Digital Disruption: Exploring the Power of Digital Activism in the Contemporary Landscape

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Introduction

The current political climate is characterised by a significant decline in democratic systems, with around 38% of the world's population living in either authoritarian or hybrid regimes (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022, p.26). These regimes present a range of challenges to society, including human rights violations, lack of accountability of elites and governments, the erosion of civil liberties, among other factors (*Ibid*, p.1). Pro-democracy social movements that challenge the authority of the government threaten the control of authoritarian regimes or dictatorships over society (*Ibid*, p.28). Therefore, governments aim to limit these movements through repressive tactics, such as restricting freedoms, arbitrary arrests, and police brutality, and also reach transnational dimensions (Amnesty International, 2023; Dukalskis et al., 2022, p.2). Social movements (SMs), as conceptualised by Jasper and Goodwin (2005), are "collective, organised, sustained, and non-institutional challenges to authorities, power holders, or cultural beliefs and practices" (*Ibid*, p. 4). These movements are more likely to emerge and persist within democratic regimes, as they benefit from mobilisation capabilities, opportunity structures, civil societies, and autonomous associations. In contrast, authoritarian regimes lack these opportunity structures, systematically suppressing mechanisms that sustain movements (Chen, Xi & Moss 2018). Nonetheless, social movements do exist within authoritarian contexts, albeit with different mechanisms and structures compared to democratic settings (Jasper and Goodwin, 2005). Traditionally, in the past, authoritarian regimes had an important level of control over the information diffusion as they could control traditional media; however the rise of the digital sphere has stripped governments of their total control, although not entirely, and have helped empower average citizens to voice their dissent (Rød, 2015, p. 340). Therefore, scholars have observed the Internet increasingly becoming a tool to bring about greater democratic participation.

In recent years, the world has witnessed a remarkable surge in digital activism, as a form of non-violent protests, empowering individuals and communities to challenge oppressive regimes and fight for social change. Digital activism is defined in its simplest form by Anna Rees (2013) as "digital tools (the internet, mobile phones, social media etc) used for bringing about social and/or political change". The advent of digital technology, particularly social media platforms, has revolutionised the way people organise, communicate, and mobilise their collective voices. Online tools include "websites for online petitions, social networks, blogs, micro-blogging (Twitter), mobile phones and proxy servers." (Rees, 2013). This transformative power of digital activism has been particularly pronounced in authoritarian regimes, where traditional avenues for political dissent are

limited, if not completely repressed. The phenomenon of digital activism, the rise of globalisation and internationalisation have facilitated the flow of information, diversified the repertoire of tactics and the scale of movements, expanding beyond the physical borders of social movements as seen in cases such as the Hong Kong protests of 2019 (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). However this channel for activism is not without risk or a safe option to challenge authoritarian regimes as it can still lead to high levels of repression and increase the risk of persecution, due to the increased visibility of movements (Joyce, 2010, p. 6). Scholars have characterised the Internet as a tool for democratisation as well as repression (Anderson & Rainie, 2020).

In fact, the actual effect of digital activism is often contested in research. Some authors suggest that digital activism does very little to contribute to the success of movements but rather offers new avenues for repression for authoritarian regimes (Kavada, 2010, p. 101). The current literature paints an intriguing picture, therefore this thesis aims to address the gaps and theoretical debates that have emerged from research.

This leads us to the research puzzle of this thesis. As traditional forms of political activism are more challenging to implement in authoritarian contexts, digital activism provides new mechanisms for social change. Therefore, the research question posed is: ***How does digital activism contribute to the success of pro-democracy movements against authoritarian regimes?***

Literature Review

1. Conceptualisation of digital activism

Digital activism is also known under many different terms in literature such as networked activism, social media activism, or cyberactivism, amongst others. Each term focuses on a specific aspect; however digital activism is an all-encompassing term that will be adopted throughout the analysis of the thesis. It is conceptualised as "social activism mediated through digital technologies to promote social movements" (George and Leidner, 2019, p. 4). Authors conceptualising the term have highlighted main advantages namely the speed, reliability, scale, and low cost that come from digital activism (Chiluwa, 2022; Nalbantoglu, 2014, p. 44) It allows for the scale of movements to become global and transnational, and for actors beyond the state borders to act and participate in the movements.

Early definitions of digital activism suggest that this form of activism is no different to traditional forms of political action (Foot & Schneider, 2002, p. 226). What is meant by

this is that every action that has been performed online whether it be a signing an online petition or emailing political messages can just as easily be performed offline (p. 226). However, researchers have now acknowledged the distinction between online and offline activism as well as recognising that digital activism offers a new repertoire of tactics for social movements.

George and Leidner (2019) characterised this repertoire as a 'virtual toolkit [...] to be used for social change' (p. 4). Platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Whatsapp are technological tools used for social change through messages, online campaigns, hashtag activism such as #Metoo movement, #BlackLivesMatter movement (Wang & Zhou, 2021). Researchers have found that digital activism on its own is not sufficient to sustain a movement, but rather that actions online help improve mechanisms of offline actions in social movements.

1.1 Social, economic and political factors

Economic, social, and political factors significantly impact digital activism practices. Economically, the purchasing power of digital activists influences their engagement in digital activism, with wealthier individuals in countries with affordable internet services being more involved. (Brodock, 2010, p. 72). The cost of hardware, such as computers, affects accessibility to digital activism, favouring those with financial resources. This is also known as the digital divide (Greijdanus et al., 2020, p. 50; Sivitanides and Shah, 2011, p. 3; Schradie, 2018).

Social norms also play a role, as different social groups have varying expectations and norms regarding digital activism based on factors like age, gender, religion, education, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. (Joyce, 2010, p.5; Sivitanides and Shah, 2011, p. 3; Schradie, 2018).

Politically, the legal and regulatory environment of a democratic society can shape digital activism, whereas repressive and authoritarian governments impose limitations on activists' use of digital technologies, including surveillance, blocking applications, and offline persecution. (Sivitanides and Shah, 2011, p. 3)

1.2. Traditional vs. Digital Activism

Traditional activism and digital activism exhibit notable differences in various aspects. In terms of the number of participants required, successful traditional social movements have been associated with large numbers of participants. (Tilly, 2006). In

contrast, digital activism leverages digital resources and efficiencies, enabling a greater impact to be achieved with fewer participants. Digital activism attracts younger people who possess technology skills and are more inclined to engage in digital platforms. (Rainie et al., 2012). It also provides marginalised groups with more opportunities to have their voices heard.

Traditional activism relies on success factors such as the availability of resources, the number and unity of participants, collective effort and commitment towards an identified cause. On the other hand, digital activism emphasises the significance of digital skills, access to the internet, and large social networks. It relies on digital platforms, including social media, websites, texting, and a variety of information technology communications (ICTs) (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752).

2. *Debate on theoretical perspectives*

The value of digital activism has always been heavily debated amongst researchers. Past academic literature have theorised three main schools of thought in regards to digital activism. These perspectives range from hyper positivism to hyper pessimism. Coleman and Freelon (2015) explain it by stating that digital communication influences politics is different from asserting that digital communication fundamentally transforms politics. Three main perspectives have emerged from this debate namely optimist, pessimistic and persistent perspective (Sivitanides, 2011, p. 4). Bradley Allsop (2016) suggests that the debate on these perspectives will "continue to rage on for quite some time".

2.1. Optimist perspective

Researchers adopting this stance argue that digital activism provides new tools and mechanisms that strengthen movements have theorised two main principles.

First, academics have found that digital activism has 'the power to reshape political power' and the hierarchy that comes from traditional forms of politics due to the 'decentralised' and 'leaderless' nature of digital activism. Benkler (2006) explains that digital activism allows for individuals to 'take action outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, traditional hierarchical power structures' (Benkler, 2006; Pesce, 2007; Shirky, 2011).

The second principle presented by Kirkpatrick (2008) views digital activism as a 'social construct', where the value and importance of technology are determined by how people use it. In other words, the value and significance of technology are determined by its

users, such as when individuals opt for an 'entertainment platform like YouTube and use it to share political content'. This view tries to generally see a more moral nature in humans and that people using the Internet "seek entertainment, communication, information, or commerce, not destruction." (Joyce, 2010, p.11).

However, Sorce and Dumitrica (2022) explore two major theoretical limitations to the optimist perspective: isolationism and determinism (p.3). Isolationism, within this context, refers to a perspective that emphasises the digital realm while disregarding its interconnectedness with established media and communication systems. This aspect highlights that research isolates digital activism from its interconnected nature to other mechanisms. Determinism, on the other hand, involves perceiving technology as a somewhat unavoidable catalyst for social change (*Ibid*, p.4).

2.2. Pessimistic perspective

On the other hand, the pessimistic criticises the optimist perspective and its belief in moral and good intentions of human nature. approach observes technology as morally neutral, equally useful for constructive and destructive purposes The destructive purposes they highlight are (1) new opportunities for authoritarian regimes to repress, control and surveil citizens; (2) encourages radicalisation of individuals by empowering hackers and cyber-terrorism (Joyce, 2010, p.4). Morozov (2009) famously explored the first aspect, and creates a substantial argument that online activism endangers activists more than it helps them, especially within authoritarian regimes as they are opening themselves up to repression and persecution. The argument also reminds us that although the Internet exists in a virtual realm, there are physical infrastructures that governments can use to exercise control and repression. This argument worries that digital activism creates "anti-democratic control of technology" (Sivitanides, 2011, p. 4; Anderson and Rainie, 2020).

2.3. Persistent

Finally the persistent perspective. This approach does not view digital activism as necessarily positive or negative but rather does not believe in a real impact from this form of activism. (Joyce, 2010, p.11). This perspective critiques the optimist view that suggests that digital activism offers a radically new and different form of activism but sees it rather as a tool or mechanism to improve existing forms of political contention. Nielsen (2010) describes this process as a "practical prosthetic" that builds on previously existing forms of politics (Joyce, 2010, p.14). Authors that take on this perspective imply that online activism is a tool

to improve the effectiveness of offline tactics such as "mobilisation, organisation, and message dissemination"; however not a tool for social change on its own (*Ibid*, p.13)

3. Political participation in the digital sphere

The authors, George and Leidner (2019), have used Milbrath's framework of hierarchy of political participation (1965). This framework was created to analyse the participation at an individual level for traditional forms of political participation, therefore the authors have modified it to analyse the mechanisms and tactics of digital activism's repertoire. Three tiers are categorised into (1) spectator activities, which require the least commitment and effort but attract the highest number of participants; (2) transitional activities, which involve a moderate level of engagement; and (3) gladiatorial activities, demanding the highest level of dedication and commitment but, therefore involving the fewest participants. (George and Leidner, 2019, p. 5). Individuals participating in the highest level of participation can and are also engaging in low-level activities (*Ibid*, p.7).

Traditional political activism relies more on effort and commitment of individuals, whereas digital activism relies on digital resources such as "technical skills, technology artefacts, social networks, internet and communications access." Contrary to traditional activism, digital activism can generate major impacts across all tiers (*Ibid*, p.8). The advancement of technology has significantly decreased the cost associated with participating, organising and coordinating collective action, however it is not to say that there aren't inequalities in the participation of online activism (Fu, 2022). Examples of activities highlighted by the authors are clicktivism, e-funding, digital petitions, data activism, exposure and others (George and Leidner, 2016)

4. Social movement theories

There are numerous social movement theories that explore how movements emerge, however the focus is often on traditional forms of political actions. Scholars have recently tried to explore these theories through the lens of digital activism. Two main theories, resource mobilisation and collective action, have expanded our understanding of the social movement field and digital activism. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) explain that a single theoretical framework cannot be used to explain the mechanisms present in social movements, and many authors have stipulated different frameworks of analysis.

4.1. Collective action and connective action

The "Logic of Collective Action" by Mancur Olson (2015) is one of the dominant theories of mechanisms in social movements. This logic explores the idea that "activities of common or shared interests amongst a group of individuals advance a common goal" (Olson, 2015). Collective action requires a highly centralised hierarchy, organisational resources and collective identity (Bimber et al, 2005).

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) counter this argument when analysing digital activism and offer a new term, connective action. Connective actions are analysed as 'organisational agents' of SM. Vaast et al. (2017) explains connective action as a novel type of collective participation that emerges when various individuals come together in an informal manner on social media platforms, driven by their own motivations and personal narratives, rather than an equal sense of common purpose (p. 1185). Connective action has a horizontal and decentralised structure as opposed to the vertical hierarchy of collective action.

This theory does not aim to invalidate collective action theories but rather shed light on the new mechanisms that have emerged from digital activism.

4.1.1. Clicktivism and Slacktivism

Similarly to the 'free-rider' theory in collective action, connective action also faces a similar hurdle. Olson (2015) established that when there are large groups performing collective action, there is a higher incentive to free-ride, meaning reaping the benefits of other people's actions without getting involved. In the digital sphere, it is coined as "slacktivism" or "clicktivism" (Christensen, 2011). These terms refer to engaging at a very low-level on social media, through following political accounts, liking or resharing posts. Miller (2017) and others criticise digital activism as an agent of social change due to these two concepts. Slacktivism and clicktivism are a remote and detached form of activism that "has zero political or social impact" (Morozov, 2009), where scholars argue simply helps individuals feel better about their participation. However, other scholars argue although it may not have an impact on the individual-level, it can carry weight on the organisational level.

4.2. Resource mobilisation theory

This theory has been an essential theoretical approach to social movements that argues that resources determine the success of movements. Resources such as "time, money, organisational skills, education, internal and external support from elites" (Selander and Jarvenpaa, 2016, p. 333). This theory has dominated the field of traditional contentious

politics, however criticised for being too narrow and not exploring the environment in which the movement is taking place. Scholars have theorised that in fact, technological advances have reduced the obstacles for resource mobilisation (Nalbantoglu, 2014). Getting people to participate in movements is easier to obtain through the digital sphere and digital applications such as Facebook or Twitter. The decentralised networks online remove barriers to collective action and allow for individuals to share personal narratives not controlled by traditional media. Using different platforms and digital mechanisms have increased the effectiveness and chances of success (Edwards, 2013; Nalbantoglu, 2014). This resource has become a facilitator for communication channels, as it allows for a further reach within seconds, therefore expanding the scale of movement to transnational or global movements. Researchers have on one hand argued that digital activism serves as a 'facilitator of traditional offline social movements'; whilst others argue that it represents an online adaptation of established offline social movements, incorporating traditional principles and strategies into the digital realm such as "online petitions, email campaigns, email bombings and virtual sit-ins targeting companies, organisations and governments" (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2009)

4.3. Online vs. offline spheres

Joyce (2010) suggests that online and offline social movements should not be seen as separate spheres but rather as interconnected, as new communication technologies increasingly merge with our daily lives. This is an opposite approach to the one of 'digital dualism', which sees the two realms, physical and online as distinct, separate entities (Greijdanus et al., 2020, p.50). Many researchers emphasise the interdependence of online and offline efforts, as they mutually support and strengthen each other (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005, p. 2). Effective social movements require the utilisation of both digital and traditional tools and strategies to achieve success. Scholars observe the interaction as reinforcing and complementing each other (Greijdanus et al., 2020, p.50) Online activities alone have weak ties and lower trust between participants and have more difficulty sustaining a movement, however does facilitate organisation processes, improves motivation and participation, and reaches more individuals to encourage to mobilise and join movements. The overall argument aims to highlight that, as the two spheres, online and offline, become increasingly embedded and complementary for one another, it is essential to analyse the whole picture rather than to simply focus on the virtual realm.

Theoretical Framework

1. Conceptualising the research question

Digital activism was conceptualised above as it was essential to analyse past academic literature on the topic. However, it is still important to conceptualise the remaining aspects of the research question in order to have a complete overview for the analysis. The research question explores how digital activism contributes to the success of pro-democracy movements against authoritarian regimes. Research greatly differs between digital activism in democratic regimes versus authoritarian regimes, mainly due to the level of repression, soft or hard repression. Furthermore, conceptualising the success of movements is not an easy task and scholars have used multiple different avenues of research in order to define what success in social movements mean.

1.1 Authoritarian regimes and digital activism

Previously, authoritarian regimes could monitor and control the information citizens were receiving from traditional media. However, nowadays the Internet now allows people to access a wide array of information as well as share the content they want without restrictions. Authoritarian regimes use 'hard repression' to suppress movements including arrests, imprisonment or not allowing gatherings in public spaces. This also translates to the digital sphere, through digital repression. The main method of hard repression is through censorship and surveillance, meaning blocking certain social media platforms or using them to track and surveil activists and the movements. (Gohdes, 2020, p. 488)

A dilemma they face with hard repression is that it can lead to radicalisation of individuals and movements. Activists can use social media platforms to broadcast instances of police brutality which in turn, increases participation. (Chen, Xi & Moss, 2018)

2. Framework of analysis

Through the literature review, it has been established that online and offline activism are complementary therefore this thesis aims to identify the mechanisms under which digital activism contributes to the success of movements. Therefore, a social movement framework of analysis, based on previous research on digital activism will be conceptualised and operationalised, looking at three main objectives for success of social movements namely

mobilisation, organisation and message dissemination. The analysis will look at how digital activism affects these three mechanisms that lead to the success of movements.

2.1 Mobilisation

Mobilisation within the digital activism realm is known as conceptualised simply as "turning a spark of popular discontent into a popular movement". It is known as E-mobilisation which is defined as "the web is used to facilitate the sharing of information in the service of an offline protest action" (Earl and Kimport, 2011, p. 13; Ting, 2019, p.3256). Digital activism can increase mobilisation as it can reach a wider audience, allows for people to express their grievances, reduces reluctance for participation and overcomes collective action problems. Theocharis (2015) observed past conceptualisation of mobilisation and adapted the definition to digital activism: "deliberate activation of social networks as a method of diffusing awareness about a social or political problem or of exerting social and/or political pressure for its resolution" (p.5). It looks at how social media is used to motivate activists to be more active on both the physical and digital platforms.

The risk of mobilisation is far greater in authoritarian regimes, therefore using social media and other platforms can be an effective tool for groups to unite, share grievances, and mobilise. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are commonly used to express political dissent and can allow people to access information of protests and political actions in real time. Oftentimes, traditional forms of media focus on negative aspects of social media such as over sensationalising the violence from protesters. Therefore, digital activism allows them to take control of the narrative and share their perspective and message that increases mobilisation. This objective allows us to draw a hypothesis for the theory.

H1: The use of digital activism, specifically through social media platforms, enhances mobilisation by increasing awareness, encouraging participation, and facilitating the organisation of offline activism.

To assess the impact of digital activism on mobilisation, a qualitative analysis will be conducted, focusing on the utilisation of hashtag activism, tweets, and Facebook posts disseminated within the Hong Kong protests. These indicators serve as valuable measures to gauge mobilisation as they enable protesters and activists to effectively propagate their messages through these digital platforms, thereby transforming initial discontent into a significant social movement. Finally, broadcasting or live-streaming police brutality leads to more anger and can increase mobilisation (Fang, 2022). The degree of mobilisation success will be examined by analysing the number of participants actively engaging in these protests.

2.2. Organisation

      The following objective of social movements is to be able to organise. Frisch and Agur (2019) define it as "using social media to gauge participant sentiments and plan strategically to increase pressure on the government". Organisation structure is essential in movements, especially to fight repressive tactics from governments and authorities.

Unity in the opposition, therefore organisational structures has to be implemented and social media facilitate the processes of organisation. This perspective goes back to social movement theories, resource mobilisation theory as well as opportunity structures. Digital activism allows for more "affordance" of resources, due to the reduced costs of digital activism and allows for organisation of movements with fewer resources. (Fu,2020). It also facilitates opportunity structures, through facilitating "decentralisation" of the structure of movements. These theories develop the digital action repertoires and their impact on both supporter behaviours and the potential transformation of the social movement organisation (Selander and Jarvenpaa, 2016).

      H2: The use of social media platforms for organisational purposes within social movements enhances strategic planning and increases pressure on governments, leading to effective resistance against repressive tactics.

      The operationalization of how digital activism impacts organisational processes in the context of the Hong Kong protests aims to explore the influence of digital activism on the organisational dynamics of the movement, particularly focusing on messaging platforms and the decentralised structure of grassroots protests across Hong Kong. Therefore, an analysis of the utilisation of messaging platforms such as Telegram,Whatsapp or LIHKG (an online discussion platform similar to Reddit) and the ways in which they facilitate communication, coordination, and decision-making among activists. Additionally, the decentralised structure of the protests will be examined to assess how digital activism contributes to the formation and coordination of grassroots protests in different locations throughout Hong Kong.

2.3. Transnational message dissemination

      Transnational message dissemination refers to the diffusion of ideologies and core messages of the social movement beyond the physical borders (Joyce, 2010, p.5). Many activists still participate without being physically present through e-funding, signing online petitions, pressuring international organisations and actors to act. Pro-democracy movements

usually garner support from other democratic regimes, as well as activists and organisations in authoritarian regimes; therefore social media serves as a tool in which the message can be disseminated on a transnational level. Therefore, the hypothesis drawn is:

H3: The use of social media platforms for message dissemination in social movements facilitates the reach and impact of the movement on an international level, leading to increased awareness, engagement, and support from individuals and organisations across different countries.

To operationalize this mechanism effectively, an analysis will be conducted to examine how digital activism impacts the emergence of international alliances facilitated by social media, reactions of international stakeholders, and the impact of digital diasporas. These indicators serve as crucial factors in assessing the extent to which digital activism has contributed to the success of message dissemination.

Methodology

1. Case Selection

1.1. Historical Background

Throughout its history, Hong Kong has always faced intense political turmoil, mainly due to its unique and complex position as a special administrative region of China. In 1997, Hong Kong, which had been under British rule for 156 years, was transferred to Chinese sovereignty in a process known as the 'Handover'. A formal ceremony was held marking the end of British rule and the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) as part of the People's Republic of China (Britannica Encyclopedia, 2022). The city operates under the 'Basic Law', which legally enacts the principle of 'one country, two system' which guarantees the protection of freedoms of citizens, and a separate legal and political system from China's systems for 50 years, until 2047 (Ghai, 1999, p. 804). However, over the years, China has been trying to impose its control over the city, through the implementation of repressive bills, such as national security bills or extradition bills. China also imposes its control through the elections of the city's leaders (chief executive) by vetting and appointing the candidates to an election committee primarily filled with Beijing supporters. Since then, there have been various protests and movements, including the 2003 protests against the national security reforms, the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) Movement in 2019 (Duhalde and Huang, 2019). Hong Kong has benefited from important civil freedoms that are not present in China

and Hong Kongers are actively trying to protect their freedoms for themselves and future generations. These freedoms include an independent justice system, open Internet access, and traditional media independent of the government (Ives, 2019).

1.2. Scope of analysis

The scope of this analysis will be focused on a single case study, Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) Movement in 2019. This wave of protests in 2019 was triggered by a 'transformative event', which was the potential introduction of the Extradition Law Amendment Bill. This bill would allow for legal cases in Hong Kong to be tried in China, where the justice system is closely tied to the government party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The peaceful protests and marches were immediately met with high-levels of repression and police brutality against the protesters. This contrasted starkly with the 2003 and 2014 protests which were not met with such high levels of brutality and rather praised for its non-violent aspects from both the protesters and the authorities. Although Hong Kong's position is politically unique as a semi-autonomous region, the protests took place within the borders of a strict authoritarian regime.

Several significant distinctions emerged between the 2014 and 2019 protests in Hong Kong. Firstly, the magnitude of the pro-democracy movement and mobilisation witnessed a substantial increase in 2019. While the largest protest in 2014 drew approximately 500,000 participants, the 2019 protests surged to over two million attendees, indicating a significant surge in public engagement. (Amnesty International, 2019). Secondly, the structural dynamics of the movement differed between the two periods. In 2014, the movement was highly centralised, primarily focused on a specific area within the city. Conversely, in 2019, the protests adopted a more decentralised approach, with demonstrations dispersed across various locations within the city. Lastly, the leadership aspect of the protests also underwent a transformation. In 2014, key figures such as Joshua Wong played prominent roles in leading the movement, whereas the 2019 protests embraced a leaderless structure, characterised by a collective and grassroots-driven approach. These distinct shifts highlight the evolving nature and dynamics of the protests between 2014 and 2019 in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is known to be a major global hub for finance and media, with high levels of digital and media literacy, thus limitations regarding resources or digital inequality are not prevalent within the research. The demographic of the movement is quite young in Hong Kong, a generation that has grown up around technology and social media, known as 'digital natives'. The main platforms in Hong Kong were Facebook, Twitter and Telegram. Telegram

and Signal, messaging apps similar to Whatsapp, were used as it had stronger end-to-end encryption and users felt that the data was more secure and were not subjected to the same levels of repression as other platforms. Although Whatsapp was a main platform in 2014, Hong Kongers became increasingly sceptical of using Whatsapp as the government was requesting access to user's data, which eroded the trust in their privacy and security.

Therefore, I chose this movement for the analysis as the democratic decline continues in the contemporary world and the digital sphere becomes more and more embedded into our lives, it is important to analyse how it can impact offline actions in social movements, either positively or negatively.

2. Research Design

2.1 Single case study

In the context provided, the single case study has been selected to conduct the analysis. By conducting an in-depth analysis of a specific case, researchers can gain valuable insights into the mechanisms and surrounding factors. The unique position and environment of the Hong Kong protests can be thoroughly examined, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in Hong Kong (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p.235). However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of single case studies, particularly in terms of external validity. The findings from a single case cannot be easily generalised to other cases or the broader field of study. The unique characteristics and circumstances of this specific case may limit the generalizability of the findings (Van Evera, 1997, p.66).

2.2 Process-tracing theory testing

The chosen research design employs process tracing theory testing approach to examine the causal mechanisms through which digital activism contributes to the success of movements. Process tracing is a research method that involves examining the causal mechanisms underlying an observed relationship between X and Y (Pedersen, 2023). It focuses on understanding the step-by-step processes or pathways through which the independent variable influences the dependent variable (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p.169) The underlying causal mechanisms have been stipulated in the theoretical framework: mobilisation, organisation and message dissemination (Joyce, 2010, p.13).

In this research design, digital activism serves as the independent variable (Y), meaning it is the factor being manipulated or observed to assess its impact on the dependent

variable. Success of the movement is the dependent variable (Y) in this research design. A main analytical advantage of the movement is the clear goals that were set by protesters. The initial goal was a to withdraw the introduction of this restrictive bill, however as the movement progressed, protesters created a list of five demands, which included the first goal mentioned above as well as "a commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality, retracting the classification of protesters as "rioters" as this term connotes criminal activity therefore harsher punishment under the law, amnesty for the 8,500 arrested protesters, and finally universal suffrage" (Wong, 2019).

3. Data Selection

This analysis will rely on the examination of secondary sources encompassing scholarly articles, books, reports, and other published materials obtained from reputable sources, including academic databases, libraries, and online repositories such as ScienceDirect, JSTOR, CambridgePress, etc. Additionally, media articles and blog posts will be considered and analysed. Lastly, public social media posts, specifically Facebook posts and tweets on Twitter, will be included for analysis purposes. The comprehensive utilisation and analysis of these diverse secondary data sources will provide a robust foundation for the research inquiry at hand. Whilst this is a very broad scope of resources and data, it is essential to be able to analyse every mechanism in the analysis, especially considering that no primary data has been collected. The empirical data collected serves to analyse the three causal mechanisms outlined in the theoretical framework

Analysis

1. Mobilisation

Mobilisation plays a crucial role in determining the potential success of a social movement, as higher levels of physical mobilisation exert greater societal pressure on governments and increase the likelihood of meaningful change or even regime overthrow. The Hong Kong protests witnessed a remarkable demonstration of mobilisation, with the largest march drawing an astounding two million participants, equivalent to approximately 25% of the population. This significant turnout vividly reflects the widespread political dissent and discontent prevailing in Hong Kong. Digital activism emerged as a facilitator of mobilisation, leveraging social media platforms to enable easier dissemination of messages

through various means, such as hashtag activism, live-streaming of protests, and documenting instances of police brutality (Fang, 2022, p.1; Wang & Zhou, 2021).

Hashtag activism refers to the practice of using hashtags on social media platforms as a means of raising awareness, expressing solidarity, and mobilising support for a specific cause or social issue such as #FreeHongKong or #StandWithHongKong (Guo and Saxton 2014). A study analysed quantitatively how many times the hashtags "#HongKongProtests, #antiELAB, #NoChinaExtradition" was used on Twitter. It was found that they appeared 79,601 times during that period (Bhatia & Ross, p.119).

Hashtags serve as strengthening narratives, "building viral communities" and solidarity amongst protesters (p.119). A criticism of hashtag activism is that it has the same effect as slacktivism, mainly very low level engagement and participation (Bhatia & Ross, p.119). However, as we have seen with George and Leidner's (2019) framework, even the lowest level of activism can have an important impact and contribution.

One effective strategy for mobilisation is the backfire effect, which manifests in contexts characterised by high levels of repression and police brutality (Hess and Martin, 2006). When citizens are subjected to harsh treatment by authorities, it fuels their anger and motivates increased participation in protests. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram serve as channels for broadcasting or live-streaming these instances of police brutality, effectively inciting further mobilisation (Fang, 2022). Viral videos or images documenting such acts become difficult for movements to repress or suppress, as they generate widespread attention and garner public outrage. The aim of this approach is to create a "moral shock," amplifying public support and encouraging individuals to join the movement in response to the perceived injustice and violence. However, an important limitation is that it can also lead to the radicalisation of certain individuals or sub-groups, which escalates the scale of violence (Frosina, 2021).

2. Organisation

The organisational structure of the Hong Kong protests underwent significant changes between 2014 and 2019, which had implications for the sustainability and support of political participation. The centralised and static structure of the Umbrella Movement in 2014 contributed to its eventual downfall, partly due to the emergence of the "backlash effect" in social movements. The backlash effect refers to the negative reactions, opposition, or resistance encountered by activists and the movement as a result of their mobilisation efforts.

It can hinder the progress of social movements, create divisions among supporters, and present additional barriers or challenges for activists striving for social change.

During the Umbrella Movement, protesters occupied key areas of the city for an extended period, which resulted in various forms of backlash. Many individuals expressed frustration with the disruptions caused by the protests and criticised the movement for its impact on daily life and business activities. This led to divisions within society and a decline in public support for the movement.

Drawing lessons from the previous experience, activists in the 2019 protests adopted a different organisational structure characterised by grass-roots organisations operating in various locations throughout the city. They embraced the slogans of "no central stage" (無大台 wu datai) and the philosophy of "be water," which emphasised fluidity and leaderlessness. (Frosina, 2021; Ting, 2020)

Protesters in Hong Kong adopted a strategy known as "blossom everywhere," which involved adopting a diverse range of urban spaces for their demonstrations. These changes were facilitated by the use of encrypted messaging platforms like Telegram, Whatsapp or LIHKG, which enables more political opportunities. For instance, Telegram experienced a significant increase of 323% in downloads in July 2019, with an estimated 110,000 new users. These platforms were utilised for sharing intelligence, evading authorities and arrests, accessing medical and legal assistance, and coordinating protest-related activities (UNHCR, 2021). Through GPS tracking, protesters were able to join movements at any location, aiming to avoid physical repression, although this strategy was not entirely successful (Author, 2021). These alternative organisational structures played a crucial role in ensuring the safety of participants and protecting them from police brutality and unlawful arrests.

The shift from a centralised and static structure in 2014 to a more decentralised and fluid structure in 2019 was a response to the backlash effect experienced by the Umbrella Movement. The adoption of grass-roots organisations and the use of encrypted messaging platforms allowed for greater flexibility, coordination, and adaptability in the face of challenges. Organisational structures played a vital role in safeguarding participants and mitigating the risks associated with repression, highlighting their significance in sustaining social movements. Sustaining a movement for an extended period of time increases the pressure put on governments to respond to the request of the movements; however government and authorities adapted their techniques as well and it is suggested that law enforcement would infiltrate group chats to collect information.

3. Message Dissemination

The Milk Tea Alliance, which appeared as a digital community on Twitter, has emerged as a significant digital activism phenomenon with a focus on message dissemination and international solidarity (Shum, 2022). Recognizing the common struggle against authoritarian regimes, particularly the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Milk Tea Alliance has garnered support from countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Utilising social media platforms, the alliance has effectively spread its message and mobilised support by employing the widely used hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance. This hashtag has become a powerful symbol of unity and resistance against China's repressive policies.

The Milk Tea Alliance has also received backing from diasporic communities, who contribute to the movement by sharing the hashtag and expressing their solidarity online. The formation of the Milk Tea Alliance illustrates the transnational reach and impact of digital activism, as well as its potential to create a global network of support for pro-democracy movements facing authoritarian challenges. Social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, served as the platforms and crucial tools for the Milk Tea Alliance to amplify its message and engage a global audience, through the use of hashtags, memes, and posts.

This alliance helped unify the movement and build support but also fight digital repression in the form of China's online army, which spreads misinformation and attacks digital activists. Connecting activists from different areas opened up channels of discussions for tactics and repertoire and encouraged offline participation from diasporic communities to mobilise in their host countries in solidarity with non Hong Kongers.

Different facebook and Twitter accounts that were named along the lines of MilkTeaAlliance (@MilkTeaAlliance, for example) were gaining significant levels of traction with some accounts reaching over 60,000 followers. Different hashtags such as, #MilkTeaAlliance, #WhatIsHappeningInHongKong, #MilkTeaIsThickerThanBlood, were used to share information and garner support from the transnational networks of netizens, and the narrative as controlled by individuals using the platforms. These posts on Facebook or Twitter using these hashtags could accumulate around 32,000 likes and 25,000 likes (Salam, 2022)

The dissemination of the protest message through social media during the Hong Kong protests had both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, the use of social media platforms brought international attention to the protests and amplified their message on

a global scale. The Hong Kong protests coincided with the Trump Administration in the United States, and the contentious trade and economic relations between China and the US added another layer of complexity. The US administration signed a bill supporting the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, which increased pressure on China and Hong Kong in the international arena (Mahtani & Yu, 2021). This geopolitical rivalry between China and the US turned Hong Kong into a pawn, further highlighting the significance of international pressure on repressive regimes (Reuters, 2020).

Diasporic communities played a crucial role in using social media to gather information and actively engage in the movement. Expatriate Hongkongers and foreign supporters staged a significant number of oppositional actions, with 147 organised by expatriate Hongkongers and 178 jointly organised by expatriate Hongkongers and foreign supporters (Tang, 2022). This widespread involvement of diasporic communities demonstrated the transnational reach of the movement and their ability to mobilise support from their host countries. The use of social media by these communities facilitated the dissemination of information and allowed them to advocate for a response from their respective governments, not only in the United States but also in the UK, Australia, and other countries within Asia.

However, the involvement of external actors and geopolitical dynamics also brought challenges and complexities to the movement. The Hong Kong protests became entangled in larger international rivalries, potentially impacting the movement's objectives and creating divisions among supporters. The toxic side of international attention and involvement could undermine the local dynamics and goals of the protest movement, leading to questions about the extent to which the movement was influenced or co-opted by external forces.

Discussion

Overall, an anonymous author summarises the findings from the movement: "social media did not create Hong Kong's 2019 protests but created enormous energy that amplified both their organising capabilities and their messages" (Author, 2021). The theoretical perspective I have adopted is that digital activism should not be analysed on its own, but rather the effect on offline activism. Therefore, three mechanisms of offline activism were analysed. Therefore, the research question aimed to explore how this contributed to the success of the movement. This was conceptualised as meeting the movement's goals, which were a list of 5 demands drafted by the protesters. It is widely accepted that the Hong Kong protests were in fact not successful. In 2019, the movement led to successfully getting rid of

the Extradition Bill, and other demands such as a private inquiry into police brutality. However, the rest were not met. The reason why I am emphasising that the movement was unsuccessful was because even though this bill was withdrawn, less than a year later the government introduced the National Security Law (BBC News,2022). This law is even more repressive and worrying than the Extradition Law as it gives Beijing access, power and control into Hong Kong. This law allows wire-tapping, closed trials, and damaging public property can be tried as terrorism, which is punishable with life in prison (BBC News, 2022). Within a year of the law passing, 117 citizens have been arrested, mainly democratic politicians, activists, journalists and students (Yiu and Katakam, 2021)

The timeframe of the introduction of the bill was unfortunate as it was during COVID-19, therefore it lets us wonder what could have happened under different circumstances. However, throughout the analysis, we aimed to assess how digital activism improved these mechanisms, which led to the initial withdrawal of the bill and sustaining the movements over several months, which can be considered as small successes.

The hypothesis drawn for each mechanism can be accepted as there is evidence of how digital activism contributed to the success of mobilisation structures, organisational structures and finally transnational message dissemination (Joyce, 2010, p.13).

The massive physical mobilisation, with the largest march drawing two million participants, exemplified the high level of political dissent in Hong Kong. Digital activism, including hashtag activism and live-streaming of protests, facilitated easier dissemination of messages and the creation of a "moral shock" to amplify public support (Wang & Zhou, 2021). The backfire effect, fueled by repression and police brutality, further mobilised citizens and increased participation (Hess and Martin, 2006). The organisational shift from a centralised structure to a decentralised and fluid structure allowed for adaptability and protection against repression. The Milk Tea Alliance exemplified the transnational impact of digital activism, fostering international solidarity and amplifying the message against authoritarian regimes. However, the involvement of external actors and geopolitical rivalries also brought challenges and potential divisions within the movement. Repression does not disappear in the digital realm and activists need to learn to navigate this. Overall, these findings shed light on the multifaceted dynamics of social movements and the complexities they face in the digital age.

Conclusion

To sum up this thesis and answer the research question posed, digital activism contributes to the success of movements by improving the causal mechanisms of mobilisation, organisation and message dissemination. I do not believe that this is the end of the Hong Kong protests, although they have been severely halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. An interesting avenue for future research is to analyse the role of digital activism during the pandemic as it was the only form possible during this time. During the pandemic, the leadership (chief executive) of the city changed, therefore it would be interesting to observe the changes the city faces.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is the inability to directly analyse sources in Cantonese or Mandarin due to a lack of proficiency in these languages. As a result, reliance on the interpretations and translations provided by authors and researchers becomes necessary, which may introduce potential inaccuracies or biases that could impact the findings and conclusions of the study.

Even without language barriers in the analysis, secondary sources have limitations. Secondary data is collected by other researchers or organisations for their own purposes, and the data may not fully align with the specific research questions or objectives of the current study. As a result, there may be limitations in the relevance of the available secondary data to address the research objectives effectively that primary data would provide. Additionally, the quality and reliability of the secondary data may vary, as it may be subject to errors, biases, or limitations inherent in the original data collection process, which can be difficult to verify.

An additional limitation of this study is the potential lack of generalizability of the findings. Since the analysis relies on secondary data sources, the specific context and characteristics of the selected data may limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other cases.

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