

Book Reviews

Media and Protest Logic in the Digital Era: The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. By Francis L. F. Lee and Joseph M. Chan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 263 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780190856779.

Reviewed by Kwok Chi

Against the backdrop of increasing interest in the interconnectedness between contemporary social movements and emerging digital media technologies, Francis Lee and Joseph Chan's book provides a timely and comprehensive analysis of the role and impact of both digital and conventional media in the Umbrella Movement (UM).

The authors lay out their central premise on the UM clearly in Chapter 1: Although the UM is the largest social activism in Hong Kong's recent history, it is "a case in which old and new protest logics and movement formations engage and interact with each other" (2), rather than a paradigmatic case for a new theory about media and social movement. In other words, the UM is neither merely a classical social movement in which the organizers dominate its formation, nor is it a pure connective action in which participants are primarily autonomously organized individuals. Instead, both conventional and digital media constituted a broader media environment, and both performed significant functions in the movement's formation and dynamics.

Following Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni's "three temporalities" framework, Lee and Chan's analysis situates the UM in the long-term, medium-term, and short-term temporal dimensions (14–15). The long-term dimension refers to the historical context of the rise and transformation of recent social mobilization in Hong Kong from 2003 to 2014. The medium-term dimension is the two-year preparatory period of the Occupy Central (OC) campaign before the collective actions in late September 2014. The short-term dimension is the 79-day occupation itself.

Chapter 2 briefly charts the long-term political and social context that eventually gave rise to the OC and the UM. As Lee and Chan argue correctly, the UM "did not arise out of a vacuum; the growth of social mobilization in Hong Kong since the early 2000s set the conditions for the rise of a large-scale and radicalized protest campaign on the issue of democratization" (48). The chapter analyzes how a "social movement society" has been developed, in which both protest issues and protest

organizations have diversified, giving rise to a wider acceptance of social movements as a means for claim making. Through collective actions, since 2005 more groups and organizations have been voicing their claims on topics not existent before, such as gender and sexual orientation, public finance, and media and press freedom. While media coverage of protests become less negative, self-mobilization among citizens emerged and the Internet has made it a lot easier for individual citizens to initiate protests. Together with the post-material turn in the younger generations—i.e. younger people find socio-political values like justice, freedom and equality increasingly important and central to their identity formation—the heightened transformation into a social movement society since the 2000s constituted a socio-political context in which the UM became possible.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the medium-term temporal dimension. Chapter 3 demonstrates how, from January 2013 to August 2014, the perceived radicalization of the OC and the idea of public order preferred by the general public caused a “tension” that “significantly shaped the discursive contestation surrounding Occupy Central and the concept of civil disobedience” (73). The self-restrained character of the movement, including the emphasis on strict discipline and absolute non-violence, were responses to social demand for public order. In addition, the OC campaign also utilized many forms of discursive work, such as propaganda and ‘deliberation days’, to popularize the concept of civil disobedience in order to gain public legitimacy. Their discursive work unavoidably resulted in debates surrounding the concept of civil disobedience, and such debates had educational impact on the society. Two telephone surveys, conducted in September 2013 and October 2014 with over 1,500 Hong Kong residents aged 15 or above, confirmed increased public understanding of the concept of civil disobedience. Their findings also reveal that time spent on social media alone does not correlate with understanding of civil disobedience, but using social media for discussing or disagreeing with others does. Hence, social media platforms have facilitated both the circulation and discussion of political information, thereby educating the public about civil disobedience.

Chapter 4 goes on to present a clear understanding of the impact and function of both digital and conventional media in the UM. The chapter argues that Hong Kong media is “considered as a *partially censored public monitor* that has a complicated and mixed impact on large-scale protest” (77, original emphasis). Communicating social images and messages of social movements to the general public still relied heavily on mass media institutions, but the mainstream media was largely biased against the UM, because many of the media owners

held formal political appointments in the Chinese political system and had significant business interests in China (38). Therefore, it is no surprise one of Lee and Chan's findings is that television news exposure correlates negatively to attitudinal support toward the movement. However, self-censorship in mainstream media is also counter-balanced by norms in the profession, demand from the audience, as well as structural constraints such as the lack of time for managerial control on content. For example, participants who joined the movement immediately after the police's firing of the tear gas were mobilized by the *mediated images* of the tear gas shown on the major evening newscast of TVB, Hong Kong's largest TV station. Thus, the media can be a watchdog for the public, capable of monitoring political violence, as images of tear gas and footages of the "dark corner incident" (in which a protestor was shown beaten by seven police officers in a dark corner) helped mobilize waves of participants into the movement. Digital media platforms further strengthened this function by circulating images and information to a wider audience. Therefore, the impact of Hong Kong media on the Umbrella Movement is dynamic and inconsistent, with its role of public monitoring eclipsed by constant economic pressure and political bias.

Chapters 5 and 6, focusing on the short-term dimension, articulate how participants and opponents of the UM engaged in digital media activities and utilized a wide range of digital media tools to achieve their purposes. As a result, participants and opponents of the UM exerted significant influence on both the internal and external dynamics of the movement. Chapter 5 puts forward three arguments. First, digital media activities enabled spontaneous connective actions, which meant protesters could join the movement in their own accord, consequently maximizing the chances of participation. Second, and therefore, digital media contributed to the decentralization of the movement. The core leaders of the UM were unable to fully command digitally active participants, since survey data show that these participants, who were also the most deeply involved in the UM, were less likely to listen to the leaders on issues of movement strategies. Third and despite this, digital media was not the *cause* of such internal division in the movement, but was only "tied to the organizational, spatial, and ideological divisions already existing in the movement" (147). On the one hand, these findings suggest that digital media did perform a significant role in mobilizing, connecting, and reinforcing movement participation; on the other, they also demonstrate the limitations of digital media, in the sense that digital communications were unable to transform the existing dividedness of the movement's structure.

Chapter 6, the last chapter, turns to counter-mobilization from the government and from pro-establishment parties and the authors identify three major counter frames that they have used to contest the UM's legitimacy: the frame of foreign intervention, the rule of law, and public nuisance. Chapter findings suggest that communist-sponsored and conservative newspapers tended to selectively expose facts and statistics that were unfavorable to the UM however the theme of foreign intervention was hardly embraced even by conservative newspapers such as *Sing Tao Daily* since such accusations were not widespread in Hong Kong's political climate. Moreover, counter-mobilization forces also utilized digital media to popularize the three frames. The most notable examples were public pages on Facebook such as Silent Majority for Hong Kong and Speak Out Hong Kong. These pages played the role of circulating anti-movement narratives, and liaising and enlarging the base of opponents of the movement.

The six chapters in *Media and Protest Logic in the Digital Era* present a complex picture of how the Umbrella Movement cannot be easily conceptualized as an ideal case of either collective action or connective action. Both logics co-existed, in the sense that there were central organizers inasmuch as there were a significant amount of individual participants who had their own personalized action frames. Interestingly, although the authors Lee and Chan proclaim that the aim of the book is to analyze the role and effects of the media in the UM "by grounding it into an *overall* account of the occurrence and evolution of the movement itself" (19, emphasis mine), they provide almost no analysis of how the media had affected the leadership during the UM. During the UM, the internal split among movement leaders, especially that between the OC founders and the Hong Kong Federation of Students, had significant demobilization effects, and, to a certain degree, shifted media attention away from the goals of the movement to the internal relationships between the leaders. The authors do not go the extra step in examining how the consumption habits of conventional and social media among movement leaders were different, and, if any, whether those differences had contributed to their different understandings of what "the people" wanted over the course of the movement. This is in my view not an insignificant question given that the UM was not a leaderless movement. A purported account of the role and effects of the media in the UM misses an important element if it fails to delineate how the media imposed limits and constraints on the strategic coordination between, and the relationships among, leaders due to their different patterns of media consumption.

Despite this omission, the book is empirically rich in terms of the data collected. Take, for instance, the public opinion surveys mentioned

above and the data collected in Admiralty and Mongkok in October and November 2014 on participants' demographics, movement-related online communications activities, perceived importance of different media platforms, and so on. Such data forms a massive empirical base and resource on the public's and on participants' attitudinal and behavioral changes before and during the UM; it will be invaluable to researchers of social movements. More importantly, in the digital era, this book offers an important reflection on the role of conventional media (e.g. traditional television and newspaper platforms) and the limits of digital media in movement mobilization. Given an emerging discourse on how conventional media will be replaced by digital media, this book shows that conventional media was still crucial to the mobilization and organization of a social movement. Conventional media platforms held an advantage on resources for producing first-hand reports, images, statistics, and videos. Without such materials provided by conventional channels, many agents on digital media platforms would not be able to articulate their discourses to mobilize and connect with the audience.

Borrowing the terminologies of Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, the authors argue carefully that digital media in the UM only had "supersize effects" but not "theory 2.0 effects" (181–82), meaning that digital media helped enlarge the movement through multiplying mobilization channels, but it alone could neither lead to nor account for the emergence of the movement. The greatest strength of this book is that it situated the UM in a larger political and social context, thus enabling the authors to clarify the multiple factors and stages that contributed to the emergence of the UM. Without these historical and contingent elements, the role of conventional and digital media cannot be fully evaluated. This book is therefore an excellent example of contextually sensitive research on social movements that would not exaggerate the immediate effects of the media in movement mobilization.