

The Power of the Keystroke: Is Social Media the Radical Democratizing Force We've Been Led to Believe it is?

Bryan H. Druzin¹

Jessica Li²

INTRODUCTION

Mao Ze Dong famously proclaimed that power comes from the barrel of a gun; however, he also recognized the power of the pen.³ Today, this pen comes mostly in the form of keystrokes on electronic devices, yet this insight remains as accurate as ever. The protests calling for universal suffrage that erupted on the streets of Hong Kong this autumn tell us something important about the power of the keystroke. There has emerged as of late a widely held view that the viral nature of social media, once properly activated, functions as a conflagrating force for civil disobedience. Indeed, the Internet is now commonly portrayed in this light, the narrative being that social media such as Twitter and Facebook gives voice to millions and these voices once raised in chorus cannot then be silenced. This assumption enjoys a great deal of intellectual currency. However, before the Hong Kong protests, the international community had yet to witness an open and democratic society with an advanced use of Internet technology and social media engaging in public protest on such a grand scale. As such, the Hong Kong protests provided a unique opportunity to truly test this supposition. Indeed, the protests possessed all the architecture of a perfect storm; yet it would appear that the storm has passed and this supposition has failed. The failure of the Hong Kong protests forces us to reassess whether social media is truly the radical democratizing force we have been led to believe it is. Indeed, the lack of success of the Hong Kong protests should now give us pause before we trumpet the political significance of social media.

We have clearly seen the power of social media to amplify civil disobedience elsewhere, first in Iran in 2009 and then more vividly across the Middle East in 2010 in what has since become known as the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring breathed new life

¹ Assistant Professor of Law, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

² Registered foreign lawyer practicing in Hong Kong. B.A., M.A., LL.B., Cambridge University, Solicitor of the Senior Courts of England and Wales.

³ HENRY YUHUAI HE, *DICTIONARY OF THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA* 305 (2001). *See also* MAO ZEDONG, *SELECTED WORKS OF MAO TSE-TUNG VOLUME TWO* 228 (1954).

into the now familiar meme regarding the ability of social media to ignite mass protest. The wave of demonstrations that swept across the Arab world engendered a widespread sense of inevitability among western think-tank pundits and armchair intellectuals that Internet technology empowers grassroots political movements. The Internet has now evolved to become a central component in liberal visions of democracy.⁴ However, despite the momentous social upheavals wrought by the Arab Spring, this thesis had yet to be fully tested.

I. THE ARAB SPRING AND THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The political power of the Internet has been universally lauded as immense and a considerable amount of ink has been spilled on the relationship between the Internet and civil disobedience. Many have asserted that because the Internet is uniquely immune to government control, it unleashes a free exchange of information and ideas worldwide that destabilizes hierarchical orders of authority.⁵ One of the characteristics said to be central to the Internet's potential to galvanize public opinion is its ability to erode physical and political borders as information bits travel along fiber-optic cables to reach millions around the world.⁶ The open-ended, decentralized structure of the Internet then allows for the rapid dissemination of information not previously seen with other forms of print and broadcast media.⁷ As Lawrence Lessig explains: "Borders keep people in and hence governments could regulate. Cyberspace undermines this balance . . . The shift is away from the power of government to regulate and toward the power of individuals to escape government regulation."⁸ The Internet permits access to a vast array of information from global sources, enabling citizenry to bypass state-

⁴ See YING JIANG, CYBER NATIONALISM IN CHINA: CHALLENGING WESTERN MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF INTERNET CENSORSHIP IN CHINA 5–8 (2012) (providing a crisp overview of the evolution of this literature, specifically as it relates to China). See generally Christopher R. Kedzie, *A Brave New World or a New World Order?*, in CULTURE OF THE INTERNET 209 (Sarah Kiesler ed., 1997) (examining the impact of Internet technology on political regimes and arguing such technology empowers citizens); Trevor Locke, *Participation, Inclusion, Exclusion and Netactivism: How the Internet Invents New Forms of Democratic Activity*, in DIGITAL DEMOCRACY: DISCOURSE AND DECISION MAKING IN THE INFORMATION AGE 211 (Barry N. Hague & Brian D. Loader eds., 1999) (arguing that the Internet empowers online activism). However, the legitimacy of this assumption is now questioned. See EVGENY MOROZOV, THE NET DELUSION: THE DARK SIDE OF INTERNET FREEDOM (2012) (arguing that belief in the democratizing nature of the Internet is unsupported).

⁵ Tamara Renee Shie, *The Tangled Web: Does the Internet Offer Promise or Peril for the Chinese Communist Party?*, 13 J. CONTEMPORARY CHINA 523, 524 (2004).

⁶ DAVID L. SIMON, JAVIER CORRALES & DONALD R. WOLFENBERGER, DEMOCRACY AND THE INTERNET 9 (2002).

⁷ JENS HOFF, INTERNET, GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY: DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS FROM ASIAN AND EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE 26 (2006).

⁸ LAWRENCE LESSIG, CODE AND OTHER LAWS OF CYBERSPACE 207 (1999).

controlled media and to think outside the political parameters often established by their governments. The rapid global expansion of Internet technology quickly captured the imagination of scholars and led to predictions that the Internet would break down political control, usurping the historic reign of the state over information.

The last half-decade has provided several demonstrations of the transformational impact of the Internet upon the growth of opposition movements, succor for those who herald the political power of social media. Indeed, the power of social media was dramatically showcased to the world by the events of the Arab Spring. Beginning in January 2011, a torrent of public protest swept across much of the Arab world, toppling long-ruling autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and sparking bloody demonstrations in Bahrain and Yemen.⁹ Protests soon sprang up in Syria, dragging the country into a violent civil war that continues to rage today. The use of internet-based social media such as Twitter and Facebook played a crucial role in moving these events forward.¹⁰ The toppling of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in early 2011 is now widely described as the “twitter revolution” because protest groups used Twitter, Facebook and other internet-based social media platforms to mobilize their opposition. The protesters who organized in Tahrir Square maintained a strong online presence, using Facebook pages to coordinate their demonstrations. Social media served as a key conduit of communication for the disaffected youth that rallied in great numbers against the Mubarak regime.¹¹ Protesters were able to “build extensive networks, create social capital, and organize political action.”¹² In many respects, the events of the Arab Spring confirmed the early predictions of political scientists who heralded the coming political impact of internet-based technology. Indeed, their prognostications came to startling fruition in the heart of the Islamic world.

II. LOOKING AT THE NUMBERS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF A PERFECT STORM

However, we should be very careful to not exaggerate the political significance of social media. The supposition that social media instantly unleashes an unbridled vitalizing impact upon mass protest, as ubiquitous as it is, remains unproven. The protests in Hong Kong were significant in that they presented a perfect case study to test this assumption, particularly in light of the technological gap between Hong Kong and the Arab Spring countries.

⁹ Sean Aday, et al., *New Media and Conflict after the Arab Spring*, 80 PEACEWORKS 1, 3 (2012).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² PHILIP N. HOWARD & MUZAMMIL M. HUSSAIN, DEMOCRACY’S FOURTH WAVE?: DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE ARAB SPRING 65-66 (2013).

A. Internet Penetration

Internet penetration in Hong Kong (the portion of the population that has access to the Internet) stood at 74.2% as of 2013.¹³ This far surpasses the level of Internet penetration in the Arab Spring countries in 2010, the closest being Tunisia at 36.8%.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Internet penetration was 31.4% in Egypt and 14% in Libya in 2010.¹⁵ In 2009, access to the Internet in Iran was a mere 11.1%.¹⁶ Moreover, the portability of Internet access has exploded in recent years with the widespread use of smartphones. Smartphone ownership in Hong Kong is in fact the highest in the entire Asia Pacific region at 87%, making it among the highest in the world.¹⁷

B. Social Media has Grown more Sophisticated

Without social media, the protestors in Hong Kong could not have coordinated as easily, flexibly and dynamically as they did. The Hong Kong protestors enjoyed access to far more innovative forms of social media than did protestors in the Arab Spring countries. Whatsapp, WeChat and FireChat as well as Twitter and Facebook were all extensively used by the Hong Kong protestors. These protestors demonstrated the ability to rapidly adapt and re-organize after being scattered by police. The sophistication of social media technology has made a stunning leap forward since the technologically pre-historic days of 2010. FireChat serves as the perfect example of an especially novel and resilient tool in that it allows for *mesh networking*, linking users in a “daisy chain” that gives them the ability to continue communicating with one another even without cellular reception. Although cellular connection did not suffer any lapse in service throughout the protests, downloads of FireChat nevertheless surged with over 200,000 Hong Kong users downloading the app over the space of a couple of days.¹⁸

C. A Small City

Added to this is Hong Kong’s geographic advantage. Hong Kong is a very small city that already enjoys extensive interconnectivity and easy mobility to protest sites. In

¹³ *Internet Users (per 100 people)*, THE WORLD BANK, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2> (last visited Jan. 22, 2015).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *The Asian Mobile Consumer Decoded*, NEILSEN (Jan. 14, 2014), <http://www.nielsen.com/ph/en/insights/news/2014/asian-mobile-consumers.html>.

¹⁸ Alex Fitzpatrick, *Hong Kong’s Protestors Don’t Need the Internet to Chat With One Another*, TIME (Oct. 1, 2014), <http://time.com/3449812/hong-kong-protesters-firechat>.

fact, Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated regions on earth.¹⁹ The population density of Hong Kong is roughly 7400% higher than that of Egypt.²⁰ This effectively means that, unlike Egypt, those who wished to play a role in the protests could have easily done so, as there were no significant logistical hindrances. The small size of the city with its ease of transportation meant that Hong Kong's entire population could have participated in the protests if they had been so motivated. Protesters in Egypt did not enjoy such a logistical advantage and it is likely that many more Egyptians would have flowed into Tahrir Square if it were as easy to do so.

D. A Tech-savvy Population

The intense interconnectivity of Hong Kong is only further amplified by the adept use of technology. Indeed, Hong Kong has been cited as the seventh most tech-savvy city in the world.²¹ The educated youth of the city are technologically proficient and the power of the technology in their pockets was undeniable. These student protesters employed social media to push the boundaries of permissive conduct and renegotiate the limits of toleration. In Hong Kong, all the conditions were present to truly test the proposition that the viral power of social media has the effect of escalating mass protest. This was not the case with the Arab Spring – at least not on the level of sophistication witnessed last autumn in Hong Kong.

III. THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

What the case of Hong Kong seems to suggest is that there are limits to the energizing impact of social media upon civil disobedience. With a wealthy, tech-savvy, politically and technologically advanced populace, we should have had, in theory, a perfect storm. Yet we did not. While there is little question that social media played a vital role in coordinating and sustaining the student-led protests, the final outcome of the protests belie the assumption that social media is an inherently explosive force, intensifying civil disobedience. In the case of Hong Kong's "Umbrella Revolution," all the ingredients were present in extremity for the impact of social media to manifest, yet the protests fizzled. There is little question that social media can swiftly ramp up civil

¹⁹ *Hong Kong: The Facts*, GOVHK (Jun. 2014), <http://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/population.pdf>.

²⁰ Politically, Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China; however, it functions as a de facto city-state comparable to that of Singapore. As such, it is reasonable to compare Hong Kong to Egypt rather than simply Cairo. CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, *The World Factbook*, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY (2013), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>.

²¹ ERICSSON AB, *Networked Society City Index 2013*, ERICSSON 17 (2012), available at <http://www.ericsson.com/res/docs/2013/ns-city-index-report-2013.pdf>.

disobedience. However, we should be cautious to not exaggerate the power of Internet technology. Let us be clear: social media in the hands of a technologically savvy public able and willing to employ it does not alone guarantee an escalation of protest behavior. Such an outcome requires a perfect confluence of factors. From a distance, the Hong Kong protests seemed to have all the ingredients necessary to foment civil unrest on a massive scale; however, clearly something was missing – be that a sufficient presence of socio-economic angst, roiling political instability, endemic corruption, a failing bureaucracy, or the correct cultural, historical and religious milieu.

The failure of Hong Kong's "Umbrella Revolution" supports our thesis – the political power of social media has been mischaracterized, its potency exaggerated. The now commonplace notion that social media is innately a robust political force is ultimately erroneous. A more nuanced analysis paints a different picture. The use of social media cannot be abstracted from the particular social and political contexts in which its impact is felt. The energizing nature of the medium cannot be divorced from the varied mix of socio-political conditions that frame the existing unrest.

CONCLUSION

Hong Kong's "Umbrella Revolution" tells us a great deal about the limits of social media. The simple presence of public unrest combined with social media does not a "revolution" make. Such an assertion where it is implied is facile. The case of the Hong Kong protests illustrates this. Despite all the technological advantages afforded the tens of thousands who flooded the streets of Hong Kong in protest last autumn, ultimately, their momentum could not be sustained.