Social Movements in the Information Communication Technology Age: The Case of Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper develops current understandings of social movements by incorporating research on state formation and counter-insurgency, expanding political process theory by introducing the concepts of legibility and capacity. It then considers the changes caused by widespread use of Internet communications technologies (ICTs).

The paper conceptualizes state-movement contention as a competition for access to civil society and its resources. Movements and states attempt to maximize their access, otherwise known as capacity, and minimize that of their rival. The legibility of society to either side impacts their success. Success, or lack thereof, determines future capacity.

Increased usage of ICTs and digital surveillance have decentralized movements, changing their organizational structures from hierarchical to decentralized and interlinked structures. Capacity, legibility, and action all take place through semi-spontaneous individual efforts, and knowledge and tactics are spread through social, not organizational, networks. As a result, trust has become a key component of capacity, rivalling—if not replacing—legibility.

BACKGROUND

For most of the past year, Hong Kong has blazed with protests, driven by a single movement locked in contention with the government. The movement is distinguished by its unusual resilience and flexibility, able to survive repression and shift from peaceful assemblies to street battles to electioneering to aid provision and back again. In the past, such flexibility was the exclusive preserve of groups with centralized leaderships. Yet the consciously leaderless Hong Kongers have been able to adapt while maintaining their resilience. As tear gas swept the streets, and large messaging channels lit up with information about police movements, requests for aid, and tactical advice, a new style of protest took shape, and is being replicated around the world.

1 Thanks to Professor Nathaniel Raymond and Isabel Salinas-Arreola for their help throughout the paper-writing process.
2 See Tufekci 2017
3 See reddit links in bibliography; additionally, based on anecdotal information, the protests in Portland, Oregon seem to have similar structures

THEORY:

This paper focuses on the competition between social movements and states over ideas, spaces, and, most importantly, access to the limited resources of civil society. This includes institutional resources, such as organizational funds, contact lists, and facilities; and individual resources, such as logistical skills and physical presence. States and movements require these resources to build capacity, achieve their goals, and ultimately, survive. The more resources each side taps into, the greater their own penetration into civil society, the greater their capacity for action, and the fewer resources available to their rival.

Capacity consists of the ability to convey information, to create and control narratives, and to mobilize and organize people. It is expressed through the mobilization of groups of

4 This is a loaded term, but I have chosen to combine the concepts from Mattingly 2020 and Keck and Sikkink 1998
5 Gee 2011; note that this definition combines some elements of the state formation literature’s understanding of capacity, but leaves out others. See Mann 1986
people behind a narrative framework in displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment that signal a movement’s power. In short, the ability to effectively take action against legible targets. States and movements allocate limited resources between action and legibility. They aim to maximize capacity and limit disruption.

Action, which encompasses the coercive and persuasive tools of a movement or state, is used to achieve goals, ranging from increasing legibility to recruiting new members. The methods include staging marches, ordering arrests, and establishing surveillance, among others.

Legibility is knowledge of society. It reflects how well a state or movement understands their surrounding society and refines its ability to act. States generally have little idea of the makeup of society, due to their limited penetration into it. Movements, by contrast, are embedded within society. Historically, they emerge from society, meaning they initially are illegible to the state. Movements thus seek to capitalize on their superior legibility and deny it to the state, while the state tries to reorganize society into legible form.

This view is solidly on the structuralist side of social movement literature. Structuralist theories emphasize the importance of external variables, such as the social networks a movement can tap into, the particular repertoires permitted or forbidden by the state, or the willingness of elites to defect. People, their reasons for protest, and their way of understanding the world, are bracketed to focus on broader movement-state dynamics. Societies always have grievances simmering below the surface, and people are naturally drawn by affinity to form groups. Those that succeed must have access to resources or opportunity. This paper particularly draws on political process theory, which points to organizational strength, insurgent consciousness, and political opportunity as the main factors determining the success of a movement. This paper adds legibility and capacity to the list of critical factors for success. Movements which remain illegible for longer and to whom society is more legible are able to better develop capacity and exploit opportunities.

This departs from the current trend in social movement theory. Current literature strongly emphasizes the role of individuals and their decision-making process. The field of study has narrowed to “grievances, resources, political opportunities or processes of meaning construction,” with a particular focus on individual rational choice and framing – the process of individually creating meaning. Approaches emphasize the agency of organizers and movement members.

I have chosen to return to structural theories because they better characterize the state. In modern literature, the state tends to be treated as a static “cost of protest” which movement members evaluate. It may change, but it is never an actor in itself. By contrast, structuralist theories envision the state as an actor, consciously responding to new innovations and changes in circumstance. The specific behaviors and goals of the state are drawn from the rich work on state decision-making and goals that have been generated by the state formation and counter-insurgency literatures, particularly their emphases on legibility and contention.

Information communication technologies (ICTs), particularly encrypted social media and messaging apps, change this calculus of capacity. They enhance both the ability to act and to control legibility, reducing costs and opening up new avenues of action, communication, and surveillance. They allow movements to not only reach civil society much more easily, but to instantaneously share techniques and knowledge worldwide, creating spaces where they can refine ideas and train activists before engaging with the broader public. On the other hand, ICT communications produce data, making users increasingly legible to states. More legible data means more legible people, information which the state can exploit.

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6 Tilly 2006
7 Scott 1998, the concept is central to much of the rest of his work as well
8 Ibid.
9 McAdam 1982, among others
10 Tilly 2006, among others
11 A common premise of resource mobilization theory. See Aslanidis 2012
12 Klandermans 1997, cited in Aslanidis 2012
14 For example, see Kuran, 1994, as well as Aslanidis 2012
15 See Mann 1986, Kalyvas 2012 and Galula, 1964
16 See Fraser 1990
ICTs reduce the cost of capacity. Coordinating a mass march, once an immense logistical feat, now can be arranged over smartphone.\(^\text{17}\) Identifying an individual, once expensive, now can be done with an algorithm.\(^\text{18}\) Everything takes fewer resources, so both state and movement are able to spend their newfound surplus on further legibility and action. Where ICTs are widespread, then, contention will be more intense, and more of society will be mobilized.

More intense protests present a threat to any state, but are regarded with particular concern by repressive regimes.\(^\text{19}\) Regimes have a long history of harassing and imprisoning dissidents to preempt movements, but ICTs make this easier than ever.\(^\text{20}\) Repression, combined with more protestors rejecting leadership structures, have flattened movement organizational structures.\(^\text{21}\) Rather than a center issuing dictates to the periphery, small groups connect dynamically, reconfiguring their organization to efficiently handle problems. Organizers, once leaders of movements, now coordinate, network, and filter, helping disseminate tactics, connect groups, and verify information. ICTs, combined with sufficient state repression, lead to movement structure resembling a mesh network.\(^\text{22}\)

**HONG KONG:**

Hong Kong has spent nearly two centuries under the rule of a distant power. Locals in general, and non-elites in particular, were ignored by the state, so they turned to contention. During British occupation, “wave after wave of collective actions” took place.\(^\text{23}\) Movements frequently succeeded and their leaders were occasionally even incorporated into the governing elite.\(^\text{24}\) Organizing protests thus became a way for the disenfranchised to make their voices heard.\(^\text{25}\) This sort of movement-led contention practically became an informal branch of Hong Kong’s government.\(^\text{26}\)

Movements were part of the language of politics, and post-handover Hong Kong saw an “explosion of social protests.”\(^\text{27}\) Largest of these were the 2003 protests against Article 23, an anti-sedition bill. Since then, a new movement has emerged every two to three years, on average, as well as annual commemorative marches.\(^\text{28}\) Such a history makes the city an ideal example of both social movement dynamics and the effects of ICTs.

**ANALYSIS:**

The theory would predict that contention between government and movement in Hong Kong would be incredibly intense, given Hong Kong’s high levels of ICT use and ownership. Not only would reduced cost of action lead to frequent and large-scale action, the reduced cost of legibility should lead to both sides understanding society while encryption renders them illegible to one another. While contention was incredibly intense, resources dedicated to legibility plateaued. Interviewees unanimously pointed to trust, rather than legibility, as the key component of capacity. Both state and movement spent a substantial amount of resources on ensuring or disrupting trust, rather than building legibility or taking action as a capacity-centric theory would predict. Once a baseline level of legibility/illegibility is reached, trust appears to take on equal, if not greater, importance than legibility.

**MOVEMENT STRUCTURE:**

The movement’s focus on trust rather than legibility comes from its decentralized structure. Social movements in Hong Kong have been decentralizing since 2014. The post-Umbrella prosecutions of Joshua Wong and other leaders made activists conscious of their legibility; most moved away

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17 Compare, for instance, the planning processed behind the 1963 March on Washington and the 2016 Women’s march; the former took much longer and was more intense than the latter
18 Soldatov 2017
19 Mattingly 2020
20 Ibid., among many, many other sources
21 Kuran 1991, Fraser 1990
22 A term from network theory and computer science referring to a collection of nodes which connect dynamically and consultatively; see Grieg 2018
23 Chen, Albert HY, 2009, “Social Movements and the Law in Post-Colonial Hong Kong” p. 3
24 King, Ambrose YC, 1973 “The Administrative Adoption of Politics in Hong Kong”; cited in Kuan 1979
25 Chen 2009
26 Ibid.
27 Chen 2009
28 Cheng, interviewed 4/13/20
Many activists were also suspicious of would-be leaders, and “there [was] no trust between the political system and civil society.” Many protesters believed that the 2014 movement had been fatally weakened when it was “hijacked by political parties.” Those parties had attempted to impose codes of conduct on protestors, enforced by party members. These members also served as liaisons, conveying strategic decisions and tactical requests back and forth between leadership and protestors.

The 2019 movement rejected this, remaining consciously leaderless. “Most of the activities/events are self-initiated instead of organized by political parties as in the past,” with protestors organizing through personal networks. Protestors first communicated primarily over LIHKG, a local website, then over Telegram and Signal. Objectives, training, figures, and mascots emerged – meme-like – from a dense network of communication channels and chatrooms. Individual protestors would both join the larger general channels and create their own group chats consisting of friends and other protestors who they had met and worked with. These chats were used to share information, make plans, and coordinate times and places of action. The largest channels, such as 612 Reminder, helped share vital information and amplify the voices of individuals or groups in need, while smaller groups served as incubators for new techniques.

Small groups made up the majority of this communication ecosystem. They formed around tasks, ranging from first-aiders, to firemen, to legal aiders. Other groups formed as protestors cemented connections with one another, or with reliable sources of supplies, first aid, and transit, via Telegram groups. Most coordination and planning took place within these small networks, making each one a vessel of capacity. A given movement member stood at a nexus of networks, whose members ranged from fellow protestors to friends and family. ICTs both made such network structures possible and were used to make them illegible to the state.

A patchwork of anonymous “admins” linked these groups to one another and to the big channels. Admins were either the creators of larger channels or experienced protestors with extensive networks. They vetted and passed on information, and arranged transit, clothing changes, and legal aid, among many other roles. “The admins were always online,” and played a key role in tying together frontline protestors and various support groups. These admins were not leaders by another name; they “[wouldn’t] initiate anything” on their own. Spontaneous organization was also common. Supplies were frequently passed via human chain, often nearly across the island. Tactical changes were passed the same way. “Someone would yell out a new destination, and the entire march would change direction.” The combination of decentralized networks of decision-making, admins, and willingness to accept decisions formed the basis of the movement’s flexibility, which in turn made the movement less legible and harder to disrupt. This structure, with many small, specialized groups operating in concert, connected by individuals, epitomizes the modern movement.

**TRUST AND CAPACITY**

Within this structure, “[Everything] depend[ed] on trust.” Protestors would not interact online unless it was “known to be safe,” meaning they knew and had met every member in person. Everyone used group-specific shibbo-
leths to verify their identity, ranging from Cantonese internet slang to their real name. Admins “were trusted only because of their past organizing and protesting experience,” and cited it to prove their trustworthiness. Interviewees as a whole frequently mentioned the vital importance of trust, especially with regards to buying “stationary,” a euphemism for sensitive supplies that would be left for protestors to retrieve.

While protest has always relied on trust, and mass protest in particular, the mostly anonymous communications ecosystem in Hong Kong intensified the demand. Accounts, even those entirely uninvolved with activism, on Telegram, LIHKG, and other platforms frequently display no identifying information. As a result, Hong Kong lacked the radical, all-encompassing trust which had characterized earlier movements like Occupy. “[I had] to be skeptical,” noted multiple interviewees, since anonymous accounts could be anyone and “I don’t trust anyone.” Such demand was reinforced by the knowledge that the only way to get information from the “safety of Telegram” would be to infiltrate a group. Thus, trust in one’s fellow group members limited one’s potential legibility. This connection only grew stronger as protestors embraced additional legibility-reduction techniques, such as wearing facemasks, paying train fare with cash, and using lasers to interfere with cameras. Other members went even further, using “clean” (burner) phones with “VPN, new SIM card, all the safety measures.” Admins, among the most cautious of all, were most afraid of trusting the wrong person and revealing secrets or spreading false information as a result. Trust also played a vital role in coordinating action. The spontaneous changes in direction and fluid response to requests for help would not have been possible without a deep trust among protestors.

On the government side, while it is cheaper than ever to surveil and identify, decentralized protest means that the range of potential targets has increased. The increase in targets outweighs the decrease in cost, leaving governments unable to support surveillance strong enough to stop movements from functioning. However, states have been subverting movements for decades, if not centuries, and the anonymity provided by the internet only made it easier. Entire movements, such as the #yosoy132 movement in Mexico, collapsed after being infiltrated by government agents posing as organizers who turned its leaders against one another.

The government’s plainclothes police tactics illustrate the importance it assigned to weakening intra-movement trust. When plainclothes police revealed themselves and started making arrests, rather than targeting those who appeared experienced or essential, they instead grabbed whoever they could reach. These plainclothes police would also sometimes wear blue armbands or a bracelet with a red flashing light, subtly marking themselves as police. Similarly, efforts to infiltrate Telegram groups were “sometimes carried out from accounts registered with a police department email.” Such clumsiness suggests the aim was not to arrest anyone important, reducing the movement’s ability to act, or to infiltrate the movement, rendering it legible, but to sow suspicion among movement members. Both contenders indicated the importance of trust through their priorities.

The government aimed to fracture the networks of trust between protestors, leaving them paranoid and uncertain of the true intentions of nominal allies. Without this trust and faith, the movement’s supporters would be much less likely to contribute. It nearly succeeded. After plainclothes police revealed themselves, “people started turning on each other really quick.” Groups would crumble as members were discovered to be passing information to the police. A man accused of being a plainclothes officer was zip-tied and beaten. Paranoia grew, to the point where people only trusted friends they knew
Small teams and individual chats were integral to preserving what cohesion remained. Because members had seen their fellow group-members in action, they trusted one another. In many cases, they had protested and clashed with police side by side, or known them for years. Trust in real life was used to develop trust online. Protestors also relied on reputations. Movement members who’d been leaders in previous movements were well-known, having built up credibility over years of pro-democracy activity. Reputations of that sort inspired nearly universal acceptance, if not trust, and allowed them to serve as “admins.” They also further strengthened their credibility by using their expertise to help coordinate logistics and solve thorny tactical problems. These admins had information security protocols designed to prevent the spread of incorrect information, protecting their credibility and limiting the spread of false or provocative stories.

There are a couple questions here which would benefit from further research. First is the role of culture. Hong Kong has a very particular culture and history of protest, so sorting out the way it informed the movement and their structure is essential. Second, research into the methods used by admins in particular, to screen out rumors and false reports has great potential. Interlinked, decentralized networks can propagate false stories and cause an immense amount of harm. Understanding how information was curated and screened could yield insights into addressing the spread of fake news online.

CONCLUSION:

Change in social movements, particularly ICT-driven change, has been characterized by the steady delegation of more and more capacities originally held by central organizers to the crowd, and the shrinking down of the units within movements from organizations to trust networks, driven by an underlying need to not only resist legibility but also to maintain trust.

Networks of groups of people and their close, trusted friends first provided their own narratives, then logistical support, then their own leadership and decision making. In the place of the perfectly organized marches has arisen a messy, spontaneous process grounded within the local cultural context and informed by the experience of past movements. Movement structures have transformed from a center informing a periphery to a coordinated network of networks communicating within itself. A network-of-networks structure has allowed the Hong Kong movement to be more resilient, flexible, and adaptable than an equivalent centralized structure. This has also been visible in the ad hoc response to coronavirus, as groups have sprung up to deliver masks and other needed supplies to those in need.

This is not necessarily the future of movements. The Hong Kong movement evolved in response to specific conditions, including effective and aggressive targeting of movement leaders and a repressive state response. In countries without these traits, intertwined individual and movement networks provide little benefit. What will carry over, however, is the fundamental shift: movements no longer primarily tap into societal networks, but rather build on and evolve from them, relying on individuals and personal networks rather than organizers and organizational networks.


Tufekci 2020


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INTERVIEWS:
Bing, Maureen, Wan, Alex, Kwan, Lo, and Matt

FIGURES:

Figure 1
Figures provided by Michael Tian, who was air-dropped them in Hong Kong over the summer.