

Effect of social media on the umbrella movement



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Would the Umbrella Movement have occurred if social media platforms did not exist?

1. Introduction

In response to the NPCSC decision regarding the Chief Executive electoral reform of HKSAR on 31 August 2014, two student-led groups the Scholarism and Hong Kong Federation of Students began boycotting class and protesting outside the government headquarters in Admiralty since late September. Benny Tai announced to join the students with the Occupy Central Movement, which had been suggested since 2012. This mass civil disobedience movement was named the Umbrella movement after the use of umbrellas by protestors to defend police's attempts of protest sites clearance using tear gas. Before the last clearance was completed by the police on 15 December, protest activities had been spread across districts to Causeway Bay and Mongkok. Its scale was claimed to be the largest ever in the history of Hong Kong.

With observation of substantial use of social media platforms such as social networking sites Facebook and Twitter, Cyber-utopians believe that social media platforms, which perform functions such as text messaging, photo sharing and social networking, are revolutionary tools that give rise to the Umbrella Movement. On the other hand, cyber-realists believe that social media platforms are only tools that facilitate mobilization of protestors, while social changes entail long term social and political reforms (Morozov, 2011).

This essay aims to argue from the perspective of cyber-realists that the Umbrella Movement was a result of long term effort from political leaders. Social media was only a catalyst but not a fundamental cause of the movement. The essay will justify that social media coverage was not a prerequisite for the movement by addressing the real cause of the movement, and defining the function of social media as simply a complementary but not revolutionary tool.

2. Causality between the Umbrella Movement and social media usage

1. Pre-existing social conditions for emergence

of the Umbrella Movement

The notion that democratic movements have occurred all around the globe before social media existed in the recent decade can be explained by the Modernization Theory and concept of relative deprivation. The former suggests that people would strive to overthrow and replace inadequate political institutions, while the latter explains the growth of social grievance when the gap between public expectations and actual attainment widens (Lopes, 2014).

In the context of the Umbrella Movement, it is the long term demand from local communities for a genuine universal suffrage of the Chief Executive, as well as the shared grievance regarding the recent NPCSC decision on the formation of the nomination committee that triggered the occupying movements (Chan, 2014).

Despite high correlation between frequency of social media usage and protest activities, Morozov (2011) believes that Arab Spring was

fundamentally attributed to cyber-activism in the Middle East which had been evolving before mass demonstrations occurred in Tunisia and Egypt. He emphasizes that formation of online protest groups are not random events organized by random people. In fact, discussions on occupying central and civil disobedience movement had been continuing since 2012 among scholars and politicians led by Benny Tai. Student groups such as Scholarism were also experienced leaders which had been actively participated in demonstrations to strive against the government on issues such as civic education. Although social media played an important role in mobilizing young population to protest, the Umbrella Movement would remain leaderless without prior actions from political activists (Howard et al., 2011). Social media platforms were only tools for political leaders to organize protests.

2. Politics-media-politics (PMP) principle

The PMP principle suggests a three-phase process in which surge of social media usage during the Umbrella Movement was likely to be the result of increase in protest activities instead of a preceding factor (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013), while this change in media environment would eventually bring new dynamics to the political situation.

Chronologically, protests in Admiralty broke out in the first phase was followed by increasing social media usage in the second phase, as the public turned to various channels for timely information at protest sites. For instance, onsite news was updated day and night on Facebook pages such as SocREC and VJMedia after police's first tear gas shot on 28 September.

Downloads of Firechat, an application that allows instant messaging without
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Internet, increased by 460, 000 times one week after the first protest activity occurred outside the government headquarter, with fear of Internet blockade in nearby areas (Peterson, 2014).

Moving towards the third phase, social media platforms gradually developed into a vital tool for disseminating information and organizing protest activities. It enhanced the scale and strengthened the impact of the Umbrella Movement. For example, 1. 3 million messages posted in Twitter from 26 to 30 September made the Umbrella Movement the most heated issue among Tweets around the world (Lee, 2014), allowing protestors to bargain with the authority with support from international community.

In the final stage, failure in sustaining the Umbrella Movement was fundamentally attributed to mass civil disobedience and occupying movements that provoke criticisms from the public due to long-period road blockage and incomppliance with the injunction order (Chan, 2014). These follow the PMP principle that social media was neither an initiator nor terminator of the movement. In other words, the Umbrella Movement would have occurred even without social media platforms, though might be at a smaller scale with limited influence.

3. Role of social mediaas acomplementary tool

The Mobilization Theory suggests that social media was essential for the Umbrella Movement in actualizing shared grievance into collective actions. Despite its prominent role, it is worth noting that social media was only a catalyst for the Umbrella Movement to grow and expand its influence.

Without this complementary tool, the movement would still emerge with the

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pre-existing social conditions as described in the last section, though its scale and impact in striving for a genuine universal suffrage would be greatly reduced.

3. 1 To organize fragmented forces and form coalition

Social media allowed pro-protestor groups to go beyond limitations of traditional media and unite fragmented forces (Howard et al., 2011).

Networking functions in social media platforms such as 'like' and sharing functions in Facebook and 'hashtag' function in Twitter or Instagram allowed people who share common goals and values to build solidarity. It was particularly important to the Umbrella Movement because targeted participants of 'class boycott' were the younger population who are the most frequent social media users. A larger-scale movement was thus created by involving segmented pro-protest forces to join the mass protest activities led by the two student groups.

3. 2 To provide new opportunities for creating social capital

Social media provided new opportunities for pro-protestor groups to mobilize citizens by creating social capital, and for commoners to produce political content as if they were social elites (Howard et al., 2011). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter became important channels for citizen journalists to broadcast stories that were not covered in mainstream media, for instance, injuries at protest sites caused by tear gas or police's violence. Violent response towards peaceful protestors generated sympathy from initially unengaged citizens (Dobson, 2001), mobilizing more angry

people to go on streets and spread protest activities beyond the initial stronghold in Admiralty to new areas in Causeway Bay and Mongkok.

3. 3 To arouse international awareness

Social media platforms such as Twitter allowed information about the Umbrella Movement to be disseminated rapidly across border through Internet. Major newspapers around the globe reported the protests in Hong Kong, whilst student leader Joshua Wong was selected as one of the most influential teens of 2014 by a world renowned magazine TIME (Campbell, 2015). Recognition from international community empowered protestors and exerted greater pressure on the government to defer clearance plans and agree on a meeting with student leaders on 21 October.

4. Conclusion

In spite of the high correlation between frequency of social media usage and protest activities during the Umbrella Movement, one should be cautious when deriving their causal relationship. Rejecting the notion regarding social media platforms being a prerequisite for the Umbrella Movement, cyber-realists point out their reverse causality using the politics-media-politics principle. The principle emphasizes on the chronological order that it is protest activities in Admiralty that first emerged, causing increase in access to social media platforms for more timely and unreported information about the movement, and eventually creating new political dynamics with the changing media environment.

Focusing on the first phase of the principle, protest activities emerged because of the pre-existing social demand for a genuine universal suffrage in <https://assignbuster.com/effect-of-social-media-on-the-umbrella-movement/>

local communities and common grievance regarding the NPCSC decision, as well as the prior discussion in organizing mass demonstrations and civil disobedience movements among political activists such as Scholarism and Benny Tai. Acting as a tool for mobilizing people and drawing international awareness, social media was only a catalyst to foster growth and expand influence of the movement. In other words, the Umbrella Movement would have occurred even social media platforms did not exist.

(Word Count: 1470)

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