"Anti"-Social Media: The Polarizing Force of Social Media Platforms as seen in the Hong Kong Protests

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Tens of thousands of demonstrators called on the U.S. to protect human rights in Hong Kong, with many waving American flags and chanting "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!"

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WSJ.COM
Hong Kong Protesters Call for U.S. Support

A tagline post for a Wall Street Journal Article on Facebook's News Feed
Source: Facebook, Wall Street Journal

As the protests in Hong Kong reach the 12th week of turmoil, the situation is as dire as ever: a massive army of young protestors violently clashing with an authoritarian Chinese Communist Party police – or so it seems. If one were to look at the top trending Hong Kong related posts on

social media, one would see posts like those from WSJ stating "Hong Kong Protestors Rally for Independence" featuring a photo of protesters waving US Flags alongside glorified imagery of President Trump[1] along with Twitter posts from leading activist Joshua Wong claiming "UPHILL BATTLES AHEAD."[2] These posts paint an "us against them" picture for the protesters in Hong Kong. However, the reality of the situation is much more complex, but social media as a medium for acquiring information fails to bring forth the nuances of a divided and leaderless movement.

Let us further examine how social media is influencing perception of Hong Kong. After searching for Hong Kong related news on the internet, social media outlets such as a Facebook, Twitter and Google News have slipped opinion piece posts to my daily feed. Many of these posts have eye-catching teasers, such as "The Hong Kong protests are the most serious challenge to the Community Party's since Tiananmen Square Massacre"[3] from *The Economist* alongside a video collage displaying a violent crash between the Hong Kong police and students. Similarly, a *Reuters* post states in an overgeneralizing manner "Hong Kong protesters hurl petrol bombs at government buildings".[4] While the two posts' messages differ in their messaging, both promote empty, out-of-context statements that do not represent the complexity of the ongoing movement. Despite this flaw, the convenience eases us into relying solely on – and thereby trusting – social media as a means of acquiring and forwarding information.

Furthermore, the comments section of the posts on the social media platforms that allow for discourse among users likewise give the spotlight for extreme and overtly punchy viewpoints, with statements such as "Hong Kong idiots are at it again! China is taking back what is rightfully

[1] https://www.wsj.com/articles/hong-kong-protesters-call-for-u-s-support-11567931423
[2] https://twitter.com/joshuawongcf?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor
[3] https://tinyurl.com/yyf6dcly
[4] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-idUSKBN1W0009?fbclid=IwAR1WYl3mNhFDIupmjdH-l2iiVJNNTRI8nJo8y7TrkhIzJ35qSbXFgPTvRbs

theirs from the West!" and replies such as "Chinese brainwashed robots are falling victim to the authoritarian regime #chinazi" frequently featured at the top of the comments section. These statements, much like the article taglines, are the most "upvoted" or "liked" given their appeal to emotion which are filtered to the top of the comments section as a result of the algorithmic methods used by social media. Ultimately, social media distorts the reality of the situation.

In addition, social media has created a polarizing effect in Hong Kong. Many protestors make posts on social media that are predominately short and curtailed in order to rapidly garner attention and support for their movements; slogans calling for the "five key demands," a demand for the removal of the Extradition Bill, amnesty for protestors, and universal suffrage, are able to go viral overnight. On the other hand, lengthy posts are difficult to write and often ignored; why read a time-consuming post when there are so many that are shorter? The nature – and greatest perk – of social media is that provides an influx of easily consumable information, which consequently discourages lengthy discussion.

One may be inclined to argue that social media can still provide a comprehensive overview for a social or political movement if one reads a variety of posts from different users and discussion threads. However, if one's aim is to acquire a 3-dimensional perspective, social media is ill-suited for the goal.

Again, let us examine the democracy movement in Hong Kong. The top trending posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Google News[5] portray a starkly black and white situation. However, just from my spending of a brief period – three weeks to be exact as a part of a study abroad program – in Hong Kong and reading texts, news publications, television, live interviews with academics, protestors, and everyday citizens, I observed a much more dynamic situation than one would

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[5] Search results as of 9/17/2019

become accustomed to from using only social media. Dynamics between some of an older generation in Hong Kong – like K.K. and John of the Teacher's Union – who are fighting for democracy in greater China and predominantly young students – protestors flying the UK and USA flags – crying for independence are difficult to dissect through the virulent posts aimed at the interlocutors within a social media post comment section. When the majority of posts and discussion on social media revolve around the violence and protester's cries of independence it is difficult to get the sense that there are protesters who aren't marching and who also aren't looking for separation from the Mainland but are still part of the movement. In a similar manner, the views and opinions of many people caught in the middle – police officers who receive death threats and MTR station managers who need to comply with the law and as a result are branded as evil-doers through slogans such as "Murderer Transit Railway" – are all but accessible on social media outlets. Those in the middle are seldom outspoken on visible platforms such as social media due to fear of chastisement from either end. These viewpoints and dynamics – which are often in a moral grey area – are obtained through thorough investigation and dialogue using a multitude of mediums, which provides a depth to the situation that the brief posts and flashy images that dominate social media platforms cannot.

The purpose of this piece was not meant to discourage the use of social media as a part of engaging with social and political movements – organizing marches and spreading unifying slogans such as the "five key demands" would have been extremely difficult in the absence of social media. The purpose of this piece was to encourage the use of other mediums to obtain information and to discourage the overreliance on social media. Otherwise, one falls victim to single-dimensional perspectives – for example views such as the protesters are all demanding

independence or that all the protesters are violent – which neither represent the complexities of reality nor contributes to a rational resolution.

It was not so long ago that social media greatly influenced social and political movements within the United States and the United Kingdom. Heavily nationalistic posts and viral memes spread via social media platforms dictated and polarized the discourse of the Brexit vote and the US Presidential elections in 2016. Regardless of one's opinions, all should agree that the best decisions are made when both quantity and quality of information are acquired. Looking towards the situation in Hong Kong, if one is to form an informed opinion on the situation (and potentially to determine a potential resolution), one should seek out additional mediums and methods for engagement. Reading news articles from varying sources (South China Morning Post vs The Economist), speaking with citizens of all generations, and interviewing protestors and anti-protesters alike are but a few of the many ways to break outside the boundaries of social media.