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Citation

CHU, Yin-Wah, & TANG, James T. H..(2005). The Internet and Civil Society: Environmental and Labour Organizations in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29(4), 849-866.
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/1534

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The Internet and Civil Society: Environmental and Labour Organizations in Hong Kong

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Published in International Journal of Urban and Regional Research

Volume 29, Issue 4, pages 849–866, December 2005

Doi: [10.1111/j.1468-2427.2005.00625.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2005.00625.x)

Introduction

Controversies abound concerning the relationship between the revolution in information and communication technology (ICT) and civil society. For some observers, the ICT revolution and the attendant process of globalization have brought about far-reaching social and political transformations. At the macro level, the ICT revolution is said to have given rise to a new economy, new society and new politics. Society has become network based and, at the same time, identity and culture have replaced class and material interests as the causes of social conflicts. As a result, the nature, organization and sources of strength of civil society have been transformed. At the micro level, ICT and the internet in particular are considered to have given a voice to the weak and powerless, facilitated their mobilization, expanded the repertoires of collective action and contributed to the advancement of civil society. For other observers, the alleged transformational power of the ICT is overstated. The new politics, like the old politics, are prompted as much by cultural interests as by material concerns. Furthermore, the digital divide has created a new form of inequality: information overflow and the technological solution have prevented the emergence of a genuine public sphere, and the virtual community cannot generate adequate trust to facilitate the launching of collective actions.

A large body of research has emerged to examine the controversies. However, while some of the discussion remains speculative, available empirical studies have mostly concentrated on Europe or the United States. This article intends to contribute to this important debate by generating empirical data to explore the micro-level issues in the context of an East Asian society. Specifically, it will report the findings from (1) an analysis of the web pages launched by 14 environmental groups and 22 labour organizations in Hong Kong and (2) in-depth interviews with spokespeople from five of these organizations.

The findings of this study suggest that the internet has indeed strengthened civil society by empowering the organizations, extending the public sphere and enriching the repertoires of collective action. To be sure, the lack of resources and low level of e-readiness among CSOs in Hong Kong and the parochial outlook of most labour organizations have resulted in a limited application of the new technology. Given their top-down management orientation, the leaders of these CSOs have also been more inclined to use the technology to communicate with each other than to network with rank-and-file members and supporters. Nonetheless, the findings of this study suggest that the technology has much potential for pluralizing public discourse and involving more people in rational-critical debate of political issues. Web-based news reports and discussion forums have been particularly helpful. The internet has also helped existing CSOs to develop a sense of community and organize protests. In extending the repertoires of collective action, such as web-based signature campaigns and e-mail petitions, the internet also helps tap into human and media resources that would otherwise not be forthcoming. Most significantly, the internet allows individual activists to seek each other out, develop a common understanding, and organize collective actions on issues not addressed by established CSOs. Finally, while there is little doubt that the internet has generated new resources for actors in

¹ The authors would like to thank the United Nations University program on non-traditional security for funding support and Venus Cheung for research assistance. We would also like to thank the anonymous referees for very helpful comments. Please direct all communications to Yin-wah Chu.

civil society, this study does not support the view that the internet has triggered revolutionary changes on its own. Instead, it is through interactions between the online and offline discourses and actions that the new technology has exerted the greatest impact on civil society.

Civil society and the information age

Civil society as a concept has been a subject of intense debate. In his effort to make sense of the rise of capitalist society and the modern state, Antonio Gramsci considered civil society to have emerged historically through differentiation from the political sphere. It is the public space that lies beyond and links dialectically to the state and the market which provides the basis for consent and for state-oriented collective action. On the one hand, beliefs articulated in civil society aspire to provide moral and intellectual leadership for the whole society, which in facilitating government by consent rather than coercion vindicate the sophistication of bourgeois rule. On the other hand, it is within civil society that subaltern classes and other agents demonstrate their capacity for self organization and potential for taking political action² (Gramsci, 1971; Calhoun, 1993).

Gramsci has been highly influential in contemporary analyses of civil society. However, later scholars have sometimes placed different emphases or questioned his core assumptions. To name just a few examples, the alleged relationship between the expansion of new social classes (bourgeois and later workers) and the rise of civil society is considered historically fallacious (Hall, 1995). The concept is also found to be gender biased (Moon, 2002) and it is uncertain whether equating civil society with the public and universal should preclude a consideration of particularistic relations (Alexander, 2001).

Civil society: institution or consciousness

As it is not the purpose of this article to review the civil society debate, we will only examine two points that are directly relevant to the present study. The first concerns the relative importance of institutions and consciousness. On the one hand, some observers have viewed civil society primarily as groups and institutions. According to Nicos Mouzelis (1995: 226), 'the existence of strongly organized non-state interest groups, capable of checking eventual abuses of power by those who control the means of administration and coercion' is a central criterion for establishing the presence of civil society (see also Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, other observers contend that civil society involves not only institutions, but also culture and consciousness. To begin with, organized groups comprise only one part of the institutional foundation of the moral community of civil society. Other important institutions include the constitution and legal code, the court, mass communication and public opinion polls. One may also add social movements, which are an important basis from which new values and identities are articulated and collective actions, both within civil society and in relation to the state, are launched. Furthermore, civil society also involves cultural and symbolic dimensions, which refer both to basic principles such as the right to participate, public trust, tolerance of difference, and to the specific values and interests of a particular time and space (Hall, 1995; Cohen, 1999). Jeffrey Alexander (2001: 194), for instance, argues that civil society is 'a realm of structured, socially established consciousness, a network of understandings that operates beneath and above explicit institutions and the self-conscious interests of elites' or, in other words, symbolic codes used to articulate public discourse or which simply inform everyday language. Proposing a different perspective, Jürgen Habermas places emphasis on the public sphere, a domain wherein interests and beliefs are debated openly, rationally and reflexively (Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1993; Cohen, 1999).

A study informed by the institutional conception of civil society would, among other things, be interested in enumerating the number of such groups, evaluating their organizational strength and measuring the vitality of collective actions. A study that places greater weight on consciousness, on the other hand, would measure the robustness of civil society by examining the extent to which political ideas are debated openly, the discourses so utilized, and the degree of accommodation or tolerance of alternative lifestyles and beliefs. Differences between the two approaches are genuine. However, instead of arbitrarily choosing one approach or the other, this article will take as its point of departure a broad concept that encompasses both the associational and cultural dimensions of civil society. In so doing, the authors by no means intend to confound the presence of

² Gramsci has not been consistent in defining 'civil society'. See Gramsci (1971) for a brief overview.

civil society organizations with the flourish of 'rational-critical' political debates (Calhoun, 1993). Both the institutional and discursive dimensions of civil society are conditions to be achieved, the importance of which is to be assessed empirically.

Information politics, network society

The second point concerns the rise of the information age and its implications for civil society. The arguments have been articulated at two levels. At the macro level, the ICT revolution, together with the globalization of economic activities and the decline of communism, are believed to have brought about fundamental changes in power and politics. Among other things, the information age is associated with the decline of the manual working class, expansion of white-collar occupations, an erosion of national boundaries and, consequently, a shift in the loci as well as targets of political contention (Melucci, 1996; Castells, 1998; 2001; Webster, 2001). Labour organizations are no longer important political actors; in their place new social movements have emerged such as those advocating environmental preservation, gay and lesbian rights, as well as alternative religions. Unlike class-based politics, new social movements are less concerned with the advancement of material interests than addressing issues of culture and identity. In part as a corollary, their tactics tend to be expressive rather than instrumental. While the movements have continued to address local audiences and national governments, they have also become more concerned with mobilizing global citizens and targeting transnational and regional governments. All this has led to changes in the meaning of civil society and some observers have argued for the emergence of a new politics. At the same time, observers suggest that the information age is associated with the rise of a network society (Castells, 2001; Wellman, 2001; see also Dean, 2001). Not only has the new technology allowed like-minded individuals and groups to get in touch with each other on an issue-by-issue basis, it undermines the commanding position of organizations and hierarchies. Major social changes no longer stem from the endeavours of 'dutiful NGOs', but spontaneous organizations triggered by media reports of crisis situations.

These observations on the nature and organizational dynamics of civil society in the information age are not free from censure. Critics have cautioned against an overstatement of the social-political transformation. The global information economy remains capitalist and the vast majority of white-collar occupations are low skilled. While most new social movements are about culture and identity, many environmental movements and gender-related movements are intertwined with issues of sustainable development, poverty alleviation, anti-discrimination and rights in the workplace. Expressive tactics have been used mainly to capture media attention, which should not overshadow the instrumental goals pursued. Formal organizations still play a role in mobilization in crisis situations. Taken together, one should not overstate the changes in civil society and the preponderance of a new politics (Webster, 2001).

The internet

At the micro level, the discussion has centred on the emergence of the internet, which, given its architectural characteristics of connecting computers globally and anonymously, seems to hold great promise for enhancing internal and external networking, mobilizing collective action and extending the public sphere. ICT enthusiasts and sceptics have come up with very diverse arguments (Putnam, 2000; Castells, 2001; DiMaggio *et al.*, 2001). On the one hand, ICT enthusiasts point out that the internet allows CSOs to access and disseminate information promptly, globally and inexpensively. Subscribers to the World Wide Web can instantaneously retrieve government documents, databases, as well as accounts of the activities of other organizations (Naughton, 2001: 153). The internet also allows CSOs to publish and distribute worldwide pamphlets, videos and sound recordings. They no longer need to depend on the traditional mass media, which more often than not focus on newsworthy occurrences, distort their activities, and fail to explain their rationales. Furthermore, anonymity on the internet has made it difficult for security services to track down dissidents or to censor the disseminated information. Insofar as the internet can facilitate access to and dissemination of information, it provides the foundation for informed public debates and therefore makes the expansion of civil society possible.

The internet is also considered to enhance the internal and external networking of CSOs. Within the organizations, leaders can use e-mail, list-servers, chat rooms and other devices to communicate directly and informally with members at all levels. Individual members can also use the same devices to gain closer

understanding of the organizations, express opinions and take initiatives. Altogether, the internet is believed to facilitate informal connectivity, horizontal structure and self-organization, which helps to both democratize the CSOs and develop solidarity (Naughton, 2001). On top of this, small CSOs with tiny budgets can take advantage of the internet's inexpensive translocal communication capability to build solidarity and mobilize resources globally, as well as to orchestrate protests within a country and all over the world (Independent Sector, 2001; Naughton, 2001). This is particularly important when potential supporters are scattered geographically or where a solution to the problems at hand requires extraterritorial cooperation. Some ICT enthusiasts have gone so far as to suggest that social movements can be built entirely through the medium of the internet. In the view of Manuel Castells (2001), such internet-based movements tend to be particularly vibrant and resilient, for the internet allows movements with no permanent organization, centre or command structure to emerge and participants can engage in debates without paralyzing the movement. The anti-globalization and anti-WTO protests in Seattle and Washington DC in 1999 and 2000 are considered exemplary cases.

On the other hand, ICT sceptics have been less optimistic. They point to problems relating to the digital divide, information overflow, as well as a lack of trust in the internet, leading them to argue for its mixed implications for civil society expansion. In the first place, observers contend that the internet has remained expensive or even inaccessible for many people in the developing world and it also takes special knowledge to use the technology. Given the lack of financial and human resources among most CSOs, there are limits on the extent to which the internet can facilitate information access and dissemination (Camacho, 2001; Levine, 2001). On top of this, CSOs based in the developed countries tend to be more resourceful and are better placed to publicize their beliefs and practices on the World Wide Web. The advantages accruing to government and corporate actors are, needless to say, even bigger (Calhoun, 1998). Given the problem of the digital divide, the ICT revolution may have created new inequalities rather than removed old ones.

In the second place, although cyberspace is open to diverse political ideas, the explosion of web pages has encouraged the development of search engines, which reinforces the tendency for individuals to dwell safely in the world of ideas that are familiar or congenial (Levine, 2001). In other words, even though the internet allows its participants to transcend physical space, it encourages people to seek out individuals or groups with similar interests, culture and taste. As a result, discussion on the internet tends to resemble 'cultural and socio-spatial "enclaves"', which is a far cry from the idea of a public sphere where social and political differences are resolved via public, rational discussion based on the merits of the arguments (Calhoun, 1998: 384; Dahlberg, 2001; see also Dean, 2001). According to this view, the enclave character would remain even if the same individual were to visit different sites to discuss disparate socio-political issues.

Finally, ICT sceptics have queried the ability of the internet to build genuine communities that can launch collective actions. Most fundamentally, although anonymity on the internet has its virtues, it also tends to reduce the level of mutual trust and produce weak rather than strong ties. It encourages people to utter irresponsible statements or even to present themselves in multiple identities, both of which hamper the emergence of serious discussion. Given the relative ease of gaining access to different organizations, CSOs also appear to be consumer goods, placed side by side for carefree sampling. Hence, even if the internet can widen social networks, ties thus developed tend to be weak and exert dubious impacts on the ability of CSOs to act collectively (Levine, 2001). In this connection, Diani (2001) has argued that one should not overestimate the ICT's ability to facilitate collective action; it may be useful for pooling professional resources, but ineffectual in mobilizing direct action.

The internet and Hong Kong's environmental and labour organizations

The present study will contribute to the debate on civil society and the information age by reporting empirical data on some environmental and labour organizations in Hong Kong.³ It will focus mainly on the internet's impact on networking, mobilization and the generation of the public sphere.

³ The study has focused on environmental and labour groups as a means to compare the culture based organizations of the information age with the class-based organizations of the industrial era. The sample turns out to be too small for a systematic comparison

The study and its context

Hong Kong used to be a British colony, but became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China in 1997. In 2001, the population was estimated to be 6.7 million. The majority of the population lived in highly urbanized areas, with 71.1% of its population aged 15 or above having attained at least secondary education and more than 79% of the workforce hired in the tertiary sector. In 2001, per capita GDP amounted to US \$24,010, which was the third highest in Asia. Altogether, Hong Kong appears well placed to capture opportunities afforded by the ICT revolution and indeed, in 2001, 37.2% of business establishments and 48.7% of households had computers connected to the internet (HKSAR Census and Statistics Department, 2002).

The territory is also noted for its liberal social-political environment and is home to a sizable number of civil society organizations. In 2001, there were a total of 610 registered labour unions with 671,076 members (HKSAR Labour Department, 2002). In the same year, the Inland Revenue Department recognized a total of 3,435 'charitable institutions and trusts of a public character', which could be used as a rough approximation of the total number of CSOs⁴ (HKSAR Inland Revenue Department, 2002). Despite the liberal environment, Hong Kong has not been known for its political activism. Some observers have noted in dismay that it has the lowest level of labour disputes and strikes among the Asian newly industrializing economies (Deyo, 1989). With the relocation of Hong Kong manufacturing industries to mainland China, the number of industrial workers has shrunk persistently, resulting in an aging workforce and a decline in the influence of labour unions. New social movements such as those pertaining to women's liberation and environmental protection exist, but they remain marginal to the social and political experiences of most people. Of course, important changes have occurred since the 1 July 2003 mass protest, but the empirical study for this research took place before that date.

Hong Kong's high level of e-readiness, its liberal environment and political quietism do not lend themselves to an easy projection of the level of ICT use among the CSOs. In this study, only 14 environmental groups and 22 labour organizations were found to have launched websites.⁵ We do not know the total number of environmental groups in the territory and cannot estimate whether the figure represents a high or low internet utilization rate. However, only 3.1% of the labour unions had launched web pages, which is far lower than the rate of 10.7% for commercial establishments⁶ (HKSAR Census and Statistics Department, 2002).

Among the 14 environmental organizations, three are local chapters of transnational organizations and the rest are locally formed groups. Their concerns range from specific topics such as a green outlying island, clean air and bird-watching, to the more general issues of environmental hazards, green living and sustainable development. These organizations vary tremendously in resource levels. The largest claims to have 50 advisors, nine working committees, 50 full-time staff and over 14,000 members; seven have hired no more than 2–20 full-time staff, and the remaining six organizations have operated with the support of volunteers alone. As for the labour organizations, all are local in origin. They include three labour confederations, seven enterprise unions, eight occupational unions, one industry union and three labour rights organizations. Once again, they differ tremendously in resource levels. The largest labour confederation boasts a membership of over 300,000, while the smallest occupational union has no more than 100 members. However, most of them are large by local standards. Taken altogether, it would be fair to say that all the environmental and labour organizations that maintain web pages are relatively rich in organizational, financial or human resources.

⁴ 'Charitable organizations and public trusts' has to be used as a rough approximation because no other data are available. The figure itself is unsatisfactory because, on the one hand, the Hong Kong government allows CSOs to be registered as companies and, on the other hand, many charitable organizations are concerned with philanthropic issues alone.

⁵ A research assistant helped to locate these websites by, first, searching 'Google' with the Chinese Characters *huanbao tuanti* and *laogong tuanti* and, second, going through hyperlinks generated by the initially identified web pages. This is the most direct and efficient way to identify environmental and labour groups that have launched web pages. The sample has missed a few local environmental groups and some globally oriented labour organizations, but it is very close to being exhaustive. The names and web addresses of these organizations will be available upon request. The study of the websites was carried out between 25 August and 15 October 2002.

⁶ The percentage is calculated by dividing the number of labour unions that have launched websites, which is 19 (as three of the websites have been launched by labour rights organizations), by the total of 610 labour unions.

The study primarily involved an analysis of the web pages launched by these 14 environmental groups and 22 labour organizations. The analysis was then supplemented by interviews with representatives of five of these organizations. The interviews were structured but open-ended and all lasted for more than an hour.

Before presenting the findings of this study, it is useful to note that a substantial number of the websites either have simple designs or are poorly maintained. For a start, 14% of the environmental groups and 55% of the labour organizations used text alone on their web pages (Table 1). Moreover, only about 70% of the environmental groups and 55% of the labour organizations had updated their web pages in the three months prior to late October 2002 when we visited them for the last time. Indeed, a few websites set up by the labour organizations had not been updated for one or two years following their launch in 1999 or 2000 in the heat of the dot.com fever. According to representatives of some of these organizations, they are resource poor, uncertain about the value of the internet, and only one has a well-defined ICT strategy.

Information acquisition and dissemination

Surfing the World Wide Web to gain useful information is not something new for the CSOs. Most interviewees reported browsing web pages for technical information, while a representative from an environmental group noted that she had looked at web pages of the UN and related organizations for funding opportunities.

Most CSOs in this study have used the internet to supplement conventional printed and electronic media as a means to enhance public awareness of their presence, and to broadcast their goals, achievements and positions on controversial issues. Indeed, all environmental organizations have used their websites to explain their goals; many have detailed the incidents leading to the formation of their organizations or even their sources of finance (Table 1). Labour organizations have, as a rule, refrained from talking about their sources of finance, but 91% have used their websites to explain their purposes and detail their history. Labour unions formed for over 30 years have generated rich and interesting historical recollections and some have tried to dispel misunderstandings concerning their radical image by telling their side of the story.

Most of these environmental and labour organizations have also used the web to educate their readers and, in this way, to articulate their identities and interests. An overwhelming majority of the environmental sites (93%) have presented educational materials in the form of special reports (e.g. on the risks of genetically engineered food products, on birds in the territory, hiking routes, wind-powered energy), daily tips (e.g. ways to save water), or interactive games targeting children and young people. However, labour organizations appear to be less keen on issuing educational materials and have been less creative in the use of technology: only 55% have made available special reports (e.g. pamphlets on labour rights, specialist comments on new legislation) or daily tips (e.g. procedures to enhance occupational safety). In the past, these organizations have published their background information and educational materials in the form of newsletters or pamphlets. The internet allows them to economize on the use of paper and postage, present the materials more comprehensively, and generate a highly accessible archive for the public and especially new members.

Table 1: Web sites of environmental and labour organizations in Hong Kong

		Environment (N=14)		Labour (N=22)	
		N	%	N	%
Format	Text	2	14.3	12	54.5
	Text, photos	12	85.7	10	45.5
Updated in the last 3 months	Yes	10	71.4	12	54.5
	No	3	21.4	9	40.9
	N/A	1	7.1	1	
Background information	Aim	2	14.3	3	13.6
	Aim, history	7	50.0	17	77.3
	Aim, history, finance	5	35.7	0	0
	N/A	0	0	2	9.1

Educational materials	Daily tips (D)	2	14.3	0	0
	Special topics (S)	7	50.0	10	45.5
	D, S	2	14.3	2	9.1
	S, games	2	14.3	20	0
	N/A	1	7.1	10	45.5
Position papers	Yes	9	64.3	11	50
	No	5	35.7	11	50
Report of activities	Yes	9	64.3	9	40.9
	No	5	35.7	13	59.1
Language(s)	Chinese	1	7.1	17	77.3
	Chinese, English	13	92.9	5	22.7
Membership registration	Yes	2	14.3	2	9.1
	No	12	85.7	20	90.9
Donation/volunteer	Yes	1	7.1	1	4.5
	No	13	92.9	21	95.5
Download forms	Yes	10	71.4	14	63.6
	No	4	28.6	8	36.4
Forthcoming activities	Yes	11	78.6	18	81.8
	No	3	21.4	4	18.2
Discussion forum	Yes	5	35.7	9	40.9
	No	9	64.3	13	59.1

The potential of the internet to enhance the plurality of public discourse and to present the viewpoints of CSOs becomes most apparent when these organizations are involved in controversial public issues. This might happen when the government announces new legislation, when the organizations issue a research report to press for reform, or when they protest against government or corporate actions. In this connection, it is useful to note that 64% of the environmental and 50% of the labour organizations have used their websites to publish position papers (Table 1). Friends of the Earth and the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions have even presented chronologies of their public actions with links to full reports. Four other environmental groups and two labour organizations also provide detailed reports with supporting documents when they become involved in specific public issues. Insofar as the presentation of an alternative viewpoint is concerned, the work of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union has been most outstanding. It explained on its website in 2000 why they considered the government's request for all non-language-trained teachers to take compulsory language tests to be humiliating and counter-productive. They presented their analysis of the historical development of Hong Kong's education policy, the crux of the problem as they see it, their meetings with government officials, position statements, as well as written, videotaped or audiotaped reports of their protest activities.

To analyse more systematically the impact of the internet on pluralizing the information we receive, we compared these organizations' reports of their latest public actions⁷ on their websites with the coverage of such activities in two local Chinese newspapers, *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao*.⁸ The result of the comparison is summarized in Table 2. In total five environmental and seven labour organizations posted on their websites press releases or reports of their public actions. However, *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao* only reported 42% and 50% of the incidents, respectively. Reports in the printed media also tend to be less detailed; a rough indication is the disparity in the number of words used in the two types of report. Finally, although the printed media have in general provided authentic reports in the sense that they either present the incidents in a disinterested way or try to introduce alternative viewpoints and come up with a more balanced report, there has also been a case where the *Apple Daily* has shifted the focus of the incident altogether.

⁷ By public actions, we include protests, meetings with government officials and legislators, press conferences, press releases and open letters to public figures. Some of the 'actions' are part of a long drawn-out process, yet only the most recent actions were selected for analysis.

⁸ *Apple Daily* is the best-selling local paper, while a public opinion survey has ranked *Ming Pao* as the most impartial in the last two years.

Such disparities can be traced to two major differences in the perspectives of the organizations and news reporters. First, while CSOs are accountable to their members and engage in works that are long term in nature, newspapers want stories that provide ‘the background, factors leading up to the present scenario, and solutions to the problems on hand’.⁹ Thus, even though the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants Association and the Hong Kong Civil Servants General Union found it necessary to report their meetings with legislative councillors and a political party on the web, the printed media, being interested in the pay cut for civil servants as a whole, decided not to report such isolated actions undertaken by individual unions. Similarly, given the intense competition in Hong Kong’s media industry, there has been a tendency for news editors to regard a story that involves conflict as captivating and therefore good. Hence, instead of reporting Green Peace Hong Kong’s protest against Nestlé’s use of genetically engineered food products as such, the Apple Daily came up with a juicy story about the protestors being trapped in an elevator at Nestlé’s headquarters.¹⁰ A second and perhaps quite obvious point is that news reporters and social activists have different political standpoints. Therefore, while Friends of the Earth argued in its press release that global warming might have caused the spread of dengue fever in October 2002 and criticized the government for exacerbating the problem by using pesticides indiscriminately, the two newspapers regarded the government’s vigorous effort to eliminate mosquitoes as a responsible act and publicized the government’s call for sponsorship from the private sector. The internet, in allowing CSOs to present their stories comprehensively and authentically, helps to overcome the confines of the mass media and contributes to the pluralizing of public discourse.

Network building and extension of the public sphere

Most interviewees agree that the internet, and e-mail in particular, has facilitated communication among decision-makers in their organizations. This is particularly true for decision-makers who hold full-time positions elsewhere. E-mail allows them to read the documents carefully and engage in in-depth discussion of controversial issues at a time and place most convenient to them. However, none of the interviewed organizations has done away with face-to-face meetings, which have been devoted to discussing the thorniest problems, finalizing decisions and, in one case, examining the most sensitive policy issues.

However, the digital divide and related problems have prevented these CSOs from using the internet to reach out to potential supporters and like-minded organizations. In the first place, supporters and like-minded organizations may not have access to the internet. The Conservancy Association, for example, has cooperated regularly with environmental groups in Mainland China, but the latter do not have access to the internet and the Association has to work with them through more conventional means. Similarly, as most teachers in Hong Kong do not have access to computers at work or cannot use them for non-job-related activities, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union finds it just as convenient to contact their members using non-electronic means. In the second place, not all organizations are ready to use the internet to reach out globally. As can be seen in Table 1, 7% of the environmental and 77% of the labour sites are available in Chinese language alone, which indicates that they are not interested in reaching out to non-Chinese speakers. In a similar way, only 64% of the environmental groups and 26% of the labour organizations have replied to e-mail enquiries within one week.¹¹ The inability to tackle problems of encryption and the threat of hacker attacks has also prevented practically all these organizations from recruiting members, donors and volunteers online.¹²

Table 2: Public actions: reportage on web sites and in printed media

⁹ The spokesperson of the Friends of the Earth made this observation.

¹⁰ More pertinently, the spokesperson for Friends of the Earth revealed that the organization strives to frame its actions and build stories for reporters. In issuing a press release to advocate the use of wind-powered energy, for example, FoE has to draw a connection with the high electricity prices in Hong Kong. The latter involves conflict and has a better chance of capturing media attention.

¹¹ The research assistant sent e-mails to these organizations asking for information on how often they update their websites. She made phone calls if no replies were received after a week and very often the CSOs asked her to send them a proper letter through facsimile.

¹² The point about encryption was made by the spokespeople of Green Peace Hong Kong and the Conservancy Association. Instead of doing online membership applications, 71% of the environmental groups and 64% of the labour organizations provided downloadable forms on their web pages.

Organization	Incident and date	Web site			Ming Pao		Apple Daily	
		Full Doc	Story	Word count	Word count	+/-	Word count	+/-
Conservancy Association	Press release: 'Land use of the former British magazine' (11 October 2002)	√		844	595	neutral	N/A	
Friends of the Earth	Press release: 'Dengue fever' (10 October 2002)	√		930	N/A		N/A	
Green Peace Hong Kong	Protest and press release: 'Nestle and GE food' (13 August 2002)		√	597	193	neutral	437	Other issues
HK Birds Watching Society	Meeting with Highways Department: 'Save the Long Valley' (13 March 2000)		√	235	N/A		N/A	
World Wildlife Fund	Press release: 'Coral reef Census' (28 July 2002)	√		866	519	+	429	+
HK Chinese Civil Servants Association	Press release: 'Meet with the DAB on salary freeze for civil servants' (23 August 2002)	√		264	N/A		N/A	
HK Christian Industrial Committee	Statement: 'McDonald's sweatshop' (9 September 2000)	√		693	259	neutral	250	neutral
HK Civil Servants General Union	Witness before the Legislative Council: 'Salary reduction for civil servants' (17 June 2002)	√		1103	N/A		N/A	
HK Confederation of Trade Unions	Research report: 'Occupation and foot health' (3 May 2002)	√		2556	617	+	275	neutral
HK Confederation of Trade Unions	Press conference: 'Rent reduction for new public housing' (8 October 2002)		√	445	N/A		N/A	
HK Professional Teachers' Union	Protest: '2,500 teachers against compulsory language test' (21 October 2000)		√		1571	neutral	776	+
PCCW Staff Association	Letter to employer: 'On outsourcing' (23 September 2002)	√		343	N/A		N/A	

Note: photograph; video excerpt; audio excerpt

Most fundamental, these organizations tend to consider face-to-face interaction and paper-based communication as more effective ways to establish a rapport, extend networks and build solidarity. All interviewees said that they would fax in addition to e-mail the news media if they were to issue a press release. A spokesman for the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union further pointed out that membership drives have predominantly been a group

activity for them. New teachers come to understand and identify with the union's missions through face-to-face interactions with school representatives and their membership applications are processed en masse accordingly.

If the internet has limited use for extending networks, it has a mixed impact in terms of facilitating public debate and democratizing the CSOs. Due to a lack of human resources to solve technical problems and handle administrative duties, only 36% of the environmental groups and 41% of the labour organizations provided discussion areas on their web pages (Table 1). Among those websites with discussion forums, two could not be accessed and two did not show the messages posted. Bulletin boards that do not provide a focus for potential participants tend to get very few messages.¹³ Some participants have also used the discussion forums to vent their anger against their superiors, their employers or the profession. Furthermore, spokespeople from two organizations confessed that they seldom browse the discussion forums and nearly all interviewees contended that their organizations have established an agenda and would not be swayed by isolated opinions expressed on the web.

Having said this, it remains the case that discussion forums have, in some circumstances, become a platform for facilitating rational-critical debates of public issues. Significantly, two of these CSOs have set up discussion forums to address specific issues that touch on the material and/or cultural interests of the groups and have accordingly attracted fervent responses and high-quality discussion. An important example is the forum set up by the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union to discuss the compulsory benchmark examination for teachers.¹⁴ It has drawn more than 400 new messages in the span of 6 months, with many of the 400 messages attracting 10–20 responses.¹⁵ Participants express their views on whether it is reasonable to make the examination compulsory, what implications the policy has on the professional standing of teachers, and whether alternative arrangements can be found. While a few messages are no more than exchanges of insults, most participants have put forth their arguments with reason and responded to messages posted by other people on the basis of their merit. The forum admits and gives equal treatment to different opinions, though most messages tend to fall within the same ideological framework and few participants have taken up critical reflection of their positions. Furthermore, not only have leaders of the Union paid close attention to the discussion, government officials and news reporters are known to have browsed the discussion forum for 'public opinions' in this case. Altogether, even though the discussion forum does not completely match the criteria for a public sphere, it has at its best come rather close to the ideal (Calhoun, 1998; Dahlberg, 2001). The same can be said for the case of the Friends of Tailongwan, which will be detailed below.

The internet and collective action

The internet has also facilitated mobilization of collective actions. The spokesperson for the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union acknowledges that the internet has allowed the union to instantaneously alert members to changing government policies, to overcome the censorship imposed by some school authorities, and to remind members of the time and venue of protests concerning the compulsory benchmark examination. However, the same interviewee believes that it has not been an e-mail or a web page, but common understanding developed through long-term cultivation that has prompted people to join the protest. The internet has also expanded the repertoire of collective action by making possible e-mail petitions and online signature campaigns.¹⁶ Green Peace Hong Kong, for example, has successfully urged more than a thousand people to e-mail letters to protest against Nestlé's use of genetically engineered food products. The Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union has also obtained several thousand online signatures to support three students detained by the police. However, the most prominent case concerns a group of nature lovers who identify themselves as the 'Friends of Tailongwan' and use the internet to protest against the government's rezoning of rural land. The case is important and will be discussed in some detail.

According to the widely reported story, the Town Planning Board issued a blueprint in April 2000 to consult the public on its plan to build 370 'small houses' on 7.88 hectares of land around Tailongwan (literally Big Wave

¹³ Bulletin boards of two labour sites got a total of four and six messages, respectively, while those of three environmental groups and three labour organizations attracted on average one message every 2–4 days.

¹⁴ The other case involves the rezoning of rural land, which will be examined in the following when we discuss the case of the Friends of Tailongwan.

¹⁵ The spokesperson for the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union estimates that only about 20 people have actively participated in the discussion forum.

¹⁶ Other cases not examined in the present study include the decision of the vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong to step down in 2000 and the Chinese University's decision to present an honorary doctorate to Lee Kuan Yew in 2001.

Bay)¹⁷ (<http://tailongwan.org/>). Some hikers got aroused and, beginning on 22 May, started to post messages on two hikers' sites: 'hiking.com.hk' and 'go2nature.net'. A certain Mr Wildman was most anxious and asked other trekkers to e-mail petitions to the Government's Planning Department. His appeal received a poor response and, in dismay, he sent a letter to the Planning Department on 3 July himself, attaching all messages posted on 'hiking.com.hk'. Mr Wildman met with relevant government officials afterwards and was informed in late August that the Town Planning Board was to hold a public hearing on 3 November. In the next two months, Mr Wildman left Hong Kong on a business trip and the matter cooled down.

Things picked up again on 22 October when a certain Mr Leung posted a message on 'hiking.com.hk', pointing out that it was the last chance for nature lovers to do something. He called a meeting in the same message, leaving his telephone number and ICQ account. Mr Wildman responded and the two met on 25 October. Three days later, they posted a letter on the same website, asking everyone to read the letter, spread the word, and above all sign and e-mail the letter to the Planning Department. A number of people responded and, in addition, e-mailed the letter to their friends, posted the letter on their school's website, or scouted various hiker sites and sent the letter to everyone who had left an e-mail address. By 3 November, more than 200 e-mail petitions were sent to the Planning Department and, after the public hearing, the Town Planning Board decided once again to defer, pending more information on the ecological and archaeological worth of Tailongwan.

Having bought a few months' time, Mr Wildman and Mr Leung decided to keep up the effort and called another meeting via the same hiker site. The meeting was postponed due to the lack of response. On 10 November, they posted another message stating that there were only two of them and they desperately needed more people to think up strategies, gather information, do research, handle publicity work, and to write up a counter proposal to the Planning Department. They asked interested parties to leave their e-mail addresses for easier contact and to suggest times when they could meet. A number of people responded and, after some e-mail exchanges, the time, venue and agenda of the meeting were posted on 'hiking.com.hk' and 'go2nature.net'. A total of eight people met on 7 December and, with a few others, became leaders of the movement.

The 7 December meeting agreed on two courses of action. First, as they lacked evidence on the level of hiker demand for Tailongwan in the November meeting with the Town Planning Board, they decided to undertake a visitor count. Second, they resolved to launch an online signature campaign so as to coalesce the strength of nature lovers.¹⁸ The eight people reported their decisions on the websites, with a view to soliciting opinions and recruiting volunteers. Many more people became interested, leaving messages and offering to help. The visitor count, which took place on 16, 24 and 25 December, was a tremendous success¹⁸ and the opinion survey, which took place at the same time, received overwhelming support for their protest. Among the 511 people surveyed, more than 80% were against or strongly against the construction of 370 'small houses'. According to one of the organizers, the high level of public support convinced them that they had done the right thing and, in part as a result, they initiated three other activities. First, they ran a face-to-face signature campaign that took advantage of the 'Millennium walk' organized by the government's Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department on 1 January 2001. Second, they organized a 'Green March to Tailongwan' jointly with the Conservancy Association on 11 March, with the purpose of educating high school students and the public about the values and beauty of the area. Third, they got under way an e-mail petition two weeks before 27 April 2001 when the Town Planning Board was to make the final decision.

The movement attracted much support from hikers. Between 22 May 2000 and 9 May 2001, about 140 people took part in the web-based discussion, posting more than 870 messages on the two hikers' sites. At first, hikers exchanged views on the Planning Department's blueprint, the beauty of Tailongwan, and reasons why the latter should be preserved. After a more or less self-selected group was formed, the discussion shifted to matters of strategy¹⁹ and, beginning in January 2001, logistics and organization. Starting with one person, the movement grew to involve about 12 organizing members. The number of volunteers also increased from about 20 during the visitor count and 'Millennium walk' signature campaign to about 60 by the time of the 'Green march to Tailongwan'. At the same time, the movement received tremendous public support. The result of the opinion survey has already been noted above. In addition, more than 2,000 signatures were collected in the span of three hours during the

¹⁷ Native inhabitants of the New Territories are entitled to build 'small houses' for their sons and the government has to provide land to accommodate such requests.

¹⁸ The web page for the signature campaign was launched on 5 January 2001.

¹⁹ Examples included which green organizations to contact, whether they needed a media policy, how to make the visitor count creditable, and whether it would be possible to draft a counter proposal that would produce a win-win situation for the government, the villagers and nature lovers.

'Millennium walk'. The 'Green march to Tailongwan' also attracted well over 700 participants. As for the online signature campaign, a total of 2,814 signatures were collected by 27 April 2001, with many people contributing supportive comments in addition. Finally, so many people sent in their e-mail petitions that the computer server of the Planning Department became overloaded.

The internet's potential for facilitating collective action has been well illustrated in the case of the Friends of Tailongwan. Individuals with similar concerns are able to locate each other through the internet and forge a social movement from scratch. Discussion boards and e-mail have served as a convenient platform to discuss matters of principle, strategies and logistics. The internet also generates novel repertoires of collective action, such as online signature campaigns and e-mail petitions. In part because of this, the movement has been able to tap into resources that are not otherwise available. On the one hand, one of the interviewed organizers claims that she abhors the idea of 'marching with a loudspeaker' and is not inclined to take to the street. Had it not been for the internet, she would have had second thoughts about taking on the organizer's role. On the other hand, the online signature campaign allowed the Chinese-based movement to enlist the support of the non-Chinese and, at the same time, made it easy for participants to put down their personal comments, which has given much weight to their signatures.

In recognizing the potency of the internet, the two core organizers have also presented facts which caution against the tendency to over-romanticize its efficacy. First, although Mr Wildman and Mr Leung came to know each other through the internet, face-to-face interactions and cultural practices developed elsewhere have served as the bases for community building. Significantly, all six people that joined the 7 December meeting were registered members of 'go2nature.net' and four of them had met before on hiking trips. Organizing members and volunteers that joined the team at a later stage were mostly friends of the original core members. In addition, it is not uncommon for hikers who do not know each other to go hiking together and, incidentally, the objective of 'go2nature.net' is to facilitate the organization of such trips. Given the background, going out to meet other nature lovers is not as unusual or adventurous as outsiders might consider. Above all, the shared identity of 'hikers' or 'nature lovers' has helped to overcome cautiousness and to build trust. Finally, having met for the first time, the eight organizing members and some 12 volunteers went camping on 31 December 2000. The objective was to foster the nascent friendship.

Second, while the interviewees agree that the internet has provided a convenient venue to discuss strategies and logistics, they do not think it is the openness of the internet architecture that has facilitated widespread discussion. To begin with, only registered members of 'go2nature.net' can participate in the forum discussion, which gives some reassurance to participants that they are speaking to real people who would be responsible for their utterances. Contrary to the supposition of Dean (2001), people using different pseudonyms to present contradictory viewpoints have tended to discredit their opinions, undermine the sense of trust, and lead to the desertion of some participants, all of which are anything but an expansion of civil society. Because of the same consideration, much of the discussion on strategies and principles after January 2001 took place in private discussion groups or through group e-mail. In addition, the organizing members had to meet nearly every week for about four hours to discuss matters face-to-face. The meetings allowed them to debate more efficiently the most controversial ideas and, at the same time, facilitate the division of labour and assignment of duties, which, in the view of the interviewees, could never be done through cyberspace.

Finally, despite the importance of online campaigns, the two interviewees consider the conventional media to be their main battleground. In their words, 'we lack resources and, to win, we have to appeal to the public. Winning the hearts and minds of the media is imperative'. Not accidentally, the organizers have taken a great deal of effort to time their actions, contact news reporters, and write press releases in a way that appeals to the needs of the printed and electronic media. Some of the online campaigns, e-mail petitions in particular, have been launched with a view to attracting media attention. Indeed, they have made their way to all major local newspapers and local television channels, as well as CNN.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have in general supported the view that the internet has contributed to the expansion of civil society. Indeed, although the technology has had a limited impact in terms of democratizing the organizations and extending their external networks, it has shown much potential for pluralizing public discourse, extending the public sphere and mobilizing collective actions. Before discussing these points in greater detail, a few words of caution are necessary. Specifically, the application of the internet among the cases studied in the present research has been limited. Despite Hong Kong's high level of e-readiness, only a small portion of labour and environmental organizations has made use of the information and communication technology. In turn, those using the technology

have been prevented by the lack of human and financial resources to make full use of it. We have seen the simple design and poor maintenance of websites, the high proportion of websites available in Chinese alone, and the low priority given to launching and maintaining web-based discussion forums. All these factors suggest that the reservations of ICT sceptics concerning the digital divide and e-readiness are well founded.

In part because of these barriers, we have seen that the internet has not been tremendously helpful when it comes to democratizing civil society organizations and building up their networks. To be sure, leaders of these organizations have made use of e-mail to exchange documents and to discuss important issues before making their final decisions. However, when interacting with rank-and-file members, most of these organizations have maintained a top-down management orientation and confined themselves to the dissemination of information such as newsletters, position papers or educational materials. Some interviewed representatives admit that they seldom browse the discussion forums and their agenda would certainly not be swayed by isolated opinions expressed through the internet. The new technology has limited effect in terms of democratizing the organizations. At the same time, despite the internet's promise of inexpensive translocal communication, hardly any of these organizations have used the technology to reach out to like-minded organizations, or to recruit members, donors or volunteers. Apart from the lack of access of potential members and supporters to computers and the thorny problem of protecting sensitive information on the internet, these environmental and labour organizations have found it equally, if not more, convenient and effective to contact or establish rapport with their members, supporters and collaborators through non-electronic means. This is especially the case for labour unions, as they tend to address issues that are local in nature or specific to individual firms, industries or occupations. Consequently, not only do the unions have few uses for transnational support, the recruitment of members and the establishment of mutual understanding can be done effectively through representatives on the shop floor. Altogether, deficiencies in e-readiness, the persistence of a top-down organizational outlook, and the local nature of most labour issues have rendered the technology rather ineffectual in building/extending networks of the CSOs and democratizing these organizations.

In the cases being examined, the internet has demonstrated much more potential for pluralizing public discourse and extending the public sphere. Most of these labour and environmental organizations have launched web pages to present their own stories. In detailing the background behind the founding of their organizations, their missions and, in some cases, the chronology of events in their history, these organizations have made available an alternative and in a sense more authentic viewpoint for people interested in their work. When controversial issues come up, they have also made use of web pages to overcome the constraints of the mass media, explicating directly their positions on the causes and possible solutions to the issues at hand and detailing their meetings and negotiations with their counterparts. Compared with the reportage in the two selected local newspapers, these web-based documentations tend to be prompt and timely, more comprehensive in coverage, detailed in information, thorough in argument and, in important instances, truer to the politics of the organizations in question. Concerning the latter, documentations of the Friends of the Earth on dengue fever and Green Peace Hong Kong on genetically modified food are cases in point. The internet has thus helped these labour and environmental organizations to pluralize the public discourse.

The web-based discussion forum has also demonstrated tremendous potential for facilitating public debate on social-political issues. It is common sense that the rich and powerful are much more likely to get their opinions heard in a modern society. As such, the discussion forum, which gives a voice to people who would otherwise remain silent, is in itself a remarkable phenomenon. In addition, some organizations, significantly the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union and Friends of Tailongwan, have taken measures to bring their discussion forums close to the ideal of the public sphere. For one, they have structured their forums around specific issues, such as the compulsory benchmark examination and the rezoning of rural land, and as such tap into communities of people with shared material or cultural interests, who are concerned and ready for heated discussion (see Dahlberg 2001: 624). For another, they have required forum participants to register with operative e-mail accounts, which provide a measure of assurance to participants that they are dealing with real people responsible for their utterances. Together, these two measures have helped to regulate the internet's openness, circumvent its anonymity, build trust and community, all with a view to facilitating open and frank discussion. In part as a result, most forum participants have been able to address issues openly, rationally and critically. Ideas are discussed with reason and criticisms are made with respect to their merits. The only limitation is perhaps that as a 'community of interest', participants tend to concur with each other and few have been reflexive or willing to consider other people's standpoints, which lend them to Calhoun's (1998) criticism that web-based discussion forums resemble 'cultural and socio-spatial enclaves'. Nonetheless, discussion forums generative of quality discussion have received attention not only from the organizations in question, but also government officials, news reporters and other interested parties. This way, discussion forums have contributed to a more reflexive consideration of public issues, served as 'partial publics'

that assist the generation of consensus, and helped mediate between the formal functional systems and the life worlds of citizens (see Becker and Wehner, 2001).

Finally, the findings of this study also suggest that the internet can be beneficial to the mobilization of collective actions. Insofar as conventional collective actions are concerned, the internet has allowed the labour and environmental organizations to instantaneously alert their members to important policy changes and remind them of upcoming activities. These reminders are particularly important when a sense of community has already existed. In addition, a web-based history of the organizations, regular updates of protest activities, and especially web-based forum discussions help to build a sense of belonging, resolve differences when they exist, and facilitate the emergence of mutual understanding. In enhancing communication among leaders of the organizations, the internet has also contributed to the mobilization of professional resources. However, in part due to the local nature of the collective actions reviewed, these organizations have not used the internet to coordinate international actions or develop common strategies, which is quite unlike cases reported elsewhere (Diani, 2001; Juris, 2004).

The internet has also facilitated mobilization through expanding the repertoire of collective actions. By making online signature campaigns and e-mail petitions possible, the internet helps to coalesce the strength of people geographically apart, gather the opinions of individual protesters, and allow people who aver street protests to participate. All these resources would not have been forthcoming if not for the new technology. Furthermore, given the novelty of online signature campaigns and e-mail petitions, they have become powerful media gimmicks. Widespread media reportage, in turn, multiplies the strength of these novel modes of collective action. It is the intertwining of online protests and widespread media reportage that have given much power to these movements.

By far the most novel transformation brought about by the new technology is to open a new world for individual activists. It has generated a venue for individual activists to seek each other out, communicate directly with the public and attend to issues not addressed by established CSOs. In this study, the Friends of Tailongwan is the only organization that has emerged through web-based networking among individuals. However, there are at least two other instances where the internet has allowed individuals to coalesce their strength and contribute to significant political discussion and action.²⁰ To be sure, it is untrue that the internet by itself has made possible the networking and contributed to the emergence of collective action. Individual activists could network with each other in part because of the pre-existence of shared cultural identity (such as 'nature lovers'). These individual activists have also worked hard to strengthen their ties through engaging in other face-to-face activities (such as going camping together). However, the internet provides an inexpensive and easy means for concerned individuals to network and, once the network has emerged, individual activists can use the web-based discussion forum to cultivate identity as well as discuss matters of principle, strategy and logistics in a democratic and vibrant way.

Taken altogether, given the lack of resources among most civil society organizations and their deficient level of e-readiness, it is important not to overstate the impact of the new technology on the expansion of civil society. This is particularly the case among labour organizations in Hong Kong, which, due to their aging membership and parochial outlook, have made relatively little use of the new technology. Nonetheless, this study has also found tremendous potential in the new technology to enhance the communication among leaders of civil society organizations, to help pluralize public discourse and to extend the public sphere, as well as to facilitate the mobilization of collective action. Insofar as mobilization is concerned, the new technology strengthens the capacity of existing CSOs to organize and help generate a sense of community, allow the emergence of new repertoires of collective action and tap into resources that would otherwise be unavailable, as well as enable individual activists to network and mount collective action. This combination of revitalized existing organizations with emergent networks of activists, widespread public debate of political issues, and synergy between old and novel modes of collective action holds much promise for the expansion of civil society.

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²⁰ The two cases are (1) the debate on education reform in 2000 and (2) the web-based discussion that fed into the mass protest on 1 July 2003.

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