

Hong Kong Rising: Does the beauty of crowds distract from the politics?

Once again a generation of well-educated, aspirational young people who want democracy with their economic growth have taken to the streets to demand a political system that gives them representation that reflects their views.

Hong Kong's streets now resemble Cairo's Tahrir Square, Istanbul's Taksim Square and Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti- though, so far, without the extreme violence that left so much blood in those places.



Of course, it is vital to remember that while all protests might [look the same on Twitter](#), they all have different causes, contexts and dynamics as well as varying motives and aims. They certainly all play out differently. [Paul Mason's book](#) 'It's All Kicking Off' is a stirring account of the global protests from a few years ago but it suffered from the author's desire to find a unifying radical ideal to link them all.

From a media point of view I think there are two main points to be made.

Firstly, the world does know more and pays greater attention to these protests than it would have done pre-digital. That's not always much of a help in the short-term (see [#Kony2012](#), [#bringbackourgirls](#)) but even the hardest-bitten social media sceptic must recognise that visibility is at least a start, a necessary precondition to debate and ultimately action. It's what academics call deliberation and agency. [Evgeny Morozov](#) is quite right that the authorities will use the same technologies to try to monitor, counter and suppress dissent. The Chinese government has [blocked or censored social networks](#), for example. But at least that shows that they are having to react to their citizens' complaints. Arguably, the more they repress, the more they [bring people's attention to the anger](#) (the 'dictator's social media dilemma').

Secondly, there is a new dynamic evolving between personal media, social networks, mainstream media and real life. [Zeynep Tufekci](#) has been charting this evolving relationship in detail, but generally it's much too early to talk

about a power shift. It's a communication shift. People can now organise better thanks to new technologies. They can make their case and they can share their anger beyond their immediate community. That builds a kind of solidarity. These protest networks may be made up of relatively 'weak ties' but their dispersed structures may be a strength.

The umbrella protest has spawned a vibrant sub-culture of instant political imagery: the clever uses of the umbrella logo, the mash-ups of mainstream media, the endless flow of still and video imagery across twitter, Facebook, Vine, Instagram and even the clever spread of dissent across the censored networks of Weibo and other China-facing platforms. But can the creativity be a distraction in itself?

Does all this media use over-raise expectations and harden demands? Does it make it more difficult for authorities to negotiate? Do outsiders admire the energy and imagery and fail to understand what is at stake? Do you actually know what the Hong Kong protestors want? It's actually quite a dry and dusty demand for a more open electoral process that allows them, not Beijing to choose candidates in their elections. Although, of course, behind that demand is a broader desire for real democracy in their system within the Chinese system. As the FT's Asia editor David Pilling has written, it's difficult to see the Chinese Communist Party caving in. So where exactly will this stunning parade of protest lead?

Some reaction to this article:



Some other links:

Hong Kong University journalism students are curating a [Facebook page](#) of 'verified information'

It's not just new platforms, it's new ways of creating content – [drones for example](#).

Here's [Clay Shirky's take](#): 'The odds against this movement are serious, but they have shown that adapting urban space to political communication is an act of shared imagination and adaptation.' Clay is right to be sceptical, his piece has some great observations about protestor behaviours but it reads like art criticism rather than political communication analysis.

Here's a rather [optimistic piece by Emily Parker](#), that I feel confuses visibility with power. Just because America is watching does not mean that it's not a local situation politically. I doubt Obama is putting any pressure on Beijing over this.

This is a really neat live [global solidarity tool](#) – the messages are displayed live on a screen to the protestors in HK:

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