

The Emergence of New Media in Hong Kong Politics

By Rikkie Yeung

The new media—manifested by Internet fundraising, online volunteer recruitment, political blogs, homemade Youtube videos promoting or bashing candidates, etc.—are playing a significant role in the 2008 American presidential election. Encouraged by the rise of the “netroots” influence in the 2006 mid-term elections, benefiting mainly liberal insurgents against the Republicans, at least three Democratic presidential candidates (Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards) announced their candidacy on the Internet instead of through conventional means of press conferences. The traditional media are leveraging on the rise of Internet politics, too. CNN, for example, organized primary debates through Youtube.

The idea of digital democracy—adopting digital media tools that are accessible, affordable, interactive and network-based to empower individuals to participate in politics and enrich grassroots democracy—has stimulated much attention in the new millennium. This was partly why last year Time Magazine selected “You” as its Person of Year. In America, the concept of digital democracy is being gradually developed into real politics through strategic deployment of the new media (mainly the Internet) in elections by politicians and activists.

What about Hong Kong? E-politics clearly is emerging in the wealthy international city. Hong Kong is technologically ready. But the progress of political use of the new media lags much behind that in the United States, mainly due to constitutional constraints in addition to other socio-economic and cultural factors. The Hong Kong experience contrasts with that of America in many ways. Whereas the netroots are making a direct impact on electoral outcomes in the U.S., the new media has only had indirect impact on political results in Hong Kong. So far, the use of new media in Hong Kong politics has been found mostly in the democracy

movement and opposition to government policies. Ordinary citizens took the lead over political leaders in digital activism. They spontaneously employed information technologies successfully to mobilize many mass protests and get-out-the-vote operations.

Hong Kong politicians are gradually realizing the potential of e-politics. The campaign blogs of Alan Leong versus those of Donald Tsang in the Chief Executive election last March created much excitement in the still immature political blogosphere. The new media will most likely make a larger presence in upcoming elections this year and in 2008. Other political usage of the new media is also emerging in the civil society.

Technologically ready but ...

Hong Kong has one of the best information-technology infrastructures in the world. Its educated population readily accepts new communications technology and has affordable access to the Internet and mobile networks. In fact, information technology is already part of the American and Hong Kong ways of life. Internet penetration rates in the US and Hong Kong were over 69%, ranking as the world's eighth and ninth respectively. Hong Kong has even more impressive penetration rates in broadband and mobile networks. The household broadband penetration rate (over 66%) ranks higher than that of the US. On average, each Hong Kong citizen holds more than one mobile phone (at a subscription rate of over 120%) whereas the subscription rate in the US is around 70%.

Despite the technological readiness, many aspects of cyberspace that already are a must in American political life do not exist yet in Hong Kong; these include a vibrant political blogosphere, Internet fund-raising, online volunteer recruitment and election campaign websites that allow interactivity with readers. Political and civil society leaders in Hong Kong seem slow to recognize, and sometimes hesitant to

explore, the potentials of Internet power. Instead, the use of cyber-power gradually emerged from mobilization of mass protests against the HKSAR government in a bottom-up, grassroots-based and often spontaneous fashion.

Turning point in 2003

The turning point was no doubt the mass protest by more than half-a-million people on July 1, 2003, the commemoration day of the 1997 handover to China. The Internet was an “accidental hero” of that protest. In the spring of 2003, the vibrant city almost stood still behind surgical masks when the mysterious SARS epidemic, originating in China, broke out in Hong Kong. All classes in schools and universities were closed. Business activities were dramatically reduced. Many citizens, especially young people, stayed home and relied on the Internet for communication. The SARS outbreak was the calm before a political storm

Before SARS, a mass opposition campaign against the government’s national security bill was already in the making. Those unpopular legislative proposals were to implement Article 23 of the Basic Law to outlaw activities of subversion, succession, treason and political connection to foreign bodies, etc. The national security bill triggered Hong Kong citizens’ worst fears about losing freedoms, especially among middle-class professionals and educated people. The community detested the government’s method of bulldozing legislation to passage and for siding too often with pro-Beijing groups in debates. After SARS broke out, public campaigns against Article 23 became impossible. Campaigners delayed a planned protest to July 1, a few days before the 23 bill was expected to be passed by a pro-establishment majority in the legislature.

During the silent SARS period, nonetheless, public grievances towards the HKSAR government accumulated quickly. People vented their anger at its handling of the national security bill, the failure to contain an epidemic that caused the highest

number of deaths (299) of any city in the world, as well as other unpopular government policies—through the Internet. People exchanged jokes and criticism of the administration, participated in chat-rooms to discuss Article 23 and sent emails to their personal networks of families, friends and colleagues, urging them to join the July 1 protest.

Spontaneous virtual campaigns against Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa and Article 23 legislation flourished. *Article 23.org.hk* was initiated by former legislator Cyd Ho to provide information to “counter official misinformation and misrepresentation”¹ about the national security law. The popular *RebuildHK.com* was initiated by a freelance website designer and political unknown, who found himself having plenty of free time during SARS and built the website to express disapproval of the government. Adapting a classic Canto-pop tune, “Under the Lionrock”, *RebuildHK* produced an online music video that became an instant cyberspace hit through snowball emailing in the pre-YouTube days. That online video flashed back to many sad post-1997 incidents, and encouraged viewers to take to the streets on July 1. Other cyber networks were formed. For example, many members of a popular chat-room, “Anti-23 newsgroup”, joined the July 1 mass protest and got themselves involved in subsequent rallies.

e-mobilization in protests

Even though the impact cannot be quantified, spontaneous mobilization through the Internet facilitated a surprisingly large and peaceful turnout on July 1 in a supposedly politically-apatetic city. Since then, spontaneous mobilization via new technologies has become a practice in annual July 1 rallies, other mass protests and the democracy movement. The tools used have expanded from the Internet (emailing,

¹ As stated in the website which is still accessible.

chat-room and websites) to mobile text messaging (SMS). The use of SMS was particularly apparent in another time-critical pro-democracy rally in 2005. On December 14, 2005, tens of thousands of people protested against Mr. Tsang's constitutional reform package for 2007/8, which was considered conservative and a further twisting of the already peculiar political system. Through SMS and emails, people mobilized their families and friends to join the protest to ensure that pro-democracy legislators would not vote for these government proposals.

Constraints and potentials

The early stages of development of the new media in the democracy movement were not led by political or civil society leaders, not even those from the pro-democracy camp. A survey of websites of political parties and legislators finds them resembling simple e-brochures with little interactivity. Many online functions such as blogs, fund raising, e-newsletters and volunteer recruitment that are basic to most American political websites are absent from their Hong Kong counterparts. In past elections, few candidates (mostly those competing in direct elections) launched campaign websites, which were more or less online versions of their election pamphlets. It appears that most Hong Kong politicians were not imaginative enough to recognize the potential of the new media.

But the people factor is only partly to blame. A more fundamental challenge is a political system that discourages political participation and party development. In particular, the functional constituencies (important participants in Hong Kong's system of "indirect elections") are designed to institutionalize vested interests and reduce competition. It makes little sense for candidates from those functional constituencies, comprising no more than a few hundred corporate voters, to spend resources on new media when they either run unopposed or may meet their voters on golf courses or at yacht clubs. Only in the few constituencies composed of individual

professionals—such as the Education or Information Technology functional constituencies—would the use of email, SMS or websites be meaningful. Electoral regulations are also more inhibitive than in the US. All content of candidates' websites, emails and supporters' websites are subject to declaration, filing and expense caps, thereby creating administrative burdens and disincentives for candidates to initiate online electioneering as a complement to their conventional campaigns.

The political system creates little incentive for innovation. Political apathy and the public's general skepticism of politicians is always an issue in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, most politicians have been slow to realize this is exactly why they should explore new technologies. Regardless of the political system, effective use of the new media helps alleviate the problems and promote democratic participation in five ways.

- First, new media reduce frictions in political mobilization, particularly in fundraising, voting and protests—especially when general discontent among the ordinary people and desire for change is strong.
- Second, people-based media reduce political apathy by reviving a sense of empowerment among ordinary citizens. This creates a positive cycle when successful mobilization of mass protests or voting energizes civic spirit and encourages people to participate a little more at the next critical moment.
- Third, the user-autonomous new media serve as alternatives to the (often biased) oligopoly of traditional media.
- Fourth, the new media enable civil society to rapidly form effective operational networks and alliances in the absence of formal organization.
- Finally, the use of new media reduces biases in an uneven political playing field by facilitating political insurgents (such as Hong Kong democrats),

who are disadvantaged in resources and access to the main media, to compete more effectively.

Gradual development in elections

After 2003, some political parties and politicians started to explore e-politics. In the Legislative Council elections of 2004, more candidates than before posted websites even though most remained e-brochures with little interactivity. In addition, a non-partisan website, *Vote04.hk*, was launched by Civic Exchange, a think tank, to motivate voting by providing information, polls, commentaries and forums.

The most effective use in Hong Kong elections was in get-out-the-vote (GOTV) operations as part of the pro-democracy movement. Again, mobilization through e-mailing and SMS by citizens was largely spontaneous in response to critical political moments. The first large-scale e-mobilization of voters was found in the 2004 election. The voter turnout (55.6%) set a historical record. Voters saw that election as an opportunity to express their demand for a faster pace toward democracy following Beijing's formal rejection earlier that year of universal suffrage in the 2007/8 elections. In spite of a rather successful vote mobilization and that over 60% of the popular vote went to pro-democracy candidates, these candidates could win only 40% of all seats due to the political system in effect.

More recent examples were sub-sector elections to the 800-member Election Committee held in December, 2006. The public used to pay minimal attention to this small-circle game in which only 220,000 individuals and corporate representatives are qualified to vote for an Election Committee that chooses the Chief Executive, who is in effect, therefore, handpicked by Beijing. Hence, the voting rate in the sub-sector elections used to be extremely low (below 20%). But the 2006 elections were different. Alan Leong of the Civic Party chose to enter the race and make it competitive, even though he had essentially a zero chance of defeating the incumbent

Mr. Tsang. Mr. Leong's first hurdle was the need to obtain at least 100 nominations from the 800-person Election Committee, which made the sub-sector elections more significant than ever before. Online campaigning and SMS GOTV were used in several competitive functional constituencies in which the voters were individuals, not organizations. All candidates in the Information Technology constituency posted websites; and some launched email campaigns and blogs. In the accountancy constituency, SMS was used to get out the voters. Consequently, the overall voter turnout reached a record 27%. Of the candidates supported by the pro-democracy camp, 83% won their races, giving them 114 Election Committee seats despite the system's biases. E-mobilization indirectly facilitated Hong Kong's first "competition" for Chief Executive between a sure-winner and a democrat.

Small breakthrough in an immature blogosphere

Another encouraging development during that Chief Executive election was the competition between the two candidates' blogs. In contrast to the influential (liberal) blogosphere in American politics, the political blogosphere in Hong Kong is immature. The challenge is partly cultural. Most Hong Kong people (including the highly educated) prefer verbal or visual communications over text. The Hong Kong blogosphere is full of photos but short on words. But the articulation of ideas and arguments are important in politics. A small breakthrough came when Mr. Leong's election blog was launched in December, 2006. In response, Mr. Tsang started the first-ever blog by any top Hong Kong official. The mass media often reported on both blogs and stimulated public excitement. In the virtual world, Mr. Leong won. By the end of the election, his blog achieved a daily average of a few thousand hits, and at one time topped the Yahoo! blog chart. However, no matter how popular political insurgents are in the cyberspace, the winners in real politics will be Beijing-supported candidates.

Outside electoral politics, the Internet is also being used to counter a mainstream media that has been accused of practicing self-censorship and being increasingly biased towards the establishment. Internet radio operations (such as *Radio CP* (formerly *Radio45*), *Hi-radio*, *Radio 71*, *People's Radio HK*) and activist journalism (such as *inmedia.hk*) emerged to provide an alternative public voice. Internet radio on politics, however, is less prominent than in the U.S. Members from *InmediaHK* were active in the recent opposition movement against the demolition of the Star Ferry clock tower and Queen's Pier. Others have also explored using the Internet as a platform for coordinating action against and opposition to government policies. The "Save RTHK" blog (saverthk.org), which was started as one individual's effort to express dismay at the SAR government's broadcasting policy, was turned into a cyberspace action center for activists seeking to deter the government from dissolving or marginalizing the government-owned public service broadcaster.

Hong Kong political bloggers, Internet radio operators and activist journalists face challenges in sustaining their e-initiatives. First are the issues of long-term funding and manpower sources. Popular websites in American civil society may sustain themselves through support from the Internet audience in the form of donations and voluntarism. The U.S. Internet population is so big that a tiny fraction will be enough to sustain websites of minority interest or political nature. The Hong Kong "market," however, is too small for that kind of self-sustaining model. Second, pro-democracy websites have experienced many instances of petty sabotage, hacking, defamatory scams and suspected influence from across the border, for which the motives can only be a matter of speculation.

Reality check vs. vision

On top of the socio-economic and cultural challenges, there is a reality check on results. No matter how successful is political mobilization achieved through the new

media—as in the examples of the July 1 protests, pro-democracy rallies and voter mobilizations of 2004 and 2006—the impact on real politics in Hong Kong has been only indirect. After all, the SAR political system was designed to minimize the impact of the people’s will. Nonetheless, these examples provide a positive lesson. Even in the incomplete democracy of Hong Kong, the new media can facilitate political mobilization, thereby stimulating political participation, overcoming apathy and partly reducing the bias in the system.

The first-stage emergence of the new media in political mobilization was encouraging. But that kind of spontaneous use with little strategic leadership has limitations. The future of e-politics in Hong Kong requires vision by political and civil society leaders. Upcoming elections include: the by-election for a legislative seat (due to the death of pro-Beijing DAB chairman Ma Lik) in December, District Council elections in the fall and Legislative Council elections in 2008. Politicians and activists from both conservative and democratic backgrounds are likely to make more use of the new media in their campaigns. Those who have the courage and imagination to innovate are the most likely to be the winners in both the virtual and real worlds.



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