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Political Participation by Political Bloggers in Hong Kong: A Case Study of the 2014 Umbrella Movement

Waikeung TAM

Abstract: Political blogs have played an increasingly more important role in Hong Kong politics. However, research on this topic remains scarce. This analysis examines how political bloggers in Hong Kong used their blogs to participate in politics through a detailed content analysis of 960 political blog articles published on two major news websites – *House News Bloggers* and *Speak Out HK* – during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. This study found that “soapbox” stood out as the most popular function hereof, as political bloggers on both ends of the political spectrum actively used their blogs to influence the legitimacy of the Umbrella Movement in the public discourse. A substantial number of blog articles from *House News Bloggers* also included the functions of “transmission belt,” “informing readers,” and “mobilising political action.” Finally, only a small proportion of the articles from *House News Bloggers* and *Speak Out HK* included the function of “conversation starter.”

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Keywords: Hong Kong, political blogging, social media, Umbrella Movement, political participation

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Introduction

Political blogs – web pages with minimal to no external editing, providing online commentary on political issues, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources (Drezner and Farrell 2008: 2; Wallsten 2008: 24) – have become increasingly popular both in Hong Kong and around the globe in recent years. Major online news sites like Stand News and Post 852 have hosted individual and group bloggers. Newspapers and political magazines like *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, *Hong Kong 01*, *am 730*, and *Yazhou Zhoukan* have also developed their own house blogs.

Political bloggers in Hong Kong have increasingly used their blog articles to influence public affairs, and have sometimes achieved remarkable results. “Take Five Minutes and It Can Change the Second Half of Your Life. Rape Fund,” written by Brother Shi on 4 March 2015, is a good example (Brother Shi 2015). The article criticised the proposal by the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority (MPFA) to introduce an automatic mechanism for adjusting the level of contributions paid by employees to their provident fund accounts. The article argued that the mechanism might force employees to increase their contributions regardless of the employees’ economic situation. More important, Brother Shi appealed to readers to take action against the MPFA’s proposal during the last two days of its consultation period. As the MPFA had created an online response system on its website to collect public opinion on its proposal, Brother Shi’s blog article urged readers to visit the website to express their opposition to it.

The blog article highlighted the link to the MPFA’s website, and provided readers with detailed suggested answers to the questions posted on it. Brother Shi’s blog article generated an overwhelming public response. Throughout the consultation period (23 January until 5 March 2015) the MPFA in total received 35,075 submissions to its proposal. Over 99 per cent of these submissions were received on 4 and 5 March (after Brother Shi published his blog article), and almost all were submitted through the online response system provided on the MPFA website itself (The Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority 2015: 4; *Apple Daily* 2015).

Indeed, apart from Brother Shi, many political bloggers in Hong Kong have sought to use their blogs to influence politics. This is

evident in the election of the chief executive in 2017. Blogger John Chan wrote a blog article to encourage Christians to actively participate in the 2016 Election Committee Religion Subsector Elections, contending that the religion sub-sector should no longer be dominated by pro-government electors (Chan 2016). *IT Voice* – a multiple-author political blog – also published an article, and appealed to the pro-democracy registered voters to participate in the 2016 Election Committee IT Subsector Elections (*IT Voice* 2016).

The previous examples show the growing influence of blogs on politics in Hong Kong. However, research on this topic remains scarce. This analysis examines, then, how political bloggers in Hong Kong use their blogs to participate in politics by conducting a detailed content analysis of 960 political blog articles published during the 2014 Umbrella Movement.

This research uses this episode from 2014 in Hong Kong as a case study for two reasons. First, the Umbrella Movement was the largest social movement in postcolonial Hong Kong. It lasted from 28 September to 15 December 2014. The Umbrella Movement allows us, therefore, to examine how political bloggers in Hong Kong use their blogs to participate in politics during crucial political events. Second, political bloggers wrote more blog posts during the relatively long period of duration of the Umbrella Movement. This, in turn, provides researchers with enough blog articles to conduct a detailed content analysis.

This paper is organised as follows. Having outlined the objective of this study, the next section reviews the literature on political participation, social movements, the role of social media in Hong Kong politics (especially regarding the Umbrella Movement), and on political blogging. This is followed by a discussion of the methodology and data of this study. The article then presents the results of the content analysis of how political bloggers used their blogs during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. The final section concludes.

Literature Review

Political participation and social movements have long been two major concerns among students of Hong Kong politics. Citizen engagement in legislative elections is an important theme of research on political participation in Hong Kong. Kuan and Wong (2006) and Ma

(2015), for example, have studied citizen participation in legislative elections in the postcolonial period and highlighted the key factors affecting voter turnout. Besides voting, the literature has examined political participation by various social groups such as women (Wong and Lee 2006), students (Hung 2014), and the Catholic Church (Leung 2014). While providing useful information about the major factors affecting the extent and impact of various forms of political participation in Hong Kong, the aforementioned studies have overlooked one crucial form of political participation – namely, that on the Internet. As argued by Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2010), the Internet/social media (including blogging) has become an important tool for citizens to engage in politics. This oversight may hinder researchers from fully understanding Hong Kong's political dynamics, as political actors – especially youth – have in recent years come to increasingly engage in politics through the Internet/social media.

Scholars of Hong Kong politics have also paid increasing attention to social movements. The edited volume *Dynamics of Social Movements in Hong Kong* (Chiu and Lui 2000) explores how the changing political opportunities shaped the trajectories and outcomes of a number of social movements. With its focus on Hong Kong's social movements occurring between the 1970s and 1990s, when social media had not yet appeared or was still underdeveloped, this edited volume naturally did not discuss any role being played by social media.

In the early twenty-first century, Hong Kong experienced a series of cultural and heritage preservation movements. A few studies on these movements have briefly discussed how activists adopted social media to promote their causes. Ku (2012: 13–14), for example, mentions how InMedia provided an online platform for activists to advance their ideas within the movements to preserve the Queen's Pier and the Wedding Card Street in the first decade of the new century. Lau (2014: 395–396) discusses how protesters in the Tsoi Yuen Tsuen and anti-high-speed rail movement used social media to mobilise supporters. It should be noted that the role played by social media per se is not the major theme in these studies. Social media became the major theme of social movement research in Hong Kong only after the outbreak of the 2014 Umbrella Movement, as evidenced by the literature review below.

The role of social media in Hong Kong politics especially during the Umbrella Movement has, as such, received increasing scholarly

attention. This literature review focuses on the important works published in the past few years, highlights their strengths and limitations, and discusses how my research on the contents of political blogs can address these shortcomings. Cheng and Chan's (2017: 232) on-site surveying of 1,681 respondents at the occupied locations during the Umbrella Movement demonstrates that social media and online news were the primary sources of information for the protesters. Extensive usage of social media facilitated coordination among self-mobilised protesters, and promoted their collective action. Lee and Chan (2018: Chapter 5) argue, meanwhile, that the Umbrella Movement fell somewhere between collective action and connective action, and that social media activities and connective action empowered the Movement through deepening the participants' psychological and indeed actual involvement in it. In short, Cheng and Chan (2017) and Lee and Chan (2018) provide important context as to how social media mattered to the Umbrella Movement, and why online activism was an essential means by which to mobilise and sustain decentralised protests.

Lee, So, and Leung (2015) find that during the Umbrella Movement social media (Facebook) became an insurgent public sphere, through which counter-publics interconnected, constructed a collective identity, articulated common goals, and engaged in collective actions – whether online or offline – in opposition to the dominant public, the state, or the market. Moreover, acquisition of political news through Facebook was related positively to support for the Umbrella Movement, and adversely with satisfaction with and trust in the Hong Kong government, the Hong Kong police, and Beijing. Lee, Chen, and Chan (2017) investigate the impact of social media use (mainly Facebook) on university students' participation in the Umbrella Movement. They show that sharing political information and direct connections with political actors through social media had a significant impact on both support for and participation in the Movement. Finally, Lee (2018) finds a strong relationship between online alternative media use and the holding of a more supportive attitude towards violent protests and Hong Kong independence – particularly among respondents who had joined in with the Umbrella Movement.

The aforementioned studies have generated important insights on the prominent role played by social media in Hong Kong politics. However, these investigations have two limitations to them. First,

they focus on how social media affected the user's attitude to, participation in, and support for the Umbrella Movement, as well as to the political authorities and the post-Movement protests in Hong Kong. However, they have not examined the discourses on social media themselves. What was actually said on social media?

Second, this literature focuses only on the counter-public spheres or online alternative media and thus overlooks the pro-establishment social media. What role did the latter play during the Umbrella Movement? Did it actively mobilise citizens and social groups to oppose the Movement? What did the pro-establishment social media say about the Movement? Indeed, Tsui (2015) analyses how the Hong Kong government had actively used a mixture of censorship, surveillance, and demonisation of foreign influence to counter the use of new technologies by Movement participants. Apart from these three tactics, however, the government and pro-establishment forces also used social media itself too, such as writing blog articles to counter the Movement.

This study makes two contributions, then, to the literature on the role of social media and politics in Hong Kong. First, it examines the discourses in the political blogs written during the Umbrella Movement. The works reviewed above have not covered such blogs, despite their rising influence in Hong Kong. Specifically, this study focuses on the discourses within these political blogs. Through examining the contents of these, this study analyses how political bloggers sought to use their blogs to influence the Movement. Second, this study explores both the counter-public and pro-establishment spheres – specifically by analysing how the Movement's activists and pro-establishment forces both used social media (political blogs) to further their causes. Investigating these spheres can provide us with a more complete picture of the role of social media in Hong Kong politics.

Research on political bloggers has been flourishing in the past decade. The existing literature can be broadly divided into two streams. The first concerns the sociopolitical impacts of political blogs, such as on authoritarian rule (MacKinnon 2008; Esarey and Xiao 2008) and democratic politics (Davis 2009), as well as whether discussions on political blogs have facilitated democratic deliberation or alternatively exacerbated political polarisation (Davis 2005; Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane 2008; Koop and Jansen 2009; Suhay et al. 2015). My literature review focuses on the second stream – how political bloggers

have used their blogs to participate in politics – given that it is the one of interest to this article.

Wallsten (2008), McKenna (2007), McKenna and Pole (2008), and Pole (2010) have all examined how political bloggers in the United States engage in politics. Based either on interviews with political bloggers themselves or analysis of the contents of political blog articles, these studies broadly divide the functions of political blogs into the following five categories: informing readers; transmission belt; soapbox; mobilising political action; and, conversation starter. First, political bloggers have used their blogs to inform readers about political issues or events like forthcoming legislative elections. Second, political blogs have served as transmission belts when bloggers provide links to other websites or quote other sources in their articles. Third, political bloggers have used their blogs as soapboxes through which they express their observations and opinions on political issues. Fourth, political blogs have served as vehicles for political mobilisation as bloggers appeal to their readers to take political action like attending a protest. Finally, political blogs have played the role of conversation starters when bloggers pose questions to readers in the articles or invite them to provide feedback via Email and/or the comments section. My analysis of how political bloggers in Hong Kong have engaged in politics will, then, be mainly based on these five categories. The next section will elaborate on the methodology of this study.

Data and Methods

In order to explore how political bloggers in Hong Kong have used their blogs to participate in politics, I conducted a detailed content analysis of the political blog articles on two major online news sites during the 2014 Umbrella Movement: *House News Bloggers* (主場博客, *Zhuchang boke*) and *Speak Out HK* (港人講地, *Gangren gangdi*).

The Sample

This study focuses on the political blog articles from *House News Bloggers* and *Speak Out HK* for two reasons. First, these two online news sites represent pro-Movement and pro-government viewpoints respectively. *House News Bloggers* was founded in August 2014 by a group

of pro-Movement bloggers who had previously published their blog articles on the now-defunct pro-democracy news site House News. After the closing down of this site, *House News Bloggers* has served as a platform where these individuals can continue publishing their articles online. *House News Bloggers* remains influential and salient given that about 80 per cent of the active bloggers at House News would join the new website (Ho 2014). More important, some of these bloggers – like Au Ka-lun – exerted substantial influence on the Umbrella Movement, as their blog articles on it were widely shared by supporters and participants via social media (Lee and Chan 2018: 105).

Speak Out HK, established in January 2013, has been described as a propaganda department of the former chief executive Leung Chun-ying. The editor and many of its bloggers were the core members of the Leung Chun-ying Campaign Office. *Speak Out HK* has frequently published articles supporting the Leung administration (*Ming Pao* 2016). Studying the blog articles on these two news sites enables us, therefore, to explore whether bloggers on the different ends of the political spectrum have used their blogs in varying ways.

Second, compared to the bloggers of another pro-democracy online news platform Post 852, those of *House News Bloggers* wrote far more blog articles on the Umbrella Movement during the period of study. *House News Bloggers* published 639 blog articles on the Umbrella Movement, with Post 852 publishing 340. *House News Bloggers* can provide us with sufficient numbers of blog articles to sustain a large content analysis. Another two pro-democracy online news sites in Hong Kong, InMediaHK and VJMedia, have not developed their own house blogs. Given that *Speak Out HK* is the only pro-government online news platform that hosts bloggers, I chose this website to analyse how pro-government political bloggers used their blogs.

The author read all the blog articles published on *House News Bloggers* and *Speak Out HK* during the period of study (from 28 September to 15 December 2014). All those that focused on the Umbrella Movement were chosen. In total, 960 blog articles were included in the content analysis – with 639 coming from *House News Bloggers* and 321 from *Speak Out HK*. These 960 blog articles were written in Chinese, except for 10 English-language ones appearing on *House News Bloggers*.

Before outlining the coding procedures, it is useful to discuss the number of blog articles coming from the two online news sites as

well as the backgrounds of the bloggers included in this study. The number of blog articles from *House News Bloggers*, as noted, far exceeded that from *Speak Out HK*. This can be explained by *House News Bloggers* having had 67 individual and 11 group bloggers writing on the Umbrella Movement at the time, whereas *Speak Out HK* then only had 33 individual and 3 group bloggers. Further research is needed to explain why pro-Movement figures have adopted political blogging in far greater numbers than pro-government ones in Hong Kong.

Regarding the gender of the bloggers in this study, for both *House News Bloggers* and *Speak Out HK* over 70 per cent of them are male. Most of the bloggers are well-educated. For those from *House News Bloggers*, 75 per cent possess a bachelor degree, 23 per cent a master's degree, and 2 per cent a doctoral degree. For the bloggers from *Speak Out HK*, 8 per cent are secondary school graduates, 58 per cent possess a bachelor degree, 31 per cent a master's degree, and 4 per cent a doctoral degree.

Content Coding

The unit of analysis in this study was the blog article. Like many cases of content analysis of blog articles, only text was scrutinised. Images were excluded, because analyses of them are rather subjective (Suhay et al. 2015: 12). The author coded the 960 blog articles for whether they fit into the informing readers, transmission belt, soapbox, mobilising political action, or conversation starter categories outlined above. Twenty per cent of the blog articles (out of the total 960) were randomly chosen for coding by a second coder. Cohen's κ was run to determine the level of agreement between two coders' judgement on the categorisation of 192 of the blog articles. There was a strong agreement between the two coders' judgement: $\kappa = .91$, $p < .001$.

An article was categorised as "informing readers" when the blogger had personally visited the occupied sites and let readers know about what they witnessed there. Blogger Kursk, for example, used his article "9.28 Occupation: History Will Not Forget" to inform his readers of what happened in Admiralty and Causeway Bay on 28 September 2014. The article mentioned in detail the actions and responses by the police and protestors in these two locations (Kursk 2014a). An article was categorised as a "transmission belt" when the blogger provided a link to other websites or quoted a source in the article. The article "A Letter to My Former Colleagues," for instance,

quoted a letter written by a former police officer (Andylau1989 2014). An article was coded as “soapbox” when the blogger offered their commentaries, opinions, and observations on the Umbrella Movement. Blogger Daniel-C, for example, praised the Movement’s participants for their courage in pursuing universal suffrage despite violent suppression by the government. He described the Umbrella Movement as a gentle but steadfast movement (Daniel-C 2014).

An article was coded as meeting the function of “mobilising political action” when it encouraged readers in this direction. Blogger Kursk, for example, called on readers to record how the police abused their power during the Movement and to hand this evidence to the mass media or to post it on the Internet. These records could later be used as evidence in lawsuits against the police (Kursk 2014b). Similarly, blogger Chan Ka-li encouraged affected business owners to initiate lawsuits against Movement organisers so as to recuperate the economic losses caused by it (Chan Ka-li 2014). Finally, an article was coded as “conversation starter” when the blogger(s) asked readers questions in the piece or invited them to provide feedback on it via Email and/or the comments section. Blogger Rosina asked readers: “In Admiralty, have we sowed the seeds of civic awareness or the seeds of hatred?” (Rosina 2014). Blogger Yuending also used one of his articles as a conversation starter, when he asked readers the following question:

What should be the next step for the Umbrella Movement and its participants, when negotiation with the government or withdrawal from the occupied areas has become impossible, and the majority of citizens are only concerned with the resumption of transportation around the occupied areas? (Yuending 2014)

It should be noted that a blog article can simultaneously include more than just one of the aforementioned functions. An article, for instance, can combine the functions of informing readers and soapbox. In her article “Farewell to the Occupied Area,” the blogger Evelyn Char not only highlighted the activities that took place in the Causeway Bay occupied area the day before its removal by the police (informing readers) but also commented that the occupied area was a utopian place in Hong Kong (soapbox) (Char 2014). In total, there are 27 possible categories of functions for each blog article. Table 1 below presents 18 categories of the functions that a blog article could include. The other nine categories are not mentioned in Table 1, be-

cause none of the blog articles included them. The nine categories are as follows: Mob only; CS only; SB + Mob + CS + TB; Mob + CS; CS + TB; Inform + SB + Mob + CS; Inform + SB + Mob + CS + TB; Inform + Mob + CS; and, Inform + CS + TB.

Results

Soapbox as the Most Popular Function

Table 1 presents the coding results of how political bloggers in Hong Kong used their blogs during the Umbrella Movement. Soapbox stood out as the most popular function. Regarding *House News Bloggers*, 29 per cent of its articles served as soapbox only. When we consider other categories which included soapbox as one of the functions (e.g., soapbox and transmission belt; soapbox and mobilising political action), the vast majority of blog articles (615 out of a total of 639) had served as soapboxes. The same phenomenon also happened with regard to *Speak Out HK*. About 87 per cent of its articles served as soapbox only. When we consider other categories that included soapbox as one of the functions, all the blog articles from *Speak Out HK* performed this role.

One possible reason behind the popularity among Hong Kong's political bloggers of using blogs as a soapbox was that they sought to influence the legitimacy of the Umbrella Movement in the public discourse. Research has shown that given public opinion is important to the prospects for success of any social movement, both supporters and opponents actively compete over it (Gamson 2004). The Umbrella Movement is no exception. I conducted content analyses to investigate how political bloggers at both ends of the political spectrum used their blogs to influence the legitimacy of the Movement in the public discourse. I examined specifically what kinds of commentary on the Umbrella Movement political bloggers had written in their articles.

Table 1. Blog Articles by Different Functions: *House News Bloggers* and *Speak Out HK*

| Functions | <i>House News Bloggers</i> (N=639) | <i>Speak out HK</i> (N=321) |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Inform only | 6 (0.9%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| TB only | 9 (1.4%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| SB only | 187 (29.3%) | 278 (86.6%) |
| SB + TB | 240 (37.6%) | 3 (0.9%) |
| SB + Mob | 21 (3.3%) | 5 (1.6%) |
| SB + CS | 11 (1.7%) | 24 (7.5%) |
| SB + Mob + CS | 3 (0.5%) | 1 (0.3%) |
| SB + TB + CS | 11 (1.7%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| SB + TB + Mob | 20 (3.1%) | 2 (0.6%) |
| Mob + TB | 2 (0.3%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Inform + TB | 5 (0.8%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Inform + SB | 52 (8.1%) | 7 (2.2%) |
| Inform + SB + TB | 46 (7.2%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Inform + SB + Mob | 8 (1.3%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Inform + SB + CS | 7 (1.1%) | 1 (0.3%) |
| Inform + SB + TB + CS | 4 (0.6%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Inform + SB + TB + Mob | 5 (0.8%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Inform + Mob + TB | 2 (0.3%) | 0 (0.0%) |

Note: Inform = Informing readers; TB = Transmission belt; SB = Soapbox; Mob = Mobilise political action; CS = Conversation starter.

Types of Soapbox

I divided the commentary on the Umbrella Movement into nine types. The first four were supportive of the Movement and/or critical of its opponents. The first “monitored and reported the wrongdoings committed by the Hong Kong government, police, or anti-movement politicians during the Movement.” In one of his articles, for example, blogger Au Ka-lun reported the police had falsely accused the Movement’s participants of intentionally vandalising two police motorcycles in Mongkok. Based on his observations from the scene, Au highlighted that the police motorcycles were accidentally damaged during the physical confrontation between the police and Movement participants (Au 2014a). The second type – “embraced the Umbrella Movement” – refers to commentaries that endorsed the messages or

ideas of the Movement, the actions taken by Movement participants and supporters, or highlighted the positive impacts of the Movement. Blogger Yuen Wing-han, for example, acclaimed the student participants in the Movement, saying that they were warriors who remained steadfast despite the danger and difficulty faced – and that they had sacrificed themselves in pursuing universal suffrage (Yuen 2014).

The third type includes commentaries that contested anti-Umbrella Movement opinions and messages. Blogger Tse Kwun-tung, for instance, rebutted a public statement made by 550 physicians that described the Umbrella Movement as cancer cells. Tse argued that Beijing's efforts to resist the implementation of universal suffrage in Hong Kong, rather than the Movement, were cancer cells (Tse 2014a). The fourth includes commentaries that criticised anti-Umbrella Movement actors, such as Beijing, the Hong Kong government, the police, and pro-government political parties. For example, blogger Tse Kwun-tung criticised the police for losing their self-control and professionalism in using excessive and unnecessary violence against Movement participants (Tse 2014b).

The next four types of commentary, meanwhile, opposed the Umbrella Movement and/or supported anti-Movement endeavours. The fifth type “monitored and reported the wrongdoings committed by the movement participants or supporters during the Umbrella Movement.” The sixth – “embraced the anti-Umbrella Movement” – refers to commentaries that endorsed the messages or ideas of Movement opponents, the actions taken by anti-Movement actors (e.g. the Hong Kong government and police), and highlighted the negative impacts of the Movement. Blogger Lau Ping-cheung, for instance, criticised the Umbrella Movement for undermining the economy and the rule of law (Lau 2014a). The seventh includes commentaries that contested Umbrella Movement opinions and messages. Blogger Wat Wing-yin, for instance, rebutted Movement participants' argument that they did not have any weapons. Instead, Wat commented that the participants' verbal insults towards the police and their occupation of main roads were indeed weapons (Wat 2014). The eighth includes commentaries that criticised Umbrella Movement actors or supporters. For example, blogger Lau Ping-cheung wrote that the Movement's leaders were shameless because they refused to condemn those participants who had stormed into the legislature (Lau 2014b). The final type was “Others.”

It should be noted that different types of commentary could simultaneously appear in the same blog article. For example, blogger Bonnie Tang used her article “Have We Really Wasted Our Efforts?” both to embrace the Movement and to criticise anti-Movement actors (Tang 2014). Thus, the total number of types of commentary in Table 2 is greater than that of blog articles included in this study.

Table 2. Types of Soapbox (Commentaries) Written by Political Bloggers from *House News Bloggers* and *Speak Out HK*

| Detail of Soapbox | <i>House News Bloggers</i> ^b | <i>Speak Out HK</i> ^a |
|--|---|----------------------------------|
| 1 = monitor and report wrongdoings by the government/police/anti-UM politicians during the UM | 15 | 0 |
| 2 = embrace the UM | 373 | 13 |
| 3 = contest anti-UM opinions/messages/news | 156 | 0 |
| 4 = criticise anti-UM actors | 401 | 7 |
| 5 = monitor and report wrongdoings by participants in the UM and/or supporters of UM during the UM | 4 | 0 |
| 6 = embrace the anti-UM | 8 | 229 |
| 7 = contest pro-UM opinions/messages/news | 5 | 101 |
| 8 = criticise UM actors | 44 | 238 |
| 9 = others | 47 | 14 |

Note: ^a All 321 blog articles from *Speak out HK* had a soapbox function.
^b Only 615 blog articles from *House News Bloggers* had a soapbox function.
 UM = Umbrella Movement.

Table 2 shows that political bloggers on both ends of the political spectrum in Hong Kong held dramatically different views towards the Umbrella Movement, and sought to sway public opinion to their side. The majority of articles from *House News Bloggers* were supportive of the Movement, as the number of commentaries from the first four types (n = 945) far exceeded that from the fifth to eighth types (n = 61). By contrast, the majority of articles from *Speak Out HK* opposed the Movement and embraced anti-Movement endeavours,

as the number of commentaries from the fifth to eighth types ($n = 568$) far exceeded that from the first four types ($n = 20$).

Other Usages of Blog Articles

While the vast majority of the blog articles from *Speak Out HK* only had the function of soapbox, those from *House News Bloggers* had more diverse purposes. Table 1 above shows that a substantial number of blog articles from *House News Bloggers* were used as a transmission belt and for informing readers. In total 344 articles (out of 639) included transmission belt as one of their functions. Concerning informing readers, 135 articles included that as one of their functions. These figures stand in sharp contrast to those of *Speak Out HK*, in which only five and eight articles included transmission belt and informing readers as one of their functions respectively.

Given that more than half of the articles from *House News Bloggers* had the function of transmission belt, it is important to know what types of message these articles put forward. Table 3 below demonstrates the types of message disseminated by these articles. A blog article can, of course, convey more than one type of message; therefore, the total number of messages in Table 3 for *House News Bloggers* ($n = 764$) exceeded that of those articles which had the function of transmission belt ($n = 344$).

About 68 per cent of these messages were supportive of the Umbrella Movement and/or rebutted anti-Movement opinions. In one of his articles, for instance, blogger Au Ka-lun quoted a statement made by a group of Hong Kong's scholars that was supportive of the Movement and that urged the government to meet with the student leaders as soon as possible (Au 2014b). Only around 7 per cent of the messages opposed the Movement and/or highlighted the wrongdoings committed by Movement participants. Thus, one can see that the majority of pro-democracy bloggers sought to influence their readers' opinions by linking them to pro-Movement messages.

Another point that is worthy of mention is that about one-fifth of the articles from *House News Bloggers* (135 out of a total of 639) had the function of informing readers about what the bloggers had witnessed at the occupied sites, whereas the corresponding figure of *Speak Out HK* was only 2 per cent (8 out of 321 articles). The aforementioned data indicates that those from *House News Bloggers* more frequently used their blogs to update their readers about the devel-

opment of the Movement. There are two possible reasons for this finding. First, these bloggers might have wanted to use their blogs as a record and recollection of the Umbrella Movement. Second, by informing readers about the difficulties or achievements that Movement participants encountered at the occupied sites, bloggers sought to motivate their readers to offer support to it. Indeed, those from *House News Bloggers* had actively used their blogs to mobilise readers to take political action.

Table 3. Types of Transmission Belt Message

| Types of Transmission Belt message | <i>House News Bloggers</i> | <i>Speak Out HK</i> |
|---|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Supportive of UM | 286 (37.4%) | 0 |
| Rebut anti-UM opinions | 232 (30.4%) | 1 |
| Oppose UM | 29 (3.8%) | 3 |
| Highlights the wrongdoings by UM participants | 22 (2.9%) | 0 |
| Unrelated to UM | 159 (20.8%) | 1 |
| Neutral to UM | 36 (4.7%) | 0 |
| Total | 764 (100%) | 5 |

Note: UM = Umbrella Movement.

Concerning using the blogs in this latter way, those from *House News Bloggers* were more active compared to their counterparts from *Speak Out HK*. About 10 per cent of the articles (61 out of a total of 639) from *House News Bloggers* included mobilising political action as one of their functions; the corresponding figure for *Speak Out HK* was 2 per cent. Those from *House News Bloggers* used their blogs to encourage their readers to take different types of political action, such as recording how the police abused their power during the Movement and handing these records to the mass media or posting them on the Internet, making donations to the Movement, clearing rubbish in the occupied areas, joining a marathon to commemorate the first month of the Movement, registering as voters, or standing as a candidate in the coming legislative elections. This indicates that pro-Movement bloggers (social activists) are more prone to adopting social media to mobilise political action than their pro-government counterparts are.

Bloggers from *Speak Out HK* seldom used their articles to mobilise their readers to take political action. One possible reason for this is that the duties involved in ending the Umbrella Movement were mainly undertaken by the Hong Kong government – especially the police – rather than by citizens themselves. By contrast, many from *House News Bloggers* had actively participated in the Movement. Given that the government had employed a number of tactics to suppress the Movement, such as cutting off public services (e.g. garbage removal) in the occupied sites, these bloggers had a greater need to appeal readers to support the Movement.

Finally, only a small proportion of the articles included conversation starter as one of their functions. Six per cent of the articles from *House News Bloggers* and 8 per cent of those from *Speak Out HK* included this as one of their functions. This relatively low rate of using blog articles as conversation starters indicates that the majority of bloggers in Hong Kong prefer not to use their blogs to engage in direct dialogue with their readers.

Conclusion

This article has examined how political bloggers in Hong Kong used their blogs to participate in politics during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Through a detailed content analysis of 960 political blog articles from *House News Bloggers* and *Speak Out HK*, it was found that “soapbox” stood out as the most popular function herein. Specifically, political bloggers at both ends of the political spectrum used their blogs to influence the legitimacy of the Movement in the public discourse. While the vast majority of the blog articles from *Speak Out HK* only performed the role of soapbox, those from *House News Bloggers* were used for more diverse purposes. A substantial number of blog articles from the latter were used for informing readers, as a transmission belt, and for mobilising political action. Finally, only a small proportion of the articles from both *House News Bloggers* and *Speak Out HK* included conversation starter as one of their functions.

This study makes two contributions to the literature on the role of social media in Hong Kong politics. First, it examines the discourses on Hong Kong social media (political blogs) that have been overlooked by the existing literature. Specifically, through analysing the contents of the political blogs during the Umbrella Movement,

this study highlights how political actors used this form of social media to participate in politics. Second, the research on political blogging includes both the counter-public and the pro-establishment spheres. Existing studies on the role of social media in social movements in Hong Kong mainly focus on how social media (Facebook) has served as a public sphere for activists to promote their cause in. My research on political blogging has shown that pro-establishment forces had also actively made use of social media (political blogs) to counter the Umbrella Movement. Indeed, apart from censorship, surveillance, and the demonisation of foreign influence, as discussed by Tsui (2015), the pro-establishment camp also adopted blogging to mobilise public opinion against the Movement. This finding suggests that future research on the role of social media in Hong Kong politics needs to pay attention to both pro-Movement and pro-establishment forces.

This study has its limitations, of course. It only focuses on two major online news sites in Hong Kong, and therefore the findings cannot be generalised to other social media platforms. In future endeavours to investigate the political roles of social media in Hong Kong, I will broaden the sample size to include a larger spectrum of political blogs such as those hosted by newspapers and political magazines. In addition, Facebook posts and other social media platforms like WhatsApp will be included too – so as to examine how these have been deployed by their users to engage in politics.

In their study of the politics of blogs in the US, Drezner and Farrell (2008: 11) highlighted that blogs provide extraordinarily fertile terrain for social sciences research. This study serves as the first step, then, to analyse the roles played by political blogs in Hong Kong. More research is required to investigate how blogs influence politics in Hong Kong, such as whether they can provide a forum for meaningful deliberation, under what circumstances they can significantly shape the political behaviours and understandings of citizens, and how the government responds to anti-establishment political blogs.

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