Social media has bypassed an indifferent mainstream media as the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ has grown in strength and has taken root in more than 80 countries. USHA M RODRIGUES says mainstream media ignored the movement initially because there was no identifiable leadership or even a set of specific demands.

It is an interconnected world we live in, and protests are the flavour of the times. A group of demonstrators have been squatting in Zuccotti Park (formerly called Liberty Plaza Park) on Wall Street in New York’s Lower Manhattan since September 17, 2011. The demonstrations, which began as a small gathering of disparate groups of people, entered its second month of protest on October 18.

In the initial days, the demonstrations were ignored by the mainstream media and political leaders alike. The demonstrators’ persistence to stay put in the heart of U.S. financial capital, and their “Occupy Wall Street” protest becoming a global movement last Saturday, has propelled the mainstream media to take notice. However, on October 16, the mainstream television channels still focused on the violence that erupted in Rome, rather than zeroing in on the reasons for these protests held across 100 cities in the U.S., and in London, Montreal, Oslo, Tokyo, Paris, Berlin, Hong Kong, Sydney among other cities in more than 80 countries.

Initially, the mainstream media ignored these demonstrators as those on the fringes of society and as a leftist movement. In fact, it was the community, citizen and liberal media organisations such as Democracy Now! who covered the protest. A number of mainstream commentators in the U.S. dismissed the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators for their diversity; the carefree atmosphere at the Zuccotti Park; their leaderless status; and for a lack of clear agenda or message. But the demonstrators, who were threatened with eviction, arrested and jostled by local police, and ridiculed by media outlets such as Fox News, seem to have tapped into a worldwide economic anxiety.

A number of respected bloggers and commentators raised the issue of mainstream media not paying attention to the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators and their need to express their anxiety, frustration and hopelessness with the current state of economic and political system in the U.S. Commentators such as Keith Olbermann and Douglas Rushkoff chided the mainstream media for dismissing the protestors. In fact, Eric Randall wrote in The Atlantic Wire about mainstream media discussing at length why they were not covering the Wall Street protest!

The occupiers of Wall Street have grown in numbers in the past month, coming from different walks of life and holding different political beliefs. The movement (more information at OccupyWallSt.org), which is inspired by popular uprising in Egypt and Tunisia, “aims to expose how the richest
1% of people are writing the rules of an unfair global economy.” There is anger against the out-of-touch corporate, financial and political elite. The strength of the demonstrators, who call themselves “We Are The 99%”, is underlined by new media technology, which is assisting it to connect with like-minded people across the world. This is not the first protest movement of its kind which has used the internet – online forums, blogs, twittering, live streaming and other social media networking sites – to spread their message. They are by-passing the mainstream media, and using the internet for grassroots mobilisation.

Traditional mainstream media is generally not good at reporting the process of change, but does a sensational job of ‘personalising’ an event or an issue. In this protest, there are no leaders or a set of demands, so it does not neatly fit into journalists’ news values of ‘personality’, ‘authority’, ‘conflict’ or even ‘novelty’ (there have been other such protests before, example the long running climate change campaigns). News values such as ‘conflict’ require clear articulation of protesters’ demands and an enemy who can be singled out or represented by someone in authority such as the government or a corporation. This protest is against a system of inequality, an omnipresent global economic order, and against all those who form part of the elite in our society. It is challenging for the mainstream media, which is owned by mainstream corporations, and regulated by the government, to report about a protest against their own excesses and nexus with those in power.

Initially, the demonstrations were led by the educated youth, who as some sociologists and journalists (more by Paul Mason, Economic Editor, Newsnight, BBC and http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-15326636) have noted, feel hopeless about the future. The demonstrators, who hold a general assembly everyday at 7pm, have started recording their activities to minimise their dependence on the mainstream media. And, a number of polls indicate that the demonstrators are winning the support of the general community. A CNN report said, a recent university poll of 1068 registered voters showed that 67% of them agreed with the demonstrators’ views.

If the mainstream media is to maintain its position as a conduit in the public sphere, it needs to tap into this anger and look deeper into issues and events, rather than stereotype protesters as ‘anarchists’ or ‘professional troublemakers’. The demonstrators are the educated unemployed, students, doctors, professors, office workers, young families, and other ordinary people. They are cut off from mainstream politics, because they have lost faith in their government which seems beholden to corporate lobbies, but they are connected globally with people just like them via the internet and other media technologies. ‘The Global Day of Action’ has demonstrated the power of grassroots movements and their use of new media technologies to connect across the world.

Pew Research Center’s (PEJ) News Coverage Index, which examines the news agenda of 52 outlets from various sectors of media in the U.S., did not show the Occupy Wall Street demonstration as a prominent issue picked up by the mainstream media during September 19-23. However, during September 26 – October 2, although media covered President Obama’s job plan and his travel around the U.S as part of ‘2012 Presidential Campaign’ and ‘Economy’ news coverage dominating the
week with 15% and 14% news domination, the anti-greed protesters in Wall Street gained some media attention when hundreds of demonstrators were arrested on October 1 as they set out to march across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Then again on October 5, when protesters were joined by union members and started spreading across the country to other cities and university campuses that media began linking the protest to the economy issue. But, it is really during the fourth week of the protest, when on October 9, protestors made a call for global action that media coverage gained momentum. And, now as the issue gains "currency", the demonstrators have a legitimacy which they lacked earlier. Political leaders, Hollywood stars and Billionaires all want to be seen to be supporting this ordinary people’s movement. And, the mainstream media is not far behind.

Meanwhile, the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators have begun an open, participatory, horizontal process to build capacity to streamline and articulate their demands. They have a Declaration of the Occupation of New York City. A ‘Demands Committee’ is regularly meeting to discuss possible actionable demands: a list which will be presented to the entire movement for a vote. Democracy in action worth reporting!