Foreword: Social Movement and Media

Since the 1970s, the main agency of social movements and civil society in Hong Kong has been nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the intervention of social workers. The more radical actions of social workers were influenced by Saul Alinsky, with residents and neighbors actively organizing and integrating with the social worker realm of community development. The anti-eviction movement of the rooftop squatters in the early 1990s exemplifies the trend at the time. Social workers with experience in community development would actively involve themselves in the community, informing residents about predicaments they faced, organizing them for acts or resistance through the conducting of a series of sharing sessions and discussions. However, the Establishment was able to put pressure on social work organizations through budget cuts for community development projects and demands for greater professionalization. Gradually, the majority of social workers were co-opted by the Establishment, and their aims shifted toward dissolving social conflicts. At the same time, many social actions evolved into some sort of ritualistic “polite politics” (Ho, 2000).

There are numerous NGOs in Hong Kong, yet the majority are social welfare, poverty relief or professional interest organizations that are nonpolitical in nature. It is estimated that the number of social movement organizations which are more politically inclined—those which actively intervene in political and social issues, and mobilize anti-Establishment voices—is limited at around three hundred. Most of these are small in scale and short of social resources. They usually focus on their own organizational matters and specific issues within their scope. On occasions in which certain cross-sector public issues draw their concern, they will form coalitions to issue a position paper on the issue(s) and take collective action. In September 2002, the Civil Human Rights Front was established specifically for the organizational work involved with the annual 1 July rally. The coalition is comprised of over fifty member groups, all of which are social movement groups and political parties working on
democracy, human rights and social justice issues. By coordinating the limited resources and optimizing work share of member groups, the organizational approach enabled a form of resource mobilization.

The Civil Human Rights Front was established specifically for the organizational work of the annual 1 July rally. (Photo taken from CHRF’s Facebook account.)

The 1990s also witnessed the emergence in Hong Kong of the newer social movement categories of sexuality, sexual minorities and human rights and environmental protection. These campaigns tend to emphasize identification through values and rely to a larger degree on actions which attract the attention of mainstream media, enabling them to appeal for public support. For instance, in March 1994, a series of mobilized actions and council interactions in support of legislator Christine Loh’s “New Territories Land (Exemption) Ordinance” brought the question of women’s rights in the New Territories into public view. At the same time, “Green Peace-esque” media activism became rooted locally as well. Greater numbers of social organizations began to prepare news releases, feeding reporters with related information and planning media strategy while organizing each action. Contentious activism was largely replaced by a form of media public relations.
Interaction between civil society and the mainstream media as such has a considerable effect. Despite the fact that over 70% of news sources are from the Establishment’s channels, there are numerous newspapers and magazines in print for a small place like Hong Kong. Their positioning in the opinion market along with professional guidelines of balanced coverage ensure that positions from different organizations are represented. Reporters sometimes even invite representatives of NGOs to comment on certain issues. For instance, most newspapers will ask the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) to respond to labor policy issues. There are, however, commentators who have pointed out that civil society organizations like these are restricted in many ways. Namely, they tend to be depoliticized; that, and they are scattered among themselves and incapable of consolidating as a political power which could steer public policies. (Lam and Tong 2007; Ma 2009)

On the contrary, interaction between civil society and media has long been a subject of debate within social movements. There have been many rallies which have ended with physical confrontations outside the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong SAR since 1989, and tension have always been present among student movement activists—between those who opt for the “showbiz” approach and those who endorse the “movement subject” approach. As mainstream commercial media became increasingly self-censored after the 1 July rally of 2004, social movement participants began to have more systematic reflections on mainstream media mechanisms. Many activists questioned the “showbiz” approach, considering it self-restrictive, as it renders participants passive. Since the anti-WTO mobilization in 2005, young activists have begun to reflect and experiment with the “direct action” approach. The subsequent emergence of Internet mobilization was in a certain way related to these discussions and reflections (Choy Chi-Keung, 2006; Lui Tai-Lok, 2010; Ip Lam-Chong, 2010; Chan Hau-Man, 2010; Chan King-Fai, 2010).
(Since the anti-WTO mobilization in 2005, young activists have begun to take up the “direct action” approach.

*Photo taken by Ip Iam-Chong*)

**The Rise of Internet Mobilization** (Note 1)

In Hong Kong, discussion of public issues on the Internet came about as early as 1998-1999. The major platform at the time was the BBS, spaces where users would share news information and discuss current affairs. The actual integration of online discussions with social action began with the 1 July rally of 2003. A survey conducted that day showed that 53.5% of participants considered Internet mobilization an important factor for their participation. Although the figure was lower than of those who considered the influence of newspapers, TV or radio stations as important (over 60%), it was higher than that of political parties (43.9%) and even more so in comparison with affiliated organizations (34.3%) (Joseph Chan Man, Chung Ting-Yiu, 2003).

Forums
The three major forums of the time were “HK Golden” ("http://www.hkgolden.com/", established in January 2001), “Uwants” ("http://www.uwants.com/", established January 2003) and “Discuss” ("http://www.discuss.com.hk/", established in February 2003). Prior to the 1 July rally of 2003, mainstream media—newspapers and free of charge TV stations in particular—had kept themselves from criticizing the legislation of Article 23 of the Basic Law, which concerns prohibitions of acts which undermine national security. Radio and the Internet then became the major platforms for opposition voices. Many netizens also parodied the related political figures in kuso manner, forming an Internet subculture around recreating aspects of mainstream politics. For instance, the use of kuso comics to mock political figures was closely related to the online culture of image modification. The politicization of forums made them a space for populist resistance. As a result, calls for stricter regulation of the Internet grew increasingly vocal and substantial. At this juncture, many individuals who founded websites turned to incorporation for a host of considerations, commercial and legal interests among them. New regulations of speech were introduced in this process, and some netizens believed that there were political maneuvers involved.

In 2003, there was a sharp rise in the number of “Hong Kong Golden” members. The website's founders handed over the forum to a company called Fevaworks, and speech regulations were subsequently introduced. There was deletion of many posts bearing the title “push to 7.1”, and the site’s servers were shut down for two months. Such measures forced netizens to meet outside the virtual world for a response strategy. Some of these Golden members established their own forums of smaller scale, while others migrated to similar forums such as Uwants, further spreading Golden’s signatory culture of image modification, foul language homonyms, and the digging up people’s private or personal information.
Golden resumed operation towards the end of August 2003, after a two-month shutdown. The new management introduced regulations such as filtering of foul words and limiting publishing to five posts a day, measures implemented with an iron fist approach which including banning the IP addresses of individuals who violated the new terms of use. What upset users the most were webmasters’ strenuous efforts to eradicate antigovernment and anticommunist postings. The users then launched a large-scale counterattack of nonstop posing, jeopardizing the forum's operations in the process. The incident became a topic of mainstream media coverage. The webmasters eventually gave in and promised to cease all censorship measures, bringing an end to the disruptions of service. Having learned the hard way that freedom of speech is not necessarily a given, some of these Golden members attempted to turn online commentators into a concrete political force, and joined the 1 July rally the following year under the banner of Golden members.

Regulations on content on “Uwants” and “Discuss” also tightened beginning from 2003-2004. Many complained that webmasters had begun eradicating postings containing antigovernment or anticommunist views. Both forums are presently run by Networld Technology Limited. The influence these forums have on public opinion is considerable given their large number of members. However, the anonymous nature of interactions on these forums makes cooperation among members, let alone organization, difficult to consolidate. In this light, forum members have not initiated many social actions. The most notable event of the last few years was the rally against police abuse of power incidents in 2008. In order to trace the source of some celebrities' intimate pictures which were in circulation at the time, police began
demanding that many online forums give up users’ personal information, and many were arrested with insufficient proof. A group of netizens, comprised mainly Golden members, initiated a campaign to raise money for a newspaper advertisement, themed “Police Have Two Mouths”. On 1 February, around 500 netizens joined the rally, taking the route form Victoria Park to police headquarters, in protest against police abuse of power.

(In 2008 Golden forum members, published a newspaper advertisement in local newspapers, themed “Police Have Two Mouths” to protest against police abuse of power.)

Nevertheless, forums with specific concerns also organize other activities aside from online discussions. These “offline” activities have helped online acquaintances further organize social actions. For instance, keypals on the HK Wildlife (“http://www.hkwildlife.net”) forum organized field trips for members to local natural habitats. Since 2007, netizens opposed to the Hong Kong government's proposal to build a manmade beach in the mudflat of Taipo's Lung Mei beach (龍尾) initiated their own series of actions. In order to conserve the Lung Mei mudflat, they
conducted their own environmental assessments to register species found there, called for an online signature campaign, hosted talks, and submitted their objections to the town planning board. Although the “Save Lung Mei” campaign ended unsuccessfully, the process proved exemplary of the self-initiative and deep involvement of the general public in natural life conservation.

**Topic-specific Mobilization Websites**

Whereas forums may serve as information portals, mobilization around a specific topic or issue requires websites built specifically as platforms for information syndication and campaign updates. These websites are often discontinued once the issue-specific mobilization has finished. Momentum sufficient to lead to the formation of sustained organization capacity or community in a campaign can hardly accrued through such means. There were netizens who borrowed the “1 to 99” slogan from the SARS epidemic to build a District Council election monitor and mobilization website (1to99.org) after the 1 July rally of 2003. The website listed in detail background information on all district council candidates, and called on the public to vote for Pan-Democracy camp candidates in order to drive those from the Establishment out of district councils. The Pan-Democrats had their major victory in the 2003 District Council election, and yet the pro-Establishment camp took over again in 2007. Consequently, the website also ceased operation.

Without the support of an active community, topic-specific mobilization websites can easily turn into a lonely island on the internet. For instance, “Save RTHK!” (“http://www.saverrthk.org”) was established by Clement Lee Yui-Wah in 2007 to campaign for RTHK's transition to a public service broadcaster. Although the website had very detailed information on the issue, the campaign itself lacked mobilization and there was not an active community of participants. Eventually, the website became more or less an archive of RTHK-related news, and failed to vehicle the campaign.
Online Radio

The “Basic Law Article 23 Concern Group”, whose core members consisted of barristers among Hong Kong legislators, regrouped as the “Basic Law Article 45 Concern Group” after the 1 July rally of 2003. They later established “Radio A45” (“http://www.a45radio.com”) as part of preparatory work for the legislation of universal suffrage in Hong Kong. As Hong Kong's very first web radio set up by a civil society organization, it initially very successful. In 2004, Radio A45 recruited several dozen volunteers to raise money for the Internet radio station leading up to that year’s 1 July rally. Nevertheless, the barristers of the group proposed to form a common web medium for the Pan-Democrats by merging with People's Radio Hong Kong (“http://www.prhk.org”), established by Wong On-Yin in 2004. The proposal was turned down at the time on account of Wong's wish to maintain PRHK's independence. Although there was no merger, many Pan-Democrat legislators and celebrities turned to speak on PRHK. With the lack of a recording studio and resources, PRHK later collaborated with “Hong Kong Reporter” (“http://www.hkreporter.com”), established by Siu Yuek-Yuen in 2005, to host several primetime programs. These included the likes of “Long Menzhen Storm” and “Feng Xiaoxiao”, making PRHK the most influential radio station in Hong Kong in the short span of just two years. Radio A45, along with other political Internet radio stations, gradually succumbed to competition, as well as lack of resources, celebrity hosts, edge or audience. Toward the end of 2006, station master of PRHK Wong On-Yin and the host of primetime program “Long Menzhen” started flaming each other, leading to the eventual close of PRHK in May 2007, with its audience and supporters largely poached by “Hong Kong Reporter”. In 2008, Hong Kong Reporter merged with “My Radio” (myradio.com.hk), founded by Wong Yuk-man, and became Hong Kong's largest and most influential Internet radio station. It also served as the media front of
the League of Social Democrats (LSD), a political group headed by Wong Yuk-man and Leung Kwok-Hung. Concurrently, My Radio also launched its entertainment channel to attract a less politically inclined mainstream audience, as well as to increase advertising income.

Over the last few years, Internet radio has begun to assert greater political influence. Many commentators believe that support for the LSD came largely from PRHK and My Radio. In fact, with the worsening of censorship seen in commercial radio, Internet radio commentary program became a viable vehicle of resistance. These programs also serve as a stepping stone for some political celebrities, enabling them to gather fans and apostles. In a certain sense, Hong Kong Reporter and LSD's “media and political group” alliance created a channel for youth participation in politics. Towards the end of 2010, however, internal conflicts arose within the LSD, and there occurred large numbers of post deletions and flaming incidents on Hong Kong Reporter, whose forum moderator and major shareholder Siu Yeuk-Yuen was not without orientation in the matter. The phenomenon led to doubts as to whether media would become mere political instruments.

(Apart from online radio, an illegal FM radio has been set up by LSD member Tsang Kin-Shing since 2005 to challenge the monopoly of radio frequency. Photo taken by Ip Iam-Chong)
Inmediahk.net and Citizen Reporters

The 1 July Rally of 2004, as well as the enforced resignation of Commercial Radio's current affairs talk show hosts Albert Cheng and Wong Yuk-man have prompted a wave of launches of online radio stations. “Inmediahk.net” was also established in the same context. At the time, “Civil Human Rights Front” had called an evaluation meeting to discuss how to consolidate Hong Kong's democracy movement. The ten to twenty attendees of the meeting all agreed on the proposal of an alternative medium, and the idea of inmediahk.net was to build an independent online platform as a response to self-censorship in commercial media. At the close of the evaluation meeting, between seven and eight people had formed a group. The group studied overseas cases such as the anti-globalization Independent Media Center (IMC, "http://www.indymedia.org/"), the more academic ZNet, the professionally-run AlterNet, and Korea's OhmyNews citizen media platform. Subsequently, the group was split between two paths forward; one aspired to build a website called the "Labour and Grassroots Coalition" to voice out for the grassroots, which in 2008 was renamed the "Hong Kong People’s Alliance on Globalization" (“http://www.globalnetwork.org.hk”). The other route sought a hybridization of the IMC and OhmyNews frameworks, hoping to build a popular, yet independent, platform.

Inmediahk.net launched as a blog for trial runs in September 2004, built its own platform in October and publicized its launch in November that year. Initially, it attempted to run like traditional media with designated feature topics. The failure of these trials brought the concept of grassroots media and citizen reporters into play, so that the website became completely open to citizen participation. The website encouraged public concern, direct involvement and intervention in social issues through citizen reporting. At the end of 2005, the website called for citizen reporters to cover the WTO ministerial meeting in Hong Kong and anti-WTO gatherings, making inmediahk.net an alternative news source which countered mainstream coverage of the economic summit. Citizen reporters with the website also initiated or participated in many social actions. There were, for instance, the Tree Protection Campaign in 2006, Save Star Ferry & Queen's Pier campaign in 2007, the campaign against tightening of the Control of Obscene and Indecent Article Ordinance in 2008 and Save Choi Yuen Village and Anti-Express Rail Link campaigns in 2010, all of which opened up space for self-initiated media actions.
Distinct from organizational mobilization in general, citizen reporters often initiate action first through reporting on certain social problems. It is through reporting that they can expose, follow up or criticize, so as to delineate specific issues and fuel public opinion. They then use social media to mobilize action in response to the problems.

(Inmediahk.net’s media action workshop (2009) poster)

The Development of Social Media and Cases of Mobilization
The term Social Media refers broadly to user-authored media combined with strong interactivity. It includes forums, blogs, collaborative publishing platforms, social networking websites, multimedia info sharing websites, podcasts and online interactive games. The development of social media in Hong Kong has seen a change in dominant mode of communication every three to five years. BBSes were prominent between 1997-1999, followed by forums in 2000-2004. From 2004-2008, there were web-logs (or blogs), collaborative publishing platforms (text and audio) and multimedia info sharing websites. From 2009 on, the dominant modes of communication have been Facebook and microblogs (Twitter and Sina Weibo).

Although online forums have certain interactive functionalities, the emergence of blogs marked a breakthrough in the development of social media, particularly so for the simplistic content management system widely adopted by various blog platforms, and the RSS (Really Simple Syndication) subscription and publishing functionalities. According to Microsoft's 2006 “Report of Windows Live Hong Kong Blogging study” (Cf. Lai Hoi-Yan, 2006), out of four million netizens in Hong Kong, two million maintained a blog. Over 70% of blog authors use their blog as a platform to share daily musings and photos with their family and friends.

With the rise of blogging, the number of Xanga users in Hong Kong also rose steadily. According to estimates based on Xanga Metros and RSS feed statistics (Cf. Hin-Ba, 2007), there were approximately 418,183 blog authors in Hong Kong, almost 90% (370,016) of whom were Xanga users. Xanga differs from other blogging systems due to its lack of RSS syndication; instead, Xanga offers a function allowing users to set up a circle of friends similar to some social networking services, allowing for content to be shared within a relatively closed circle. A survey conducted in 2009 (Hong Kong Association of Interactive Marketing, 2009) shows that 94% of marketing professionals used social media to stay in touch with friends and 74% to seek information. According to the survey, preferred forms of social media were, in order of preference: social networking services, instant messaging tools, video sharing websites, forums and blogs—with Facebook and Xanga ranked at the top.

In consideration of the history of Internet mobilization in Hong Kong and the development of social media, it seems that the emergence of blogging and predominance of Xanga did not directly bring forth new forms of social mobilization. Political or social mobilization since 1997 has mostly taken place in forums or collaborative publishing platforms that are more public in character. The power of
blogs lies in the medium’s ability to amplify public opinion and other media.

As video sharing website YouTube gained popularity in 2006, the first incident of public concern was not political in nature, but the candid short clip of a quarrel involving “Bus Uncle”. In 2007, blogger Kay Lam repurposed the Hong Kong government's promotional short “Just Because You are Here”, and turned it into a clever parody called “Fokguy Because You are Here”. The video accumulated millions of hits, bringing Golden forum members' Kuso culture of image modification to a new level of anti-propaganda video production.

Facebook launched in Hong Kong in 2007 and its number of users continues to rise. As of mid-2010, there were already 3.5 million registered users in Hong Kong and the site's vast influence is evident. However, it was not until 2009 that larger scale social action utilized Facebook for mobilization. For instance, the “Anti-Religious Right-Wing Hegemony Rally” in February 2009 was organized using Facebook's group and activity functions. And yet, apart from a few exceptions, most Facebook mobilizations are declarative by nature.

Although many netizens use multimedia sharing tools, whether or not these social media tools actually bring impetus to political campaigns depends largely on local political contexts and intervention on the part of activists. The interaction between social media and real-world politics embodies newer political culture. The following cases will help us to analyze how political activists interact with the mainstream Establishment by through the use of social media, and how new spaces of resistance and dynamics of governance are produced in such a process.

**Declaratory Mobilization: “I bet I can call up 100,000 who detest DAB”**

The most successful and politically charged declaratory participation on Facebook should be the group, “I bet I can call in 100,000 who detest DAB”. It was formed on 8 September, 2008, and reached 31,600 members within a year; by 20 January, 2010, there were over 50,000 who joined. The group, however, was removed by Facebook administrators on 4 February, when it had accumulated more than 84,000 members. The administrators of the group formed a new group at 3:00PM the same day and successfully led 100,000 users to join the group within 28 days (by 2 March, 2010).
The drive for the “Detest DAB” group could be traced back to a remark made by Wong Yuk-man in the electoral forum for the West Kowloon constituency leading up to the 2008 Legislative Council election. While on the debate platform, Wong burst out, saying “DAB is the most shameless”, and the video clip of the scene was then widely circulated on the Internet via video sharing websites. In addition to calling users to join, the Facebook group also gathered evidence of the DAB’s previous wrongdoings in selling out the interests of the Hong Kong people. As the “Anti-Express Rail” campaign escalated, the DAB also became a target of criticism. Membership of the group increased drastically, and political censorship on the part of Facebook employees only fueled that rise. Yet, when the group actually attained its objective of reaching 100,000 members, it lost its sense of direction. Presently, it has become a current affairs discussion forum critical of the Establishment.

Even with significant online support, it is often difficult to mobilize netizens to take part in real-world actions, and campaigns lacking in concrete advocacy and organizational work tend not to be sustainable. One of the “Detest DAB” group administrators pointed out that although the group had wanted at one point to set up an election monitoring website, the plan failed to materialize due to the lack of
experience in organizational work and groundwork for collaboration. He said that organizational work involves accountability issues and use of power, and while some might be hesitant to take on responsibilities, there remain others who don’t trust the core members. Online mobilization can often draw public attention for a short period, yet it is difficult to transform into a sustaining campaign.

Organization and Internet Mobilization: “Anti Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link movement”

The “Save Choi Yuen Village” and “Anti-Express Rail Link, Stop Funding Allotment” campaigns in 2009 and 2010 involved a synergy of public opinion, organizational work and use of social media, which helped achieve the consecutive sieges of Legislative Council, in which tens of thousands people took part over several different dates.

(Anti-XRL campaign 2009-2010. Photo taken by Tiger.)

The Hong Kong government in 2000 proposed a regional express rail link (XRL). The basic conception was to link Hong Kong's existing rail network with that of Shenzhen. In order to speed up construction on the rail, it was proposed that a section be built between Kowloon and the New Territories. In 2005, the National
Development and Reform Commission approved plans for a Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Rail. The Hong Kong government also proposed to build a dedicated rail line connecting West Kowloon and the northeastern part of the New Territories, to be linked with the West Rail and, subsequently, the Shenzhen rail network. In 2007, The Ministry of Railways of the PRC indicated that the number of daily scheduled XRL trains would exceed original estimations, implying that the “shared passage” proposal would not be feasible. A later report from the Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation (KCRC) on the study of Hong Kong section, however, recommended that the “dedicated passage” plans be continued, and proposed a HKD 30 billion design which included a covered tunnel passage. By November 2008, the government announced that Choi Yuen Village in Shek Kong would be evacuated to make way for the XRL supply station. As residents of Choi Yuen are not designated as indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories, villagers were to receive a very small amount of compensation, in addition to being removed from their farms and rural ways of living.

In early 2009, Hong Kong In-Media organized citizen journalism workshops, curriculum for which included issues related to construction of the XRL. At the close of these workshops, a number of citizen reporters did further reporting on Choi Yuen Village, exposing the lack of consultation concerning the XRL route done with those affected by the development. Their reporting also questioned KCRC's feasibility study, and whether proposed designs betrayed a conflict of interest. In this early stage, the communities most concerned with the situation in Choi Yuen Village were students and scholars who follow issues of developmental justice, citizens previously affected by urban renewal, and small groups concerned with Hong Kong's ecology and sustainable, or green, living.

As the same time, several professional groups presented an alternative routing plan which involved the building of a Kam Sheung Road station. The proposed plan was rejected by the government without adequate discussion, resulting with these professional groups and the closely aligned Civic Party joining the anti-XRL camp. Later, the government announced in October 2009, that the cost for building the Hong Kong section of the Express Rail Link would be HKD 57.3 billion. That figure soon rose to HKD 69.9 billion, more than twice the figure estimated in a budget bill tabled by the Legislative Council in 2007. The cost for Hong Kong’s 26 kilometer-long portion of the project thus worked out to HKD 280 million per kilometer.
Organizations which closely follow urban renewal issues also pointed out the impact construction of the XRL would have on Tai Kok Tsui residents, as well as the fact that they too were denied proper consultation. Opposition grew as the project sparked discontent on a host of issues, such as environmental protection, alternative ways of living, developmental justice, procedural justice (lack of consultation), construction costs and cost effectiveness, as well as the interests of district residents. Before the budget bill was brought to the Legislative Council for allotment, a team of “penance walkers”, comprised mainly of students, embarked on an action to walk prostrated around Hong Kong. On one hand, the action reinforced emotional connections within the opposition camp, winning greater social support and the upper hand over opinion on the other; it also brought generational value issues and social conflicts into play. The general public's opinion of the Express Rail Link construction was drastically reversed within just a few months. Those who opposed the construction and those who endorsed the alternative plan grew to outnumber those in support of the government plan. Although the opposition were backed by all elected legislators, the budget bill was nevertheless pushed through by the functional constituencies which dominate the Legislative Council. The “Anti-Express Rail Link” campaign was
subsequently attenuated by political demands for parliamentary democracy and abolition of the functional constituencies.

A circulating information network and discussion platform helped greatly to consolidate opposition forces. The early advocacy on In-Media, echoed by bloggers and through Facebook mobilizations, helped provide a basis for coordination among different organizations, while individual participants were able to gather tactically. There were over thirty organizations and groups of different sizes which joined Anti-Express Rail activities; the core group among those was the “Choi Yuen Village Concern Group”, whose Facebook group had merely an approximate 2,000 members. “Hong Kong In-Media Net” served as the major information hub for the campaign, and information was further disseminated through discussion forums and Facebook. The mobilization of Legislative Council sieges at the later stage were coordinated through a Facebook group of allied organizations which had between ten and twenty administrators. At its peak, the group had membership of around 60,000, and currently has around 52,000 members. The activities launched by this group included: “Stop XRL, Stop the Budget, December 18 Siege Legco mobilization” on 18 December, 2009, “Stop XRL, Stop the budget, January 8 Legco occupation” on 8 January, 2010, and “January 15 Battle at Legco” held on 15 and 16 January. On the evening of 15 January, around 3,000 protesters breached the police picket line and reached Government House to voice their discontent with the Chief Executive. On the evening of 16 January, the protesters blocked all exits of the Legislative Council building after funding for construction of the XRL was passed in a vote. Appointed and functional constituency legislators who voted for the funding had to be escorted out by police and left by way of a nearby MTR metro tunnel.

Following approval of the funding, the allied groups and network contacts returned to each of their own positions. The objectives of Choi Yuen Village's struggle shifted from “No Evacuation” to “Relocation and Participatory Planning”. While those who were concerned with developmental justice and green or sustainable ways of living continued to monitor land development in the New Territories, those concerned with redevelopment of old districts returned to their residents groups; those concerned with political development organized to oppose the government's political reform proposal.
In April 2010, the Hong Kong SAR government announced its “Package of Proposals for the Methods of Selecting the Chief Executive and for Forming the Legislative Council in 2012”. The package proposed to enlarge the Election Committee from the existing 800 to 1,200 persons, and to increase by the same proportion the number of minimum nominations required for a Chief Executive candidate, from 100 to 150. In other words, the nomination threshold for a Chief Executive candidate, instead of being lowered, was in fact raised.
The package also proposed to increase the number of seats in the Legislative Council from sixty to seventy, with an increase of five seats for both geographical constituencies and functional constituencies, so that the total number of seats returned by functional constituencies would further increase rather than decrease. On 24 May, deputy director of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong SAR, Li Gang, had a meeting with three core members of the Democratic Party: Albert Ho Chun-Yan, Emily Lau Wai-Hing and Cheung Man-Kwong. In the meeting, the Democrats proposed a modified package of “One Person, Two Votes”, requesting that the five newly-added functional constituency seats and the original functional constituency seat for the District Council be elected in a simple one-person-one-vote manner. They also suggested the abolishment of appointment seats in District Councils, as well as the inclusion of 500 District Councilors in the Election Committee, while maintaining the minimum number of nominations for Chief Executive candidates at 150. On 29 May, Donald Tsang led government officials to promote the political reform package in local neighborhoods with the slogan “Act Now”. The image modification group of the Golden forum, using characters similar in overall appearance but with vastly different meanings, quickly changed the slogan into “All Wrong”. Active Internet communities also created a number of kuso video parodies in response to the government's promotion campaign for the reform package, such that “anti-propaganda” became a form of “consensus”.

The schedule for the government officials' community promotional tour was kept secret; to ensure media coverage, the Information Services Department would notify media reporters only two to three hours ahead of schedule. As a result, it was
impossible to have large-scale online mobilization. Pursuits were instead carried out through “consensus” by “self-initiated” “cellular guerrillas”. These “pursuers”, or protesters, were loosely connected, and were comprised of “Tertiary 2012 Platform”—which joined the Five District Referendum Movement—as well as the more radical, younger section of Pan-Democrat parties, district groups and netizens. They would obtain notice of Donald Tsang's itinerary stops from mainstream media, and notify each other through SMS, calling on people to come join the pursuits. To facilitate, offices of the Pan-Democrats’ district councilors, students and local groups would provide loudspeakers and other necessary resources. Lacking in coordination, these “pursuers” each made use different means. As performances put on for media, there were other possible negative consequences.

The series of “consensus” actions were largely enabled by the social movement information network on Facebook, formed during previous campaigns such as “Anti-Express Rail Link” and the Five District Referendum campaign. This social movement information network is an extension of core groups from previous mobilizations, connecting around 1,000 activists. Although they each remain committed to different issues of concern, they continue to join forces and act in greater synergy on major issues.

**Interaction Among Different Forms of Media: Tai Long Sai Wan**

The “Save Tai Long Sai Wan” campaign could be regarded as the most “successful” social media mobilization of the past two years. (Tsoi Tong-Hoo, Yim Kim-Ho, 2010) On 16 July, 2010, the Hong Kong-based English-language newspaper South China Morning Post published an exclusive article which exposed environmental destruction in Tai Long Sai Wan caused by work led by private developer Simon Lo Lin-Shing. Tse Kwun-Tung, A columnist of “Hong Kong In-Media Net” immediately translated the article into Chinese and circulated it on forums and on Facebook, sparking a general outrage. Yim Kim-Ho, who had previously worked in media, set up the Facebook group, “Condemn Lo Lin-Shing for destroying the natural landscape and ecology of Tai Long Sai Wan, Demand the immediate halt of all related works”, in order to share related news with his hiker friends. To his surprise, thousands of users joined the group within the first few hours, and it had more than 10,000 new members on each of the following few days. Eventually, more than 80,000 people joined the group. Two days after the South China Morning Post published its exclusive report, a single Chinese-language newspaper still had yet to follow up on
the story. In contrast, netizen Ah Jiu called for a field trip via the aforementioned Facebook group, and following which fifteen people went traveled to Tai Long Sai Wan on 16 July. Wong Chun-Pong of inmediahk.net was among them, and he took the opportunity to interview the Sai Wan Village head, later explaining the details of the development plan in question to inmediahk.net’s readers. Follow-up stories began to appear in Chinese media the next day, and the government then issued a press statement in response. At the same time, around thirty members of the Facebook group held a meeting at City University to discuss measures to stop the works at Sai Wan. Later on, the ten to twenty core members of the Facebook group formed the “Tai Long Sai Wan Concern Group”, which plotted the petition at the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department on 24 July, as well as the petition delivered to the Legislative Council on 28 July.

On 20 July, nearly all local newspapers ran substantial coverage of the Sai Wan incident, and public opinion was unanimously critical of the government's approach. More people joined the Facebook group, offering all sorts of related information, one piece of which mentioned that the work site in question was actually an archeological
Taking note of this, Wong Chun-Pong of “In-Media” checked that against visual materials he had gathered from the website of the Antiquities and Monuments Office, and confirmed the allegations that works at Sai Wan were causing damage to an archeological site. On 22 July, the Antiquities and Monuments Office confirmed the news, and Lo Lin-Shing announced later that day that work at Sai Wan had ceased.

Contributing reporters for Inmediahk.net also looked into land registries for the work sites, and disclosed on 27 July that Lo's project had been illegally occupying 50,000 sq.ft. of Crown land, an allegation which was confirmed the following day by Secretary for Development Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor. On 6 August, the government gazetted and drafted Lo's land in Sai Wan into a restricted development zone, thereby bringing the matter to a close—the public had won a small battle. The Facebook group later changed into an information hub used to monitor rural development projects.

The mobilization witnessed how interactions among different forms of media influence public opinion. The matter was first reported by an English-language newspaper, translated by In-Media and then circulated on Facebook, turning information into public opinion which led to action. When mainstream media were drawn to the matter, the bureaucratic response of the Secretary for the Environment ignited citizens' outrage and stirred up criticism. Through their joint efforts, netizens and In-Media further exposed more of Lo's offenses, including the illegal trespassing of construction vehicles in rural areas, illegal occupation of construction sites, and the fact that the work site was situated on the remains of an ancient lagoon. On these grounds, the government was obliged to intervene. Similarly, netizens steered public opinion and organized actions through interactive use of different forms of media and successfully stopped the Town Planning Board from approving Henderson Land Development's projects at Nam Sang Wai, a wetland area in the New Territories.

**Conclusion: Internet Mobilization and Accumulation**

All of the abovementioned cases of mobilization or incidents were related to the “Post-80s Youth” movement. The drive behind this new wave youth movement doubtlessly comes from the social structure premeditated by neoliberalism, in which the market and resources of every kind are increasingly integrated and monopolized by elites and the ruling bloc. While the financial-real estate hegemony created by
business-government collusion further marginalizes those excluded from the interest network, the younger generation resists by invoking local cultural values and abstract economic capital. On the other hand, the media culture, new ways of communication and cognitive scope of the present generation have been intertwined with the development of Internet technologies. New forms of political resistance and actions have emerged through interaction between local politics and technological culture.

(The post-80s Youth Movement is originally a cultural identity movement. Photo taken by Ng Chak-Ming.)

In earlier times, the Internet was structured around virtual communities in which each member contributed and worked to centralize information on the same platforms. Information was then distributed to members of these virtual communities, and general users outside these spaces could access the information through search engines.

The emergence of social media, in which each user is a publisher of information, individualizes information, and the transfer of it is often given added interpretation. When mainstream news item is circulated across social media, responses of different kinds arise, each of them a surplus. These responses might, in turn, influence how traditional media respond to the issue. The Online Rights Defending Movement in mainland China often proceeds in such a manner, through information sharing, subjective interpretations and reliance on the “surrounding gaze”. When numerous “micro-actions” converge, mainstream opinion is formed form and pressure put on the
rulers subsequently affects the outcome of such incidents. In Hong Kong, the influence of these sorts of “micro-actions” lies mainly in the interaction between the Internet and traditional media. The rather rigid bureaucracy of Hong Kong seldom responds to public opinion alone by means of accommodating changes in policy or law enforcement measures. It was with the campaign for Tai Long Sai Wan that Internet users opinion was first successful in altering the course of development in a matter.

Another characteristic of individual network distribution is mobilization of effects. When information is passed along personal networks, it no longer remains a mere news item; rather, the news becomes a story of significance to those distributing it. They share with their friends the idea brought forth by the story, fostering a form of inter-subjective beliefs. These common beliefs among friends can become a source of strength and an effective force for collective action.

Mobilization of this kind is similar with the identification mobilization of “identity” and “values” in new social movement theories. However, the mode of organization for new social movements (such as the environmental movement) is typically that which has been initiated by professional organizers, seeking to raise “public” awareness through a series of advocacy actions. The “public” in this context is often faceless, making it difficult for organizers to gauge the extent to which the public has become more aware of the issues involved. Eventually, mainstream media coverage became the indicator of public awareness and effectiveness in advocacy work. Mobilization through social media, on the other hand, makes identification politics implicit in every redistributed message, enabling the huge number of “micro-actions” to create an explosive climate of opinion.

Mobilization through social media furthers the development of social movement on internal democracy and equal participation seen in Hong Kong throughout the 1990s. It also compliments the weak horizontal linkage and exclusiveness in scope of work among civil groups in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, the momentum created by virtual and declaratory actions is often difficult to sustain. In a large-scale virtual mobilization, approximately 5% of participants will support real world-action, and generally around 5% of those will take on roles of organizer or facilitator. Without an organizational core, new questions are not raised and a network will soon dissolve. The present challenge is to consolidate the organizational core of each campaign and to establish linkage and coalition among the cores of different oppositional campaigns.
As mobilization through social media takes place in semi-secretive, semi-opaque networks, a mobilization network risks isolation if not enough effort is invested in public discourse. In fact, governments around the world are learning to handle and neutralize such “surrounding gaze” mobilization on the Internet. For instance, the rulers in mainland China were able to neutralize outrage arising from the “Li Gang incident” in 2010 by way of political performance, staged rectifications and sheer consumption of time on mainstream media. In the case of resettling Choi Yuen villagers, the Hong Kong government also employed tactics such as low-profile disturbances and prolonged attrition to displace the conflicts involved in relocating the village.

With the above cases, we can see how “emotional outbursts”, “organizational networks”, “network consensus” and “media interactions” each serve their own role in Internet mobilization. “Emotional outbursts” are often catalyzed by certain “events”, and subsequently transmitted through personal networks. How certain events become a focus of public attention depends heavily on discursive articulations, while the transformation of individuals’ emotional responses into a form of consensus involves continuous articulations.

In order to turn netizen concern or consensus in any of these events into a sustained campaign, further organizational efforts are necessary. The major challenge for media and social movements is in considering how best to accumulate experiences and achievements of Internet mobilization, both in terms of discourse articulation as well as organization.

Notes:

1. Part of the information for this section came from interviews.

References:


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