Social Media Framing in the Global Health Crisis: Pro-Democracy Versus Pro-Regime Opinion Leaders During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Hong Kong*

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Abstract

Social media depiction of crises can mobilize people's support for or dissatisfaction with the government. By analyzing 3,799 videos, this study compares how pro-democracy and pro-regime opinion leaders framed the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong. The results reveal that pro-democracy opinion leaders placed the primary blame for the crisis on the misadministration of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region authorities, followed by attributing responsibilities to the Chinese authorities, and then suggesting opportunities for foreign penalties to be imposed on China. Pro-regime opinion leaders mostly criticize the opposition, denounce foreign countries, and seek to garner support for China. The conclusion strongly supports the thesis that opinion leaders and users from both camps actively engage with negatively framed content rather than positively framed content. Specifically, videos that frame foreign pressure on China demonstrate statistically significant explanatory power in relation to the engagement of pro-democracy users, while videos denouncing pro-democracy figures

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exhibit statistically significant explanatory power in regard to the engagement of pro-regime users. This article explores which negative topics can stimulate the audience's engagement and it compares the significant variations in framing strategies employed by either of the opposing factions when targeting their opponents. The case of Hong Kong illustrates how social media framing contributes to the emergence of "political extremism" in a polarized society.

Existing literature has long recognized that social media framing in non-democratic regimes plays a significant role when challenging a regime.[1] The main forms of pro-democracy challenge can be summarized as (1) increasing public awareness of political problems,[2] (2) sharing hatred,[3] (3) integrating humor,[4] and (4) mobilizing actions.[5] In addition to these "hard approaches" to imposing legal sanctions on content creators, authoritarian regimes have learned to adopt "soft" participatory persuasion with pro-regime supporters.[6] Recently, non-democratic regimes have adopted different measures to groom opinion leaders and counter-mobilize pro-regime opinion. By allowing a small degree of Internet freedom on social media, non-democratic regimes indicate their openness to the world and can gain more public support.

The battle between pro-regime and pro-democracy opinions is commonly evident, especially in times of crisis.[7] The reason is that a crisis can bring new political consequences to both sides. On the one hand, if pro-democracy content can overly expose the government's poor performance, regimes may receive more challenges. On the other hand, if pro-regime content can be dominated by presenting the government's achievements and calling for solidarity, the state can earn public favors. This study moves beyond the mainstream studies on pro-democracy framing to extend a combined approach with pro-regime framing in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. As highlighted by Jo and Chang, "a disaster such as the COVID-19 pandemic has various aspects … and how the media frames COVID-19 can determine people's responses to the threat."[8] By exploring both pro-democracy and pro-regime opinion leaders on YouTube, the most influential social media platform, this study compares how opinion leaders in Hong Kong reacted to the global health crisis.

Since the transfer of sovereignty in 1997, Hong Kong has become a Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China under the framework of One Country Two Systems. In recent decades, increased political and economic integration from Beijing has triggered intense resistance and