

Summary of 'Social Media and Civic Movement'

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Panel Discussion:

The 4-27 Anti-nuclear Power Plant Movement: reflection and prospects

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In recent years, there has been a shift in the frame of social media related protests from a revolutionary trope – as in the Arab Spring – to that of the effects of social media networks. The use of social media in Taiwan during the Sunflower Protests and the anti-nuclear protests in 2014 is unsurprising and predictable. In Taiwan, there is high internet penetration, an educated younger generation, a coherent target, a degree of frustration about issues that has not been resolved through conventional political processes, and it is inevitable that these frustrations get displaced onto social media. At the same time, nuclear issues also have great symbolic resonance, which can mobilise political movements and divide people.

With respect to social media and protests, networking through social media does change things. This form of network can 'bleed' into other things – the use of cell phones and SMS, for example; in Egypt, taxi drivers were also spreading messages to passengers. Networking through social media works because social media is easy to access and easy to connect to, and there are low costs. Social media networking therefore makes opposition visible. Seeing people angry about issues on social media allows others to be angry about these issues. And seeing protests makes people think they can protest as well. Social media networking is therefore highly effective in terms of spreading information and mobilisation. It is also very flexible: it is easy, for instance, to change the time and venue of protests at short notice to avoid the police. It is also easy to change platform, and to securitise. Social media therefore integrates participation with information. Further, online communication enables connection to local networks, but the reach is potentially global. As a result, social issues gain resonance because unwanted attention is brought on the government.

There are downsides and negatives to networking with social media. First, it is ritualistic and fun. The Taiwan protests involved copying from other protests, e.g. Occupy in the West. Being ritualistic, it can be performative, and there is the risk it is transient, and that the focus is not so much on impact. There can therefore be little legacy and impact after the ritual is over. So, while social media does build social capital, it does not work well in effecting change. The campaign against the Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony, who kidnapped children to be soldiers, resulted in engagement around the world, but had no impact. Similarly, with the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, the online campaign got onto mainstream media. This had a distorting effect in that it distracted from other major news during that period, but the effect so far is that none of the girls has been released. Having said that, there have been instances in which online campaigns have been effective in offline goals. The Obama campaign, for instance, was effective in getting people to attend meetings and donate funds.

On the positive side, social media can provide a public sphere in which the discourse is hegemonic, and where criticism can be posed beyond the way the mainstream media frame issues. However, the same tools that social media protestors use can also be used by the authorities. In China, the authorities are flooding social media with their own messages because they realise that this can be more effective than suppressing criticism. In Turkey, Erdogan characterises social media users as unpatriotic, and this has resonance among people. In Russia, Putin captures social media platforms with economic might and powerful surveillance.

Social media can change the rules of engagement if there is an opportunity to reconfigure public discourse, and create space for opposition to flower. However, politics is still about control of resources, and social media is subject to those conditions.