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IS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA OVERRATED?

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Feeling empowered is not the same as being empowered

From the civil rights protests in the US to the events that led to the collapse of the Berlin Wall, social movements in the past have had notable successes, long before the invention of social media.

Today, it's hard to imagine such movements occurring without Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp being involved from the very beginning.

But exactly what role does social media play in the development and success of social movements pressing for change?

Carmen Leong, a lecturer in the school of information systems and technology management at UNSW Business School, has been seeking answers through her study of the Bersih movement – what she calls, “the first and arguably the largest people movement on electoral reform in Malaysia”.

Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has been dominated by the Barisan Nasional (BN) ruling coalition, which has claimed electoral victory in every subsequent election. But Malaysians, both within the country and in the global diaspora, have long suspected that elections have been unfairly manipulated.

In 2007, this gave rise to the Bersih movement ('clean' in the Malay language), which has used social media to campaign over issues such as the reform of postal ballots and the implementation of indelible ink in elections. The struggle continues.

BEYOND PARTICIPATION

"We argue that a social movement, as a form of empowered collective action, develops in three stages where normative, mobilisational, and institutional power emerges," says Leong.

Normative refers to social media's ability to shape narratives; mobilisational to its ability to mobilise those who have failed to find redress for their grievances through the existing system; and institutional refers to its ability to organise and influence decision-making.

Importantly, Leong argues against the idea of simple participation as the goal of grassroots movements.

"There's an imperative need to have a closer examination on the outcome, beyond the notion of participation," she says. "Feeling empowered is not the same as being empowered."

While the Bersih movement has yet to achieve a change of government, there have been positives to take from the campaign.

"We were very close to making changes," says Leong.

"There was a record turnout where about 80% of registered voters cast their ballots at the 13th general election in 2013. BN lost its two-thirds majority in parliament, along with the popular vote, but through gerrymandering and entrenched advantages, they remain in power.

"The opposition didn't win the election, but what happened made more people realise that there's more to do, and this is a development.

"Social media is just a tool to get people's attention, either locally or internationally, but if the people come together you can move forward – whether it's putting pressure on the government, getting countries to intervene, or forming other parties," says Leong.

NOT AS STICKY

Kean Wong, a Sydney-based steering committee member of Global Bersih, helps oversee the media face of the organisation.

"In conversation with academics in the past on the rise of social media in movements, I've always been struck by the evolving nature of social media," says Wong.

“If there’s a critical mass of audience – and you can’t tell in advance where that is – then social media can make a difference.”

Wong believes that while the velocity of change is greater with social media over traditional media, both require communication with clarity, and with a strong idea.

“Good ideas, compelling ideas that excite and affect people, still have currency and still work, regardless of which media it turns up in,” he says.

But in as much as the original idea for Global Bersih was conceived in a series of email exchanges, it was certainly a child of social media. “Social media helps increase the speed with which these ideas ramp up and proliferate,” Wong says.

Looking at Leong’s phases of normative, mobilisational and institutional power, he feels the gap between mobilisation and the development of institutional power is quite large.

“This is where a lot of social media advocates fall down,” Wong says. “In the absence of a big, shocking event that draws people in, movements that are forged online tend not to be as sticky or resilient. They require a level of human interface and offline relationships, which can be hard to forge or sustain, if you’re talking about a global wide network.”

None of this, however, is unique to the Malaysian experience.

“When I was working in the US during the Obama era, I was struck by the depth and breadth of American ignorance of their own electoral system,” says Wong. “It speaks to a more fundamental problem of citizens wanting to live in democracies.”

“The daily challenge of trying to sustain a democracy-minded movement is trying to engage citizens who are interested in determining their own future.”

“Many see democracy as a transactional process, like buying something from a shop. A lot of citizens might be falsely reassured that that’s all it takes to live in a democracy. And that’s not just a Malaysian problem.”

SUPPORTING BRANDS

Gideon Hornung, digital experience director at global advertising agency Leo Burnett, is responsible for managing its social and content team. What strikes him about Leong’s research is how closely the uses of social media in social movements connects with his own work – on the uses of social media to support brands.

Hornung describes Leong’s normative phase as “lowering the barriers to usage”, the mobilisational phase as “being about behaviour”, and the institutional phase as “connecting to the idea of scale, where it can reach a critical mass, and stops being niche”.

“Participation, and we talk about this a lot for brands, is a spectrum ranging from the highest level of contribution – actually creating content – to a middle level of participation, with sharing and ‘liking’,” he says.

“About 90% of all people on social media are passive consumers – they’ll read, but never participate or create. We often discuss this when talking to clients or marketers – that 90% won’t engage with the content.”

Hornung notes that Facebook has shifted its focus away from branded communities – the idea of a group of people 'liking' a brand on Facebook – and in turn away from brands investing time and effort in increasing their number of 'followers'. The focus is now towards a 'reach' based platform, which means speaking via paid advertising to as many people as possible for a given budget.

Interestingly, Facebook is also shifting back towards a grass roots approach, via evolving Facebook groups – pages set up by individuals – such as groups to facilitate house shares.

“This is because Facebook, with its 12 million-plus users in Australia, is still at its core a platform for connecting people with friends, family and interests. The more time people spend using it, the more money Facebook can make from advertisers.”

A social media challenge, for both brands and social movements, is the rise of messenger apps, such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, or Snapchat.

“These spark a change in behaviour, moving from a public forum to a more closed environment, and what makes it interesting is that this leaves nothing behind,” says Hornung.

“But how do you have a conversation between consumers and brands when it’s moving to a more private forum?”

“In many ways, brands have evolved faster than social movements, but we’re following the same three-phase structure. Anytime a brand implements a new social technology, it reverts to the three phases.”