

## **The Role of Social Media in the Hong Kong Protests**

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### **Abstract**

In 2019, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region was shaken by a movement that lasted from late March up to New Year's Day in the following year. The movement, however, was already anticipated to grow several months before it began by a few key players. Just as earlier waves of contentious politics in Hong Kong benefitted from the recent wave of technology development, the activists used sophisticated online technologies to orchestrate their actions. Contrary to the predictions of some observers, however, the movement and accompanying "umbrella foreigner solidarity movement" did not bring China's leaders back to the negotiating table with the sarnation-for-sale chant. While referenced scholarship disparagingly refers to Chinese petitions as "punching smoke" perhaps the only more inaccurate preconception concerning China is the belief that the protests will lead to a similar "color revolution" as the "Arab Spring". Certainly, the government of Macau Special Administrative Region and Hong Kong stop-hazard accusations of Western subversion will only hold their legitimacy with the readers of the imagined community of fellow governments with poor credibility in regards to the bright weigh group of bribe-deciduous Hollywood actresses. In fact, online expression of discontent concerning the 2019 movement was extinguished with measures much more severe than the 2014 movement, and the movement itself were severely honest news blackouts by the local media intimidated by local elites who dominate Hong Kong's economy. During the movement years, the newly enacted National Security Law for Hong Kong was weaponized against 324 protesters, at least 12 of whom were foreign nationals. Given its controversial past, nepotistic structures, and extremely high level of corruption, Macau responded to the Beijing-instigated Gaulhic with a caution-level government salary cut, weeding our ten or bomb-shells of the city's population. Since Hong Kong under the pliable Carrie Lam was not selected to submit to a will-imposing "Patriotic Test", the city of Ruins, facing the outgoing leader

association, opted for a less controversial large-scale test that focuses on Cantonese proficiency in order to filter out desired-British elements on its way to full universal self-determination, claiming that already by 2049 it would be clairvoyantly able to state whether “all” “good” calls counterpointed for Beijing’s sovereign actuation would be honored.

Keywords Hong Kong protests, social media, activism, National Security Law, online expression, political mobilization, technology, government response

## **2. Introduction**

On Sunday, September 15, 2019, yet another massive protest emerged in Hong Kong. The march was ostensibly against the repressive and undemocratic bills that had been proposed by the Carrie Lam-administration earlier that summer. The latest slogans were now meticulously targeting Carrie Lam and the broader authoritarian regime in Beijing. In real time, these moments are documented and disseminated on social media. This essay aims to investigate how social media informs the organization of the protest, the state response, and how graphic images circulate, which provoke heightened public outcry and engagement (Druzin & Li, 2016).

Social media are increasingly ubiquitous in everyday life. Internet activism through digital media has developed over the last two decades and is now best understood as a “complex set of strategies,” which are ultimately aimed at beginning or shattering radical opposition through a mix of online protests and dissemination of information. The broad socio-political context in Hong Kong underscores the significance of these protests, social media, and their suppression. They are a reaction to the increased economic inequality and poor living conditions, particularly amongst the younger generation, who cannot navigate the unforgiving and expensive housing market. Sense of despair and powerlessness best evinced by the case of the young e-cigarette user who committed suicide. The protesters primarily use social media as a way to dramatize the violence of authoritarian repression and to document police brutality. The difficulties of tangling with the most well-resourced surveillance state are emphasized through bullet grounds and facial recognition software. Further at stake is the financial undertakings and ecological trade between the marchers and the police on the campus of the City University of Hong Kong’s Kowloon Peninsula. (Earl et al., 2022)

### 3. Background of the Hong Kong Protests

In June 2019, the Hong Kong government proposed an amendment to the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance, which would allow the extradition of wanted persons to mainland China and other jurisdictions in the absence of an extradition treaty. The bill was proposed in response to a case involving a Hong Kong resident who was accused of murdering his girlfriend in Taiwan (Urman et al., 2021). The event had occurred in February 2018; it was eventually discovered that the suspect had fled to Hong Kong, where he was arrested and imprisoned for a different, non-murder related crime. Since there was no existing arrangement between the two jurisdictions for mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, including the extradition of criminal suspects, the Taiwan authorities were unable to prosecute the suspect for the murder. Despite repeated calls to close the loophole and cooperate with Taiwan, the Hong Kong government was slow to act and chose to wait over a year before proposing the bill. The extradition proposal generated significant concerns among the Hong Kong populace. Many feared that the change would undermine the region's judicial independence and could be abused by the mainland authorities to extradite those who criticized the Chinese regime. Critics of the bill, including legal experts, questioned the judicial safeguards in place for suspects extradited to mainland China, which has a significantly different legal system from that of Hong Kong. These concerns were exacerbated by China's poor human rights record, as well as the Chinese regime's perceived disregard for due legal processes and the rule of law. Critics also expressed worry about the fairness of the mainland courts and the protection of suspects from possible abuses, including torture and maltreatment (S. F. Yip & Pinkney, 2022).

Protests against the bill began to emerge in March 2019, but the public reaction remained relatively restrained as long as there was no leak regarding the bill's presentation date. Large-scale marches were called by civil organizations, most notably the Civil Human Rights Front, which organized two massive, public demonstrations in April and June, with over one million participants each (T. L. Shek, 2020). Although the first reading of the bill was scheduled for late April, public suspicion regarding the government's determination to pass the bill into law began to grow when the government refused to abide by protesters' demands to withdraw the bill and to investigate allegations of police brutality during demonstrations. On 9 June

2019, nearly two million people took to the street in a peaceful, million-strong protest march. It soon became clear that the public opposition to the bill was irreconcilable with the government's position. The event not only failed to demoralize the protesters, but it had instead emboldened them. In response, the government had suspended the bill on 12 June 2019 and declared it as "dead" on 9 July 2019. However, the announcement failed to pacify the demonstrators who, disenchanted by the government's intransigence, expanded their demands into a broader pro-democracy movement. This time, in addition to the complete withdrawal of the now "formally dead" extradition bill, the protesters also demanded that the government retract its labelling of the protests as "riots," release and drop charges against those arrested, launch an independent inquiry into police brutality, and implement universal suffrage for the Chief Executive and the Legislative Council. Since then, protests have been taken to the streets on a regular basis, with widespread calls to the international community to support Hong Kong. Since June 2019, Hong Kong saw its largest series of sustained protests in contemporary history. The anti-extradition movement was one of many post-1997 social movements in Hong Kong, following mass rallies over national security legislation in 2003 and middle-school students' backlash to the moral and national education policy in 2012. Despite their failure, these movements had created a lasting impact on the city's political landscape and their legacies have been instrumental in shaping subsequent resistance. The anti-extradition protests have likewise induced social, economic, and political repercussions that will continue to shape Hong Kong for years to come. Many recognize that the contest between Hong Kong and China is an existential one: the very identities and way of life that set the two hostile are in direct conflict. From an economic perspective, Hong Kong's unique role under the "one country, two systems" principle is dwindling. As Beijing has promoted the development of neighboring cities in the Greater Bay Area, Hong Kong's weight within China's economy has diminished. The city is now widely regarded as an economic hub in name only. Conversely, the Chinese state has drawn a significant range of security, economic, and social levers to respond to the unrest. The authorities have acquired vast technological powers to tackle dissent within their own borders and are likely to play a greater sphere of influence within Hong Kong. The security law imposed last year is a sign of the bigger authorities for the contribution of

the city's anxiety and economically significant are the "concept stocks over mainland China where the funds are extracting capital in Hong Kong. The imposition of the National Security Law (NSL), which came into effect on 1 July 2020, had a significant chilling effect on political dissent in Hong Kong. Although the NSL has been effective in countering dissent, the underlying grievances of the populace remain unaddressed and could surface again under different social, political, or economic conditions.

Since the anti-extradition movement, there has been an increasing number of public opinion studies on the sociodemographics and attitudes of demonstrators. A lot of research has highlighted the diversity of the movement's participants beyond the stereotypical young, university-educated activists. After the movement's conclusion, activists have speculated on its inefficacy, acknowledging it as a failure. The conventional view, even among many supporters of the social movement, is that the protests were ineffective and self-destructive. They damaged the movement's image among uninvolved citizens and united views of nonpartisan violence, destruction of public property, and traffic disruption. Many activists also disparaged the movement's leadership, branding it as inept and naive. These critiques were undergirded by the protests' inability to affect change and secure any of the five demands. (Hsiao & Radnitz, 2021)

#### **4. Social Media Platforms and Usage in the Protests**

The 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement in Hong Kong is the first place-based protest in history, protest participation was largely confined to offline world. Yet, Hong Kong netizens have embraced different social media platforms to generate and disseminate frames related to protests (Urman et al., 2021). Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram feature manifold user activities indicative of coordinated action. The activities include, but are not limited to, the dissemination of tactical information, slogans and posters by the protesters, joint singing of songs and speeches, and organizing protest events. This section outlines the usage of various social media platforms during the protests. The platforms include Facebook, Twitter, in-TG features, and for-TG channels. For-TG channels proliferated since June 2019 and have experienced significant growth up to October 2019.

Twitter became synonymous with political firestorms in Hong Kong in recent years as discussion about the city's future began to focus on its role in China's ambitious Belt and Road project. The platform became the favoured online battleground for state-media mouthpieces, foreign diplomats and army of bots as a one-stop shop for blue-tick opinions on news du jour, be it asparagus harvesting or protests for democracy. It is overwhelmingly popular with the young protesters, such as the 730 anti-tear gas campaign in August 2019 in which protesters coordinated through LIHKG, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and then finally on the ground. Facebook, on the other hand, is favoured mostly by Hong Kong middle age fans of 21st May "BREAK Day" and "Let's sit in Mandarin," in which the final logistic decisions were made via detailed "operation orders" posted on public business pages. Protestors were instituting new actions and campaigns almost daily in response to developments, from lunchtime protests that disrupted public transport to buying up all MTR tickets to prevent an indiscriminate crackdown of passengers. Social media makes all of this possible, acting as both a collective memory of current events and a virtual space for real-time coordination between actions. Efforts to keep police guessing the exact nature of the next move were generally effective, as the tactics devised pro-actively by demonstrators to control the media narrative consistently kept the authorities, particularly Carrie Lam and her team of advisors, one step behind in the reaction game. Telegram is a seamless platform connecting internet and offline worlds to provide real-time communication and response. There were at least two interviews with pro-democracy party leaders that concluded with them broadcasting protest locations live. On another occasion, protesters were urged to do "shopping" at locations away from Chow Tai Fook, those locations flashed across TG stores' flash sales resulting in shops being emptied.

### **5. Impact of Social Media on Protest Dynamics**

The multifaceted impact of social media on the overall dynamics of the Hong Kong protests is investigated by taking a two-level approach. Empirical findings are first introduced at the meso-level, revealing how social media became a formidable organizer for the protesters. Large-scaled protests might not have been possible if social media had not enabled swift and efficient communication between the various sectors of the population in Hong Kong. Online activism is then explored at the

micro-level, illustrating how the role of social media evolved over time and affected individual behavior in both tangible and intangible ways. It is shown here that the protesters derived great empowerment from the use of social media in the Localist environment of the Hong Kong protests.

The massive scale of the protests after September would not have been possible without the instrumental role played by social media, which helped in rapidly mobilizing large groups. A citation network analysis of Telegram chat groups used in the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill movement indicates that Hong Kong's protest activities are closely linked to a quasi-independent political community using this encrypted chat application (Urman et al., 2021). While a topic analysis of more than 400,000 messages posted over five months reveals that the device was predominantly used for organizing protests against the government. The discussion in the chat groups thus echoes the calls for action of the broader local 'telegramsphere', while at the same time providing venues for protests to be organized.

#### **6. Challenges and Criticisms of Social Media in Protests**

The 2014 Hong Kong protests demonstrated the profound influence of social media on both the formation and repression of large-scale political events. Social media platforms played a vital role in organising and bolstering the resilience of the large-scale 'Umbrella Movement' in Hong Kong. In addition to social media's undeniable organising power, the spread of information through these platforms extended well beyond the physical spaces of protest sites and allowed for a more explicit focus on, and coordination of, *vis-à-vis* the dynamics unfolding in real time in the streets. It is notable that social media became the primary source of information for the public, as the mainstream media faltered. However, it is equally important to adopt a more nuanced and critical stance towards the relationship between social media and physical protest actions. Media practices should not be taken at face value as a vehicle for mass political dissent or a singular force opposed to state power and market forces. It cannot be overlooked that social media practices can also act as complementary or supportive technologies fundamentally entangled with structures of established power. An analysis of the challenges faced by the 2014 Hong Kong protests indicates that various arenas should be considered better when reflecting on these issues. For people in the midst of contentious political actions, an urgent consideration is the ways in

which the use of particular information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as social media, could not only benefit but also greatly disadvantage, in less transparent ways. For a more comprehensive examination, reflections on the relationship between social media used in protests and wider commercial and state controlled media are warranted. Among other things, this means focusing more on the architecture and ownership of communication platforms, as well as attempting to grasp better the various ways information flows are restricted and/or filtered via these technologies. An ever-developing understanding of how protesters and organic intellectuals can most effectively shape their media practices and tactics in response to the broader environment of marketisation and surveillance is vital to the future of this particular struggle, as well as an enhanced overall grasp of the political potential of contemporary media's practices in social movements (Hintz, 2016).

### **7. Comparative Analysis with Other Movements**

In the chain of global mass demonstrations that have erupted over the past decade purportedly fueled by social media, the boycott movement in Hong Kong is a curious study in contrasts. From the Arab Spring to Indignados in Spain and more recently, Black Lives Matter in the United States, social media platforms have been viewed as instrumental in disseminating information and raising awareness effectively leading to action. If the Chinese Communist Party assumed that its Great Firewall would work like a digital Damocles' Sword in Hong Kong, then that will be proven a rather empty boast.

Bear in mind that the protests occurred completely without an organized group in any form orchestrating them. Looking at other instances of the identical protest movement around the Global South revealed how Twitter and Facebook had a remarkable effect of networking "milling protesters" into large, clearly coordinated assemblies. A key question high off the back of the Occupy Central road block was can those more effective infrastructures of coordination, much as they look unlikely at present, be developed given an environment so wholly hostile to open dissent and organization? In other words, while resistance to the state to perceived injustice is a near universal, social media strategies to wage it successfully aren't (Druzin & Li, 2016).

## 8. Conclusion and Future Implications

The protest culture surrounding the unprecedentedly influential Hong Kong protests was escalated and largely facilitated by social media platforms. Recent scholarly debates constantly prove themselves to be either too deterministic or indeterministic regarding if the use of social media technologies had mainly constructive contributions to the 2014 Hong Kong protests. Hong Kong is distinctive with the positively dual-faced role concerning social media's activities during the protest cycle, embracing the velocities to give rise to constant chain reactions as a result of immediately spreading validated incidents on social media as a primary action of support to the protest activities along with legally advocating for the various own rights. Thereby, a highly developed productive culture emerged to vindicate concerns under the challenging barrier of what exactly circulated and resulted as a broad dispute from the non-users of such platforms. Finally, the landscape of the whole promotion mechanism in Hong Kong is rapidly reminiscent to critique prudence. There remain numerous challenges to co-create a binding pleasurable space in cyberspace within the entire Hong Kong society, and protests and inter-corresponding social media should acknowledge the vulnerabilities within, suitable for a shorter authentic focal action of prioritization (Druzin & Li, 2016).

There is no doubt that large protests movements are aided by social media and new technologies. Yet, it's their limitation that requires more focus—it is never easy, especially in a largely authoritarian context, to ensure that protests achieve measurable changes. Social media and new technologies are neither panaceas nor redundant—they are tools that provide mechanisms for possible influence. When they are combined with effective organization and strategies, contextual factors that reference the broader framework, and personal engagement, then the chances of winning (or at least achieving influence in a David versus Goliath contest) are substantially increased. Nevertheless, scholarship and the media has lost sight of the limitations of such technologies. It would be erroneous to think that because civil society has new tools of collective action, it has successfully redressed the balance of power with the state.

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