

From 'Be Water' to 'Be Fire': Nascent Smart Mob and Networked Protests in Hong Kong

In recent months, masses of Hong Kong citizens have taken part in a remarkable wave of protests, known as the Water Revolution. Ignited by the Hong Kong government's attempt to pass a bill that would have allowed extradition to mainland China, and later in response to numerous incidents of police brutality and human rights abuses, hundreds of thousands of protestors abruptly gathered in various parts of the city to rise up against the encroachment of the incumbent regime. Through novel uses of social media and mobile technology, they acted in concert to confront riot police in wildcat actions. In effect, they exhibit a contemporary type of smart mob, as digitally savvy citizens engage with each other in largely ad hoc and networked forms of pop-up protest. This profile illustrates both the continuity and changes in the recent development of a nascent smart mob in Hong Kong. It fleshes out how its protest repertoires and movement objectives have emerged and evolved vis-à-vis state suppression that has turned the global city of East Asia into a despotic police state. With a focus on changing contours, this profile brings to the fore the pragmatic and temporally emergent properties of the smart mob to consider the widespread and protracted movement in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Hong Kong; mobile social media; networked protest; political activism; smart mob

Introduction

In recent months, masses of Hong Kong citizens have taken part in a remarkable wave of protests, dubbed the 'Water Revolution' by the *Financial Times* on 2 September 2019. Ignited by the Hong Kong government's attempt to pass a bill that would have allowed extradition to mainland China, and later in response to numerous incidents of police brutality and human rights abuses, hundreds of thousands of protestors gathered abruptly in various parts of the city to rise up against the encroachment of the incumbent regime. Through novel uses of social media and mobile technology, they acted in concert in so-called 'wildcat' actions. In effect, they exhibit a contemporary

type of ‘smart mob’ (Rheingold, 2002), as digitally savvy citizens engage with each other in largely ad hoc and networked forms of pop-up protests.

Rather than remaining consistent with a fixed iteration, the smart mob of Hong Kong has demonstrated many-faceted street politics over time – exhibiting tranquil behaviour during the initial stages of the movement and becoming more militant, especially in the last few weeks. This escalating development was recently exacerbated by the fierce standoff at The Chinese University of Hong Kong and the 13-day siege of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Through an interpretive analysis of news coverage and activists’ social media activities, this profile illustrates both the continuity and changes in the recent development of a nascent smart mob in Hong Kong. It fleshes out how its protest repertoires and movement objectives have emerged and evolved vis-à-vis state suppression that has turned the global city of East Asia into a despotic police state. With a focus on changing contours, the profile reveals the pragmatic and temporally emergent properties of the smart mob to consider the widespread and protracted movement in Hong Kong.

Roots and Routes of the Water Revolution

Ad hoc and networked forms of pop-up protest are not entirely new in Hong Kong; they have roots in its contemporary history of social movements. Whereas Hong Kong lacks a strong tradition of radical protests, its recent episodes of pro-democracy protest have enjoyed considerable support amongst self-joining citizens (Ting, 2017), who have resisted formal membership but joined in selected action by experimenting with social media and mobile technology (Ting, 2019). In late November 2014, soon after the occupation sites of the Umbrella Movement in Mong Kok were wiped out by legal injunctions, some former protestors self-organised online to walk in groups in the working-class neighbourhoods. They assembled to express discontent over the police

clearance by pretending to shop. Chanting ‘I want shopping!’, they took to the crowded footpaths to convey their political message in the name of ‘shopping’. These highly mobile, networked groups of ‘shopping tours’ thus emerged as a response to the inefficiency and unsustainability of the 79-day Umbrella Movement, which aimed to occupy the city’s financial and business centres but eventually failed when public support petered out and police cleared the sites.

‘Be water’ can be seen as a continuation of such pragmatism to benefit from the hard-learned lessons of the Umbrella Movement. Instead of camping out in finite areas, this time, networked protestors sought to rise up simultaneously in multiple locations without lingering too long in any one area. This strategy, known as ‘blossom everywhere’, required rapid mobilisation on the Internet within a short period of time – usually a day or two in advance – and was coordinated almost in real time via the encrypted messaging app Telegram and mass Airdrops over Bluetooth as protests occurred. Other social media apps such as WhatsApp and Signal were used by protestors to exchange information on where and how to protest and to request additional supplies such as riot gear and first aid kits. Rather than being centrally organised, the smart mob drew upon mobile social media to coordinate its operations and to avoid police detection.

Whereas the members of the smart mob of Hong Kong perceive themselves as leaderless, this horizontal structure did not happen entirely by choice. Rather, it was in part because many of the former movement leaders were jailed earlier this year. In this context, the ubiquity of social media and mobile technology provided the organisational backbone for the mobilisation and coordination of a nascent smart mob in Hong Kong. In particular, LIHKG – a Reddit-like messaging forum – emerged as the de facto virtual command centre of the Water Revolution by enabling new agendas, innovative

strategies and up-to-date tactics to be upvoted and the best ones to rise to the top. The open-ended, consensus-based operating system facilitated the crowdsourcing of leadership, linked to robust feedback loops. It helped to replace entrenched elites with transient ‘collective intelligence’ (Rheingold, 2002), whereby decisions are based on real-time performance and momentary reputation on the Internet. As such, the self-organising, evolutionary smart mob of Hong Kong surged as ‘rhizomatic assemblages’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) with multiple entryways and contributors.

Indeed, the Water Revolution has been highly tolerant of diverse movement ideologies and protest activities from the outset. Again, this is largely due to its experiential learning and practical adaptation from the Umbrella Movement, which declined when the former protestors divided themselves into factions and denounced each other as their tactics diverged during static occupation. Whilst at times protest violence has tested the unity between ‘valiant fighter’ groups and ‘peaceful-rational-nonviolent’ protestors, the smart mob as a whole has been committed to preserve its movement solidarity. Such commitment was vividly represented by one of its famous slogans – ‘Don’t snitch! Don’t divide!’ – to remind protesters of the importance of unity for the current movement to succeed.

Transformative Momentum of Networked Protests

In addition to its fluid and rhizomatic outlook, another strength of Hong Kong’s nascent smart mob has been its persistence in uprisings. Over the past few months, this iteration has not only been persistent but has also demonstrated an accelerated sequence of protests that have surpassed all previous local movements in scale and intensity. Social movement studies have suggested the notion of ‘transformative events’ (McAdam & Sewell, 2011) to capture how moments of rupture or political crises may result in ‘critical junctures’ (della Porta, 2018) to trigger a chain of protests. In the digital age,

growing networked environments may spark more scandal politics and accelerate the delegitimisation of institutions, and thus broaden the possibility of widespread movement protests worldwide (cf. Castells, 2018).

In the case of Hong Kong, transformative events that reproduced ruptures and networked protests have been characterised by incidents of police brutality and human rights abuses. Although the Hong Kong government's attempt to pass the bill was undoubtedly the starting point of the current movement, excessive use of force and aggressive arrests by the police sparked a massive wave of citywide protests that cut across former dividing lines such as gender, ethnicity and age. Since June 2019, it has become routine practice for the police to shoot corrosive blue dye using water cannons, to fire rubber bullets, bean-bag rounds and sponge bullets at eye level, and to deploy tear gas in ways that allegedly defy international standards, even though the large majority of participants in the rallies have been peaceful.

This shift in policing tactics not only strengthened the 'eventful temporality' (Sewell, 1996) of the movement, it also explains why the adoption of more militant tactics gained momentum, as reflected in a well-known protest slogan: 'It was you who taught us that peaceful marches don't work'. In July and August, in particular, striking incidents of police misconduct and violence against protestors – vividly featured by the alleged condoning of triad attacks in Yuen Long and the attack of passengers by riot police inside a train carriage in Prince Edward station – paved the way for street battles to erupt continuously around the city.

With its fleet and leaderless nature, the smart mob of Hong Kong has been reactionary to unfolding protest environments. In this regard, live-streaming via mobile social media helped amplify the 'rupturing moments' (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017) as protests played out on the ground. The round-the-clock coverage of rallies and clashes

by the digitally enabled activists themselves, who serve as citizen journalists while simultaneously participating in pop-up protests, have been beamed to tens of thousands of viewers. The minute-by-minute reportage by online news media have also exhaustively covered protesters getting shot, blinded, crippled, beaten up behind closed doors and allegedly (gang-)raped. Together, they have played a central role in constant mobilisation in the global city, whose Internet use and smartphone penetration rates are among the highest in the world and whose compact urban landscape enables mobile journalism.

Protest violence and government suppression have thus escalated in a symbiotic relationship, whilst peaceful demonstrations have gradually given way to militant acts. Because police brutality and human rights violations were increasingly seen by protestors as a political defiance of non-violent forms of protest, they changed their movement goal from ‘No China extradition!’ to ‘Five demands, not one less!’, notably including the demand of ‘establishment of an independent commission of inquiry into police conduct’. This change in the movement goal was further confirmed in ‘Literate Hong Kong – The Hundredth Day Declaration’ announced by protestors on 25 September 2019 online. In the declaration, rather than simply demanding the withdrawal of the controversial bill, they focused on denouncing police violence and state impunity as they faced ‘the government’s ever-tightening grip, an intensification of police violence’ and justified militant acts ‘as a reasonable act of self-defence to best protect ourselves’.

Hong Kong’s Winter on Fire

In response to the intensifying protests, on 5 October 2019, the Hong Kong government advanced an anti-mask bill as a step to combat the public gatherings. The bill imposed a ban on wearing face masks and was intended to scare off protestors who sought

anonymity. Immediately after the emergency bill was announced, a citywide uprising was inflamed, and the protestors replaced one of their prevailing slogans – ‘Hongkongers, add oil (keep it up)!’ – with ‘Hongkongers, resist!’ to signify their repositioning of the movement towards an open battle.

Across the most destructive weekend since the movement began, several groups of ‘valiant fighters’ set fire to state-owned bank branches and pro-China businesses, threw bricks and Molotov cocktails at riot police and vandalised government property and the stations of Hong Kong’s mass transport railway (MTR), which they accused of colluding with the police. Meanwhile, ‘peaceful-rational-nonviolent’ protestors came to join the black bloc. As ‘valiant fighters’ stormed government offices, halted public transportation and defaced symbols of Beijing’s authority, originally peaceful protestors learnt to set up barricades, move bricks and extinguish tear gas by copying the ‘valiant fighters’ on the frontline.

Another striking set of protest activities takes the form of ‘private solutions’, in which ‘valiant fighters’ dole out vigilante justice to those who attack demonstrators or confront them during protests. Whilst this is one action that ‘valiant fighter’ groups hesitated to undertake during the early stages of the movement, it has become more common since. A recent survey conducted by The Chinese University of Hong Kong shed some light on this development. Approximately 70% of the population are demanding a major restructuring of the police force and 59% have come to accept radical actions in general in the Hong Kong protests (Lee, 2019).

The most ruthless combats took place in November, when a student from The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology tragically died after falling from a carpark complex where riot police had clashed with protestors. Chanting an even newer slogan – ‘Hongkongers, revenge!’ – protestors called for a citywide strike. To this end,

they barricaded two university campuses, where major transportation networks lay – The Chinese University of Hong Kong with the Tolo Harbour, a key traffic route of New Territories East, and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in the heart of the city right next to the Hung Hom Cross-Harbour Tunnel that links to the Hong Kong Island – ready to block traffic nodes. Protestors borrowing a slogan from The Hunger Games – ‘If we burn, you burn with us’, the campus standoffs turned into fiery battles in which riot police fired all types of guns and protesters replied with volleys of Molotov cocktails, bricks and other projectiles.

However, although these valiant uprisings initially managed to confront riot police, they provided the pretext for the rise of a despotic police state. In addition to the anti-mask law that targets peaceful demonstrators, the city’s subway system has been weaponised to stifle citizens’ movement by shutting down subway stations along the protest routes and closing early to create a de facto curfew. Meanwhile, with the justifications of combating protest violence and vandalism, police totalitarianism has come to prevail. As of November 2019, more than 5800 people had been arrested since June, whilst police misconduct such as arbitrary arrests, framing protestors, trespassing on private property and outright ban of rallies ushered in a new normal.

Conclusion

Rather than being entirely spontaneous, the smart mob of Hong Kong has emerged from the past and is always in the making in experimenting with the present. Although the Umbrella Movement bore little fruit 5 years ago, it laid the groundwork for street politics to ‘flow like water’. By learning that lesson the hard way, Hong Kong protestors became more acquainted with local movement dynamics. With intensive use of social media and mobile technology, they gave up occupation of key parts of the city in favour of guerrilla tactics. They also successfully transcended internal collisions,

pragmatically advocating for an ‘unconditional’ unity between ‘valiant fighters’ groups and ‘peaceful-rational-nonviolent’ protesters. As events continued to unfold, these networked activists renovated their acts of resistance and enacted new consensus. In the face of police brutality and government suppression, the situation gradually devolved into a steady stream of valiant uprisings with more protestors embracing militant acts, even after the unpopular extradition bill was withdrawn.

However, even with sophisticated and innovative tactics, networked protestors can hardly come face to face with riot police to confront the repressive regime. Currently, frontline activists increasingly face unprecedented danger at protests, with a heightening of the cyber risk as government surveillance and suppression have adapted to the smart mob’s tactics. For the moment, whilst the protests have shown few signs of fatigue, the nascent smart mob is at a crossroads where it must decide whether to continue with confrontational protests or focus on the development of a ‘yellow economy’ – a crowdsourced and crowdfunded system of resistance in the form of a shadow economy – combined with the resources gathered from the recent landslide victory in the district council elections. Whereas the unresponsive government and its brutal strong arm are certainly to blame for the cycle of uprisings, the activist economy, which aims to shift the balance of power and wealth by supporting protestors and pro-movement stores and by boycotting pro-establishment media and state-owned businesses, may prove to be more fruitful over the long run. However, it will depend upon activists’ ability to change, whether partially or entirely, individuals’ consumption and other behavioural patterns on a large scale. This shift from mobbing to crowding will require enormous effort to transform current practices and logics to move from networked protests to a network society of counter-power (cf. Castells, 2009).

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