International Journal of Communication 13(2019), 3244–3249 1932–8036/20190005

East Asia in Action: Activist Media Communication in New Perspectives

Introduction

CHIAONING SU
Oakland University, USA

TIN-YUET TING
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR

Although the interactions between media communication and movement activism have been widely acknowledged, much remains to be understood about how they operate in East Asia, where centralized authority and Confucius ideology prevail. This Special Section collected articles to examine the latest trends of activist media communication and reflect critically on their impact on civic-political participation and social change in the region. Some of the articles focus on the role of media practices in the emergence and proliferation of popular protests in East Asian societies, such as Hong Kong and Japan, where a tradition of political activism and radical protest had been lacking. Others analyze communication strategies and networks for engaging potential supporters and appealing to citizens in China, Taiwan, and Thailand. By highlighting the multiplicity of media forms, ranging from press media to social media and street performance, in the course of mobilization and activism, this Special Section opens up debates about the equivocal conceptualizations of activist media communication and offers insights into to their multiple potentials for advancing liberal democracy and social justice in East Asia.

Keywords: activist media, East Asia, political communication, social movements

After an intense wave of Occupy protests around the globe, citizen activists continued to ride the momentum by combining and drawing on both "old" mass media and "new" communication channels to take part in movement protests and citizen actions (Ganesh & Stohl, 2013; Kong, 2019; McKee, 2017). In East Asia, contentious political participation has particularly surged in the so-called post-Occupy era as the ubiquity of digital media usages has met mass media effects. This has resulted in several large-scale "networked social movements" (Castells, 2012) facilitated by information and communication technologies (Ting, 2015; Tsatsou, 2018; Willnat & Aw, 2014) as well as in a series of self-coordinated, grassroots forms of "civic collective action"

Chiaoning Su: chiaoningsu@oakland.edu
Tin-yuet Ting: tin-yuet.ting@polyu.edu.hk
Date submitted: 2019–06–24

(Sampson, McAdam, MacIndoe, & Weffer-Elizondo, 2005) concerned with diverse social issues and public agendas in the region (Chen & Ting, 2019; Guntarik & Trott, 2016; Kim, 2010). Although the interactions between media communication and contentious politics have been widely acknowledged, scholarly attention has largely focused on incidents within Western societies, along with sporadic exceptions such as the high-profile cases of the Arab Spring. Much remains to be understood about how activist media communication operates in East Asia, particularly under authoritarian regimes.

Indeed, focusing on East Asian experiences provides a unique opportunity to broaden the scope of activist media communication operating in a different region, where centralized authority and Confucius ideology prevail (Kluver, 2004; Rodan, 2003; Skoric, 2007). Whereas political communication in most Western democracies shifts toward lifestyle movements, identity politics, and consumerist activism (Bennett, 1998; Bennett & Lagos, 2007; Klein, 1999; Micheletti, 2003), movement protests in East Asia have been largely fueled by (post-)colonial rule, ineffective governance, and political repression (Hachigian, 2002; Hasegawa, 2018; Ting, 2017). The current antiextradition bill protests and the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong, the Sunflower movement in Taiwan in 2014, the public impeachment of South Korea's President Park in 2016, as well as the post-Fukushima protests in Japan since 2011 are all prominent cases in point. They emerged in the face of globally witnessed democratic crises, shocking political scandals, and poorly handled natural disasters in striking for a more democratic and just society.

With this in mind, we collated articles to examine the latest trends of activist media communication and reflect critically on their impact on political participation and social change in the region. The articles collected in this Special Section derived from two sessions held at the National Communication Association's 103rd Annual Convention in November 2017 and the XIX International Sociological Association World Congress of Sociology in August 2018. The two conference sessions were organized to discuss the dynamics of activist media communication in the particular sociopolitical and cultural contexts of East Asia. As evidenced in the robust debates and fruitful discussions during the two sessions, shifting attention to East Asia not only generates fresh insights for knowledge advancement but also provides cases for cross-cultural comparison and contrast in social movement studies and communication research.

The articles collected in this Special Section attend to the multiplicity of media forms, ranging from press media to social media and street performance, in the course of mobilization and activism. Drawing on empirical cases of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Japan, we open up debates about the equivocal conceptualizations of activist media communication in terms of "alternative media," "relatively free spaces," "network of resistance," "digitally enabled practices," and "contentious performance." We also pay special attention to the different aspects of activist media in shaping and transforming movement protests and citizen actions, grounded on nuanced theoretical approaches. Emphasizing the variety and coexistence of diverse media forms, this Special Section opens a window to the multiple potentials of the emerging cross-media environment for advancing liberal democracy and social justice in East Asia.

Furthermore, we encouraged contextualization of the East Asian experiences of activist media communication. As will be demonstrated, the articles in the Special Section illustrate a range of perspectives to analyze the manifestations and consequences of activist media communication in relation to the particularities of local contexts. For instance, some of the articles examine the role of media practices in the (re)emergence

and proliferation of popular protests in some East Asian societies, such as Hong Kong and Japan, where a tradition of political activism and radical protest had been lacking. Others analyze the communication strategies and networks for mobilizing potential supporters and appealing to citizens to take part in collective civic action in both authoritarian regimes, such as China and Thailand, and democratic societies, such as Taiwan. In their different ways, these articles shed light on the distinctive patterns and premises of activist media communication engendered within the specific contexts of East Asia.

Moving forward to the empirical studies of this Special Section, Tin-Yuet Ting's article employed a practice-oriented approach to investigate self-joining activists' digital media usage during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. As Ting observed, the self-joining activists' digital media usage evolved over time. Although these practices were first inspired and guided by their preestablished lifestyle (e.g., journalism majors at the University of Hong Kong), they were routinized and became part of the activists' new daily operations, especially when the movement lasted up to 87 days (e.g., daily update of a Facebook page to disseminate new developments). Shifting attention from the power and affordance of ICTs in social movements and from elite actor's digital discourses, Ting demonstrated the ordinary engagement in contemporary networked activism, a topic that is largely underexamined. He reminds us that the whole picture of contentious politics can be better understood through the embeddedness and (re)productiveness of SNS and mobile devices in the mundane routines of everyday life.

Penchan Phoborisut examines the changing dynamics of local student activism in Thailand. Under the authoritarian rule of the Thai junta, students were motivated to employ various resistant tactics, ranging from cultural symbols (e.g., *The Hunger Games* and George Orwell's *1984*) to alternative events (e.g., outdoor picnic) to express their defiance of military dictatorship. Inviting Joshua Wong, the poster boy of the Umbrella Movement, to Bangkok to mark the 40th anniversary of the 1976 massacre was another effort to seek international support. Wong, however, was immediately detained at the airport. Deftly transforming Wong's absence to a social media spectacle, the leading Thai student activist, Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, successfully galvanized global allies to pressure for Wong's release and protest against the junta's manipulation and suppression of truth. Phoborisut's findings demonstrated the nuanced interplay between popular culture, political mobilization, and networked communication in the age of globalization.

Satotu Aonuma's article further took us to the frontline of three street demonstrations in Japan—namely, the No Nukes, No War, and Counter Hate protests, which responded to the failed disaster governance after the Fukushima earthquake in 2011, the deliberation of military expansion bill in 2012, and the rise of racist public rhetoric in 2015, respectively. Through participant observation in these assemblages with emphasis on rhetorical experience, Aonuma identifies the sharp contrast between demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s led by institutional efforts (e.g., students groups and labor unions) and the contemporary decentered, unorganized rallies. Participants in these street demonstrations used both verbal, textual, and visual materials to express political messages and create an inclusive street politics. It was not unusual to hear call-and-response chants delivered through hip hop genre. Body paint and slogan T-shirts further brought political aesthetics and open dialogue to the tightly organized Japanese public sphere. Nevertheless, Aonuma points out that mainstream media tend to ignore these street demonstrations, thus reducing them to niche politics.

Chiaoning Su's article examines an alternative digital platform aimed to break through the dominant media agenda in the aftermath of Typhoon Morakot in 2009—the third deadliest natural disaster in Taiwanese history. Most mainstream media focused only on "disaster spectacles" (e.g., casualties and ruins) and failed to bring justice to the typhoon victims, primarily Taiwanese Aborigines. Seeing this information vacuum, a group of independent journalists formed 88News to bring these marginalized voices to the national discourse. Through in-depth interviews with 88News writers and textual analysis of its content, produced in the span of four years, Su discovered an alternative disaster narrative illuminating the political and religious forces wielded by Han Chinese to impose dominant cultural and religious values on indigenous typhoon victims through disaster governance. Contemplating civic journalistic practices during natural disasters with social justice aims, Su's work provides a much-needed lesson in the time of climate change.

Environmental issues, however, are communicated differently in the authoritative regimes such as China. Focusing on various advocacy strategies employed by Green Volunteers, a Xiamen based environmental nongovernmental organization (ENGOs), Wei Lit Yew's article illuminates a snapshot of the possibilities and the challenges facing civic activism under state surveillance. Specifically, Green Volunteers launched lawsuits against local government to defend pedestrians' rights. This seemly individualized legal action was a disguised activist experiment to help everyday citizens practice the vocabulary of citizenship. The lawsuit campaign was further developed, and solidarity among activists was forged through citizen discourse in both physical and digital spaces. In a context in which the state–society relationship remains hostile, Yew points out that carving a free space for the discussion and circulation of activist pedagogy is essential before any activism can be ignited. Once a matrix of free spaces is cultivated, participants will have a better opportunity to transform from individual actors to civic agents.

Taken together, this Special Section points to some of the new avenues of activist media and the ways they gave rise to a more recent wave of citizen actions and social protests. First, it provides a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of five East Asian examples to demonstrate the similarities and distinctiveness of social movement strategies shaped by its local context of origin. For example, despite shared environmental concerns, Su found that alternative media was used in Taiwan to advocate for social justice, whereas Yew discussed the pursuit of free spaces in China as the first step of any mobilization. The difference among them speaks to the different levels of free speech and press. Secondly, struggles for political development and social justice did not cease after the protest movements ended. In fact, the embeddedness of activist actions in everyday life and improvised communicative tactics define the contemporary social movements in East Asia. Both Ting and Aonuma demonstrated the mundane and human aspects of political assemblages and the emergence of advocacy creativity, ranging from digital media usage to apparel activism. Finally, this Special Section reveals the political synergy among active citizens in the East Asian countries examined. This alliance is most visible between Ting's article examining the formation of everyday networked activism in Hong Kong and Phoborisut's article analyzing the transnational activism against the detention of Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong in Thailand.

In many East Asian societies, oppositional campaigns and everyday resistance continue as (former) activists as well as civic group members, journalists, and scholars have been silenced or, worse, imprisoned. Yet, although massive street protests and open civil disobedience may be more vulnerable to government intervention and police surveillance, citizens and protestors have become adept at learning to search and create

more innovative and resilient forms of political activism and citizen actions, facilitated by digitally mediated networks and everyday practices. It is in dark times that we see light.

References

Bennett, W. L. (1998). The uncivic culture: Communication, identity, and the rise of lifestyle politics. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 31*(4), 740–761.

Bennett, W. L., & Lagos, T. (2007). Logo logic: The ups and downs of branded political communication. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 611*(1), 193–206.

Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. Oxford, UK: Polity.

Chen, W.-F., & Ting, T.-Y. (2019). Contesting shopping tourism: Neoliberal consumptionscapes and conflicts in host societies. *Tourism, Culture & Communication, 19*(2), 155–160.

Ganesh, S., & Stohl, C. (2013). From Wall Street to Wellington: Protests in an era of digital ubiquity. *Communication Monographs, 80*, 425–451.

Geertz, C. (1973). *Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Guntarik, O., & Trott, V. (2016). Changing media ecologies in Thailand: Women's online participation in the 2013/2014 Bangkok protests. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 9*(2), 235–252.

Hachigian, N. (2002). The Internet and power in one-party East Asian states. *Washington Quarterly, 25*(3), 41–58.

Hasegawa, K. (2018). Continuities and discontinuities of Japan's political activism before and after the Fukushima disaster. In D. Chiavacci & J. Obinger (Eds.), *Social movements and political activism in contemporary Japan: Re-emerging from Invisibility* (pp. 115–136). London, UK: Routledge.

Kim, S. (2010). Collaborative governance in South Korea: Citizen participation in policy making and welfare service provision. *Asian Perspective, 24*(3), 165–190.

Klein, N. (1999). *No logo: Taking aim at the brand bullies*. New York, ny: Picador USA.

Kluver, R. (2004). Political culture and information technology in the 2001 Singapore General Election. *Political Communication, 21*(4), 435–458.

Kong, T. (Ed.). (2019). *As long as there is resistance, there is hope: Essays on the Hong Kong freedom struggle in the post-Umbrella Movement era, 2014–2018*. Harrisburg, PA: PEMA Press.

McKee, Y. (2017). *Strike art: Contemporary art and the post-Occupy condition*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso.

Micheletti, M. (2003). *Political virtue and shopping: Individuals, consumerism and collective action*. New York, NY: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Rodan, G. (2003). Embracing electronic media but suppressing civil society: Authoritarian consolidation in Singapore. *Pacific Review, 16*(4), 503–524.

Sampson, R. J., McAdam, D., MacIndoe, H., & Weffer-Elizondo, S. (2005). Civil society reconsidered: The durable nature and community structure of collective civic action. *American Journal of Sociology, 111*(3), 673–714.

Skoric, M. M. (2007). Is culture destiny in Asia? A story of a tiger and a lion. *Asian Journal of Communication, 17*(4), 396–415.

Ting, T.-Y. (2015). Digital narrating for contentious politics: Social media content curation at movement protests. *M/C Journal, 18*(4). Retrieved from http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/995

Ting, T.-Y. (2017). Struggling for tomorrow: The future orientations of youth activism in a democratic crisis. *Contemporary Social Science, 12*(3/4), 242–257.

Tsatsou, P. (2018). Social media and informal organisation of citizen activism: Lessons from the use of Facebook in the Sunflower Movement. *Social Media + Society, 4*(1), 1–12.

Willnat, L., & Aw, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Social media, cultural and politics in Asia*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.