

A discussion on the use of digital media during the Sunflower Movement and how long lasting effects can be achieved with images and generally with social movements

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, an undemocratic legislation procedure triggered not just the biggest social movement in Taiwanese history but the rise of an alternative media to answer the traditional media's biased broadcastings and to have access to first-hand news. What made this protest really unique and worth understanding was its smart use of technology and digital media. The main difference between the use of Internet and the use of traditional television news or newspapers is that the Internet is more interactive and it is supposed to be an open space: open to anyone who has access. Obviously an advantage, but can turn into a disadvantage in the long term because of the 'Filter Bubble' phenomenon, which means that we will only see news on social media sites based on our previous interests and likes. Several other aspects of the applied internet technology are discussed, such as Facebook plugins, HackPad, "*g0w.tw*". Besides making good use of the internet, protesters also made their ideas memorable. Dan and Chip Heath discussed in their book why certain ideas succeed while others fail – on the emblematic picture taken during the first hours of occupation of the Legislative Yuan the six main characteristics of "sticky" ideas are presented (simple, unexpected, concrete, emotional, credible, story) and also shown on pictures taken during the violent events on the 24th of March. The social media might have been very influential in the Movement, but its effect might not be long-lasting. In a TED talk from October 2014, Zeynep Tufekci argued that in contrast to what people think, social media presence paradoxically weakens the after effects of protests. The easier to mobilize people, the harder to achieve something long lasting because the fast pace doesn't give time for the birth of a thinking group. Tufekci proposed that for social movements to achieve profound influence, the innovations might need to happen on all levels, from activists to legislators and president. For the future of democracy, this was just a small battle to win, there is more to do, however, the road is given.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to sincerely thank to Jung-Yu Lin, who helped me a lot throughout the making of this paper. A big thanks for all the people who answered to my interview request and were willing to share their insights on the Sunflower Movement.

In 2014, an undemocratic legislation procedure triggered the biggest social movement in Taiwanese history. It was the very first time during the so-called Sunflower Movement that the majority of the modern Taiwanese youth stood out and said no to the ruling Kuomintang's (KMT's) undemocratic procedures and their China-tilting policy. The name Sunflower originated from the sunflower donation by a floral vender to show her support, and the flowers were later used by the protestors as a symbol of hope. In the following essay I will introduce the political background of the movement, and the impact on modern Taiwanese society. I will then narrow down my focus by analyzing how the protesters' side made their idea stick in to people's mind [1] because the way the protestors spread information is one of the keys for the movement to have such a heavy impact. I'll also discuss how the use of humor in social media affected the protest, and how the prospects of democracy look now for the future of Taiwan.



Figure 1. Protester holding a sunflower, the emblem of the movement. A scene of the mass protest, CNA photo from March 30, 2014. Source: <http://focustaiwan.tw>

Probably most Taiwanese people remember the date of March 23rd when frustrated students broke into the Executive Yuan (the executive branch of the government) because of the government's ignorance of their appeals. This wasn't the first event of the Sunflower Movement, which originally started on the 18th of March as a student uprising occupied the Legislative Yuan. However, the action in the Executive Yuan was particularly memorable and influential because it was violently stopped as police evicted the students. The event resulted in global sympathy and support for the movement. The initial reason for their uprising was the passing of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). This 50 pages long document was aimed to liberalize trade in services between the two economies [2].

I am from Hungary, which is part of the European Union. European countries traditionally vote in favor of free trade and movement of both people and freight. Why is this agreement considered as a bad thing then? First, we have to know that China still claims Taiwan to be a part of it; and the Constitution of the Republic of China (R.O.C., Taiwan) claims the entire China to be their territory. This is often referred to as 'One China Policy' and 'One China principle' [3]. It means that both the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China (P.R.C., China) claims to be the one and only China. This is taken so seriously that if a country seeks diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, it must break official relations with the Republic of China. Mainland China is incredibly strong both economically and military-wise. They have been trying to 'conquer' Taiwan for long, but military actions do not seem possible in current international political situation. Instead, as feared by Taiwanese people, 'buying' Taiwan is much easier. Second, the Agreement mainly concerns the service trade industry, which accounts for a huge percentage of Taiwanese GDP; it would thus influence most people's living. Most Taiwanese people worried about their national 'identity' and sovereignty to be in danger, because of the complex political status between China and Taiwan. Some people worry that if

Chinese companies took over information services, then the national security will be jeopardized because the Chinese will be able to access secret information. The opposition against the CSSTA argued that this agreement would ease Chinese investments in total of 64 industries, including the publishing and news media industries, which is too risky for the freedom of speech, and generally for the freedom of Taiwan. It would also open the gates for Chinese companies for opening branches in Taiwan, which can flood the market with underpriced services that weaken the economy.

What further angered the Taiwanese society is that the China-tilting government proposed and passed the influential agreement in less than 30 seconds without the consent of the congress or even careful review, not to mention the support of the people. This process was discovered by an organization aiming to supervise the government called “*watchout.tw*”. The undemocratic procedure caused outrage among a group of social activists: mainly college students led by one named Lin Fei-fan. On the 18th of March, a crowd of about 200 climbed over the fence and broke into the Legislative Yuan (the Congress), and occupied it after 4 failed police attempts to take them out. What made this protest really unique and worth understanding was its smart use of technology and digital media [4]. Thanks to the wide online publicity and support, the protest eventually escalated on the 30th of March with a massive rally of about 500,000 people who gathered in Taipei City center to express their opposition and anger to KMT’s policy. Every street around the city center was filled with people wearing black.

As for most protests in history, this wasn’t only about a trade agreement, but I argue that it was generally as well against the ruling party’s politics. The ideology of the Movement discourse had to fight against the preexisting ideology imposed by KMT (Kuomintang, the ruling party of R.O.C.). The party has been rooted in Taiwanese society and was constantly empowered by mass media, like Television Broadcasts Satellite (TVBS), which has been previously accused of violating national laws [5] as the majority of the shares were owned by Chinese, thus it can be used to gain influence and propagate pro-China messages. It was also the first time that a considerable number of people started to be aware of the impact of politics to their lives and maybe even started to be interested in political issues without fearing of being considered as “political-nerds”. Both the government and the protestors used different types of propaganda to gain support from the society. The ruling KMT used traditional media (television news) which is sometimes considered to be subjective and biased. This gave rise to a new, alternative media for the protesters who made use of social media and the Internet so they can have access to first-hand news. For example, Facebook, the forum PTT on BBS (bulletin board system), UStream, YouTube among several other online news portals were widely used to create and spread informational inside and outside the country. To further attract international attention, about 80 people worked constantly on translating all the important news into over ten languages worldwide. Also, they insisted on remaining politically neutral, so they purposely denied any association with other political parties, like DPP.

Students had the knowledge and resources for using the online tools discussed above, but the content they were delivering had to be good enough to stick into people’s minds. How should they present to a bigger audience that it will be understandable and memorable? Should they use

humor in such a serious situation? What else can be done? Dan and Chip Heath described in their book how to make an idea sticky [1] and why some ideas succeed while others fail. In the following paragraph I will analyze the picture below based on their ideas and see how effectively it delivers the message.

An iconic image of the first moments of the occupation can be seen on the picture: A pair of flip flops holds an iPad used for providing live streaming to UStream (a San Francisco based company with more than 80 million viewers) of the first hours of the occupation. This was set up Sean Su, a web engineer and blogger from New York. The students' top priority was to set up an ongoing live broadcast from the Legislative Yuan for both informing the world and protecting themselves against possible police violence. Later on this task was done by an organization called "g0w.tw", who originally aimed to give information to people about politics so that they can better understand what's going on and what's influencing their lives.



Figure 2. Emblematic picture from the first hour of the movement after occupying the Legislative Yuan. This photo shows an iPad held by a pair of flip-flops as it is recording the gathering students.

When analyzing how something sticks into people's mind, we might illustrate the process by using this picture, according to the Heath brothers [1]. They argue that there actually is a receipt that can be followed to create memorable ideas. As all happy families resemble each other, all sticky ideas do as well, as it will be discussed here.

An idea must be **simple**, something profound, which packs a lot of information into a few words. It should as well be **unexpected**. The reason is that our brain is keen on change. Just imagine a table where everything is aligned to the center except something, which is to the side – we will immediately pay attention to that detail and wonder why. Getting our attention can be done through surprise and interest. Surprising people is what we start with, which is done through breaking the patterns. People have seen the Legislative Yuan filled with white-collar legislators, but they have never seen it through a lens of an iPod, with a background decorated with different messages and young students sitting on the ground. A good idea is **concrete**, which is actually the easiest part to achieve: a concrete message can persevere over time. The concrete message here is that their belief is so strong that they are willing to risk. An **emotional** part is also involved in making an idea sticky, especially in case of the Sunflower Movement. This emotional part was done effectively in this case of the image, and most of the later messages as younger generation saw protesters as their peers, older generations saw them as their children, grandchildren, who should be protected and their opinion taken into consideration as they performed a peaceful but passionate, polite and clean protest. People tend to care most about themselves ("what's in it for me?") but they can also be motivated if it's appealing for their identity – as was the thought of an independent Taiwan in the end. Because of this emotional part a large number of people turned to support them and stepped up since the beginning of the movement and joined it as volunteers becoming the propelling force behind the

scenes. Students organized a complex ecosystem to ensure that all protesters stay healthy, and safe. The message should be **credible**, which is easy for well-known or generally credible people, like Stephen Hawking talking about astrophysics. For average students this was hard to achieve in the beginning, and at the point when the photo was taken their credibility wasn't influential – people might have asked who they are, and why are they doing this. An idea is more and more sticky if all ingredients are present, not necessary all. Finally, the **story** makes it all complete. The memorable plot will persevere in the long term, as from the above picture we will always remember the dramatic story that students broke into the Legislative Yuan, and their first thing was to set up a live online broadcast of what's going on there, and why are they doing it. They would publicize stories of young protesters' emotional struggle between being a good child obeying the parents' wishes and commands as imagined by the Confucius school of thought: respect the elders, conform societal rules and be a good student, while at the same time being good citizens who rise up in order to convince the government to listen to them.

The probably most widely seen episode of the protest was the failed occupation of the Executive Yuan in the 24th of March. This was led by a different group of protesters, who believed those in the Legislative Yuan were not making the impact they wanted since the government kept ignoring them. Truth to be said, several days passed since the students barricaded themselves in that building, neither President Ma Ying-Jeou, nor premier Jiang Yi-Huah spoke to them and both denied the retraction of the CSSTA. Jiang, the premier at the time who used to be a professor of political science in National Taiwan University, waited until the 22nd of March to meet the protesting students, but most of the people still believed the President isn't taking them seriously since he didn't come personally. Some more radical students was disappointed so they turn to occupy the building of the Executive Yuan around 7pm local time on the 23rd. Shortly after Jiang ordered to remove the media and medics from the building, cutting off the safety shield of the media coverage. However, they couldn't prevent the students from using their smart phones and take pictures of what was happening to them. By 5am the day after they have been evicted from the building by more than 1000 officials. More than 150 people were injured and 61 were arrested. Student's recording went viral and attracted a lot of attention from both inside and outside of the country. It was obvious that police used excessive violence when dealing with unarmed protesters.



Figure 3. Emblematic picture from the movement illustrating the excessive police violence when taking out unarmed protesters from the Executive Yuan.

The widely circulated bloody pictures of students made a sticky story in people's minds. It was most of all the emotional kind – these are our children – for many people. They are just pleading



Figure 4. An image collage comparing Professor Fu Si-Nien, respected former principal of NTU with a fictional quote from Jian Yi-Huan, Premier, currently professor of political science at NTU.

for a democratic procedure but the government sent police to beat them up instead. Moreover, it was Mr. Jiang who wrote a book called “自由民主的理路” (literally means the reasoning of freedom and democracy). This two-faced act made protesters angry and they created the picture on the left, which was also a memorable one. On the upper figure Professor Fu Si-Nien, a respected former principal of National Taiwan University says “*I have one request: No bloodshed tonight when you evacuate the students. If I see blood, I will fight you with my life.*” On the bottom figure former Premier Jian. People made up a quote saying “*I have one request: You have to evacuate the students, even if bloodshed happens. If I see a student remaining, I will fight you with my life*”. This is a simple yet concrete, unexpected idea referring to the above events. The comparison of these two people both from NTU makes the story memorable, and even this one quote is enough to remember the whole story. Despite that the quote is made up for Mr. Jiang, it impressed people because it somehow conforms to what happened. On the figure 3, one can see a policeman with one leg up. This was widely circulated after the violent police evacuation on the 24th of March. This was used as a proof of excessive violence to appeal for public sympathy because it was interpreted as the police kicking the unarmed student protesters. However, later on the police claimed that he was just trying to step across the students.

Besides students making their communication filled with sticky ideas the movement probably couldn't have been successful without innovative uses of the internet. Among these played a significant role the website “g0w.tw”, which collected all important information links to online news channels and provided transcripts of all aspects with a collaborative work of more than 1500 volunteers using an online tool called HackPad [6], which is similar to Google Docs. Other uses of social media also proved to be helpful throughout the protests. One of the techniques was the design of a user-friendly interface and the integration of it with social media (Facebook). This was particularly used when most of the people had to go to classes, but there was a lot of work to do from bringing food to taking medical care, from posting news to guarding against undercover police break-in attempts – which actually happened several times. So the supporters designed a website for shift schedules. Users were able to input when they have time and in three steps they were already signed up, as it can be seen on the picture below.

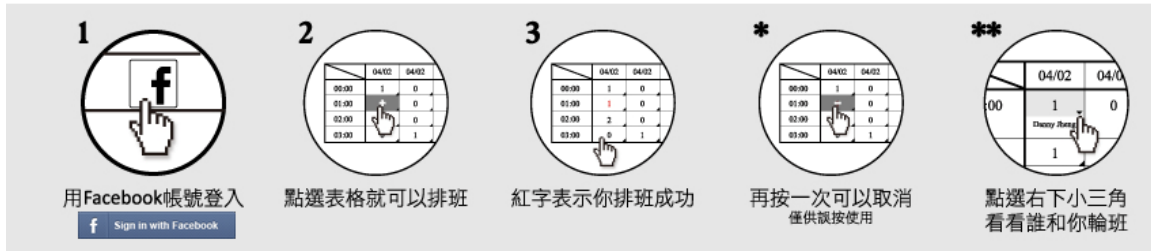


Figure 5. User friendly interface embedded into Facebook to help protesters in applying for time slots. This easy to use tool won several supporters for the movement.

On the other hand the protest has proven that the Internet and social media is more of a home territory for them. This can be justified in several ways, but it can be stated unbiased that politicians underestimated the power of the Internet. Legislator Tsai Cheng-Yuan posted a collage of pictures on his Facebook page, labeling the students of the Sunflower Movement with “inappropriate” behaviors, including drinking beer, homosexual couple kissing, two people hiding under a blanket, and two girls touching a girl’s thighs and breasts. This picture was actually from a Vietnamese Facebook page, which was not related to the movement at all. Obviously the legislator thought that no one will find out; but the Sunflower supporters did find out because of their searching skills using the World Wide Web. This is the power of the Internet. Even after Tsai took it off from his page, his deed had been recorded. If something ever appears on it, it will always remain traceable.



Figure 6. Legislator Tsai Cheng-Yuan posted this picture on his Facebook page, showing “inappropriate” behaviors of the Sunflower protesters. It has been discovered that he took this picture from a Vietnamese Facebook page.

The social media might have been very influential in the Movement, but their effect might not be long-lasting. Concerning the future of democracy in Taiwan, all the people I interviewed agreed on that Taiwan is closer to being a real democracy than China, however, they are not there yet. In a TED talk from October 2014 [7], Zeynep Tufekci argued that in contrast to what people normally think, social media presence paradoxically weakens the after effects of protests because social media is mainly powerful when spreading messages. The wide circulation of the pictures from the Sunflower Movement, which were taken on March 24th after the violent police

evacuations, and they triggered the massive protest on March 30th. A Facebook page can become a hub of mass mobilization, like it was for the March 30th rally for democracy.

However, the easier to mobilize people, the harder to achieve something long lasting. Tufekci proposed that for social movements to achieve profound influence, the changes might happen in all levels, from activists to legislators and president. This is somewhat similar to taking the fast highway when we intend to see the country. We will see things from it, but we are losing the benefits of the slower route where we would see much more. The problem is not that people are different than decades or centuries ago. Leaders of these protests are brave, they do sacrifice and sometimes risk their lives similarly as people risked it before. Bonds are made during the protests between people which might also last long. For a social movement, the benefit of the hard work would be the creation of an organization, which can think together and make hard decisions together. Getting influential in the social media level is not equivalent to becoming influential on all other media as social media is the playground of younger generations. And even though we usually don't like traditional politics and we might think of them as dinosaurs, if someone would like to achieve a major change, they have to innovate in every level. Yu-Hsiang Chen, Professor of Chinese Studies in the United Kingdom argues [8] that in fact this whole Movement was mainly supported from the younger generations because it is a sociological matter for them. The reason is the different concepts of democracy between older and younger generations. Taiwan "officially" became a democracy in 1987 with the removal of the martial law. For older generations democracy equals to free speech and vote in fair elections. However, current generation grew up taking freedom of speech for granted, and what they want to fight for now is a democratic national identity. The Taiwanese identity rose in the recent 20 years, among 20-29 generation more than 89% claims themselves Taiwanese, rather than Chinese. Consequently, for many Taiwanese people, the Sunflower Movement was a democratization movement for protecting their independence rather than an anti-free-trade protest.

Zeynep Tufekci discussed why a social media based protests might not have so long after effects and why it might really reach the goal – which as Yu-Hsiang Chen argued in this case was Taiwan's independence, covered into the protests against the CSSTA. The main difference between the use of Internet and the use of traditional television news or newspapers is that the Internet is more interactive and it is supposed to be an open space: open to anyone who has access. This can be an advantage, but finally it is a big disadvantage in the long term for the several following reasons. First and foremost the so-called the 'Filter Bubble' phenomenon. As the Internet develops, it keeps learning about us. Every time we do a Google search, google will save it and suggest better results to us the next time based on their algorithms. Facebook was widely used during the protests, but Facebook as a company is also a big collector of data. They actually measure "success" of a new concept based on how many clicks per minute they achieve for it. This means the more we click the more successful they are, because the more we click, the more we interact, which gives them the more information about us. They do this because later on they can make more money – through targeted advertisements. But this is a double-edged sword in the discussions about the Movement. In the Filter Bubble, we won't see other voices – we won't see what the other side wants to say. We will only see what (based on our interactions) we want to see. The young generation in Taiwan also relies on Facebook for information because it

is also easily accessible. However, because of Facebook's Filter Bubble they will only see what Facebook wants them to see. The result is that people would mistake their own opinion to be supported by everyone on the Internet.

It can be finally inferred that the protesters used social media extensively in a very powerful way. They didn't just simply use Facebook, they added functionality to it (application calendar), but they also used several other sites with the help of "g0w.tw". They didn't stop at using these sites but went one step ahead and translated the messages into more than ten languages to spread the news. Each and every real life event gave plenty of space for the creation of long lasting messages through images, which can be characterized as "sticky" images based on the Heath brothers *Made to Stick* book [1]. The Movement had a happy ending, because legislators took back the CSSTA for further consideration and gave warranties for not passing it again too quickly. Occupying students announced that they got what they wanted and left all occupied buildings, life returned to usual. But for the future of democracy this was just a small battle to win, there is more to do, however, the road is given.

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