

Tactics in Networked Social Movements: Case Study of “Be Water” and the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement

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Abstract

The era of social media was said to be a great step of decentralization of discourses, while voices of minorities could be more easily heard. In social movement context, the usage of social media had been increasing, along with an optimistic view that usage of social media can encourage interactions and assemble of power (Wang et al., 2013). The highly-recognized strategy of “Be Water” is closely related to this background. Protestors used social media to communicate, discuss tactics and call for rallies, which had further influenced the social movements in Catalonia, Chile and Belarus. However, instead of celebrating the usage of network and social media in social movements, this article focuses on the limited effects of the “Be Water” tactic. With a panoramic view to the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (Anti-ELAB), this article analyzes two major incidents, the Polytechnic University conflict, which is a recognized major radical conflict; and the 616 protest, which is claimed to have the highest attendance throughout the whole Anti-ELAB. Online discourses from web forums, news reports and printed literatures are used for a textual and discourse analysis. While, I suggest that the online tactics in social movements did not completely change a social movement, while the difficulties and oppression faced by protestors are not being solved by these tactics. It is hoped to show that “Be Water” strategy and use of social media should not be too optimistically viewed, while lots of oppression are still remaining unsolved in social movement fields.

Keywords: Anti-ELAB, Anti-Extradition Bill Movement, be water, networked social movement, social movement tactics

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Introduction

The use of internet and social media in social movement scenes had been emerging. To discuss this phenomenon, Castells (2012) introduced the notion of **Networked Social Movement**, referring to the decentralized structure and self-driven action in social movements of internet era.

Networked Social Movement was treated as a great leap of speech freedom and democracy, especially in terms of how discussions and interactions are liberalized during online activities (Lin & Cheng, 2001; Su et al., 2022). Several studies (e.g., Lin & Cheng, 2001; Wang et al., 2013) had pointed out that decentralized social media make the spreading and interchanging of information much more efficient than before, which is important during a social movement scene where situations may change really fast. Moreover, the decentralized information spreading can avoid domination and framing from traditional media, whose reports were long criticized to be discursively affecting the social movement scene and introducing bias to the whole movement (Castells, 2012; Rucht, 2004). Other edges include the virtuality of internet that erased the territory barrier of mobilization and cross-region cooperation during actions (H. Lin & Cheng, 2001), and the decreasing costs in spreading information (Ruijgrok, 2017).

These discussions had led to an overall optimistic view towards the effects of social media on social movements (Chen et al., 2016). No matter in terms of media reporting, mobilization and discussions about social movements' actions, network and social media had given a more tentative and utopian future to social movements. Research like Eltantawy and Wiest (2011), Sommerfedlt (2013) and Wang (2017) had employed the classic theory of resources mobilization to describe this digital utopian view, which the improvement of communication technology was defined as an evolved resource that can be used by social movements. Empirical studies like Xie (2014) and Lee (2014) had also shown positive relations between using social media and political participation.

However, there are also researchers that questioned the importance of social media in social movement scenes. For example, Gladwell (2010, Oct) criticized the weak ties and low participation commitment of networked social movements' participants as slacktivism (a compound word of Slack and Activism), while Morozov (2011) further questioned on how much actual actions will online participants do for a social movement. These claims can be categorized as a form of cyber-dystopian (Nye, 2004), which is in contrast of the optimism that discussed in the last paragraph. Also, some scholars proposed a third route naming skepticism (see Lin, 2012; May, 2002), who emphasize that the distribution of resources online is still unfair and shaped by political, economic and social relations. Thus, in skepticism believers' eyes, going online had neither changed the actual situation of social movement nor contributed to a more liberated society.

There is not yet a solid conclusion that cyber-utopian, cyber-dystopian or skepticism is correct. However, in the actual social movement scene, the usage of social media, as to bring social movements new imaginations and possibilities, had become a normal practice within the recent decades (Chen, 2019; Chen et al., 2016). In this article, the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (henceforth Anti-ELAB) in Hong Kong within 2019 to 2020 was chosen as a case study. The Anti-ELAB is one of the most concerned political movements in Sinophone society, while also the largest social movement in Hong Kong (Foundation on Asia-Pacific Peace Studies, 2019; Liu, 2021). The Anti-ELAB had significantly emphasized its decentralization and flexibility strategies during protests, which was later named "Be Water",

borrowing from the famous line of Bruce Lee, the local kungfu artist (Zhang, 2021). Article from *the Financial Times* further elaborated this strategy in a somehow poetic way:

‘Be strong like ice’ when confronted by police or violent vigilante groups; ‘be fluid like water’ in order to disrupt many parts of the city at once and stretch police resources; ‘gather like dew’ for ‘flash-mob’ protests that are hard to prepare for; ‘scatter like mist’ to avoid arrest and fight another day. (Anderlini, 2019, September 2)

The “Be Water” strategy had much linked with online activities from participants and protesters. Su et al. (2022) mentioned the usage of instant messaging (IM) software Telegram within protestors, which had better privacy and anonymity affordance than the other IM software like WhatsApp and Facebook which is used in the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Other common online tools include the LIHKG forum, which is also an anonymous platform where protesters and online participants can disseminate information, discussing strategies or rally locations and call for new actions (Lee, 2020). Protesters form Telegram channels or create posts on LIHKG forum to disseminate protest news, and radical protestors also use secret Telegram groups to discuss topics like confronting, buying weapons or flash-mob protests (Su et al., 2022). According to the interviews done by the documentary “Revolution of Our Times” (Team of “Revolution of Our Times”, 2022), there are also groups that helps protestors finding vehicles to leave the protest scene, offering unwanted gears in protest or even providing online medical consultation for injured frontline protesters.

Thus, Su et al. (2022) made a conclusion that the affordances of communication technology affected the Anti-ELAB movement and how the protesters “Be Water.” However, from Lee’s perspective (2020), instead of providing a chance of liberation, the interference of social media had actually led to problems like disinformation and aggravated the information politics.

This article’s problématique started from the above diverse opinion towards the usage of social media in Anti-ELAB. Does social media help liberate the actual scene of Anti-ELAB? Does the strategy of “Be Water” really being accentuated by the usage of social media? Throughout this article, I will hold a skepticism view and to argue that the use of social media in Anti-ELAB does not contribute to liberation, while this also does not affect the notion of “Be Water”. In the later sections, I will go for an overview of the concept of “Be Water” in different social movements; while also, the usage of social media in two major scenes in the Anti-ELAB, the Polytechnic University conflict (henceforth PolyU Conflict) and the 616 Protest will be further discussed and analyzed.

(Networked) Social Movements and “Be Waterness”

Obviously, before the Anti-ELAB, “Be Water” was not a concept or slogan that was used within social movement contexts. However, considering the characteristic that the notion of “Be Water” has, that may not be something brand new to social movements.

“Be Water,” as a social movement strategy, emphasizes its flexibility and decentralization (Zhang, 2021). Tai (2019 Dec) also added that anonymity is a feature of “Be Water,” extending the metaphor that protesters leave no stain for tracing. These three descriptions had been the common recognition of the notion of “Be Water.” However, tracing back to the

social movements before, I suggest that these three features are not only shown in and after the Anti-ELAB. I will discuss some cases in the following paragraphs.

Flexibility

Social movements were defined as a group of people with common goals or aims continuously interacting with elites, governments or people with power (Ho, 2005). In this sense, the strategies of protesters vary in different movements, as to face different types of opposition or fit into different contexts. For example, in green activism groups, protesters raise plants on land that does not belong to them, as a flexible participation that allow people from worldwide to join (Hardman et al., 2018). West German students in 1960s used humorous tactics to promote their protest, as to gain spotlights and discussions (Teune, 2007). China protesters holding blank white paper, instead of propaganda slogans, to show their anger to the Chinese government's pandemic measures, as to prevent being accused by the government (Huang & Kung, 2022). These examples demonstrate that social movements' participants are always needing to create new strategies to face the predictable oppression from the authorities.

In the Anti-ELAB, protesters' flexibility was mainly reflected in their quick mobilization. Protesters gathered fast when rallies were called and dispersed fast when riot police came. Also, protests took place in anywhere in Hong Kong in a "flash-mob" sense, as to consume the power of the riot police, which were described as a form of guerrilla (Wong, 2023). However, it is worth reminding that guerrilla, as a strategy, had been well developed in social movement context (Bloom et al., 2021). Wickham-Crowley (2022) added that guerrilla movements are useful when the authority is tightening the freedom or showing serious oppression. Under this concept, I would like to add a note, that facing serious oppression and tightening freedom is somehow common in social movement scenes, which is the main reason why social movements (including Anti-ELAB) are "guerrillarize." The use of social media may be a tool that helps spread the thought and tactics on guerrilla protests; however, were not a key feature that made guerrilla protests happen.

Decentralization

Decentralization had been a key feature in networked social movements, as it is believed that the emerging social media can break the domination of discourse from the traditional media (Castells, 2012). Under this decentralization process, people with different social capital became equal on social media, and thus voices of minorities and oppressed groups could be more easily heard (Chen et al., 2016).

In the Anti-ELAB, decentralization is also a core notion and strategy, naming MouDaaiToi (無大台, No Main Organizer). It is a well-known slogan during the movement (Ma, 2020). However, it is worth noted that, the decentralization in Anti-ELAB is mainly based on a correction from the defeat in the Umbrella Movement in 2014 (Ho, 2020). In the Umbrella Movement, protesters occupied and stayed at the main roads in Hong Kong for 79 days. Protesters and organizers promote slogan of "Protest peacefully" (和平抗爭) and suggest protester to show their courage by sitting right on the road to let the riot police to arrest them; which had later been criticized as the reason of unsuccessful social movement (Passion Times, 2016). This defeat had led to the emerging groups of valiant activists after 2014 (Chan & Ng, 2017). They despise the traditional democratic groups that usually takes a mild and peaceful stance in social movements, for example, the Civil Human Right Fronts and the Hong Kong

Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, who are always the organizer of major demonstrations and rallies in Hong Kong (Chan & Ng, 2017). In other words, the decentralization strategy in Anti-ELAB is mainly due to a distrust to usual organizers, but not a result of the emerging social media usage. Again, in this case, social media can only be treated as a tool or accelerant that made decentralization **more** possible.

Anonymity

In protest scenes, especially when the risk of being arrested is high, people tend to go for anonymous plans, in order not to be traced by the authority (Ho, 2005). In the Anti-ELAB, anonymity is shown on the black bloc tactic of protesters which make their identity hidden in the actual scene (Ma, 2020). Protesters used a black bloc costume with gas masks to block their whole body, mainly to ensure that police will not be able to trace them afterwards by their clothing or faces (Ma, 2020). However, it is worth noted that black bloc, or masks like the “V for Venetta” mask, is already a well-established social movement gear, which is commonly used in protests like the German black bloc movement in the late Cold War period and the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. In other words, the anonymity strategy of Anti-ELAB in protest scenes is quite universal and common.

If we put our attention back to online, the use of Telegram and LIHKG forum, which I discussed in the previous section, is also a sense of anonymity. Protesters relied on the encrypting function of Telegram and delete their conversation messages time to time to prevent being traced (Su et al., 2022). Under this high concern on anonymity, protesters are safer when discussing tactics online, as it is believed that the police will monitor online speeches and discussions (Ma, 2020). In a cyber-utopian perspective, these measures seem to use social media well and accentuated freedom of speech. However, here I would like to argue that these kinds of secret, private conversations can still be accomplished even without social media — just imagine the secret societies like XingZhongHui (興中會) by Sun Yat Sen during the late Qing period. There is always a need to have secret conversations during social or political movements, while social media is just a new field that provides a virtual place for protesters to sit down and discuss. Moreover, it is also a doubt that did those social media like Telegram and LIHKG forum really do their job to protect the protesters’ anonymity, or is actually leading to another route of governmental monitoring (this will be discussed further in the case study section). To conclude, the usage of gears or tools to hide the actual identity, no matter at the protest scene or online, is not a strategy that invented under the notion of “Be Water”. Instead, it is a certain outcome when the authority tries to use different ways to monitor or trace the identity of protesters, no matter if we are in a web era or in the 1900s.

The previous paragraphs discussed the three characteristics of “Be Water.” While it is clear that, after all, “Be Water” as a strategy, is just a constructed notion after the Anti-ELAB commenced, as to describe the action of protesters or even the whole social movement.¹ It is not realistic to expect any special power of “Be Water” which made Anti-ELAB totally different from other previous social movements. Also, these features of “Be Water” is not tightly related to social media. Similar strategies were always there, while social movement examples before the web era had shown also their strategies of how to “Be Water”. In other words, “Be Water” did not pop out due to the usage of social media. In the next part of case studies, I will go through two significant incidents in the Anti-ELAB and evaluate the

¹ The Anti-ELAB was once named “Water Revolution,” under the notion of “Be Water.” For such naming, see news article by Anderlini (2019 September 2).

interaction between the usage of social media, “Be Water” strategy and the actual scene of the movement.

Scenes in Anti-ELAB

In this article, two major scenes in the Anti-ELAB were chosen for case study, which is the PolyU Incident and the 616 Protest. PolyU Incident refers to the conflict of protesters and riot police around the Hong Kong Polytechnic University during 13th to 29th November, 2019. Within the PolyU Incident, riot police proposed a blockade for more than a week on protesters staying inside the PolyU and bombarded them with tear gas and water cannon vehicles, while protesters resisted with Molotov cocktails and bricks (Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, 2020). The PolyU Incident was described as the biggest confront between protesters and riot police within the whole Anti-ELAB.

The second scene chosen for case study is the 616 Protest on the 16th June, 2019. It was the biggest-ever protest in Hong Kong history, which the organizer claimed for a two-million participants joining the rally.² This rally was concerned and highlighted by major media worldwide, like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*; while they addressed the rally as orderly and peaceful (Bradsher & Victor, 2019, June 16). The choosing of these two scenes is aimed to include the major incidents in the Anti-ELAB, especially to address both the both the Valiants and the WoLeiFeis.³ So, a rather radical protest and a comparatively peaceful protest scene is chosen for analysis. Below, I will go deep into these two scenes and discuss their usage of social media during the protest.

PolyU Incident

The PolyU incident was described as the biggest confront of protesters and police during the Anti-ELAB. Commencing on the 11th November, 2019, the incident elevated within a few days, while the police proposed a blockade to the whole campus of PolyU on 17th November, after several serious conflicts with the protesters (for more about PolyU incident, see Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, 2020). The police defined the whole PolyU incident as a riot, while it is claimed that all people staying inside or entering PolyU would be arrested and charged. The blockade continued for nearly two weeks, with no medical aid or food were allowed to enter the campus. During the blockade, 1377 protesters were arrested, and unknown numbers of protesters escaped successfully through abseiling from pedestrian bridges, climbing out the campus to the railway tracks or even by crawling through the sewerage (Yeung, 2019, Nov 29). The PolyU incident was described as a humanitarian disaster (Mann, 2019).

The protesters in PolyU were originally aiming to support the labor strikes actions by paralyzing transportations in Hung Hom metro station and the Cross-Harbour Tunnel, both right next to the PolyU. However, after the blockade started, the major focus of protesters

² The actual number of participants claimed by the organizer, Civil Human Rights Front, is two million plus one. The added one refers to Mr. Leung Ling-Kit, who committed suicide when showing banners supporting the Anti-ELAB one day before the 616 protest. His suicide was also a reason of the large number of participants in the 616 protest.

³ WoLeiFei is a Hongkongese abbreviation of Wo (和, Peaceful), Lei (理, Rational) and Fei (非, Non-violent). This notion is commonly used in the Anti-ELAB referring to the protesters who will not directly confront the police, but to take a rather peaceful attitude during demonstrations. For more discussion on this concept, see Ma (2020).

quickly shifted to “how to escape.” Under the strategy of “not dividing the Valiants and WoLeiFeis” (和勇不分), finding routes to escape the PolyU had become a mission of protesters that could not join the actual protest scene, while they were described as keyboard fighters or keyboard supporters.

To understand the online discourse of PolyU Incident, I used PolyU (理大) and Polytechnic University (理工大學) as keywords and archived a total of ten discussions about the incident in the LIHKG forum. They all have more than 500 comments and 500 likes, which shows their popularity among all posts related to the incident. These posts mostly started during the PolyU Incident, as a form of live discussion, including strategy negotiation, real-time information sharing or sharing of online news. After grouping those discourses together, it is found that disinformation is filled in online discussion about PolyU incident. For example, a post with more than 1700 likes is named “PolyU may be the second June fourth incident,” and stating that the China People’s Liberation Army had started marching in the city, which will soon enter PolyU and commence a massacre. The post is echoed by tons of comments, while most of them did not raise any question about where the information is from. Another obvious disinformation topics included like “Protesters arrested in PolyU is sent to China by railway,” “Protesters had invented chlorine gas bottle as weapons against the police,” which are all similar situation of disinformation with no obvious evidence provided.

Disinformation within the Anti-ELAB is discussed in Lee (2020). Lee (2020) argued that the tons of disinformation had led to distrust within protesters; also, under the scheme of not having a responsible group in charge, the problem of disinformation had accelerated, as no one is capable to give a strong-enough clarification to the situation. This had led to several problems in the PolyU Incident. First, one of the major missions of online supporters should be finding paths for protesters inside PolyU to leave safely. However, under these disinformation, any secret route posted on online forums may be considered suspicious, or can be a trap of the police. This mistrust had weakened the power of “Be Water,” as online protesters cannot effectively get their job done through a highly-engaged usage of social media as a protest platform.

616 Protest

The 616 Protest on the 16th June, 2019 was at the very beginning of the entire Anti-ELAB, and was when the well-known “Five Demands” of the Anti-ELAB protesters formed. Right before the day of the Protest, the then Chief Executive, Ms. Carrie Lam had posted a suspend of the ELAB, but the protesters demanded for a total withdraw of the law. The unsatisfactory reply of Carrie Lam had led to a huge amount of crowds onto the street. Also the day before the Protest, a Hongkonger named Leung Man Kit commit suicide at the Pacific Place, an iconic building on the normal demonstration route, with banners and slogans supporting the Anti-ELAB movement. This had also emotionally affected crowds to step onto the street, while Leung Man Kit, with his yellow raincoat, had then become a symbolic icon of the whole movement.

Under these reasons, the 616 Protest eventually brought 2 million plus one Hongkonger to the street, according to the Civil Human Rights Front who organize the protest.⁴ Unlike the latter

⁴ The actual number of protesters is unknown and disputable, while figures from pro-government groups and pro-democracy groups showed big difference. For example, the estimated protester numbers were just 380000 from the Hong Kong Police. This will be discussed further in the below paragraphs.

protests that protesters were separated into Valiants and WoLeiFei groups, the 616 Protest can be described as peaceful and of good order. At the time, protesters were not aiming to arm themselves and fight against the riot police. Instead, they were trying to show how peaceful and civilized can Hong Kong protesters be. They consciously perform themselves as peaceful protesters, and just alike every social movement (see Rone, 2022), protester try to gain media coverage by showing their good image. “Not visually satisfying” (畫面唔靚) even became a common critique to Valiants who enact rather radical confrontation to the police force. Due to the clear aim of gaining media support, I used this protest as a case to show how online discourses may interfere the aim of the protesters.

The essence of a mass protest can be the number of participants. Attendance in protest is always a contested figure in social movements (Tilly, 2004), where both sides will tend to propose a number conducive to their stance and discourse. The official number of participants in the 616 protest was 2 million plus one and 340,000 respectively, according to the organizer and the police force’s claim. The huge difference had led to questions from medias, especially from foreign press who may not be able to witness the event (see Scarr et al., 2019, June 20). Many scholars and organizations tried to use scientific way for a more accurate measure, for example, Lee Hong-yin had estimated a figure of 892,000 to 1,442,000 using big data prediction (cf. Lin, 2019). Post-legislative council member Edward Yiu had claimed a number between 1,120,000 to 1,840,000 based on a population calculation formula (see EcyY, 2019). These figures, with a clear calculation method stated, had higher credibility than the previous two figures from the official. However, the number of 2 million plus one is too well-established that attracted news media to use. In online discourse, serious echo chamber effect had also restrained discussions about the actual protest figure. At the end, no foreign media or major local media had quoted the above measurements, while a questionable figure had dominated discourses on news media and online platforms.

This shows another weakness of networked social movements. From an optimistic view, social media had made many discussions possible, especially for the minorities (Chen et al., 2016). However, under the recent evolution of online algorithm, an obvious echo chamber is made, while questioning an established discourse (or figure of protest) became increasing difficult. In fact, it had even provided a room for disinformation or misinformation to spread, as information can easily be communed under a viral phenomenon. In this sense, social media platform had still a long way to go, before stating itself liberating the freedom of speech.

Conclusion: The Myth of “Be Water” and Networked Social Movements

This essay is not trying to go against the notion of “Be Water.” In fact, “Be Water” as a social movement strategy, had long been proved effective, although using some kinds of different names like guerrilla protest (see Bloom et al., 2021). The main concept of “Be-waterness” like decentralization, anonymity and flexibility is also shown in the Anti-ELAB even without online participation. So, what I am arguing is that the social media environment did not actually prepare a better environment to enhance this notion. Instead, under a highly-anonymous sphere, it is easy for disinformation or penetration of the government to hide within protesters’ online discourses. This brought me to another Anti-ELAB notion of “Catching Spy” (捉鬼), referring to what the protester did to spot police or pro-government citizens hidden in protesters’ crowd, who will create violent scene and provide reasons for the true police to come and arrest the protesters. Catching Spy is not always a successful action (see Ho, 2025); however, it is obvious that comparing to catching in real protest scene,

catching spy in online platform will be much more difficult. This had led to an unresolvable problem of online protest, that anonymity must have to face.

It is no doubt that networked social movement had its own strengths. For example, in terms of mobility, social media is undoubtedly an important tool to reach as much people as possible. However, even for this claim, there are still critiques arguing that the mobilized crowd in social media is just a form of slacktivism (Piat, 2019). This debate actually concluded this article: networked social movement is not a liberation, but instead a totally different environment of social movements, where new pros and cons both emerged. It required new bunch of strategies and epistemologies towards social movements in a new form. Before we can celebrate for a liberation of speech, much more researches and conceptualization works are yet be done.

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