Activating Support for Social Movements  
The Effect of the Internet on Public Opinion  
toward Social Movements in Hong Kong  

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Abstract

Despite the stagnant democratization process, social movements and citizens’ contentious collective action have become a prominent feature in Hong Kong politics in the past few years. One specific issue which has aroused the interest of both scholars and commentators is the role of new media technologies in the protest politics in Hong Kong. While much research in Europe and America has documented the Internet’s ability to facilitate the expansion of social movement mobilization and participation, this essay examines whether the Internet has helped to foster positive public opinion toward social movements, their goals, and their collective action. Based on considerations of the characteristics of the online information environment and people’s information-seeking behavior, this essay develops the hypotheses concerning persuasion, support activation, and opinion radicalization. These hypotheses are examined in the case of the anti-Express Rail protests in Hong Kong in early 2010. Analysis of survey data (N=1,007) confirms the support activation and opinion radicalization hypotheses. Theoretical and social implications of the findings are discussed.

Key words: Internet, social movements, public opinion, protests, opinion radicalization, Hong Kong.

Although institutional democratization has been slow in Hong Kong over the past fifteen years, arguably the general public has become more and more active in expressing its opinions and attempting to influence the government through various means, including through participation in contentious collective actions. After the large-scale protest on July 1, 2003, in which more than 500,000 Hong Kong people marched on the street to protest against the
government, the July 1 demonstration has become an annual event, with the participation of tens of thousands of local citizens.\(^1\) On a daily basis, there are protests and rallies of different scales, organized by a wide range of groups and addressing different topics.

While political scientists and sociologists may explain the rise of protest politics in contemporary Hong Kong in terms of the enduring legitimacy crisis of the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government and/or the growth of local civil society,\(^2\) this essay aims to contribute to an understanding of the politics of collective action in the city by examining the role of new media technologies, especially the Internet. In the past decade, communication researchers around the world have paid much attention to the question of whether and how social movements can benefit from the rise of new media technologies. Research has shown that existing social movement organizations (SMOs) can utilize the Internet to transmit information to and maintain dialogue with supporters,\(^3\) connect with other SMOs,\(^4\) and mobilize people for online and offline activities.\(^5\) The Internet also facilitates new forms of networks and action.\(^6\) At the individual level, Internet use can lead to higher levels of civic and political engagement, including in both online and offline


collective action.\textsuperscript{7}

Combined, such research findings suggest a relationship between the Internet and the proliferation of movement mobilization and protest action in contemporary societies.\textsuperscript{8} This essay examines whether a similar relationship exists in Hong Kong. Specifically, our analytical focus is whether and in what ways the Internet influences how the general public perceives social movement activities. This focus is related to, and yet different from, the literature’s primary concern with mobilization and participation. But if we are to understand whether and how the Internet affects social movements, the question of public opinion cannot be ignored. Some movement scholars have shown that the probability for a movement to achieve its goals is higher when the public is sympathetic toward its cause.\textsuperscript{9} Whether a movement can persuade the public at-large is therefore an important concern. Although this study focuses on Hong Kong, the findings have general significance in two related ways. First, this study provides evidence about whether certain key arguments related to the role of the Internet in movement mobilization apply to a democratizing society. Second, this study’s examination of public opinion toward social movements also broadens our general understanding of the implications of new media technologies on social movements.

Using the anti-Express Rail protests in early 2010 as a case study, this essay examines whether people who used the Internet for movement-related


\textsuperscript{8}David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow, eds., \textit{The Social Movement Society} (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

information, when compared to other people, were more supportive toward the movement as well as certain controversial actions of the activists. A key concern is whether Internet-based communication has a generalized persuasive effect, or whether it works mainly to activate the support of citizens who already are sympathetic to the cause.

The next section explains the arguments underlying what this study labels as persuasion, support activation, and opinion radicalization impact of the Internet by drawing upon a range of literature from media and public opinion studies. Specific hypotheses are established after a brief description of the anti-Express Rail protest in Hong Kong. Data from a survey study are then analyzed. The concluding section discusses the implications of the findings.

Social Movements and Public Opinion in the Online Environment

As noted above, there is substantial literature in media and social movement studies regarding the role new media technologies can play in social mobilization and formation of collective action. Given the proliferation of new phenomena such as social networking sites and micro-blogging, some recent studies have focused on the roles played by specific types of online platforms. However, the present study does not differentiate among the various platforms and outlets in the online arena. Instead, it treats the Internet holistically as an information environment. The decision to adopt a “holistic perspective” is based on the consideration that, in reality, people move very easily from one platform to another in the online environment, and that the contents from various platforms often interpenetrate each other. For example, a person may, through a shared Facebook link with his or her friend, encounter an article originated from a movement Web site, while clicking on another link may bring the individual to another Web site with other contents. In other words, the boundaries separating various online platforms are porous. Hence, a “holistic” approach remains important when analyzing Internet communication. Given the holistic approach and based on arguments and past research about the general characteristics of Internet communication, this study develops the hypotheses concerning persuasion, support activation, and opinion radicalization.


Internet as a Conduit for Social Movement Persuasion

One often-cited reason for why the Internet can benefit social movements is that the Internet provides a platform from which movements are able to communicate more directly and effectively to their constituents and the larger public. For example, a European study found that the Web pages of “activists” often serve as communication nodes that reassemble new and existing knowledge and transmit it to the public. A content analysis of American social movement Web sites found that social movement organizations do not always utilize the Web to its full potential. But most Web sites provide users with important information related to the issues addressed by the movements.

Certainly, views critical toward or dismissive of social movements also exist online. The specific utility of the Internet for a social movement, therefore, has to be seen by comparing it to conventional media. Due to the connections between mainstream media organizations and established political economic institutions, the ways news production is routinized, and the commercial orientation of many news outlets, the mainstream media often either ignore movement activities or highlight their deviant aspects. The substantive concerns behind the activities are often “lost.” It follows that, when compared to those who rely mostly on the mainstream media, Internet users can be expected to have access to relatively more information about the substantive concerns and rationales of a movement.

Admittedly, there is a lack of studies in the extant literature directly comparing the contents of conventional media and the contents of the Internet with regard to specific issues addressed by social movements. But both the openness of the Internet and the pro-establishment bias of the mainstream media in Hong Kong are well documented. Hence, it is still reasonable for us to argue that social movements have a better chance to successfully persuade people to support their actions through the Internet than through conventional media. More formally, we can state the persuasion hypothesis as follows: When compared to those who rely on conventional news media to acquire

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12 Hajek and Kabele, “Dual Discursive Patterns,” 55.
13 Stein, “Social Movement Web Use in Theory and Practice.”
information about a social movement, people who rely on the Internet for information have a more positive view toward the social movement.

**Online Communication as a Means of Support Activation**

The proposed persuasion effect of Internet communication is based mainly on arguments about the range of information existing online. But when analyzing the ability of social movements to persuade the larger public through the online arena, one also should take into account the likely behavior of Internet users. Specifically, the phenomenon of audience selectivity must be considered. Political scientist Anthony Wilhelm has argued that the Internet is marked by homophily (i.e., there is “the propensity [for people] to gravitate to persons with similar viewpoints”).

Similarly, political scientists W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar have argued that the new media environment has led to higher levels of selective exposure among media consumers. Indeed, empirical research has found that people do not often encounter differing viewpoints in the online arena.

The implication of audience selectivity for social movements is that it may not be easy for them to reach those people who are not already interested in and/or sympathetic toward movement activities. As media scholar Stephen Marmura stated,

> [the] most important difficulties facing social movements and others hoping to draw attention to specific issues or causes stem from the reality that the “alternative” sources of information that they put online most likely will be visited and utilized by those already holding compatible views and ignored by others.

Nevertheless, audience selectivity does not entail the absence of “Internet effects” on people’s opinions toward social movements. In fact, if audience selectivity predominates, the Internet is likely to “activate” support among those who are already predisposed toward supporting social movements, because these people are likely to selectively encounter mostly pro-movement

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information. To elaborate, people vary in the extent to which they consider “social movements” and “protest action” as legitimate means to press one’s claims, and such attitudes toward social movements, in general, should partly explain people’s attitudes toward specific social movements. Yet, this linkage between general support for movements and support for a specific movement may need to be activated. Here, Internet-based communication can serve as an activator. Stating it more formally, the support activation hypothesis holds that the positive relationship between general support for movements and support for a specific movement will be stronger among those who rely on the Internet for movement-related information.

*The Possibility of Opinion Radicalization*
Moving one step further, to the extent that movement sympathizers selectively expose themselves to pro-movement contents, such exposure may also “radicalize” their opinions. Following the scholarship in social movement studies, radicalization is defined in this essay as changes in a movement’s ideology, identity, or strategies and tactics such that the movement moves further away from the values and norms generally accepted in the society at-large. A common example of movement radicalization is a movement’s adoption of violent tactics, which are often denounced by mainstream public opinion. Movement radicalization, theoretically, can be the result of dynamics such as state repression or competition with other movement organizations. The concern of the present study, however, is not movement radicalization itself, but the radicalization of the opinion of movement sympathizers (i.e., a change in [at least some] people’s opinions toward the direction of accepting radical ideologies or tactics).

But why would use of the Internet radicalize opinion? Similar to support activation, the possibility of opinion radicalization also follows from audience selectivity in the online environment, as explicated in the previous section. Research on the impact of political disagreement has illustrated that encountering differing views can lead to less polarized and more ambivalent...
attitudes. The flip side of the argument is that exposure to mainly congruent views is likely to reinforce one’s opinion such that it becomes more extreme. As movement sympathizers selectively expose themselves to mainly concordant contents, their views are likely to become more extreme. Moreover, movement sympathizers are also more likely than others to be exposed to the justifications behind the radical ideologies or tactics being circulated online. Hence, they become more likely than non-Internet-users to accept any radical action undertaken to express the standpoint that they support.

Based on the above considerations, the opinion radicalization hypothesis can be stated as follows: Reliance on the Internet for movement-related information will result in high levels of acceptance of the radical tactics and ideologies of a social movement.

**Background and Research Hypotheses**

This study tests the arguments explicated above by focusing on the anti-Express Rail (anti-ER hereafter) protests in Hong Kong. The movement was against the Hong Kong government’s plan to build an Express Rail to connect the city to China’s Express Rail system. The plan was criticized for several reasons. First, the budget, in the range of HK$60 billion, was considered to be too high. Second, civic associations accused the government of neglecting the needs of the rural villagers who would be affected by the construction of the railway. Third and related to the second, there was debate about the proper location of the terminal. Fourth, critics argued that there was a lack of genuine public consultation. Fifth, some critics interpreted the movement as a struggle against the dominance of “developmentalism” in government policy-making in the city (i.e., policies are often designed with economic development as the only goal in mind, neglecting social and cultural concerns).

The controversy came to a climax in January 2010 when the Legislative Council (LegCo) was scheduled to approve the funding for building the railway. Movement organizations and activists joined hands to engage in a series of collective actions, culminating in the “besieging of the Legislative Council building” on January 16 and 17, the two days when the legislature held the funding-approval meeting. During the two-day protest, activists engaged in a range of activities, including a “trekking protest,” in which the protesters bowed to the ground every twenty-sixth step. Some activists charged the police line. On January 17, after the legislature finally approved the funding, the

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protesters refused to disband immediately. Hundreds of protesters stayed and surrounded the building, preventing government officials from leaving. The protests ended only after midnight.

We do not need to go into all the details of the protest actions here, but two aspects of this movement are highly pertinent to the present study. First, the Internet apparently played an important role in mobilizing people to join the protests. For example, activists established numerous Facebook groups against the government’s plan. According to a protest onsite survey conducted by a team of university students, 60 percent of the protesters acknowledged that the calls to action which they had received from the Internet were very important in their decision to participate. In comparison, only 49 percent and 47 percent regarded the calls to action they received from the mass media and political parties, respectively, as important.24

Second, related to this study’s concern with opinion radicalization, the anti-ER movement involved some arguably “radical” action, such as the charging of the police line. Such behavior is against the protest culture of Hong Kong, which is dominated by an “order imagery”25 and emphasizes that protests should be “rational and peaceful.”26 It should be noted that, calling the actions “radical” does not mean that the present authors opposed them. Radicalism, as explained earlier, refers to a divergence between movement tactics and general social norms.27 An action is “radical” to the extent that it is disapproved by the society at-large.

Given the background, the hypotheses can now be stated in contextualized terms. First, the persuasion hypothesis refers simply to a positive relationship between using the Internet as a source of information about the anti-ER movement and support for the movement’s cause (i.e., opposing the government’s plan):

24 The survey was conducted by a group of students in the journalism department to whose faculty the authors belong. It was done as part of a magazine feature report about the anti-ER movement. The first author of this essay was consulted by the students during the planning of the survey. Admittedly, the survey was not designed to be a piece of rigorous academic research, and the findings reported here are for illustration and reference only. Details of the survey are available from the authors upon request.


27 Beach, “Social Movement Radicalization.”
$H1$: People who relied on the Internet for information about the movement were more negative than non-Internet-users toward the government’s ER plan.

The support activation hypothesis states that the Internet facilitates the linkage between general support for movements and support for a specific movement. In the survey to be analyzed, we included an item regarding whether people saw social movements, in general, as capable of representing public opinion. Obviously, people who believed that social movements represent public opinion were more likely to support the anti-ER movement. Yet the support activation argument states that this relationship should be stronger among people who relied on the Internet for information. This constitutes $H2$:

$H2$: The positive relationship between general support for movements and support for the anti-ER movement was stronger among people who relied on the Internet for movement-related information than among non-Internet-users.

Finally, the opinion radicalization hypothesis states that the Internet can lead movement sympathizers to become more receptive toward the radical actions of the activists. In the anti-ER movement, the activists’ “besieging the legislature” and charging the police lines were generally regarded by the local media as controversial. Whether there is opinion radicalization thus becomes a question of whether some people find the radical actions more acceptable (or at least less unacceptable) as a result of using the Internet for movement-related information. Hence, $H3$ is stated as follows:

$H3$: Reliance on the Internet for information related to the anti-ER movement relates positively to acceptance of the “radical” collective actions, and this relationship should apply mainly among people with high levels of general support for social movements.

Data and Method

Sampling
Data analyzed below come from a telephone survey conducted by the Center of Communication Research at the Chinese University of Hong Kong between February 3 and 18, 2010, two weeks after the end of the besieging of the legislature by the anti-ER protesters. The population was all Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong residents, aged eighteen or above. To derive the sample,
the Center first selected all telephone numbers from the 2005 and 2007 residential telephone directories. To ensure the inclusion of non-listed numbers, the Center replaced the last two digits of the numbers by the full set of one hundred figures from 00 to 99. Specific numbers were then randomly chosen from the database by the computer during the survey period. The most recent birthday method was used to select a target respondent from a household. At the end of the survey period, 1,007 interviews were completed. The response rate was 62.9 percent using the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) formula RR6, and 40.9 percent using the AAPOR formula RR3.

Females constituted 57.3 percent of the sample, 19.7 percent of whom were between the ages of 15 and 29, 18.8 percent between 30 and 39, and 21.7 percent between 40 and 49. About one fourth of the sample (25.7 percent) had university degrees, while 12.9 percent had primary school education or no formal education at all. According to government statistics, in mid-2010, 53.2 percent of Hong Kong’s people were females, of whom 20.5 percent were between 15 and 29 years of age, 17.1 percent between 30 and 39, and 22.4 percent between 40 and 49. The sample-population discrepancies in age and sex were minimal. More substantial discrepancies existed in education, as government census data in 2006 showed that only 15.4 percent of Hong Kong people had university degrees, and 25.4 percent had primary school education or no formal education at all. The data were therefore weighted by education when conducting the analysis.

Operationalization

General Support for Social Movements
The survey asked the respondents to rate, using a 0-to-10 scale (0 = absolutely cannot, and 10 = absolutely can), whether the following nine entities were representative of public opinion: political parties, legislators, news commentators, newspapers, television news, call-in talk radio, polling agencies, the government, and social movements. Conceptually, the ratings people give to social movements can indicate the extent to which they have accepted organizing social movements as a proper way to stake claims in the public opinion process. Hence, the ratings can be used as a measure of people’s general attitude toward social movements. The mean score of the variable is 5.21, which is higher than the mid-point of the scale and significantly higher than the mean scores for political parties, legislators, and the government (which are 4.54, 4.67, and 4.94, respectively; mean differences are statistically significant at $p < .05$ in paired-samples t-tests in all three cases). Yet, Hong Kong people still rated the mass media and polling agencies most positively (which have mean scores ranging from 5.52 to 6.11).

Support for the Anti-ER Movement
The survey asked the respondents to state, using a five-point Likert scale
ranging from very not supportive to very supportive, whether they supported the government’s Express Rail proposal. Opposing the government’s proposal meant that one’s opinion was consistent with the claim of the anti-ER movement. Hence, this item was used to represent the respondents’ support for the cause of the anti-ER movement. The item was reverse-coded, so higher values represent stronger support for the movement ($M = 2.60$, $S.D. = 1.07$).

**Information Source**
The survey asked the respondents: “What are the major channels from which you acquired information about the anti-Express Rail movement?” The interviewers coded the respondents’ answers according to television, radio, print media, the Internet, family/friends/acquaintances, and “other.” A respondent might name multiple sources. The findings show that traditional mass media remained the most important information sources: 86.1 percent of the respondents named television as a major information source, 71.3 percent named print media, and 20.8 percent named radio. These findings are unsurprising since, by the time of the survey, the media had reported the controversies surrounding the Express Rail proposal for months. Yet, even with abundant information from the mass media, 14.4 percent of the respondents still voluntarily named the Internet as a major source of movement-related information.

**Acceptability of Movement Actions**
A set of questions in the survey asked the respondents to indicate, by means of a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = very unacceptable, to 5 = very acceptable, their attitudes toward four forms of collective action carried out by the anti-ER protesters: (1) “demonstrations,” (2) “trekking protest,” (3) “besieging the Legislative Council building,” and (4) charging the police line. Probably partly due to the fact that many citizens did not support the anti-ER movement to begin with, our respondents did not regard the four forms of collective action as highly acceptable. At most, “demonstrations” obtained a mean score of 3.07, which is only slightly above the mid-point of the scale. The trekking protest obtained a mean score of 2.86, which is somewhat below the mid-point. The two other forms of collective action were largely rejected by the respondents: the mean scores for besieging the legislature and charging the police lines were 2.38 and 1.95, respectively. These figures nonetheless confirm the validity of treating the latter two as “radical tactics” adopted by the protesters.

Control variables used in the multivariate analysis include four basic demographics and past protest participation. The latter was constructed by respondents’ answers to two questions: (1) whether they had ever participated in the annual June 4 commemoration rally and/or (2) the annual July 1 protest. The June 4 rallies and the July 1 protests are two series of recurring collective action in Hong Kong, which have attracted the participation of tens of thousands of citizens from year to year.  

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Analysis and Results

Before examining the research hypotheses, it is useful to examine the relationship between people’s general support for social movements and their reliance on different information sources. A study of the anti-Iraq war protests in the United States found that people closer to movement organizations were more likely than others to have used digital communication media to receive movement-related messages. Then, would Hong Kong people’s having a positive attitude toward social movements, in general, tend to rely more on the Internet for information related to a specific movement than people with neutral or negative attitudes toward social movements? We conducted a set of logistic regression analyses with the information sources as the dependent variables. Four demographics, past protest participation, and general support for social movements were used as the independent variables.

Table 1 summarizes the findings. Not surprisingly, young people and educated people were more likely than older and less educated people to name the Internet as a major source of information. But household income did not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information source</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>Print</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Internet</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.25***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.26***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past protest</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>General support for movements</td>
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<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>14.36*</td>
<td>8.42</td>
<td>86.44***</td>
<td>14.40*</td>
<td>142.96***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke $R^2$</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
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</table>

Note. Cell entries are standardized logistic regression coefficients. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.


30 It should be noted that the penetration rate of the Internet in Hong Kong is high. According to government statistics, as of February 2011, 83 percent of Hong Kong households had access to broadband Internet services (see http://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/telecommunications.pdf). Hence, the problem of digital divide, at least in terms of basic access, is not serious in Hong Kong. In any case, the following analysis is concerned mainly with the difference between those who relied on the Internet for movement-related information and those
relate to reliance on the Internet as an information source.\textsuperscript{30}

General support for social movements and past participation in protests have limited relationships with information source. People who expressed high levels of support for social movements were less likely than others to have relied on television as a major source of movement-related information. People who had participated in the June 4 rallies and July 1 protests in the past were more likely to have relied on newspapers and magazines for information.

Both general support for social movements and past protest participation obtained a positive regression coefficient in the last column of Table 1. However, neither coefficient is statistically significant. On the whole, there is no sign showing that Hong Kong citizens who have positive attitudes toward social movements, in general, have become especially reliant on the Internet for information related to a specific movement.

We can now examine the research hypotheses. $H1$ predicts that people who used the Internet as a major source of information should be more supportive of the goal of the anti-ER movement, whereas $H2$ predicts that the relationship between general support for movements and support for the cause of the anti-ER movement should be stronger among people who relied on the Internet as an information source. These two hypotheses can be tested with the same regression model, with support for the anti-ER movement’s cause as the dependent variable. The independent variables include four demographics, past protest participation, general movement support, the information source variables, and an interaction term between Internet as an information source and general support for social movements.\textsuperscript{31}

Table 2 summarized the findings. Not surprisingly, past protest participation is strongly and significantly related to support for the cause of the anti-ER movement. General support for movements also obtained a positive regression coefficient, though the coefficient falls just short of being statistically significant ($p < .06$). More importantly, among the five information source variables, only the interpersonal connection variable has a significant relationship with the dependent variable. Reliance on the Internet as a source of information obtains a positive regression coefficient, which is consistent with the prediction of $H1$. However, the coefficient is not statistically significant ($p = .09$). Therefore, the evidence is not strong enough to support $H1$.

Nevertheless, the interaction between the Internet as an information source and general support for movements is statistically significant. The positive sign

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\textsuperscript{31} The interaction term, which is the key to testing $H2$, was centered to alleviate the problem of multicollinearity. For explanations about the use of centering as a procedure in the examination of interaction effects, see Leona S. Aiken and Stephen G. West, \textit{Multiple Regression Analysis} (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991).

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of the coefficient means that, for people who were reliant on the Internet as an information source, the positive relationship between general support for movements and support for the cause of the anti-ER movement became even more positive. The finding thus supports \( H2 \).

Figure 1 illustrates the support activation effect graphically.\(^{32}\) For people who have relatively low levels of general support for social movements (1

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**Table 2. Internet Use and Attitude toward the Express Rail Project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opposing the Express Rail project</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>Print</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Internet</th>
<th>Past protest participation</th>
<th>General support for movements</th>
<th>Internet X general support for movements</th>
<th>Adjusted R(^2)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.07*</td>
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<td>Past protest participation</td>
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<td>General support for movements</td>
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<td>Internet X general support for movements</td>
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Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. N = 1,007. *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05.

\(^{32}\) The figure was created based on the regression results. High and low levels of general movement support refer to 1 S.D. above or below the mean of the variable, respectively. The values of 0 and 1 were used to represent whether the respondents used the Internet as a major information source. All other independent variables in the model were set at their respective means.
S.D. below the mean score), the line is almost completely horizontal, that is, whether they were reliant on the Internet did not make a difference to their support for the anti-ER movement. But for people who have relatively high levels of general support of social movements, using the Internet as a source for movement-related information was associated with higher levels of support for the anti-ER movement.

Overall, the regression results show that there is not very good support for the generalized persuasion hypothesis. Rather, Internet use is related to support for a movement mainly among people who are already sympathetic to social movements.

To further clarify the specificity of Internet-based communication, we conducted more analysis by creating additional interaction terms between general support for movements and each of the other information source variables. The other interaction terms were then used to replace, on a one-by-one basis, the interaction between Internet and general support for movements in the model. The results show that television, radio, and print media do not have any significant interaction effect with general support for movements on the dependent variable. There is a significant interaction between interpersonal information channels and general support for movements on the dependent variable, but the coefficient has a negative sign ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < .01$). That is, among people who relied on interpersonal channels as a major source of information about the anti-ER movement, the positive relationship between general support for movements and support for the anti-ER movement became weaker and potentially negative. In other words, among the five information source variables, only the Internet exhibits the pattern in line with the support activation effect.

We now turn to the last hypothesis concerning opinion radicalization. Multiple regression analysis was again used. People’s evaluations of the acceptability of four forms of protest action were the dependent variable. For additional information, we also created an index of acceptability of protest action by averaging people’s evaluations of the four forms of action and used it as a fifth dependent variable. The independent variables included four demographics, the five information sources, past protest participation, general support for social movements, attitude toward the government’s plan, and the interaction term between Internet and general support for movements. The key to $H3$ is the last interaction term.

Table 3 summarizes the results. The first column shows that, when the four forms of collective action were combined, males and younger people were more likely than females and older people to find the collective action

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33 The four items indeed are highly correlated with each other. The reliability coefficient, measured by Cronbach’s $\alpha$, is at .78.
acceptable. People with high levels of income, however, tended to find the collective action unacceptable. Obviously, acceptance of collective action is strongly related to past protest participation, general support for social movements, and the respondents’ attitudes toward the Express Rail plan.

Interestingly, a number of information sources relate to acceptability of collective action. Reliance on television relates negatively to acceptability of collective action. But when the four specific types of action were separated, the negative relationship existed only in the cases of the two more radical forms of action. The negative impact of television, therefore, is probably due to the tendency for television news to highlight the violent and aggressive aspects of protest action. “Radical” action, when visually presented, may be particularly unacceptable for common people.

In contrast to television viewers, people who used radio as a major information source were more likely to find collective action acceptable. This finding perhaps indicates the “mobilizing impact” of some radio public-affairs talk shows in Hong Kong. Radio phone-in talk shows on public affairs have become a prominent venue for the expression and communication of public opinion in Hong Kong since the mid-1990s. The leading radio talk shows often exhibit a pro-democracy and critical “bias,” and empirical research has

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<th>Table 3. Regression Analysis of Attitudes toward Protest Actions</th>
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<td>Internet X General support</td>
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<td>Adjusted R²</td>
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Note. Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients. N = 1,007. *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05.
shown that talk-radio listening is positively related to support for democracy and political participation. Given the context, it is understandable that radio consumption relates positively to acceptance of various forms of protest. Yet, it is notable that, when the four forms of collective action were differentiated, reliance on radio was significantly related to acceptance of only the two milder forms of collective action.

Most importantly, reliance on the Internet does not relate to support for any of the four forms of collective action. Yet, the interaction effect between reliance on Internet and general support for social movements is significant and positive. Among people who have high levels of general support for movements, relying on the Internet for movement-related information was associated with high levels of acceptance of collective action.

Nevertheless, the hypothesis concerning opinion radicalization does not predict a generalized positive relationship between Internet use and acceptance of all forms of collective action among movement sympathizers. Rather, what the hypothesis predicts is that reliance on the Internet for movement-related information relates to support for more radical action, in particular. In fact, clearer support for the opinion radicalization hypothesis could be seen when the four forms of action were separated. As the second to fifth columns of table 3 show, the interaction effect between Internet use and general support for social movements is statistically significant only in the cases of the two “radical” forms of collective action. The positive coefficients mean that, for people who strongly support social movements in general, accessing Internet as a major information source was related to high levels of acceptance of the protesters’ attempt to besiege the Legislative Council and charge the police line.

Figure 2 presents the interaction effect graphically. Both panels illustrate the same pattern, which is one of polarization through Internet use. Admittedly, even for people with high levels of general support for movements, the average scores on the two variables are still below the mid-point of the scale, which means that these people, on average, still found the two forms of action unacceptable. But what is important here is that, among people with high levels of general support for movements, using the Internet as a source of information was associated with an increase in perceived acceptability of the two radical forms of collective action. In contrast, among people with low levels of general support for movements, using the Internet was associated with a decrease in acceptance of the radical collective action.

Similar to the analysis regarding H2, additional analysis was conducted to examine whether other information source variables would interact with general

Figure 2. The Opinion Radicalization Effect of the Internet

Support for movements in the same way to influence the dependent variables. The results show that none of the other four information source variables has any significant interaction effect with general support for movements regarding the acceptability of any of the four forms of collective action. Again, only the Internet exhibits opinion radicalization effects.

Concluding Discussion

Our analysis shows that using the Internet as a source of movement-related information has effects on public opinion toward a specific movement. Specifically, we find evidence for the support activation and opinion radicalization hypotheses. Hong Kong people who relied on the Internet for movement-related information exhibited a stronger association than others between their general support for social movements and their support for the
anti-ER movement. These people were also likely to find the radical actions of the anti-ER movement activists more acceptable.

It should be noted that, in table 3, the interaction effect between Internet as an information source and general support for social movements is statistically significant only in the cases of the two radical actions. The interaction effect does not apply to the two less controversial forms of action. However, this does not refute the opinion radicalization thesis. It simply means that, when an action is not too controversial and is already accepted as legitimate by a large portion of the population, Internet communication does not have any further effect on people’s acceptance of such action. Rather, it is when the actions of the movement are highly controversial that Internet communication becomes influential.

This pattern is consistent with the argument that controversial and/or radical movement actions are likely to be marginalized or criticized by the mainstream media. In Hong Kong, many social movement activists have criticized the media for misrepresenting their claims and actions. In the present study, the negative relationship between reliance on television and acceptance of the two forms of “radical action” can be taken as evidence supporting the criticisms of the mainstream media by movement activists. In this context, the value of the Internet for social movements is that it can become a platform to communicate with potential supporters more directly, and in the online arena, that social movements have the chance to explain why they must engage in seemingly radical action. Therefore, Internet-based communication may matter the most when movements engage in action which does not correspond with general societal norms. Of course, the tendency for people to pay attention only to messages congruent with their existing views means that such online communication may not affect everyone. Instead, those who were already generally sympathetic toward movements were most likely to find the relevant contents online and also find them persuasive. Hence, the opinion radicalization effect involved an interaction between Internet use and general movement support and was applicable mainly to radical action.

Compared to support activation and opinion radicalization, the persuasion hypothesis is not confirmed. Although the Internet variable in table 2 obtains a positive coefficient, the relationship is not statistically significant. In figure 2, we see that using the Internet as a major information source did not generate support for the anti-ER movement among people who had a low level of general support for movements. Table 3, meanwhile, shows that there is no

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36 Grace Leung, “The Past and the Present of the Relationship between Social Movements and the Media in Hong Kong,” paper presented at the Conference on Hong Kong Culture and Society, October 2010, HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity, Hong Kong.

37 Wojcieszak, “‘Carrying Online Participation Offline.’”
main effect of the Internet on attitude toward the collective action. Thus, the findings of this study mainly point to how the Internet can reinforce rather than change people’s existing attitudes and predispositions.

It should be reiterated that this study treats the Internet holistically as an information environment. The hypotheses are premised on the relative ease of accessing contents sympathetic toward or supportive of social movements online, as well as the prevalence of audience selectivity in the online environment. Without denying the value of differentiating the influences of various online channels and platforms from each other, the findings of this study show that conceptually meaningful patterns can also be derived by adopting a “holistic” approach to Internet-based political communication.

At the beginning of the essay, we mentioned that new media technologies may have played a role in the proliferation of social movements in contemporary societies by creating new forms of communication, mobilization, and participation for movements, and that we are interested in whether the Internet may also facilitate the rise of movements by shifting public opinion favorably toward them. Our findings suggest that we should not exaggerate the influence of the Internet in this latter regard. Although studies in other contexts are needed to ascertain whether the Hong Kong case can be generalized, there are theoretical reasons why the current findings should be applicable to other societies. As long as the Internet is marked by a tendency for people to cluster around others with similar views, across-the-board “Internet effects” on all people are unlikely. Instead, consistent with arguments made by various scholars, this study’s findings suggest that the Internet is likely to polarize public opinion. The empirical findings of this study fall in line with those who have argued that the Internet might fragment the public arena.

Nevertheless, when the Internet’s effects are placed into specific social contexts, there still could be situations in which the Internet might enhance the emergence of social movements by altering public opinion. This would be the case when there are already other social forces and factors pushing a society toward what some scholars have labeled a “movement society” in the first place. That is, while there is little reason to treat the Internet as a prime cause behind the development of a movement society, the Internet might nonetheless reinforce an already existing trend toward a movement society.

This indeed may be the case in Hong Kong, where a protest cycle has

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38 Bennett and Iyengar, “A New Era of Minimal Effects?”
39 Meyer and Tarrow, The Social Movement Society.
40 Wilheim, Democracy in the Digital Age.
41 Sustein, Republic 2.0, and Marmura, “A Net Advantage?”
42 Meyer and Tarrow, The Social Movement Society.
arguably begun since the historic July 1 protest in 2003. Since then, new political and movement organizations have emerged, and new collective claims have been raised. Since 2005, a number of movement organizations have become active concerning heritage protection and urban planning. In fact, the anti-ER movement is but one episode of the larger movement addressing the problems of urban planning in the city.

The root cause of the protest cycle is traced back to the weaknesses of the political system in Hong Kong and the continual underdevelopment of democratization, which has led to the enduring legitimacy crisis of the Hong Kong government. As mentioned in the methods section, our survey found that Hong Kong people regard social movements as more representative of public opinion than the Hong Kong government, the legislature, and political parties. Although we lack longitudinal data tracing public opinion toward social movements in Hong Kong, it is arguable that protest actions have become more and more commonplace in the city and that citizens have become used to them, if they do not necessarily support them.

The Internet did not create the protest cycle in Hong Kong. But since the protest cycle has come into place due to structural reasons and critical events, the Internet probably has contributed to the further growth of it by reinforcing sympathizers’ favorable attitudes. In this sense, the Internet can still be regarded as having facilitated the expansion of social movements and collective action in contemporary Hong Kong.

Admittedly, this essay has a couple of limitations which must be acknowledged. First, it is essentially a case study examining only one social movement in Hong Kong. But there are no strong and specific reasons to see the anti-ER movement as idiosyncratic. The findings of this study should be illustrative of the general implications of the Internet on public opinion toward social movements in the city, even though the ability to generalize the findings has yet to be established through further research on other cases.

Second, with a cross-sectional survey, the causal direction of the relationships is not established. It is possible that people actively sought information through the Internet when they were generally sympathetic toward social movements and supportive toward the anti-ER movement. A similar alternative interpretation can be made regarding the opinion radicalization phenomenon. Therefore, the employment of the terminologies of “media effects” throughout this essay should be understood as one possible way to interpret the significance of the findings. Future research with more sophisticated design is needed to ascertain the causal direction involved.

Although these arguments place the notion of Internet “effects” in question, it should be emphasized that such alternative interpretations do not render invalid the more general arguments made by this study. No matter whether

44 Ma, “Value Changes and Legitimacy Crisis.”
movement-related information is “pushed toward” or “pulled by” Internet users, the pattern of relationships among people’s reliance on the Internet as an information source, their general support for movements, and their support for a specific movement remains suggestive of the Internet’s capability to shape public opinion toward social movements.