Digital Narrating for Contentious Politics: Social Media Content Curation at Movement Protests

Movement Protests

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Introduction

The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) bears witness to thriving movement protests worldwide. The development of new hardware technologies such as mobile devices and digital cameras, in particular, has fastened visual communications among users that help document and broadcast contemporary social movements. Using social media with these technological tools, SMOs present new opportunities for movement organisation and engagement to become narrators of their activist lives, and to promote solidarity and recognition for advancing varied civic and political agendas. With the case of a student activist group that led and organised a 10-day occupation protest in Hong Kong, this article examines the idea of new media-savvy SMOs as political curators that employ SNS platforms to (co-)create new context, digital narrating occurs as it may result in a new or additional layer of meaning (Baym and Shah). Therefore, more understanding of a subject (Franks). For example, when new media content is re-posted or shared in its original form but in a new context, digital narrating occurs in a new or additional layer of meaning (Baym and Shah)

The New Media-Savvy SMO as Political Curator

Whereas traditional social movement studies stressed the importance of pre-existing social networks and organisational structures for collective action, developments in new information and communication technologies (ICTs) challenge the common theories of how people are drawn into and participate in social movements. In recent years, a spate of research has particularly emphasised the ability of individuals and small groups to self-organise on the Internet (e.g. Rheingold). Lately, SMOs and marginalised communities worldwide have increasingly learnt the ability to become narrators of their activist stories and protest movements (Bekkers, Segerberg, and Walker). More importantly, not only does content curating entail the selection and preservation of online materials that may facilitate collective action, but it may also involve the (re-)presentation of selected content by telling stories of concrete actions, ongoing campaigns, and thematic issues of protest movements on more multimedia platforms. In order to advance political ideas and collective action frames, they may bring together a variety of online content in a way that the collated materials offer a commentary on a subject area by articulating and negotiating new media artefacts, while also inviting responses. Therefore, not only are the new media channels for activist communication comparatively inexpensive, but they also provide for a richer array of content and the possibility of greater control by SMOs over its (re-)presentation, maintenance, and distribution for potential digital narrating. To understand how digital narrating takes place in contemporary protest movements with SNSs, we now turn to two analytic concepts—curation and choreography.

Social Media Content Curation and Choreography

Curation, as a new media practice, involves finding, categorising, and organising relevant online content on specific issues. For instance, museums and libraries may have curators to select and feature digital items for collection and display, improving the treatment by a public audience. In protest movements, SMOs and political actors may curate produced content on SNS platforms so as to filter and amplify useful information for mobilising collective action. In fact, this process by SMOs and political actors is particularly important, as it helps sort and draw timely attention to these information streams, especially at times when users are faced with a large amount of noise created by millions of producers (Bennett, Segerberg, and Walker). Moreover, not only does content curating entail the selection and preservation of online materials that may facilitate collective action, but it may also involve the (re-)presentation of selected content by telling stories not being told or by telling existing stories in a different way (Foucault and Coudry). In contrast to professional curating, it is a much more deliberate process, one which clearly articulates and puts forward opportunities for new meanings or new understanding of a subject (Franks). Here in this analysis, it may result in a more deliberate process, one which clearly articulates and puts forward opportunities for new meanings or new understanding of a subject (Franks).

Moreover, nowadays, social media curating is not restricted to text but also includes image and video streaming, as the development of new hardwares and social media has facilitated and enhanced visual content and communication almost regardless of distance. The practice of content curating with SNSs may also involve the process of choreographing with various social media modules, such as posting a series of edited pictures under an overarching schema. Although this activity is relatively new, the idea of choreography is thus enriched with curated items seen and experienced from the users' perspectives as it "allows curators not just to expose elements of a story but to tell a structured tale with the traditional elements of beginning, middle and end" (Franks 288).

In practice, the implementation of choreography can be envisioned as an expanded way of understanding the practice of content curating and that of enhancing and connecting contentious engagement at protest movements. For example, when SMOs make use of images and video to help frame an issue in a more advanced way by sharing a picture with a comment added on Facebook, they may at once, whether consciously or unconsciously, suggest possible endorsement to the selected content and/or the source—may it be that of an individual user or a formal organisation—while drawing attention to the image and circulating it beyond the original network for which it was posted (Bennett, Segerberg, and Walker). As such, by posting pictures with captions and sharing user-generated photos that do not belong to the SMO but are produced by other users, curating and choreographing with social media content can create a temporary space for practicing mutual recognition and extending the relationship between the SMO and the larger public. Combined, they may therefore "entail the creation of norms and boundaries at
This article examines the ways in which a new media-savvy SMO employed SNS platforms to (co-)create digital narratives, with the case of the 2012 Anti-National Education Movement in Hong Kong. By highlighting how social media content curating and choreographing may work together to encourage engagement and collaboration at large-scale protests, we can better understand how emerging SNS-enabled affordances can be translated into concrete contentious activities. This article argues that, rather than simply producing and disseminating content on SNS platforms, SMOS today have learnt to actively construct discursive aspects and cultural expressions of using new media platforms and digital technologies in contemporary protest movements.

**Digital Narrating for Grassroots Mobilisation**

Since 2010, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government has undertaken national education curriculum reform. However, the worry about mainland Chinese style national education in schools brought people out to defend values that were held dear in Hong Kong. Scholarism, a new media-savvy SMO founded by about 20 secondary school students in May 2011, became the first pressure group formed against the Moral and National Education curriculum and became the leading activist group. On 30 August 2012, about 50 members and supporters of Scholarism started occupying the government’s headquarters, while three of its members went on a hunger strike. At the same time, Scholarism made active use of Facebook to undertake grassroots mobilisation, prompting both online activism and offline participation. On 7 September, over 120,000 people went to Occupy Headquarters. The next day, the Chief Executive, C. Y. Leung, succumbed to the pressure and declared that the curriculum would not be imposed in Hong Kong schools.

In order to initiate a grassroots mobilisation, upon the beginning of Occupy Headquarters, Scholarism carried out the new media practice of telling the story of the student hunger strikers on Facebook to create a “moral shock” (Jasper 106) among the general public. On the first day of the occupation protest, 30 August, a poster on the hunger strike was released by Scholarism on its Facebook page. Instead of providing detailed information about the protest, this poster was characterised by the pictures of the three student hunger strikers. The headline message simply stated “We have started the hunger strike.” This poster was very popular among Facebook users; it accumulated more than 16,000 likes.

By appealing to the hardships and sufferings of the three student hunger strikers, more photos were uploaded to narrate the course of the hunger strike and the occupation protest. In particular, pictures with captions added were posted on Facebook every couple of hours to report on the student hunger strikers’ latest situation. Although the mobilising power of these edited pictures did not come from their political ideology or rational argumentation, they sought to appeal to the “martyr-hood” of the student activists. Soon thereafter, as the social media updates of the student hunger strikers spread, feelings of shock and anger grew rapidly. Most of the comments that were posted under the updates and photos of the student hunger strikers on Scholarism’s Facebook page protested against the government’s brutality.

In addition, as the movement grew, Scholarism extended the self-reporting activities on Facebook from members to non-members. For instance, it frequently (self-)reported on the amount of people joining the movement days and nights. This especially so on 7 September, when Scholarism uploaded multiple photos and text messages to report on the physical movement of the 120,000 people in Hong Kong. As a movement strategy, the display of images of protests and rallies on the Internet can help demonstrate the legitimacy, unity, numbers, and commitment of people supporting the movement goals (Carly and Ornetti). Curating and choreographing with protest images on Facebook therefore facilitated the symbolic exchanges and emotional exchanges among activists for maintaining movement solidarity and consolidating activist identity.

To demonstrate the public support for its organization and the movement, Scholarism extensively reported on its own, as well as other, protest activities and efforts on Facebook against the introduction of the “Moral and National Education” curriculum, creating unprecedented parallel public records of these events. In fact, throughout the entire movement protest, Scholarism took tight photo records of protest activities, systematically organised them into albums, and uploaded them onto Facebook every day between 30 August and 8 September.

**Content Co-Creation for Counter-Hegemonic Expressions**

From a (neo-)Gramscian perspective, counter-hegemony is often embodied and embodied in music, novels, drama, movies, and so on (Boggs). An example of counter-hegemony in the traditional media is a documentary that questions the government’s involvement in a war (Cohen). Therefore, popular culture in the media can help foster counter-hegemonic narratives on the terrain of civil society in preparation for political change (Pratt). For Chinese communities in East Asia, pop music, for example, had played a significant role in organising patriotic feelings in mass protest events, such as the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989 and the many subsequent protests in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere against the violence of the Beijing government (Chow 153).

During the occupation protest, Facebook was turned into an open and flexible discursive space, in which cutting-edge counter-hegemonic narratives were produced, distributed, and expressed. Scholarism and many individual activists adopted the social media platform to (co-)create activists’ discourses and knowledge in order to challenge the dominant political and cultural codes (Melucci). An example is a poster created by Scholarism, posted on its Facebook page on 4 September. The title message of this poster is: “This is not the government headquarters. This is our CIVIC SQUARE. Come and occupy!” This message represents a discursive intervention that seeks to “illuminate the limits of normative discourses of knowledge and power” (Lane 139). It did so by replacing the original, official name and as well as its authority with the counter-hegemonic idea of “civic square,” a term developed and coined by Scholarism during the occupation protest to represent the public space in front of the headquarters.

Moreover, the Facebook page of Scholarism was by no means the only source of content out of which counter-hegemonic knowledge and discourses were produced. Conversely, most of the new media artefacts observed on the Facebook page of Scholarism were originally created by other individual or group users. They are in forms of text, picture, video, and the like that sought to undermine the legitimacy of the Hong Kong government, ridicule the rationale of the “Moral and National Education” curriculum, and discredit figures in the opposition.

An example is a cartoon made by an individual user and re-posted on the Facebook page of Scholarism on 2 September, the day before schools restarted in Hong Kong after the summer break. This cartoon features a schoolboy in his school uniform, who is going to school with a bunch of identical locks tied to his head. The title message is: “School begins, keep your brain safe.” This cartoon was created to ridicule the rationale of the introduction of the “Moral and National Education” by “making visible the underlying and hidden relations of power on which the smooth operation of government repression depends” (Lane 136).

Another new media artefact re-posted on the Facebook page of Scholarism was originally created by a well-known Hong Kong cartoon painter of a major local newspaper. This cartoon sought to humanise the student activists and to condemn the brutality of the Hong Kong government. It paints an imagined situation in which a public conversation between the Secretary for Education, Hek-lum Eddie Ng, and the three students, who went on hunger strike to protest against the imposition of the “Moral and National Education” curriculum. Holding a bottle of liquid in his hand, he says to the students: “This is the tears of the chief executive from last night. Kids, should you all go home now?”

Thus, counter-hegemonic expressions did not flow unidirectionally from Scholarism to the society at large. The special role of Scholarism was indeed to curate and choreograph new media artefacts by employing social media modules such as re-posting and sharing user-generated content in order to promote the movement’s protest causes and consolidate activist identity. An example is a poster made by an individual user and re-posted on the Facebook page of Scholarism on 2 September, the day before schools restarted in Hong Kong after the summer break. This cartoon features a schoolboy in his school uniform, who is going to school with a bunch of identical locks tied to his head. The title message is: “School begins, keep your brain safe.” This cartoon was created to ridicule the rationale of the introduction of the “Moral and National Education” by “making visible the underlying and hidden relations of power on which the smooth operation of government repression depends” (Lane 136).

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**Conclusion**

This article has briefly looked at the case of a new media-savvy SMO in Hong Kong as an example of how activist groups can become political curators at large-scale protest events. In particular, it highlights the concepts of curation and choreography in explaining how emerging SNS-enabled affordances can be translated into concrete contentious activities. This article argues that, rather than simply producing and disseminating content on SNS platforms, SMOS today have learnt to actively construct discursive aspects and cultural expressions of using new media platforms and digital technologies in contemporary protest movements.

**References**

Contentious politics is the use of disruptive techniques to make a political point, or to change government policy. Examples of such techniques are actions that disturb the normal activities of society such as demonstrations, general strike action, riot, terrorism, civil disobedience, and even revolution or insurrection. Social movements often engage in contentious politics. The concept distinguishes these forms of contention from the everyday acts of resistance explored by James C. Scott, interstate