Critically Assess the Effectiveness of Social Media as Resource for Social Movements Interested in Democratization and Media Reform Processes

---Using a Case Study of Social Movement Use of Social Media in Two Distinct National Settings

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Abstract

The fast development of social media in recently years has made the traditional concept "public sphere" created by mass media of newspapers and television into a more engaging online sphere. This sphere has gained more freedom as well as more participation in terms of discussing social and political affairs. It keeps the information updated and more importantly facilitates social movement online and offline organized by grassroots. This essay argues that social media is more effective in enhancing and igniting the public's desire for democracy in Occupy Wall Street in America than in Jasmine Revolution in China; but neither of the movements deliver direct social reform, which means that social media has no direct relationship with success of social movements. Using details and data collected from the two movements, this essay will explore how social media take effect in social movements in distinct national settings as well as evaluation of what we learned from social media in promoting democracy.

Keywords

Social media;Communication power;Effectiveness.

1. Reasons of Why Social Media is Effective in Promoting Social Movements

There are three reasons why social media are an effective resource for social movements in their campaigns for democratization: fast development of social media, shared awareness and mass self-communication of online activists.

1.1. Facebook Registered Users have Grown at an Astonishing Speed in Recently Years

According to research from Social Times, in 2004,Facebook only had one million users but the number soared to more than 1 billion in 2014. Twitter users increased from around 80 million to 300 million over the period 2009 to 2011(Morrison, 2014). In the survey conducted by the Pew Research Center and American life Project, the number of social networking sites users has grown from 33% of the online population in 2008 to 69% in 2012.About one third of American adults (39%) engaged with political activities in the context of a social networking site such as Facebook and Twitter in this survey (Smith, 2013). Netizens' online participation contributes to the exchanging of information and helps to flow the information and also involve a larger participation of users. These online users not only share their general thoughts but they also share their thoughts on politics. In Occupy Wall Street, when first occupy message was posted on July 13,2011 by Adbusters Journal, other networks and groups also involved in posting similar message saying, "on September 17th,flood into lower

Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street " (Castells, 2012,p158). This message went viral and with more and more online activists involved they even formed New York City General Assembly (Castells, 2012).

1.2. In his Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,German Philosopher Habermas Expressed the Notion of "Public Sphere"

It is a realm between private individuals and government authorities where opinions and conversations particularly focusing on the needs of society could be freely and openly exchanged without intervening by external pressures (Habermas, 1989). Habermas regarded public sphere as a positive force keeping the authorities within bounds. Conversations as well as debates normally happened in cafes, coffee house and in the media, such as letters and books. However, the "public sphere" is challenged by the fast growing of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs where opinions and debates could be expressed in a wilder scope. It is easier for the public to communicate and find others who hold the similar opinion, which means in this realm there is a higher level of collective awareness, a term scholar Clay Shirky called "shared awareness". As Shirky argues "shared awareness is the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too" (Shirky, 2011). His main point is that social media has the potential to increase online activists' shared awareness. These people may take part in different discussions and then impressed by other thoughts and feel some degree of social connection with one another. Occupy Wall Street was aiming to restore democracy which was a consent opinion held under the background of financial crisis. The shared awareness of "income and wealth inequality " is a key message conveyed by Occupy Wall Street protestors across the country. This message resonates with those who lost jobs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Jasmine Revolution in China, shared awareness stem from one party state control, protesters "urge China to reform and change"(Lee, 2011). Social media enables ordinary citizens to connect and give a voice to individuals and then most people's opinions could be heard.

1.3. Mass Communication is Used to be an Important Process for News Gathering and Disseminating

It is a process that a person, a group and an organization sends a message through a channel, either newspapers or TV stations as well as magazines to a larger group. In recent years, the most important change in media has been the shift from mass communication to mass self-communication as Castells argues (Castells, 2013). It is mass because countless messages from senders can reach to a larger group of receivers. It is self-communication because "the message is autonomously decided by the sender, the designation of the receiver is self-directed and the retrieval of messages from the networks of communication is self-selected" (Castells, 2012,p.7). Mass communication is prepared for elites while mass self-communication can reach a larger group that not only include the elites but also the public. As Castells argues "mass self communication provides opportunities for the construction of the autonomy of the social actor"(Castells, 2012,p.7). In other words, mass self-communication is characterized by horizontal networks of communication, which helps to bypass the government's control. This explains why both occupy Wall Street and Jasmine Revolution can attract online activists attention immediately.

2. Features of Effective or Ineffective Use of Social Media in Two Movements

Occupy Wall Street is effective in using social media as a method to organize and mobilize online activists. The original protest was initiated by Kalle Lasn,who then registered the OccupyWallStreet.org web on June,2011.In September, protestors created Facebook sites to

arouse the awareness of mass protests. Twitter account was created and protests kept updated information with hastage #we are the 99%. Youtube is also the most popular search engine for occupiers as occupy videos were uploaded on a timely basis (Social Media, 2011). People can watch these videos of conflicts between demonstrators and police; president Barack Obama's response as well as celebrities' interviewing of what their opinions towards the occupy (Social Media, 2011). Through these means social media in all its form has contributed to the widespread of the movement online and offline.

Scholar Guobing Yang argues that online political activism in China "focus on human rights, political reforms and other issues that touch directly on how China is governed"(Yang, 2009). Online activism sometimes leads to street demonstration. Inspired by the Middle East uprisings, Jasmine Revolution started from a twitter message from blogger Jason Ng saying, "every large city in China would be conducting a Jasmine Revolution and details of the revolution would be later posted on "(Lee, 2011). Weibo,Chinse version of Twitter and search engine Baidu later censored sensitive words such as "Jasmine" "revolution". Social media in this movement is in effective as less information could be accessed online. The information was post on some websites that are not very popular among netizens, such as blogger Jason Ng and Boxun.com (Lee, 2011).

3. Why Social Movement in China is Ineffective?

Compared to American media system, which favors long time media freedom. Chinese public sphere was tightly controlled by the Communist party and since 2002,media was further controlled by the then president Hu Jingtao, aiming to create a "Harmonious Socialist Society"(Volland, 2011,p.186). As Shirky states that in authoritarian governed countries, public sphere seems to be online and that is why these governments are trying to limit public's access to social media (Shirky, 2011).

The widespread of Internet empowered the public to engage in the news making process online. The Internet provides a free and fast communication channels for netizens to share opinions of the public affairs outside the controlled traditional media. This rising new technology equipped the public with ideas of free speech and changing the society, as Castells says there is "synergistic interaction between technological discovery and social evolution" (Castells, 2013). In this case, the effect of new technology is positive for people with lower income and lower social status, who want to change the society. Social media in this case take into effect in arousing people's awareness but the change of the society takes time. Even in the situation that the will of changing Chinese society is weak and the organization system is loose. As Xin argues "citizens journalism alone could not be a driving force in promoting social change in China"(Xin, 2011). The will of these activists is weak, telling from a blogger's experience that he arrived earlier on "jasmine revolution" day, it was almost no protest atmosphere because no one seems to be protesting (Lee, 2011). According to the updated post, what these protestors want is "the government and officials to accept the supervision of ordinary Chinese people," and "an independent judiciary." Compared with Occupy Wall Street targeting the wealthy people and require financial reform, the objective in Jasmine Revolution seems too ideal and too general.

4. Evaluation of the Two Social Movements

4.1. As Castells Points out "Power is Enforced by the Institutions"

Counter power is most often exercised by the rise of social movements" and he further explains, "Social movements have been and continue to be the levers of social change". I agree with that point, as the rise of mass self-communication online provides more opportunities

for individuals to challenge the existing power. But after analyzing the two movements in two distinction nations, I may argue that in what situation could social movements achieve to success in countries where collective action are not strong enough to suppress state power. The two movements are repressed by the police in the end, which resonates with the Shirky's point that not every movement will success because the state has not lost the power to react (Shirky, 2011).

4.2. Neither of Movements could be Regarded as Effective in Terms of Social Reform and Democracy

Although the Occupy Wall Street movement is more effective in helping people to shape shared awareness of "collective action", neither of movements could be regarded as effective in terms of social reform and democracy. In Occupy Wall Street, protesters bring many important and legitimate concerns about the future of America, such as social inequality, lack of jobs and social stability. But because of protestors' lacking leadership and failed in supporting specific policies, no major policy changed after this movement (Castells, 2012). In China,as Xin argues although citizen journalism plays a positive role on the exposure of social injustice and stands for the grassroots opinions, it is still hard to say challenge and even change China (Xin,2011).In Jasmine Revolution, protesters have no goals to achieve, saying they "do not necessarily have to overthrow the current government," and that they don't care if they "implement a one party system, a two party system, or even a three party system." (Lee, 2011). This obviously set the tone for the "revolution"; it could not achieve any results.

4.3. Two Arguments

Shirky presents two arguments that are skepticism of the possibility social media making a difference, "the tools are ineffective and social media produce more harm than good"(Shirky, 2011). Nowadays, with information spreading in a fast speed, there is a rising trend of "slacktivism". While it is positive that information can be disseminated worldwide, there is one fact that we sometimes take this information for granted. People may hold the view that they are making contribution to a current event by click "like", but in fact, it means nothing. The critique is right from Shirky's opinion but he further pointed out that "barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not means that committed actors cannot use social media effectively"(Shirky, 2011).

5. Conclusion

In my understanding, by understanding "the tools are ineffective" means social media on its own could not change the society. Technology cannot remove the efforts of collective action. It only can be a catalyzer. Castells also argues, "technology does not determine the process and the outcome of the power-making process, but it is not neutral either, since it maximizes the chances for the expression and mobilization of alternative projects that have emerged from society to challenge the powers that be " (Castells, 2013). To summaries, social media to a broader extent means shaping the public minds and it is a more decisive and lasting form of domination than the social movement itself. The actual goal of these social movements should be raising the public's awareness. The result is less important than the shaping process through which the consciousness of democracy will be informed.

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