Social Media and Informal Organisation of Citizen Activism: Lessons From the Use of Facebook in the Sunflower Movement

Panayiota Tsatsou

Abstract
The literature embraces several arguments regarding the influence of online communication platforms and practices on communicative, semantic, affective and organisational elements of citizen activism. Although organisational matters are inherent in most discussions in this area, there is a need for empirical insight into under-explored cases of citizen activism that can contribute toward addressing questions about the informal organisation of citizen activism and the associated role of social media. This paper presents an interview study of the role of Facebook in the informal organisation of the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan. The study found that participants in the Sunflower Movement engaged more with Facebook's information-spreading and information-sharing functions than with its networking affordances. They used these functions to enhance the public's engagement with the movement and recruit new participants, as well as to initiate, support and coordinate offline action. In addition, in the context of the Sunflower Movement, Facebook appeared to support the largely self-organised and loosely structured character of the coordination of offline action. It also fostered movement participants' actions and feelings of 'altruism' toward other participants as well as their desire to 'awaken' other groups and the public at large. Regarding leadership, the study shows that leadership structures still exist in technologically mediated citizen activism, but they are often challenged by activists, while decision-making is a lot more complex and multi-layered than in the past.

Keywords
citizen activism, Facebook, interviews, organisation, social media, Sunflower Movement

Introduction
The Internet and its associated technologies of online communication have puzzled scholars, researchers and practitioners as to whether they have refreshed, extended or empowered today's citizen activism and acts of civic revolt or whether they have simply placed them in different technological, communicative and institutional contexts. Discussions of the role of online media in citizen activism have delivered fragmented and inconsistent insights. Citizen activism takes various forms across times and contexts, and the (perhaps causal) relationships between (online) mediated forms of communication and citizen activism are not likely to become entirely clear in the near future. In addition, the distinction between online and offline activism, the associated role of online technologies, and which affordances of those technologies (e.g., networking, communication, collaboration) play the most important role and why are issues that cannot be tackled with ease. It is not possible to conclusively determine whether online or offline is the most efficient and rewarding form of activism. Nevertheless, researchers who make sense of the role of online communication in citizen activism and the boundaries between online and offline activism as fruitful areas of inquiry must also examine the difficult issues of size, quality, level, forms/means, organisational structures, and effects.

One issue that researchers have debated over the past few years is the organisation and structure(s) of mostly transnational and technologically mediated cases of citizen activism (e.g., Bennett, 2005; Bimber, Flanagan, & Stohl, 2012, 2005;
This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the links between social media and the organisation of citizen activism. Specifically, it examines the nuances, mechanisms, and complexities of the role of Facebook in informal aspects of the organisation of the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, and it sheds light on associated organisational features of the movement. The findings demonstrate that informal aspects of the organisation of citizen activism are important in demonstrating the role of social media in the organisation of contemporary citizen activism. Despite the informative results of this paper, there is a need for further study of the role of social media in the informal organisation of citizen activism, and the concluding section notes the knowledge and lessons that researchers should use for the conduct of future research.

The first part of the paper presents literature that examines online communication technologies and their role in citizen activism, focusing on the main discourses and debates in the literature, especially those concerning the role of online technology in the informal organisation of social movements and other cases of civic revolt. This is followed by a brief presentation of the case study of the Sunflower Movement and the qualitative methodology employed in the study. The paper then presents the main set of findings obtained in the study. It closes with a critical discussion of those findings and the lessons that can be extracted from this study for the conduct of systematic, evidence-based and longitudinal research in this area in the future.

**Online Communication and Citizen Activism: The Question of Informal Organisation**

**Why Does Online Communication Matter for Citizen Activism?**

Broadly speaking, scholars have paid attention to dialogic, flexible, deliberative and inherently democratic forms of communication online, and many have argued that social media (e.g., blogs, social networking sites, grassroots sites, citizen journalism sites) constitute a source of new, online forms of participation and activism. Some have referred to the lowered transaction costs and end-to-end architecture of the Internet as significant modifiers of social movement mobilisation (Bimber et al., 2005; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Lev-On & Hardin, 2008; Shulman, 2009). In addition, some have focused on the scale and range of information to which digital media users are exposed, arguing that users may come across mobilising information online even without seeking it out (Tang & Lee, 2013; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). Others have stressed how pre-existing communication practices have developed a new scale and dynamic since the advent of online media. For instance, Ayres (1999) and Rosa (2014) have argued that social media platforms, such as discussion boards, listservs and social networking sites, enhance the transmission speed and reach of protest-related information and multi-media content, ascribing to such information and content a dynamic not met previously. Some others have focused on how Internet-based platforms are used by rebels to diffuse information internationally and thus to gain support from all over the world (Castells, 2010; Garrido & Halavais, 2003). Still, others emphasise the innovative features of online-based or -motivated public engagement. In referring to online petition sites (such as Change.org), online boycotts and email campaigns, they discuss the potential of online innovations to change well-established forms of public engagement without there being any necessity for offline protesting (Bennett & Fielding, 1999; Earl, 2010).

The role of online media has also been placed within a broader discussion of community connectivity and mobilisation. Carty (2010) set out distinctive elements of virtual communities that make a difference to the way people engage with politics and how politics is conducted: ‘virtual communities, like actors in many contemporary movements, are … made up of social relations that are decentralized, diverse, heterogeneous, fluid, open, informal, and in many ways self-governing’ (p. 159). Kavada (2015) provides nuanced reflections on how communication practices and processes on social media might have enabled the Occupy Movement to act as a collective, inclusive and at the same time distinctive actor with its own identity. Others have contended that, even if weak ties and a fluid sense of connectivity prevail in cyber-space, they can still facilitate campaigns and mobilise people to act in face-to-face contexts (Bennett, 2003; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2003). Bimber et al. (2005) pointed out that new participatory technologies have made available to individuals communication methods that were previously used exclusively by formal organisations. Thus, changing structures of organisation are made possible and enable social movements to take on certain functions of formal organisations, blurring the boundaries between traditional hierarchical forms and flexible network structures.

In contrast, some authors disagree that online communication necessarily changes the fundamental structures and forms of activism. They argue that the extent to which this occurs depends on the extent and use of the two key activism-specific affordances of the web: the reduced cost of organising and participating in protests and the decreased need for activists to physically get together in order to act (Earl & Kimport, 2011). A similarly careful argument is put forward by those who suggest that online communication and networking do not replace face-to-face contact but supplement existing communication channels and practices (e.g., Benedikt, 1991; Flaherty, Pearce, & Rubin, 1998;
Hampton & Ling, 2011). Some others identify the pros and cons of online communication in creating new spheres for communication and deliberation, stressing that fragmentation of online communication puts at risk a shared and integrative public culture (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 152). Still, others think that social media platforms such as microblogging lead to weak forms of activism (i.e., slacktivism) and are thus relatively ineffectual, causing only small-scale change (Gladwell, 2010). Finally, some researchers refer to new digital disparities, or what Bimber (1999) early on called the ‘transitional effects’ of technology on citizens’ contact with politicians, which result from the uneven distribution of technology in society.

Overall, the literature embraces diverse and often conflicting arguments regarding the influence of online communication platforms and practices on communicative, semantic, affective and organisational elements of citizen activism. Although organisational matters and features of citizen activism are inherent in most discussions in this area, the literature has not yet thoroughly and systematically addressed the question of informal organisation and its associated challenges and features in citizen activism, particularly with regard to the role of social media. This paper aims to contribute to the filling of this gap.

**The Role of Online Communication in the Organisation of Citizen Activism**

As early as the 1990s, activists (e.g., Mexico’s Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the protests against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999, and the J18 anti-globalisation protests in the same year) made use of online forms of communication to organise and empower themselves. They employed online discussion forums, prototype blogs, email lists, instant messaging, online donations and volunteer audio and video to disseminate information but also to organise their activities and demonstrate a participatory ethos. In addition, through software tools such as Tactical FloodNet and a ‘do-it-yourself’ attitude to action-taking, they encouraged ‘hacktivism’ (Chadwick, 2007, p. 287). Since then, studies on the scale, spread and success of citizen activism have posed new questions or re-posed old ones concerning the organisation and structures of social movements and other types of collective action in the age of transnational and technologically mediated activism (e.g., Bennett, 2005; Bimber et al., 2012, 2005; Chadwick, 2007; della Porta & Diani, 2006; Earl & Klimport, 2011; McDonald, 2002; Melucci, 1996; Tarrow, 2011; Tremayne, 2014).

Chadwick (2007) argued that the Internet encourages ‘organizational hybridity’. This suggests the emergence of new organisational forms, sometimes termed ‘hybrid mobilization movements’, such as MoveOn. These hybrid movements blend repertoires associated with three organisational types – parties, interest groups and social movements – and are dependent on the Internet and the spatial and temporal interactions it facilitates. Some authors have attempted to understand the role of technology in the organisation of social movements through looking at the existence of a new ‘network’ structure of society (Castells, 1996). Thus, they have interrogated the blurring of the boundaries between traditional hierarchical forms and flexible network structures in online-mediated forms of activism (Bimber et al., 2005). To explain emerging forms and organisational features of social movements, Hardt and Negri (2005) talked about the development of a new social class – the ‘multitude’ – that is marked by nomadism and functions as a ‘swarm’. Others have used case-focused studies to shed light on the role of online technologies in the organisation of social movements. For instance, Carty (2017) analyses two student-led social movements in Canada and the United States that challenge the cost of higher education so as to provide instructive examples of how young activists are carrying out acts of political dissent that combine digital forms of information sharing and organizing with traditional forms of protest such as direct action. Also, in an interview and participant observation study of the MoveOn.org and the Florida Tea Party Movement, Rohlinger and Gaulden (2017) suggest that, while hierarchical organizations may be more effective at engaging individuals in a breadth of activities, decentralized structures may encourage deeper activism because individuals have to take that first step (e.g., finding a movement’s online presence or attending a meeting) on their own without an organizational cheerleader cheering them on. Tremayne (2014) examined the role of Twitter and Twitter-based networks in the Occupy Wall Street Movement so as to uncover important features of the movement’s composition, organisation and evolution.

On a deeper level, the literature has stressed the role of the Internet in blurring the boundaries between private and public forms of action and in the development of a range of new collective action repertoires. Such repertoires consist of self-organised protests and political actions in the absence of central coordinators, affiliation with a wide array of online organisations without formal membership procedures and incentives, and the creation of web content that offers a range of personal, voluntarily contributed informational goods for public use (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006, p. 30). This suggests that today’s grassroots activism has the potential to develop and demonstrate diverse ways of organising itself and mobilising, adopting a blend of online and offline, as well as more and less structured, forms of action that are placed in a locality or across physical boundaries (Chadwick, 2007, p. 286).

In studying the 1999 ‘Carnival Against Capital’ protests, Scott and Street (2000) referred to ‘organized spontaneity’ to explain how new media technologies enabled activists to blend coordination and decentralisation in the organisation of those protests, adopting leaderless and often temporary forms of organisation. More recently, Bennett and Segerberg
(2011) argued that digital means of activism have fostered the ‘personalization of collective action’, which has its roots in a broader trend of growing individualisation in today’s globalised and highly personalised politics. According to Bennett and Segerberg, digital technologies are increasingly important for the conduct of personalised collective action, as they enable individuals to engage with the cause of action or mobilisation and to create the potential for personal networks to play a prominent role in a protest or other forms of action. From an organisational perspective, the authors suggest that digital technologies ensure flexibility in how, when, where and with whom individuals may affiliate and act, and they also facilitate communication and coordination of a variety of forms of action on all sorts of scales (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, pp. 771-772).

**Online Communication and Informal Organisation of Citizen Activism**

Traditionally, social movements’ organisation and structures have been marked by some degree of democratic experimentalism (McCarthy, 1996), favouring non-hierarchical, consensual and participatory methods of organisation and decision-making (Chadwick, 2007, p. 285). This particularly appears to have been the case in the past couple of decades, since online communication became a widespread part of organisational structure and a common organising principle or organising agent (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This has come to suggest the prevalence of rather informal elements in the organisation of citizen activism.

Shirky (2008) describes social media as allowing for ‘organizing without organizations’, which resonates with the goal of many of today’s activist groups to demonstrate an organic, bottom-up structure of organisation that has nothing in common with the hierarchical, top-down structures of formal organisations. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) refer to self-organising (i.e., organised via technology) ‘connective action’, namely digital network-enabled ‘connective action’, juxtaposing this with the logic of organisationally brokered collective action networks. In their attempt to untangle the informal organisation of digital mechanisms of ‘connective action’, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that, in the case of movements such as the Indignados and the Occupy protests in the United States, digital platforms assumed the role of established political organisations, allowing personalised, digitally mediated forms of collective action to become large in size, to scale up faster than traditional forms of collective action and to be flexible in tracking moving political targets and bridging different issues. This sort of digitally networked connective action, they continue, can run ‘without the requirement of collective identity framing or the levels of organisational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 750). Thus, according to these authors, connective action networks self-organise without central or ‘lead’ organisational actors (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 755) and with the use of digital networking mechanisms, such as:

…organizational connectors (e.g. web links), event coordination (e.g. protest calendars), information sharing (e.g. YouTube and Facebook), and multifunction networking platforms in which other networks become embedded (e.g. links in Twitter and Facebook posts), along with various capacities of the devices that run them. (p. 753)

Looking into the role of social media during the turbulent days of the political protests in Tahrir Square, Egypt, in early 2011, Tufekci and Wilson (2012, p. 366) found that dedicated pages (e.g., ‘We are all Khaled Said’) on social media platforms such as Facebook became crucial platforms for announcing and coordinating offline protests. These authors’ survey found that ‘the early participants in the Tahrir Square demonstrations tended to rely on blogs, Twitter, Facebook, phones, and email for the information about the protests’ (Tufekci & Wilson 2012, p. 373). For example, almost half of their survey respondents (48.2%) had produced and disseminated videos or pictures from protests, with Facebook being the leading platform, and a quarter of the respondents (25%) had used Facebook to create and disseminate visuals.

In analysing the culture of the protest movements of the 21st century – from the Arab Spring to the Indignados protests in Spain to the Occupy Movement – Gerbaudo (2012) argues that social media spaces are used as part of a project of re-appropriating public space. This project involves assembling various groups around ‘occupied’ places, such as Cairo’s Tahrir Square or New York’s Zuccotti Park, enabling a new ‘choreography of assembly’. For Gerbaudo (2012), the notion of ‘choreography of assembly’ encapsulates the mediation of physical assembling through social-media-enabled forms of communication, namely ‘the mediated “scene-setting” and “scripting” of people’s physical assembling in public space’ (p. 40). Facebook, for instance, has been a mobilisation tool, a ‘springboard’ for ‘recruiting’ new movement members and preparing them for offline action (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 145), much of which involves instances of spatial assembling, with spatiality incorporating both symbolic and material meanings (e.g., the Occupy Movement, as well as the occupation of central public squares, such as Tahrir Square in Cairo and Syntagma Square in Athens). A similar argument was put forward by Juris (2012), who juxtaposed the ‘logic of aggregation’ and the ‘assembling of masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical spaces’ ‘to the “logics of networking” in the case of the global justice movements:

…whereas the use of listservs and websites in the movements for global justice during the late 1990s and 2000s helped to generate and diffuse distributed networking logics, in the #Occupy movements social media have contributed to powerful
logic of aggregation, which have continued to exist alongside rather than entirely displacing logics of networking. (pp. 260-261)

Regarding leadership, the literature has argued that, primarily due to the ways in which contemporary user-oriented platforms can be used for mediated communication and the organisation of activism, social movements increasingly rely on a form of ‘swarm intelligence’ (Hardt & Negri, 2005, pp. 91-93), where no single individual is assigned the role of leader and everyone can potentially and at any time play a leading role in the movement. In contrast, Gerbaudo (2012) argues for the existence of ‘soft’ forms of leadership on social media and among social media activists. For Gerbaudo, communication activities through social media and for the purpose of activism can be the core of leadership and organisation in a movement, and thus the ‘communicators’ of a movement automatically become its organisers and leaders. Gerbaudo names this soft, dialogic and interactive leadership a sort of ‘choreographic leadership’. He suggests the centrality of social-media-enabled forms of communication as a determinant of organisation and leadership in today’s civic movements: ‘[this is] a form of leadership, which makes use of the participatory and interactive environment of social media for the channeling and triggering of participants’ emotionality’ (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 135).

Precisely such arguments over the existence and forms of leadership and the extent to which non-hierarchical and self-organised activism develops through social media point to the increasing importance of citizen activism’s informal structures and forms of organisation and the extent to which social media determine them. To date, there are studies that look at one or another aspect of citizen activism’s informal organisation and the associated role of social media. However, this paper presents a case study that aims to enrich existing knowledge on the role of social media in the various aspects and elements of informal organisational structures of activism, thus augmenting the consistency of claims made by others in this research field.

The Role of Facebook in the Informal Organisation of the Sunflower Movement

The Sunflower Movement

The Sunflower Movement was formed by a coalition of students and civic groups, with Lin Fei-fan as the student leader of the movement. The movement consisted of a series of civic protests, including the occupation of the Legislative Yuan – Taiwan’s parliament – from 18 March to 10 April 2014. The name Sunflower Movement arose from the sunflowers that the movement organisers suggested that protesters take with them to demonstrations; the sunflowers came to symbolise the hope for democratisation in Taiwan. The movement was against the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA)\(^1\) with China, which was signed by the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits and the Straits Exchange Foundation. The protesters were concerned that the agreement not only comprised evidence of the large influence mainland China has over Taiwan but also could ultimately give the Chinese government control over the political system and economic development of Taiwan.

The problems began on 17 March 2014, when the ruling party – Kuomintang of Taiwan – attempted to pass the CSSTA in the Legislative Yuan without a clause-by-clause review. The whole black-box operation caused an uproar, and crowds of protesters climbed over the fence to occupy the parliamentary chamber on 18 March. On the evening of 23 March, a group of students occupied the Executive Yuan, the seat of Taiwan’s executive branch, for about ten hours (they were evicted in the early morning hours of 24 March), while more than 100,000 protesters were enlisted to occupy the Executive Yuan via Facebook and PTT BBS.\(^2\) On 30 March, students organised a demonstration that saw more than 500,000 Taiwanese citizens going to the streets in support of the movement’s cause. Throughout its duration, the movement put forward the following demands: first, that Taiwan must establish new legislation to monitor all cross-strait agreements; second, that the CSSTA must be postponed until this legislation was enacted; and third, that a Citizens’ Constitutional Conference must be convened to discuss the political and electoral system in Taiwan. On 26 March, the movement’s activists drafted an undertaking document for a law that would supervise cross-strait agreements (i.e., a ‘cross-strait pact supervisory law’) and asked lawmakers to sign the document to show their approval. On 6 April, the legislature’s speaker, Wang Jinpyng, visited the occupied chamber and offered a concession. He stated that the parliament would pass a bill to enable lawmakers to have closer oversight of agreements with China before the legislature resumed consideration of the trade pact. In response to this concession, the protesters held a press conference on 7 April in which they announced their decision to vacate the Legislative Yuan on 10 April but not to stop their efforts to inform and protect Taiwanese society.

The Sunflower Movement officially concluded on 10 April 2014, when the students left the premises of the Legislative Yuan. Regardless of its short duration, it is one of the biggest political movements Taiwan has seen. An indication of its broad appeal is that it received NTS$6,630,000 (around US$206,000) within three hours of posting a series of advertisements in the New York Times titled ‘Democracy at 4am’ (Chen, Liao, Wu, & Hwao, 2014). It is also notable that the movement involved various groups – over 20 – that were marked by some sort of community consciousness (Chen et al., 2014). Overall, it was perceived as a movement that awoke the younger generation’s interest in politics, democracy and the identity of Taiwan as a country, while it demonstrated the clever use of technology and digital media for its purposes.\(^3\)
Methodology

To flexibly explore the role of Facebook in the organisation of the Sunflower Movement, the study conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with ten students who participated in the Sunflower Movement. Qualitative interviewing was suitable for the in-depth examination of movement participants' experiences, behaviours, practices and observations, which were collected with the view of unpacking the various aspects of the movement’s informal organisation and the associated role of Facebook, if any.

Facebook appeared to be the most popular social media platform among movement participants. Specifically, Facebook pages were created to publicise and disseminate anti-CSSTA information, including ‘Civic 1985’ (178,626 likes as of 1 September 2014), ‘Democracy at 4am’ (35,322 likes), ‘Fan He Xiang Fu Mao Xie Yi’ (395,222 likes), ‘Hei Se Dao Guo Qin Nian Zhan Xian’ (327,790 likes) and ‘Sunflower Movement’ (64,068 likes).

The study employed an interview topic guide that included general questions about the Sunflower Movement as well as specific questions on the interviewees’ involvement in the movement and the way they used Facebook as part of their involvement. For the specific-to-Facebook questions, the interviewees were encouraged to reflect on whether and how the information, communication and networking affordances of Facebook made any difference to the kind, range and efficiency of the organisational basis and structure of movement activities. Specifically, the interviewees were asked questions about:

- the movement at large: their views on the movement and its cause; their knowledge/awareness of the cause of the movement; and the reason(s), form(s) and degree of their participation in the movement;
- the use of Facebook in the context of the movement: the importance of new media in general and of social media such as Facebook in particular; movement events and activities for which Facebook was used; drivers of Facebook use in the context of the movement; and when, why and how they used Facebook as individual movement participants;
- the outcomes of the movement and lessons for the use of social media and/or Facebook in the future.

We interviewed ten students who participated in the movement and, one way or another, made some use of Facebook in the context of the movement. Although academics and other civic groups also participated in the movement, students were the leading group. In addition, due to age and lifestyle parameters, students are particularly engaged with social media such as Facebook and thus they were the group best placed to provide the study with insights into the relationship between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ in the context of this movement. Although this was a relatively small sample of interviewees, it proved suitable for the study and provided rich insights, as shown below by the length of the interview data corpus generated in the study.

Participant recruitment involved several steps. Snowballing was applied to identify students who participated in the movement and were active on Facebook. When a sufficiently long list of potential participants was put together, a Facebook invite was sent to each of them to explore whether they would be interested in taking part in the study. Those who accepted the invitation to participate in the study were involved in electronic communication with the researchers so that any questions about the study were answered before the interviews and all interview arrangements were made as appropriate (e.g., interview time and the electronic platform to use for the interview).

All interviews were conducted via Skype, through video-enabled, synchronous conversation, and in this respect, the interviews were similar to face-to-face interviews. The interviews underwent verbatim transcription in Chinese and then they were translated into English. In total, the interview data amounted to 104 pages of transcripts, which were then subjected to thematic analysis with the assistance of NVivo software. We employed thematic analysis, which was highly effective for coding the interview data.
Results

The general findings of this study, as presented in Tsatsou and Zhao’s (2016) two-level social capital analysis, suggest that the movement participants developed bridging/linking social capital via Facebook and that the information-dissemination and information-sharing tools of Facebook were the prevalent drivers of Facebook-enabled social capital. Further, the general findings (Tsatsou and Zhao, 2016) suggest that the main forms of offline action in the movement, namely, protesting, sit-ins, and the occupation of the Legislative Yuan, were largely coordinated and supported through Facebook. More specifically, as shown in Figure 1, the interviewees stressed the network diversity and openness of Facebook and directly contrasted this with the limited, highly uniform and controlled information found in the mainstream media. The interviewees commented on Facebook’s openness and the speed with which information can be circulated across it, largely facilitated by its ‘comment’ and ‘follow’ tools. They maintained that, as a result, Facebook enabled movement activists to connect not only with their friends’ groups and the relevant movement community but also with online groups and networks that were diverse and often vague in nature, form, and purpose. The interviewees were also able to connect with the broader public via Facebook. The picture the interviewees drew of Facebook presented possible qualities of an online public sphere, such as free exchange of ideas and multi-layered processes of co-learning and deliberation. An exchange with Eddie is illustrative in this respect:

Interviewer: Do you think that social media such as Facebook have been significant for the movement? If so, how? If not, why?

Eddie: Yes, very important, as you can follow everyone’s views, attitudes, and positions. They might influence your thinking and show you the different ideas and opinions of the public. The views of opinion leaders are never exposed to mainstream media, but they will be highlighted and forwarded on Facebook.

In addition, as shown in the word cloud below (Figure 2), the words ‘information’, ‘communication’, ‘activities’ and ‘messages’ were some of the most frequently used among the interviewees. Other common words included ‘actions’, ‘change’, ‘CSSTA’, ‘events’, ‘Facebook’, ‘island’ and ‘media’. This indicates that the interviewees mainly related the use and role of Facebook in the movement to communication and information activities as well as to messages, events and actions around the idea of change (born out of the movement).

Looking deeper into how the affordances of Facebook influenced the drivers of its use in the context of the movement, Table 2 shows that all the interviewees used Facebook to find, disseminate and share information as well as to communicate about the movement. This shows that information search and exchange and communication activities were the two main reasons movement participants used Facebook. In addition, almost all of the interviewees used Facebook to coordinate offline activities in the movement and to develop a dialogue with other movement participants or Facebook users more generally (eight interviewees), often aiming for such a dialogue to result in some kind of influence at the level of ideas or action (eight interviewees). In contrast, Facebook was not used to a great degree as a facilitator of general, target-specific or innovative forms of action in the context of the movement. Also, rather
surprisingly due to the social networking nature of Facebook, only four of the interviewees said they used Facebook in the framework of the movement for networking purposes, which challenges arguments about online network structures and their role in the organisation of collective action.

The data showed some interesting links between the drivers of Facebook use in the movement. As shown in Figure 3, the information-spreading and information-sharing affordances of Facebook allowed movement participants to obtain and exchange information about the movement’s ideas and aims in general, as well as to disseminate news about the movement’s activities, events, and practical needs. The interviewees perceived that information on Facebook about the movement’s goals and ideas had influenced people, ‘awakening’ non-movement participants (such as young people) and making many of them join the movement. For example, Sunny said: ‘Young people in Taiwan would not talk about politics before. Many of them thought that politics is corrupt so they stayed away from it. But after promoting the movement through Facebook, young people in Taiwan started to care.’ At the same time, the interviewees linked the dissemination and exchange of news about the movement’s activities, events and practical aspects with the coordination of offline action. Many interviewees used the information-spreading and information-sharing affordances of Facebook to assist the offline activities of the movement, such as providing supplies to offline sites of action and responding to massive calls for assistance with event organisation. For example, Cai said: ‘Before going to the scene, I will first have a look at the information [on Facebook] to see which zones don’t have enough people or supplies [for those who were there]. If possible, I will take supplies with me to the scene.’

The study also examined the links between Facebook-based action, on the one hand, and forms and structures of offline action, on the other. At this point, the study drew from concepts such as the ‘repertoire of contention’ (Tarrow, 2011; Tilly, 1995), which Tilly (1995, p. 42) defined as ‘a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice’ and that signify established and repeated tactics and practices of activism. The literature has suggested that the history and experience of contention lead people to borrow or imitate ‘learned conventions of contention’ (Tarrow, 2011, p. 29), and the study examined whether repertoires of contention in online and social media platforms, such as Facebook, were linked to or influenced offline practices and tactics in the Sunflower Movement. Cluster analysis (Figure 4) showed that some but not all Facebook-based activities were associated with the same or similar forms and structures of offline action. Specifically, the interviewees suggested that Facebook enhanced, extended or even introduced the following forms

### Table 2. Drivers of Facebook use in the Sunflower Movement.

| Drivers                                | Interviewees | References* |
|----------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Communication                         | 10           | 31          |
| Information seeking                   | 10           | 75          |
| Information sharing                   | 10           | 51          |
| Coordination of offline activities    | 9            | 25          |
| Dialogue development                  | 8            | 18          |
| Influence / be influenced by others   | 8            | 28          |
| Target-oriented action (online)       | 4            | 11          |
| Networking                            | 4            | 4           |
| General action (online)               | 3            | 3           |
| Innovative action (online)            | 1            | 2           |

*Number of times the item was found (i.e., coded) in the interview texts.
and structures of offline action in the movement: ad hoc, individual and short-term action; action against interest group(s); gatherings; sit-ins; protesting; and civil disobedience. In contrast, according to the interviewees, Facebook-based tactical, collective and long-term action, as well as single-issue politics, did not appear to influence or link to the same forms and structures of offline action.

Such forms of action appeared to have links with some of the drivers of Facebook use in the movement (as presented in Table 2). For instance, the interviews suggested that the coordination of offline action, which was one of the key drivers of the use of Facebook, can explain the prominent link of certain forms and structures of Facebook activity with the same or similar forms of offline action, especially offline protesting, sit-ins, civil disobedience (e.g., the occupation of the Legislative Yuan), and ad hoc, short-term and individual forms of action (e.g., talks, workshops, artistic events). This is to say that certain forms and structures of offline action were largely initiated, coordinated and supported, both practically and symbolically, through Facebook-centred communication and other initiatives (e.g., blacking out Facebook profile photos):

Manni: I have used Facebook to do an independent event with several friends. During the movement, I dragged my close friends out through Facebook to do one [activity] directly on the street in front of the Legislative Yuan. … Talking about the CSSTA, it was something like a soapbox in England, to express our ideas about the CSSTA.

In addition, the interviewees maintained that Facebook played a role not only in the forms and structures of the movement’s offline action but also in the attitude of ‘altruism’ developed among the movement participants. The idea of altruism is not flagged up in the relevant literature very much, but it was quite prominent in the interview discourses, wherein it demonstrated how Facebook enhanced users’ spirit of support and altruism to those protesting offline and enabled users to practically respond to protesters’ calls for food, equipment, clothes and so on. For example, Eddie said: ‘Students on site without water and food preferred to ask for the resources through Facebook; someone would always send things to them the next day after seeing their messages on Facebook.’ Remarks like Eddie’s show that Facebook users were continually responsive to calls for help and support, something that prompted movement participants to raise their needs for supplies and other help through Facebook. This constituted evidence of altruism, in the sense that altruism does not necessarily involve literally expressed affection or emotional connection, but it tends to involve psychological, ideological and/or practical support for the purpose of achieving individual or collective ends.
Regarding the movement’s leadership, the interviewees mentioned the influence of opinion leaders and leading movement activists on their involvement in the movement via Facebook. For instance, Eddie stated that he followed Lin Fei-fan, the student leader of the movement, on Facebook and that Lin Fei-fan was the person who influenced and inspired him the most: ‘I was affected by his charisma. I appreciate that. The momentum, the structured analysis and advocacy can incite and encourage people to follow him.’ Some of the interviewed activists seemed to think that some level of leadership was necessary and beneficial for the movement. For example, Feixiang said: ‘leaders like Lin Fei-fan and Weiting Chen. These two had a very strong influence because of their charisma. I think there had to be someone who stood out, otherwise, the movement would have faded away without making any difference.’ At the same time, other interviewees challenged the leading activists’ role and the agendas they had put forward on behalf of the movement, with students such as Gina arguing about the need for other, more collective opinion-gathering and reporting mechanisms, so that the movement’s interests were represented accurately:

Lin Fei-fan only focuses on how to stop the Legislative Yuan passing the agreement. Though he entered or even occupied the Legislative Yuan, he does not know how to improve the agreement. He may even be wrong. So we need to refer to other opinions or wait for someone to share on Facebook records of the public hearings so that people can have some materials to make their own judgment.

Finally, the interviewees indicated that decision-making structures on platforms such as Facebook are a lot more complex and multi-layered than in traditional leadership schemes:

Interviewer: Do you mainly follow friends’ news or opinion leaders on Facebook?
Cai: Both.
Interviewer: Whose opinions influence you the most, your friends’ or opinion leaders’?
Cai: Friends’, I think.
Interviewer: Why?
Cai: Although I read views from opinion leaders, I still have my own judgment. I won’t follow blindly what they say. Some of our values are different.

In this regard, the interviewees suggested that a variety of movement actors and even actors outside the movement influenced their involvement in the movement, thus presenting a complex picture of leadership that involved a range of actors and action levels, both online and offline.

Discussion

This study aimed to shed some light on the Sunflower Movement, which has not been broadly examined as yet. Its findings show that social media platforms such as Facebook could influence the organisational aspects of social movements at the informal, ordinary participant level in many ways.

First, the study participants suggested that Facebook enabled the instant dissemination and exchange of information in the Sunflower Movement, pointing to the importance of the multi-directional dissemination of information online. This brings to mind Granovetter (1974) and his contention that it is through weak ties (which prevail in online spaces) that information is transmitted across groups rather than merely within them. The study found that the information-spreading and information-sharing affordances of Facebook were directed toward enhancing the public’s engagement with the movement and recruiting new movement participants, while also making a significant contribution to the initiation, support and coordination of offline action in the movement. At the same time, networking and the pursuit of general, innovative or targeted action appeared to be less critical areas in which Facebook influenced organisational aspects of the Sunflower Movement.

Regarding the forms and structures of offline action in the Sunflower Movement, Facebook appeared to enhance, extend or even introduce ad hoc, individual and short-term action as well as forms of action such as gatherings, sit-ins, protesting and civil disobedience. At the same time, the study participants reported the rather limited influence of Facebook-enabled action on the undertaking of tactical, collective, long-term and single-issue politics action offline. This finding deserves further exploration, especially regarding the reasons why such forms of offline action were not related to similar action undertaken on Facebook in the context of the Sunflower Movement, unlike the cases of ad hoc, individual and short-term action.

According to the study participants, Facebook fostered feelings of ‘altruism’ within the Sunflower Movement as well as movement activists’ desire to ‘awaken’ other groups and the public at large. Furthermore, Facebook appeared to support the self-organised and loosely structured coordination of offline action in the movement, while movement activists largely used Facebook to coordinate the occupation of physical spaces such as the Legislative Yuan. This largely supports arguments regarding the facilitation of self-organised activism through social media. It also validates Gerbaudo’s (2012) argument that social media spaces are often used as part of a project of re-appropriating public space, which involves recruiting new members and assembling those members around ‘occupied’ places, namely a new ‘choreography of assembly’.

Along these lines, the findings support the existence of relatively non-hierarchical leadership in today’s citizen activism. Specifically, they challenge the idea that, in digitally mediated activism, connective action networks...
self-organise without central or ‘lead’ organisational actors (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 755). This is so because the study participants acknowledged the meaningful existence of opinion and activist leaders in the Sunflower Movement, also questioning the argument that activism relies on ‘swarm intelligence’ (Hardt & Negri, 2005) and that everyone can potentially and at any time play a leading role in the movement. These findings paint a picture that is closer to what Gerbaudo (2012) called soft, dialogic and interactive leadership, even though they do not showcase Gerbaudo’s argument that the ‘communicators’ of a movement automatically become its organisers and leaders. Hence, the study suggests two things. First, online communication does not annihilate the existence and influence of offline forms of leadership and may even strengthen them. And, second, there are multiple actors and levels of leadership in online and social-media-enabled communication that complicate the entire picture and demonstrate that leadership can involve a range of actors and action levels, both online and offline.

Overall, the insights this study offers can lead to the conclusion that informal organisation of citizen activism is an important parameter in the investigation of the role of social media in all sorts of organisational aspects of today’s social movements and other cases of citizen activism. However, further unpacking of the Sunflower Movement is needed so that we can delve deeper into the drivers of Facebook use and the implications of Facebook-enabled actions and trends for the informal organisation of this movement as part of its broader organisational strategies and practices. In addition, the findings presented in this paper should be compared to research accounts of the role of online communication in other recent cases of citizen activism, such as the civically motivated Arab Spring (e.g., Howard & Hussain, 2011; Rahimi, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), and especially in relation to insights into informal aspects of the organisation of such cases of citizen activism. All in all, there is a need for further study of the role of social media in informal aspects of the organisation of specific cases of citizen activism, so as to more clearly outline the existing repertoires of the informal organisation of digitally mediated forms of citizen activism and to more thoroughly comprehend associated innovations and controversies.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr. Yupei Zhao for her invaluable help with the collection of data on the Sunflower Movement.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Panayiota Tsatsou https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6670-4711

Notes

1. See http://www.ecfa.org.tw/SerciveTradeAgreement1.aspx?pid=7&cid=26&pageid=0 (in Chinese).
2. The PTT Bulletin Board System is the largest terminal-based bulletin board system in Taiwan.
3. See ‘Taiwan’s Sunflower Protest: Digital Anatomy of a Movement’ at http://flipthemedia.com/2014/07/social-media-taiwan.

References

Ayres, J. M. (1999). From the streets to the internet: The cyber-diffusion of contention. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 566, 132–143.

Benedikt, M. (1991). Cyberspace: Some proposals. In M. Benedikt (Ed.), Cyberspace: First steps (pp. 119–224). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Bennett, D., & Fielding, P. (1999). The net effect: How cyber-advocacy is changing the political landscape. Merrifield, VA: E-Advocates Press.

Bennett, W. L. (2003). Communicating global activism. Information, Communication & Society, 6, 143–168.

Bennett, W. L. (2005). Social movements beyond borders: Organization, communication, and political capacity in two eras of transnational activism. In D. della Porta & S. Tarrow (Eds.), Transnational protest and global activism (pp. 203–226). Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2011). Digital media and the personalization of collective action: Social technology and the organization of protests against the global economic crisis. Information, Communication & Society, 14, 770–799. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2011.579141

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. Information, Communication & Society, 15, 739–768. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661

Bimber, B. (1999). The Internet and citizen communication with government: Does the medium matter? Political Communication, 16, 409–429.

Bimber, B., Flanagin, A. J., & Stohl, S. (2005). Reconceptualizing collective action in the contemporary media environment. Communication Theory, 15, 365–388.

Bimber, B., Flanagin, A. J., & Stohl, C. (2012). Collective action in organizations: Interaction and engagement in an era of technological change. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Carty, V. (2010). New information communication technologies and grassroots mobilisation. Information, Communication & Society, 13, 155–173.

Carty, V. (2017). Challenging the cost of higher education with the assistance of digital tools. Case studies of protest activity in Canada and the United States. In J. Choudrie S. Kurnia and P. Tsatsou (Eds.) SocialInclusion and Usability of ICT-enabled Services. London: Routledge.

Castells, M. (1996). The rise of the network society. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (2010). The power of identity. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
Chadwick, A. (2007). Digital network repertoires and organizational hybridity. *Political Communication, 24*, 283–301. doi: 10.1080/10584600701471666

Chen, B., Liao, D., Wu, H., & Hwan, S. (2014, September). The logic of communitative action: A case study of Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement. Paper presented at the IPP2 014’Crowdsourcing for Politics and Policy’ Conference, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford.

Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. *Political Communication, 22*, 147–162.

della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2006). *Social movements: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Earl, J. (2010). The dynamics of protest-related diffusion on the web. *Information, Communication & Society, 13*, 209–225.

Earl, J., & Kimport, K. (2011). Digitally enabled social change: *Activism in the Internet age*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Flaherty, L. M., Pearce, K. J., & Rubin, R. B. (1998). Internet and face-to-face communication: Not functional alternatives. *Communication Quarterly, 46*, 250–268.

Flanagin, A. J., Stohl, C., & Bimber, B. (2006). Modeling the structure of collective action. *Communication Monographs, 73*, 29–54.

Garrido, M., & Halavais, A. (2003). Mapping networks of support for the Zapatista movement: Applying social-networks analysis to study contemporary social movements. In M. McCAughey & M.D. Ayers (Eds.), *Cyberactivismo: Online activism in theory and practice* (pp. 165–184). New York, NY: Routledge.

Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. London, England: Pluto Press.

Gladwell, M. (2010). Small change. *The New Yorker, 4*, 42–49.

Granovetter, M. (1974). *Getting a job: A study of contacts and careers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hampton, K. N., & Ling, R. (2011). The contact fallacy of social presence and large, diverse core social networks: Why bigger is not better and less can mean more (Unpublished working paper), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2005). *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Howard, P. N., & Hussain, M. M. (2011). The upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: The role of digital media. *Journal of Democracy, 22*, 35–48.

Juris, J. S. (2012). Reflections on #occupy everywhere: Social media, public space, and emerging logsics of aggregation. *American Ethnologist, 39*, 259–279.

Kavada, A. (2015). Creating the collective: Social media, the Occupy Movement and its constitution as a collective actor. *Information, Communication & Society, 18*(8), 872–886.

Lev-On, A., & Hardin, R. (2008). Internet-based collaborations and their political significance. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics, 4*, 5–27. doi: 10.1080/193316380802076074

McCarthy, J. D. (1996). Constraints and opportunities in adopting, adapting and inventing. In D. McCAdam, J.D. McCarthy, & M.N. Zald (Eds.), *Comparative perspectives on social movements* (pp. 141–151). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

McDonald, K. (2002). From solidarity to fluidarity: Social movements beyond ‘collective identity’ – the case of globalization conflicts. *Social Movement Studies, 1*, 109–128.

Melucci, A. (1996). *Challenging codes: Collective action in the information age*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Rahimi, B. (2011). The agonistic social media: Cyberspace in the formation of dissent and consolidation of state power in post-election Iran. *Communication Review, 14*, 158–178.

Rohlinger, D. A. & Gaulden, S. (2017). Overcoming obstacles to activism with ICTs. An analysis of MoveOn.org and the Florida Tea Party Movement. In J. Choudrie S. Kurnia and P. Tsatsou (Eds.) *Social Inclusion and Usability of ICT-enabled Services*. London: Routledge.

Rosa, A. L. (2014). Social media and social movements around the world. In B. Patrut & M. Patrut (Eds.), *Social media in politics: Case studies on the political power of social media* (pp. 35–47). London, England: Springer.

Scott, A., & Street, J. (2000). From media politics to e-protest: The use of popular culture and new media in parties and social movements. *Information, Communication & Society, 3*, 215–240.

Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.

Shulman, S. (2009). The case against mass e-mails: Perverse incentives and low quality public participation in U.S. federal rule-making. *Policy & Internet, 1*, 23–53.

Tang, G., & Lee, F. L. F. (2013). Facebook use and political participation: The impact of exposure to shared political information, connections with public political actors, and network structural heterogeneity. *Social Science Computer Review, 31*, 763–773. doi: 10.1177/0894439313490625

Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements in contentious politics* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Tilly, C. (1995). *Popular contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tremayne, M. (2014). Anatomy of protest in the digital era: A network analysis of Twitter and Occupy Wall Street. *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest, 13*, 110–126. doi: 10.1080/14742837.2013.830969

Tsatsou, P. and Zhao, Y. (2016). A ‘Two-level social capital analysis’ of the role of online communication in civic activism: lessons from the role of Facebook in the Sunflower Movement. *Social Media + Society: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Movements*, 2(4). doi: http://dx10.1177/2056305116671967

Tufekci, Z., & Wilson, C. (2012). Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observations from Tahrir Square. *Journal of Communication, 62*, 363–379.

Van Aelst, P., & Walgrave, S. (2003). Open and closed mobilization contexts and the normalization of the protestor. In W. Van De Donk, B. D. Loader, P.G. Nixon, & D. Rucht (Eds.), *Cyberprotest: New media, citizens and social movements* (pp. 123–146). London, England: Routledge.

Xenos, M., Vromen, A., & Loader, B. D. (2014). The great equalizer? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies. *Information, Communication & Society, 17*, 151–167. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2013.871318

**Author Biography**

Panayota Tsatsou (Ph.D, LSE) is an associate professor of Media and Communication at the University of Leicester. Her research interests lie in the broader field of digital media and her publications aim at intellectual and research advancement in the areas of digital divides/digital inclusion, Internet studies, digital research, digital media and civic activism, and digital policy and regulation. More info on Panayota’s work can be found at [http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/media/people/dr-panayota-tsatsou](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/media/people/dr-panayota-tsatsou).