Leaderless resistance drives Hong Kong protests

Protesters in Hong Kong SAR and the government of mainland China have fundamentally different conceptions of media and messaging. Dr Ryan Manuel examines how these differences mean that the two sides have consistently talked past each other since the Hong Kong protests began in March 2019

Key Points

- Protesters in Hong Kong SAR have adopted leaderless resistance and decentralised online modes of organisation in an approach that has neutralised Beijing's ability to direct the narrative.
- The backbone of the protest movement is the use of the secure messaging app Telegram, although other platforms including Facebook, Google Maps, Twitch, and WhatsApp are in widespread use.
- Beijing's methods are unlikely to change but its messaging is likely to, based on the reaction to the protests and the sophisticated use of Chinese-language social media platforms such as WeChat and Kuaishou.

Hong Kong SAR’s anti-extradition-law protesters have made adept use of technology – including social media and encrypted messengers – during the demonstrations and unrest that began in March 2019, and which continued with a 17th consecutive week of protests on 29 September amid police deployment of water cannon and rubber bullets and protesters’ use of petrol bombs and barricades. However, the mainland Chinese government that the protesters are fighting by proxy is also using modern technology and propaganda techniques, albeit with a different worldview.

The protesters live in a ‘fake news’ world, where technology is used to fight disinformation and mutual trust is absent. Conversely, Beijing believes that citizens should trust institutions, particularly those of the mainland Chinese government. The tools and methods used by each camp are therefore different as this clash of trust and technology presages future debates about how other countries will deal with China and related protests, given the many Chinese diaspora spread around the world.

The 2019 Hong Kong protests work by decentralisation, with no single individual in charge but with decisions made by voting. A central website, LIHKG (lihkg.com), acts as an online clearing house, enabling anyone with registered access to the site to post messages and support ideas through up/down voting. The proposer of an idea that garners the most votes takes charge of the protest-related initiative in a leadership model similar to that used by the ancient Greeks.
Distinct identity

There are two unusual factors to the Hong Kong protests. First is the direct shaping of the protests to be directly targeted at the mainland Chinese state. Some protests have previously succeeded in mainland China, often by appealing to morals in a form of the so-called ‘rightful resistance’ that has been documented by Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang in Rightful Resistance in Rural China (2007) and Elizabeth Perry in Challenging the Mandate of Heaven (2001). Success is defined as concessions to protesters’ demands and often some form of accountability or punishment for local officials. However, rightful resistance requires the authorities to understand the protests as legitimate and a scapegoat to be found.

A pro-democracy protester throws petrol onto a burning barricade during a gathering in front of a Mong Kok police station on 22 September 2019. Pro-democracy protesters have continued demonstrations across Hong Kong SAR, calling for Chief Executive Carrie Lam to meet the rest of their demands – including an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality, the retraction of the word ‘riot’ to describe the rallies, and genuine universal suffrage – as the territory faces a leadership crisis. (Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

Protesters have taken onboard the ‘Be water’ mantra of kung fu star Bruce Lee, implying fluidity and mobility. They can defy comprehension of their workings and stop the mainland authorities targeting leaders one by one, reflecting a method of organisational restructuring
that was common in Chinese non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the 2000s and 2010s to ensure smooth functioning under heavy pressure from the Communist Party of China (CPC). The NGOs knew that if their leadership was unclear, the CPC would be slow to deal with dissent. A rotating leadership ensured no obvious point of failure.

Second, ‘Be water’ makes skillful use of technology. Online groups can attract more sympathisers, avoiding the fate of small NGOs that the government can shut down in a single sweep. The protest movement uses social media applications and novel innovations. Several hundred people can share information in social media groups, and hundreds of thousands – or even millions – of readers can access information.

The messaging app WhatsApp, for example, allows a maximum of 256 members in any chat group, but an unlimited number of ‘followers’ who can read but not post. The microvideo app Twitch enables users to provide live streams of developments elsewhere in a protest. Such social media groups function as an instant rolling guide to events. In larger protests, colour-coded maps are used to indicate police deployments to protesters, police activity, and the location of escape routes that need to be kept clear.

However, the backbone of the protest movement is the use of the Russian open-source secure messaging app Telegram, which has two advantages. First, Telegram can have up to 200,000 members in an internal chat group. Second, it cannot be rapidly shut down by denying a single server or access point. This challenges government censorship such as during unrest in the Xinjiang region in 2009, when the Chinese government shut down access to the internet for six months.

Like many essential websites for modern commerce, Telegram has used Amazon Web Services and Google to host its data and to run a number of ‘software as a service’ actions that make Telegram exist in the cloud, without any physical address or server. This enables data to be packaged and delivered more efficiently and rapidly than with a proprietary server. It also means that Telegram cannot necessarily be independently taken down as this could threaten other web-hosted services.

The Hong Kong protesters also use mainstream technology such as web mapping service Google Maps for organising meetings, YouTube for disseminating videos, WhatsApp for communications, Facebook for publicity, and internet memes and bulletin boards such as LIHKG to develop a vernacular and culture that bind them together. Content is largely user-generated without interacting with the government and can therefore be analysed as being representative of a ‘voice of the people’.

[Continued in full version…]

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