voice in society. And in the age of digital media, this may be in fact what democracy looks like.