

How New Media Mobilized Resources and Political Opportunities for Social Movements - A case study based on the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan

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Abstract

This study examines the role of new media in resource mobilization and political opportunities within the context of the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan. Through an analysis of the impact of new media at various stages of the movement and its influence on resource mobilization and movement development, it is observed that new media played a significant role in expanding the movement's political opportunities and facilitating efficient resource mobilization. However, it is also noted that new media contributed to the dissemination of negative information in the later stages of the movement, accelerating resource dissipation and the decline of the movement. Therefore, the role of new media in modern social movements transcends mere resource or tool status, presenting a new paradigm that warrants sustained and in-depth scholarly attention.

Keywords

Social movements, Resource mobilization theory, Political opportunity theory, New media.

1. Introduction

Social movements are collective challenges to specific goals based on a 'set of opinions and beliefs' [6]. Early research on social movements suggested that the emergence of social movements was psychologically relevant. Ted Gurr [9] argued that collective political violence arose from people's frustration or feelings of deprivation. After the 1960s, with the emergence of social movements that emphasised rationality, Several new perspectives on social movements emerged, one of which was the resource mobilisation theory.

Resource mobilisation theory suggests that social movements only emerge when specific resources are made available to them. These resources include moral and symbolic resources (to demonstrate the legitimacy of claims), human resources (people who participate in the movement in different ways), material resources (funding, office space and equipment etc.), and cultural resources (educational, historical and tactical repertoire)[4]. McCarthy and Zald [6] argue that social movements come not only from the participants but also from the concerned people who are willing to mobilise resources for the movement. Thus resource support from outside may be a key intervention leading to the success of a social movement.

In the 1980s, political opportunity theory developed based on resource mobilisation theory [5]. This theory argues for the need to consider the political opportunities available to rebels to analyse social movements. Political opportunities generally include a reduction in state repression, increased access to authorities, disagreements between elites and those in power, and allies in decision-making [3]. When the external environment breeds political

opportunities, social movements can be galvanised and resources continuously mobilised for their continuation.

New media is a dynamic concept that presumably encompasses the various forms of media that have been derived from the development of Internet technology. The interactive and immediate nature of new media allows users to disseminate information and mobilise resources quickly. Some scholars argue that social media has become the primary tool for disseminating information within social movements while helping social movement participants to build collective identities [2][8].

The Sunflower Movement is a massive social movement that erupted in 2014. The movement began when the Kuomintang forced the passage of the Cross-Straits Trade in Services Agreement, which eventually led to the outbreak of the movement. At its height, the movement involved nearly half a million participants and involved different regions. The movement not only created a huge amount of attention at the time but also had a great impact on the subsequent political elections in Taiwan. During the movement, the protesters used the new media to voice their demands, seek resources and mobilise the Taiwanese public, expanding a small-scale protest into a large movement across Taiwan.

How did the new media contribute to the response of different resources to the Sunflower movement in Taiwan? What new forms and changes did the new media reflect? Was there a relationship between the decline in resources in the later stages of the movement and the new media? This case study will take a chronological approach, incorporating the key resources of the movement and dividing the process into three parts: 'Before the movement', 'The development of the movement' and 'The destruction of the movement'. By demonstrating the role of new media at different stages of the Sunflower movement, it will illustrate how new media expanded political opportunities and mobilised resources for social movements.

2. Before the Movement

The modernisation theory in comparative politics holds that the more modern a society is, the more its citizens wish to participate in political life. Taiwan's economy entered a phase of rapid development in the late 20th century, and the economic boom contributed to the modernisation of society and increased the political activism of intellectuals. Social movements have been on the rise in Taiwan since the 1980s. In Taiwan, movement organisers have successfully used new media tools for social mobilisation, starting with the Wild Strawberry Movement in 2008 (Li, 2012). However, the role of new media was relatively limited until the Sunflower movement, when it changed. As Jiang Yihua, the head of Taiwan's executive branch, told the media on 16 April 2014, "In the past, new media was not converted into a political force, but the biggest difference in this movement is that the younger generation has changed the way democratic politics works through communication technology". This means that the state of the new media was sufficient to breed political opportunity before the movement began.

Specifically, the political opportunities that the new media has fostered for the movement have manifested themselves in the form of escaping state repression, spreading elite and government disagreements, and mobilising potential allies. For example, on 2 January 2014, before the report had reached the public through traditional media, the Citizens' Awakening Coalition uploaded the contents of the agreement through the PTT platform, which began to attract attention. The following day, scholar Zheng Xiuling outlined the contents of the agreement and criticised Ma Ying-jeou's government for covering up the truth, causing widespread controversy. It can be said that before the movement, the new media began to construct the discussion of the issue before the mass media did, and gained the right to take the initiative to interpret it, enhancing the political opportunity to initiate the protest.

Furthermore, political opportunity theory suggests that social movements are less likely to emerge when there are no free channels allowing for the expression of grievances [5]. The emergence of new media has expanded the space for the expression of grievances. As a non-institutionalised channel of action, it is difficult to dissipate the negative feelings of discontented people. The accumulation of unresolved negative emotions on the Internet increases the potential for social movements to occur. The new media thus expands the political opportunities for social movements to take place.

3. The Development of The Movement

After the movement began, the movement drew on the efficiency and accessibility of new media tools for the efficient mobilisation of material, human and moral resources.

As soon as the movement began, the protesters called in translators and engineers to get the all-English official media, 4am, online in one day. When the movement had a shortage of materials, it was able to mobilise external resources to replenish them by simply posting the demand on the online platform. In terms of financial resources, in the early stages of the campaign, participants raised a whopping NT\$6.3 million in three hours through the fundraising platform, laying the material foundation for subsequent changes to the movement's repertoire. In terms of human resource mobilisation, the campaign recruited over 1,500 initial participants through the internet. Volunteers could be scheduled and allocated remotely through the online platform and were divided into different groups such as material, medical and legal groups as appropriate, ensuring a high level of activity in the initial stages of the movement. The ability of the new media to mobilize the initial phase of the movement is unmatched by traditional movement tools of the past.

As the movement progressed, new media succeeded in mobilising more potential participants in the movement. According to data from a systematic sample survey of movement participants conducted by the Department of Sociology at Taipei University, 87.3% of respondents ranked Facebook as the most important source of information, followed by online news and finally PTT [1]. By simply opening the online media, participants can quickly get the latest information about the movement, keep track of when, where and what to do, and participate directly in the movement. The efficiency of new media has not only mobilised human resources but even increased efficiency, compressing the cost and time of resource mobilisation.

In terms of moral resource mobilisation, the protesters have widely disseminated "lazy packs" summarising the content of the SCA on online platforms. The "lazy packs" interpreted the agreement as an unequal deal. This dissemination of information incited resistance across Taiwan, reconstructing the public's perception of events and enhancing the legitimacy of the movement's continuity. At the protest sites, participants used their mobile phones to upload live videos of the movement to Facebook and YouTube in real-time, highlighting the suppression of democratic movements by public power to gain sympathy from public opinion. In addition to the mobilisation of local ethical resources, the movement also mobilised international ethical resources through new media. The movement developed an all-English official website and linked and interacted with foreign websites. The movement's latest information had been translated into over a dozen languages and disseminated worldwide. At the culmination of the movement's 'Rally for Kaido', the website launched a 'no time difference' support event which attracted support from people around the world. This not only mobilised potential international resources, but also increased the perceived legitimacy and legality of the movement. This has greatly increased the moral resources at the movement's disposal.

4. The Destruction of The Movement

Despite the positive role of new media in inciting and sustaining the movement, it is interesting to note that in the latter stages of the movement, new media also undermined the gains of the protests and deconstructed the meaning of the movement.

As the movement entered its later stages, huge divisions arose within the movement, with the new media creating a heterogeneous understanding of the movement among different groups. Some protesters opposed the KMT's "black box" practices, some opposed the economic agreement itself, and some demanded that the relevant supervision regulations be improved. On 4 April, due to the serious differences in the protests, the "Kijin Flank" group first announced its withdrawal from the movement, followed by the "Democratic Black Tide Students' Union", which announced that it would carry out the protests on its own. On April 8, the so-called "Large Intestine Flower Trash Talk Forum" was held, featuring participants of the movement taking turns to insult and swear on stage. The forum was webcast live and attracted the attention of the whole of Taiwan. This forum began to add an irrational and farcical dimension to the rational democratic political movement, and confused the outside world even more, making the human, material and moral resources available to the movement significantly less.

In addition, during the early stages of the protest, figures such as Chen Weiting and Liu Qiao'an were hailed as the movement's "war gods" for their acts of protest. However, in the later stages of the protest, the dark histories of these figures were widely disseminated on new media platforms. Chen Weiting's past acts of sexual harassment were shown on PTT, while Liu Qiao'an was exposed by online media as having used the movement to raise money through fundraising, and subsequently faded away from the movement. As the image of the movement's founding figures crumbled, new media accelerated the dissipation of followership resources and also impacted the legitimacy and legality of the movement.

5. Conclusion

The above analysis explains how the new media mobilised resources for the movement at different stages, driving changes in the process of protest. Prior to the protests, the new media efficiently attracted public attention and bred the creation of political opportunities. In the course of the movement, the use of new media allowed the movement to gain ownership of the movement, mobilising material, human and moral resources and laying the groundwork for its expansion. In the later stages of the movement, the dissemination of negative news by the new media accelerated the disappearance of resources and the demise of the movement.

For modern social movements, the new media is no longer just part of the movement's resources or tools. Its ability to cut across the entire movement, to bring systemic impact to social movements, and even to create a whole new paradigm for developing movements, deserves continued research and attention.

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