

## **Reconceptualizing Online Free Spaces: A Case Study of the Sunflower Movement**

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*Using the Sunflower movement as a case study, this article seeks to articulate a theoretical framework to evaluate online “free spaces” as tools for political mobilization. To this end, this article conducts a thematic and content analysis of 151 posts on the official Facebook page of the Sunflower movement. Key results uncover four thematic functions among posts – expressive, informative, informative-support, and promotional – that overlap, in which the expressive theme prevails, and two thematic topics discussed by posts – damages by protesters and their ideology of freedom. I conclude that: (1) combining the logistic and thematic dimensions of posts enables a specific understanding of an online free space’s political viability and anticipates the campaigns it will connect itself to; (2) the networked nature of the Sunflower movement page prompts the reconceptualization of (i) online free spaces as nodes through which various political campaigns and struggles are thematically connected by a political ideology; (ii) inactivity as a strategy where protest capital and followers accumulate to prepare and empower future mobilizations.*

*Keywords: free spaces, networks, protests, Taiwan*

### **Introduction**

Over the past few decades, “new social movements” or constituencies organized around issues or identities have grown (Buechler, 1993), stimulating theories that have urged sociological attention to the study of identity-construction processes, claiming that “efforts to define, celebrate, enact, and deconstruct identity are more important in recent movements than they have been in the past” (Buechler, 1995). These developments point to an altered social formation behind new forms of collective action “that displaced class-based political mobilization with emphases on modes of participation independent of class location, including local autonomy, environment, homosexuality, and feminism” (Touraine, 1981, 1985; Melucci, 1985; Castells, 1997; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Cohen, 1985).

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Yet, collective identity remains a popular grounds for mobilization compels a deliberation on the role of protest gathering spaces within contemporary movements. According to Ammaturo (2015), for instance, participants' emotions and sexual identities are shaped by encounters with the city and with public displays of sexualities in gay pride parades. The subjection of identities to the influence of their protest spaces illustrates a gap in studies of protests concerning their spatial dimension: existing social movement theories present deductive approaches (Barassi, 2013) that reduce protests to functions of a highly abstracted society, and essentially neglect analysis of how protest spaces themselves shape the interactions and strategies within them (Au, 2016a)

In a similar vein, the boundaries of "free spaces" (Evans and Boyte, 1986), or institutions located outside the control of those in power (Morris, 1984; Scott, 1990) to allow for the creation of new, insurgent identities, are liberalized by the rise of new communication technologies. According to Poletta and Jasper (2001), such spaces encourage movement participation while permitting "the development of counterhegemonic ideas and oppositional identities". Thus, the function of new communication technologies as a resource and strategy for the mobilization of collective action or cyberactivism (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011) calls into attention the creation of new "free spaces" online, characterized by a greater level of accessibility and reach alien to traditional spaces. However, the investigation of social media technologies has centered on network analysis, taken as strategies and resources for mobilization, ultimately considering how they allow participants to attend physical protest sites, but neglecting the function of these nodes as online "free spaces" or as sites of political deliberation themselves. It follows that a second gap exists in the conceptual haze surrounding the processes at work in cyberactivism, focused on (ii) how online "free spaces" are organized and operate as a site of protester interaction after the conclusion of a protest. That is, what happens to online "free spaces" after their associated protests have ended?

Using the 2014 Sunflower movement and its Facebook page as a case for analysis, this article opens up dialogue that bridges these two gaps in the literature and takes a step toward building a theoretical framework and methodological approach for understanding how online free spaces act as tools for political mobilization. In doing so, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. Thematically, what types of content does the Sunflower movement's online "free space" publish?
2. Which types of content attract the most participation from viewers or members of the space?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Nodes within online networks impart upon the "free spaces" that form within them both ephemeral and real qualities distinct from physical "free spaces". Online "free spaces" are ephemeral by virtue of their intangible contexts, allowing for easier access by interested persons and potential participants. This function is bulwarked by their common location on publicly available social media platforms (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011).

At the same time, the partition of protest spaces from physical environments carves out a space committed to the purpose of protest. An online page campaigning against a regime is

exactly that and nothing else at any given time. Implicated is a sense of reality previously alien to physical “free spaces”. Physical “free spaces” borrow sites to form their institutions. The conclusion of a protest or interaction within these institutions would terminate this occupation, leaving only a physical locale bereft of evidence that the “free space” even existed. Thus, physical “free spaces” are, in a sense, more fleeting than online “free spaces,” whose messages, posts, interactions outlive its associated protest and remain accessible even after its interactions cease.

The longevity of these spaces must be reconciled by how protester strategies to frame collective identities and attract and rally support remain constrained by the characteristics of their social media platform of choice. Whereas strategies within physical free spaces are restrained by size and openness of venues, online free spaces are restrained by the forms of engagement made publicly accessible by software built into social media platforms.

Traditional “free spaces” facilitate the development of oppositional identities, but remained largely divided between the function of distance from coercion itself (Hirsch, 1990) and that of belief systems ensconced in these sites (Polletta, 1999), without a theoretical framework to evaluate assessments from both schools. Meanwhile, Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) highlight the largely strategic function of online “free spaces” during the course of a protest, manifested in the exchange of information, mass recruitment, and expression of collective identity. Sensitive to these functions, combining logistic information on the uses of an online free space with thematic functional content of its activities enables a specific understanding of its political viability and can anticipate the campaigns and struggles it will connect itself to, as well as the success with which certain types of actions would attract interaction. Simultaneously, these dimensions constitute a theoretical framework that offers clarity on the debate about how free spaces facilitate the development of oppositional identities.

## **Methodology**

The official Facebook page of the Sunflower movement was selected as an online “free space” for a case study analysis. The merits of the case study as a strategy to understand the depths of both a case, its features, and its impact as a bounded integrated system (Stake, 2005), in addition to the class of similar phenomena to which the case belongs (Gerring, 2004), align with this study’s interest in using the case of the Taiwanese Sunflower movement to articulate a theoretical framework through which online free spaces can be understood as a tool for political mobilization. The case study’s need for multiple methods of data collection (Collins, 2011) is met by the conduct of a thematic analysis and a content analysis were conducted for all textual, photo, and video posts made by the page and adherent comments on each post from April 11, 2014 (the first day after the Sunflower movement’s end) to January 15, 2016, for a total of 151 posts. The small sample size must be reconciled with the fact that it was all that was available: the aim of this paper is to uncover the functions of an online free space post-mobilization. As such, it was only appropriate to use posts dated after the Sunflower movement had officially ended. In a similar vein, the approach best suited for this purpose was qualitative thematic analysis for its theoretically flexible approach in exploring themes and patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The coding scheme for all posts consisted of: the date, the number of shares, the number of likes, whether “Sunflower movement” appeared and the context of its appearance, and generalizable themes within the content of the post compared with other posts. The number of times “Sunflower movement” appeared and their textual context provides insight on how the Sunflower movement was conceptualized and whether the political preoccupation of the online “free space” had moved beyond it. Recording the number of likes, shares, and themes establishes relationships between them that represent how participant commitment, interaction, and organizer content are structured in online “free spaces”.

At the same time, to unearth the organizing themes and principles behind the structured interactions observed, thematic analysis was most appropriate. Described as “a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories of analysis” (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006), thematic analysis developed codes out of interactions, strategies, meanings, attitudes, conditions (Robson 2011:479) to unveil commonalities or themes that were then used to articulate overarching themes. The process of organizing these themes enabled an exercise of grounded theory, organized around the core inductive practice of developing and constantly comparing analytical categories, their relationships, and their contingencies directly from the data (Charmaz 2004:501), which generated a deeper understanding about the social conditions of the phenomenon in question. Data collection and analysis constituted a dialectical process, where one continually shaped the other (ibid:503), reflected in possible changes in very questions posed to participants or discovering and remedying gaps in categories from analytical memos documented over the course of the project (ibid:514)

## **Context**

In March 2014, hundreds of thousands of young Taiwanese stormed the streets and occupied the Legislative Yuan (the Taiwanese legislature) in protest against the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). The mobilization, now called the Sunflower movement – its name derived from a donation of sunflowers made by a local floral vendor in support of the movement’s cause –, garnered worldwide attention, demonstrating against the proposed widening of Taiwanese industries to potential investment, and to liberalize trade between the Taiwanese and mainland Chinese states (Cole, 2014; Lin, 2014). Although the protest perpetuated growing sentiments of anti-Sinoism during its procession, it continues to serve this function more than a year later.

But in spite of the global attention the CSSTA protest attracted and its adherent media constructions as an outburst of political will, polls and social movements reveal it was not as spontaneous as it was made out to be. Public opinion polls in Taiwan indicate changes in collective attitudes are growing supportive of Taiwanese independence above unification (Sobel et al, 2010; Taipei Times, 2014; Wang, 2013), reflecting the endorsement of a distinct Taiwanese identity (Chang, 2004) and increasing ambivalence about a shared identity with China (Sobel et al, 2010). Moreover, the growth of political and economic ties between the two, evinced by the sharp rise in the number of business agreements and trade pacts, such that China has become Taiwan's largest import and export partner (Bureau of Foreign Trade 2014), is compounded by a surge in social movements in Taiwan. The majority of these protests – such as the 228 Hand-in-Hand Rally in 2004, the 1025 Demonstration in 2008, the Wild Strawberries Movement in 2008,

and the 517 Protest in 2009 – are defined by a specific opposition to political and economic ties with China, demonstrating a burgeoning alienation from China.

## Logistic Dimension

### Frequency

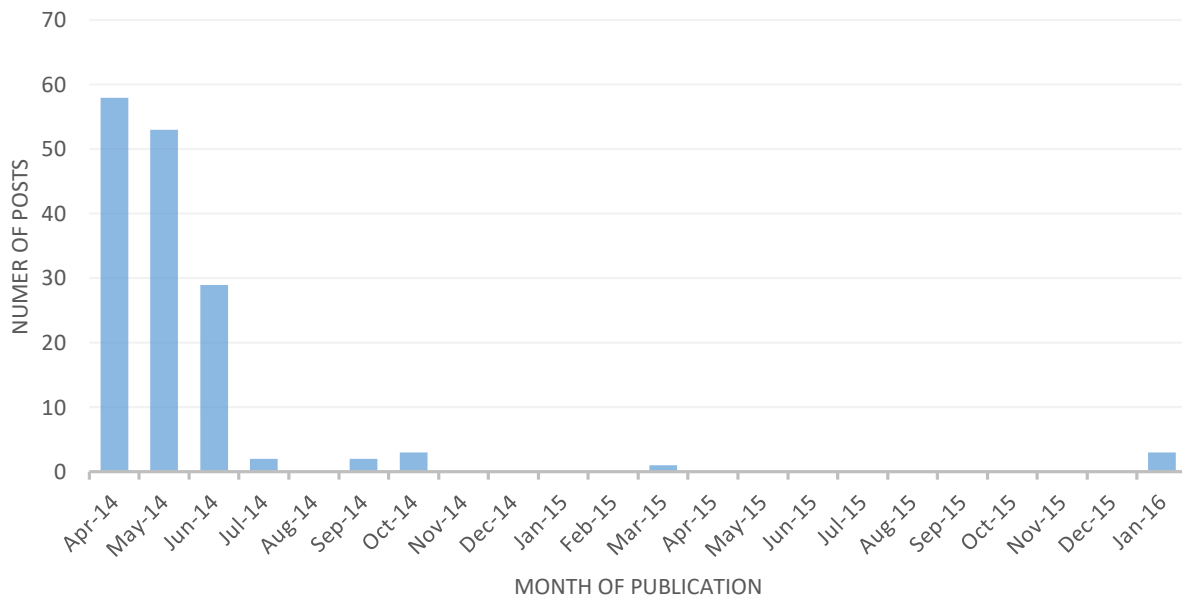


Figure 1 – Frequency of posts expressed in number of posts per month of publication

The Sunflower Movement Facebook page made 151 posts since the conclusion of the protest on April 10, from April 11, 2014 to January 15, 2016. The overwhelming majority of the 148 posts were made in the immediate months during and after the protest itself. In 2014, 58 post-protest posts were made in April 2014, 53 were made in May, and 29 were made in June. Beyond these three months, the frequency of posts plummeted. 2 were made in July (of the same year), 2 made in September, and 3 were made in October. A long silence persisted until March 2015, in which one post was made, after which another persisted until January of the following year, in which 3 posts were made<sup>2</sup>.

### Secondary Content

37 of the 148 posts were reposted content from external pages on Facebook, often from Taiwan Voice and individual activist users. Reposted or secondary content did not have an apparent

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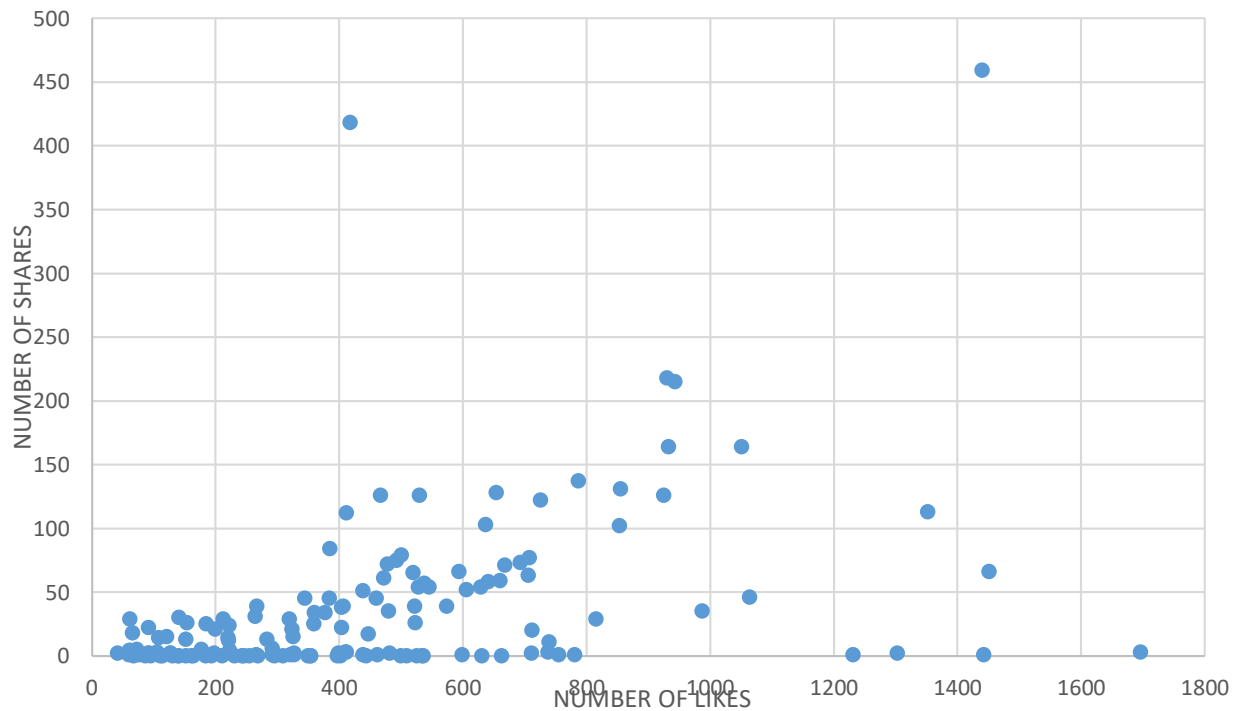
<sup>2</sup> The three posts in January 2016, having generated a disproportionately greater number of shares and likes than the rest of the posts, would have skewed the data significantly and so have been excluded from calculations of likes and shares, and will instead be discussed later.

impact on the number of likes accrued, evinced by the wide range of likes and shares generated by posts with reposted content. On April 27, for instance, a reposting of a news report on the use of a water cannon on a protest at the Taipei main station generated 1303 likes, while a reposting of a speech by President Ma on October 11 attracted only 87 likes. This points to how the content of a post and its appeal to protesters outweighs the significance of whether content is original or secondary. At the same time, that reposted posts failed to elicit numbers of shares proportionate with those of their likes constitutes an effect of content, becoming a question of substance, not source.

### *Language*

While many posts were in Chinese or included links to Chinese articles/sources (62), or in English or included links to English articles/sources (77), some posts included translations into and links to sources in other languages, including German (15), Japanese (7), French (5), Italian (1), and Portuguese (1)<sup>3</sup>. That posts made in foreign languages also generated a wide range of likes corroborates the significance of content over medium.

### *Overall Likes & Shares*



*Figure 2 – Number of likes versus number of shares*

<sup>3</sup> Some posts included several translations/languages, producing a total count greater than 151.

The average number of likes was 446. 87 of the 148 posts had a moderate number of likes (defined as 300 or more likes). The average number of shares was 36. 30 of the 148 posts had a moderate number of shares (50 or more shares). Shares were frequently disproportionately lower than likes, evidenced by 13 of the 151 posts that showed a common discrepancy: they accrued a high number of likes, but a low number of shares. Among them, six were informative content, four were promotional (one overlapped between promotional and informative), two were expressive, and two were informative-support. 9 posts, by contrast, demonstrated a convergence of high numbers of shares and likes. Six were informative, one was promotional, one was informative-support, and one was expressive. While some success can be achieved with understanding the distribution of likes, that of shares does not seem to offer any coherent pattern except for one, among those with convergences of high likes and high shares: it appears that informative content dispensed from Western sources (seen as international perspectives) enjoys a better likelihood of being shared (i.e. iCNN, an English article on Clinton, and BBC), which can be interpreted as an attempt to disseminate the knowledge that the struggle for Taiwanese independence is globally recognized.

### **Thematic Dimension**

Posts in online free spaces can be thematically analyzed according to *two intersecting axes*. The first pertains to the functions of posts. In the Sunflower movement page, for instance, these ranged across expressive, informative, informative-support, and promotional purposes. Understanding the manifest uses of an online space's posts and the frequencies of each category's appearance allows researchers to illustrate the argumentative position of the online free space and the lean of its strategies; for example, understanding whether a movement or its strategies demonstrate a lean toward reactiveness or activeness. Second, posts must be understood in terms of their topics. The consistency and diversity of political/protest topics that constitute the foci of posts and interactions provides insights into the connectivity of an online free space and, by extension, its uses. These two axes of thematic analysis combine to construct an overarching narrative on how an online free space functions as an apparatus of protest mobilization.

### ***Functional Axis***

(1) *Expressive content*: content that expresses ideals or the message of a movement, often containing slogans or phrases that emphasize how they deserve democracy or the use of passionate language to invoke emotional responses. Online spaces produce reactive content to stir interaction and create solidarity, consistent with the tendency to retain commitment beyond the end of a protest cycle among physical protests (Gitlin 1995). The discourse in the twenty-nine expressive posts were often combined with (links to) external media, such as videos and photographs, to accentuate the force of their message. For instance, on April 26, 2014, the group posted "For those who once believed, who is still believing, and who is beginning to believe" as a preface to a video of a song titled "Island Sunrise", a nationalistic song written for the Sunflower movement.

Posts within this theme were commonly responses to recent events. On January 15, 2016, the group wrote

[“I absolutely do not apologize, my origin is also absolutely will not support a unable to protect a foreign land, vested in the home, other countries the curtailment of bully government. #Chow Tze Yu is Taiwanese #1月 to vote on 16”].

in reaction to how Chow Tze Yu, a young singer, was forced by mainland Chinese pressure to publicly apologize for waving a Taiwanese flag on a television show. On June 14, the group responded, sardonically, to comments made by a spokeswoman for the Chinese government’s Taiwan Affairs Office and the Hong Kong protest:

“China: If you want to do business with us, don't say anything about human rights. A few days ago, the spokeswoman... said that the future of Taiwan ‘must be decided by the Chinese people’, sparking widespread condemnation on the Taiwanese internet... Furthermore, protests in Hong Kong against land development have also been tied with the Chinese government's growing encroachment of Hong Kong's democratic rights...”

Although online spaces can be used to promote external sites, it emerges that the context in which these references are located determine their function. Here, mentioning the Occupy Central movement in the context of an expressive message transforms it into an attack on the Chinese government than a manifest promotion for the movement. Overlap, therefore, exists between different functions.

On January 15, 2016, following an extended period of silence, three posts were made that acquired phenomenal numbers of likes. All of them in Chinese, one provided a link to a video of the Island Sunrise song, adding that it had been a while since the editors had heard it, with 2739 likes and 198 shares; a second expressed an unapologetic stance on Taiwanese origins and thoughts about a bully government, with a picture of Chow Tzu-yu holding a Taiwanese flag – the post was a response to a controversy concerning the sixteen-year-old Taiwanese singer, who had received mainlander backlash for waving a Taiwanese flag on television and had since issued a public apology for her actions – which acquired 4126 likes and 148 shares; the third was a statement expressing strength and hope in Taiwan’s future independence, generating 3661 likes and 27 shares.

(2) *Informative content*: content meant to inform about any new event or a development. Found in eighty-two of the posts, consisting the largest proportion among all the functional types of content, the overrepresentation of informative content suggests a chief emphasis on keeping the protester public informed and reminded of the tyranny of their opponent, in order to sustain the anti-Sinoist ideological fervor and retain commitment. On June 4, 2014, the movement posted:

“During a KMT meeting yesterday, President Ma Ying-jeou, speaking in his capacity as KMT chairman, again called for the legislature to ‘spare no effort’ in passing CSSTA. As followers of the Sunflower Movement already know, the rough handling of CSSTA was what started the movement in the first place.”



That the post only accrued 66 likes and 18 shares sheds light on lack of participation as a way of disavowing political opponents, when mentioned in informative posts whose content illustrates their misconduct. On May 6, 2014, the group shared a news article on ballooning official estimates of damages caused by the Sunflower movement, noting:

“in addition to retaliation from the police (and possibly from the judiciary), persecution and character assassination of those associated with protests has taken on many forms... Of course, such ballooning of official estimates in damages is nothing new.”

This, by contrast, generated significantly more attention with 439 likes and 51 shares. The sharp dissonance in the amount of interaction between the two posts speaks to the appeal of expressive messages even in informative content. That is, where the post on June 4 merely *reported* government misconduct, leaving room for audience ambiguity concerning “who” the target of their interaction would be, the post on May 6 interspersed the news of misconduct with expressive commentary, framing the individual action within a discourse aimed at defaming the government, to inflame its audience enough to interact on the clear grounds that likes and shares empower the movement, and are directed against their political opponents. Moreover, the dispensation of information or news about events within the form of critiques indicates that the online free space inserts its political presence into the news it shares. News presented in this free space is thus subsumed by a reconstruction into forms that promote the movement’s own political positions and ideological messages, much like a physical free space or rally would.

(3) *Informative-support content*: content meant to inform about support from non-Taiwanese organizations and people for a movement or event. Unlike the other themes, the publication of posts within the informative-support theme were constrained by the availability of such support, culminating in the smallest proportion of the four themes with fifteen posts. Nevertheless, posts within this theme generated significant numbers of likes and shares. On April 17, the page translated a Japanese site’s report on fundraising efforts undertaken by Japanese citizens for the Taiwan media movement, with a link to the article, which accumulated 1451 likes and 66 shares.

The function of informative-support content centers on the maintenance of support and solidarity amongst protesting members of the online space, demonstrating the solidarity among outsiders and continued significance of their struggle – even after the movement had concluded on April 10 – through the continued support from the outside. Within this theme, posts written in foreign languages acquired a legitimacy to their supportive claims. It corroborated the movement’s ability to attract global attention from a diversity of peoples, strengthening the solidarity of its protesting members and prompting interaction in its online space. On April 22, the page posted a translation of (along with the original text) a purported letter from German netizens expressing their support for the Taiwanese, which drew 726 likes and 22 shares. It noted how the Germans watched and were moved by the student actions:

“I personally participated in Taipei in the student movement of collective sit-ins, when most people were not in the political discussion. Me and my one Taiwanese friends go together to participate in the sit-ins, while we are part of some different views, but our attitudes are quite radical.... Thank you”

That even non-Taiwanese or non-Chinese individuals supported the movement again testified to the legitimacy and coverage of the students' efforts, reaffirming their solidarity and identification with the movement, and prompting them into engagement. The letter also restated the goals of the Sunflower movement – proving that the movement was known by the world. Comparable posts from Liberty International, American senators, Hillary Clinton, French students all drew over 400 likes each.

(4) *Promotion content*: content meant to promote attendance for an external group or an upcoming event or a call to action. Among the twenty-four promotional posts, things promoted included (i) *other groups campaigning for freedom*. On June 19, the page advertised Watchout, a “Taiwanese group dedicated to overseeing and streaming legislative proceedings”:

“Watchout... has also asked netizens to declare their support for freedom of speech... by posting the following statement: I stand steadfastly against censorship and being disappeared on the internet, and hereby reaffirm my unreserved and unequivocal support for freedom of speech.”

However, it only attracted 60 likes and 1 share, a stark contrast to the 1443 likes and 1 share drawn by a post on April 23 calling for users to join an NGO: “Want to change Taiwan? 52k job opportunities waiting for you to enlist and vote for the village chief; reject spud politics, surround central, with us together, nothing can be impossible.” Implicated by this difference is a lack of interest toward requests for engagement that calls upon an investment of personal space, such as users' Facebook profiles where the statement would be posted, or that by predetermining the form of engagement desired (something external to the page), users deemed engagement with the prompt (the post) unnecessary. At the same time, calls to participation ensconced in the framework of an expressive message were much better-received, a tendency recurrent in this type of content.

(ii) *Upcoming events such as workshops*. On May 5, the page shared a poster advertising a workshop for translation and the Sunflower movement, which garnered 933 likes and 164 shares. On May 7, a workshop at the international department of a Hong Kong university was advertised, acquiring 462 likes and 1 share. On May 13, another workshop on translation and the Sunflower movement was shared, attracting 404 likes and 22 shares. Interaction only dropped when posts were links to videos of the actual workshops going, such those on May 14 that shared four videos of four rounds of the Sunflower movement International workshop. The drop corresponds to two potentialities: users respond to videos with the belief that interaction should concern watching the video, above liking the post; or that users are only interested in the subject insofar as it does *not* demand too much of their time, where liking a short post is a palatable request, but watching a half-hour long video is not.

(iii) *Products that expressed the ideology of the movement, including songs and goods*. On April 22, the page reposted another page's photo and text on the impending release of a new song, and its English version, from Island's Sunrise, which attracted 1231 likes and 1 share. On May 3, the page shared a photo of a beer branded after the Sunflower movement:

“The Sunflower Movement now has an exclusive beer to its name! However, supplies appear to be very limited, since as the brewing genius behind this effort

emphatically stated in his message to our fan page: "IMPORTANT: Like Taiwan, this beer is NOT FOR SALE!"

The popularity of the post, with 740 likes and 11 shares, could be attributed to the fact that it did not elicit purchases or financial contributions from members.

(iv) *Calls for assistance with projects.* Calls for participation that requested little of users elicited significantly greater amounts of interaction. On June 13, an update was provided on an impending police crackdown on protesters occupying a Hong Kong legislative council over land development, followed by a call for “Netizens not currently in Hong Kong: In addition to following the World Cup, please help keep an eye on the events in Hong Kong!” which elicited a large 930 likes and 218 shares.

On May 2, the page requested users’ attention and their online support (likes) for the Appendectomy project page, with links provided and the accumulation of 660 likes and 59 shares, which was an “an ongoing project to gather momentum for removing unfit legislators who have failed to reflect public opinion after being elected”:

“As explained in their ‘About’ page: ‘The appendix is a vestigial organ in the human body that has lost its function. When the appendix becomes inflamed, the condition can become so serious that it is life threatening. *A country is much like a human body in this respect. Our country's appendices have become so inflamed that they're starting to rot, and we need everyone to stand up and remove them, so that our country may live.*’ In many ways this Project is a continuation of the momentum launched by the Sunflower Movement and its occupation of the legislature, which has boosted public awareness of the incompetence and arrogance of many legislators. After roughly a month of gathering public opinion, the Appendectomy Project announced earlier today... that they will begin procedures to remove the following three legislators...”

Two observations are important to note here, which reappear again in the posts below calling for alternate forms of support. First, expressive content reappears as a strategy to encourage support and engagement among protesting members. Second, the Sunflower movement, or its ideology to be precise, became a discursive frame that lent legitimation to successive protest actions, which became “continuations of... the Sunflower movement”.

When the page called for physical or financial support from its users, however, interaction declined. On May 18, the page requested volunteer support for the Farglory situation, where current volunteers worked to protect trees scheduled for destruction by the Farglory Land Development company’s road expansion project:

“Trees on Zhongxiao E Rd. outside the old Songshan Tobacco Factory are slated to be removed at 9:30 am today. Although Farglory says the act is legal and tree experts will be on site to monitor the situation, their past actions leave little doubt that this will not be the case. Activists are calling for anyone who can to help protect the site.

The post generated 177 likes and 5 shares. On the same day, the page requested financial support for a photobook project, with a link to the artist’s crowdfunding, which only attracted 221 likes and 12 shares. A detailed explanation of its premise was provided, but predicated on an

expression of the movement's process and goals as noble, non-violent commitments of the movement in their journey to achieving a goal that could benefit the entire world:

“The mountains of donated goods, the recycling and free phone-recharging stations, the way they cleaned up after themselves - *all spoke of a way that we can bring positive change in the world without resorting to violence.* In order to commemorate the events and create a permanent visual record, I have invited around a dozen fellow photographers, mostly expats but also locals, to contribute their photos, and stories, to a photobook that I am calling ‘Sunflowers in Streets.’”

The discrepancies in likes and shares between the calls for online versus physical, and intangible/emotional versus financial support throws into relief an important characteristic of cyberactivism: protesting members of an online free space are more *ideologically* invested and are less committed or capable of contributing tangible resources such as labor or capital. This imparts important implications for the types of action that online free spaces can elicit. It means that their capacities for invoking protest activity are best realized within the realm of online participation, and the contribution of resources is one with severe restrictions.

That financial endeavors appeal to emotional affect through expressions of the movement's ideology and interpretations of the movement consistent with those held by protesters themselves demonstrates a “bleaching effect” of the online space. That is, all posts are conscious of and washed with the ideological colors of the movement, *irrespective of whether the issue at hand relates to the original Sunflower movement or not*, a point to be taken up later.

### ***Topical Axis***

This axis captures the extent to which an online space focuses on its original movement or other movements. Actual references to the Sunflower movement were only counted among forty-six of the 151 posts, and fell under at least one of two themes: debating the damages incurred by the protesters, and rehashing the ideology of Taiwanese independence and freedom represented by the movement. Both converged in the function of defaming the government and operating as a strategy to empower subsequent protest actions. By associating protest activity with an earlier movement, or framing them as an ideological continuation of an earlier movement, the activity gains legitimation at the same time it acquires access to a wider audience among those interested in the original movement. The advertisement for the Appendectomy project, aforementioned, was the most apparent example, which was framed as a “continuation of the momentum launched by the Sunflower Movement and its occupation of the legislature, which has boosted public awareness of the incompetence and arrogance of many legislators.”

Furthermore, on May 21, a reference was made in the page's recount of the Taiwan Metro massacre, to challenge the problem of media bias against freedom and democracy: “... while such an act, the first of its kind to happen in Taiwan, is certainly deplorable, an equal cause for concern is how some media outlets and public figures have been quick to tie this incident to the recent wave of protests. The editorial stance of China Times already needs no mention; less than two hours after the incident, it ran a report tying the stabbing incident to a completely

unrelated protest, staged shortly afterward on a different line of the Taipei Metro...”

On May 27, the page referenced a case from the Sunflower movement to illustrate a more general problem of police surveillance and its encroachment of personal freedom:

“Directly following the Sunflower Movement, many students were immediately summoned to the police station, leaving students scratching their heads as to who ratted them out. It turns out that the police had accumulated a massive amount of video during the protests, which was uploaded and run through the M-Police facial recognition system to cross-check with ID...”

The other 105 posts exhibited the page’s interest in a great diversity of protest activities outside the Sunflower movement, delving into issues including: the Farglory situation, the Ministry of Education’s textbook change proposal, external projects (i.e. the Appendectomy project, the photobook project, the Mockingbird project), external protest groups and their campaigns, general police misconduct, the misconduct of individual politicians (i.e. Taipei City mayor Sean Lien, Chiayi mayor Huang Min Hui), Want Want China Times media group’s distortion of data, the low tax rates that make Taiwan a tax haven for companies like KPMG, the Taipei Metro massacre and its incorporation into slander against the Sunflower movement, interviews with key figures in the nation’s democratic history (i.e. Judy Lin Linton, the eldest daughter of Lin I-Hsiung), the poor use of funds for transportation development, the free economic pilot zone legislation, Taiwan’s participation in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Hong Kong citizens’ occupation of their legislative council in protest of a land development project and the loss of democracy, the Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong, and the lack of media coverage concerning the Hong Kong demonstrations.

## **Discussion**

The diversity uncovers the networked characteristic of online free spaces: online free spaces are nodes to and through which various political campaigns, efforts, struggles are thematically connected by a political ideology or set of values, such as democracy or freedom. It stands, therefore, that these connections lift their underlying political ideology to higher levels of abstraction. In other words, the values enabling cohesion among different political endeavors must be broad, and by extension, vague and general, if they are to maximize their range of inclusion. The Sunflower movement online free space evinces a dual function of identity-formation: it references the Sunflower movement to narrow the online space’s identity enough to retain solidarity and commitment, at the same time it reconstructs these references into a broad political ideological frame – grounded on the broad value of adherence to democracy – to reify links, channel support, and foster a solidarity between differing political endeavors.

Indeed, online free spaces operate as vehicles for other movements by shuttling traffic and audience around different online free spaces, carrying the potential to better establishing solidarity and a pan-identity spanning across different spaces and their political campaigns. Yet, as demonstrated in the functional themes uncovered, the context in which other campaigns are mentioned wields the potential to (re)shape them – a promotion for the Appendectomy project, for instance, became an expressive call for solidarity around the project’s rebranding as a

continuation of the Sunflower movement. Embedded within this potentiality is a concentration of *protest capital* or of the capacity to alter the life cycles of protest mobilizations by tapping into external campaigns or audiences to revive or expand interest in local campaigns; using the Appendectomy project to revive interest in the Sunflower movement or using the Sunflower movement as an ideological frame by which future mobilizations can gain legitimation (Au 2016b).

The concept of protest capital gains credence from the rise in participation witnessed on January 15, 2016, when expressive posts attracted the attention of thousands of users, prompting the question of what causes the depression and rise of interest and interaction? The attention from January informs us that the networked quality of online free spaces redefines how we interpret periods of inactivity: the spike in likes and shares from previous posts in March 2015 and in 2014 indicates that spells of inactivity are *not* necessarily detrimental to the momentum of online free spaces; that unlike traditional free spaces, *inactivity in online free spaces can be conceptualized as a strategy and a period during which its existence, made permanent by social media platforms, actually attracts more followers and users*. Moreover, they alert us to how the popularity of interacting with online free spaces rises and falls according to its congruence with ongoing events. The social issue concerning singer Chow Tzu-yu in January 2016 had sparked outrage across all online and physical media outlets in Taiwan. The expressive posts made by the Sunflower movement page, then, capitalized on the popular rage and attention on this rage that had occupied the public consciousness by making posts that allowed its audience to express their rage while associating it with the Sunflower movement, effectively redirecting the interest of this massive audience to its own causes. Here, the popularity of the page's January 2016 posts were a reflection of the protest capital and the following that had accumulated during its period of inactivity, and spoke to a congruence between its posts and the issues raised in the public consciousness. A lack of this congruence threatens to direct attention away from online free spaces, as evinced by a post made in March 2015 on protests against Taiwan's participation in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which only attracted 131 likes and 0 shares; since this post was made after a long spell of inactivity, without expressive references to the Sunflower movement or its political ideology, and ultimately discussed an issue that did *not* occupy the public consciousness, its ability to attract interaction was severely curtailed.

The Sunflower movement page published content scattered across four different thematic functions – expressive, information, informative-supportive, promotion – and two different thematic topics when connecting with issues external to itself – damages incurred protesters and ideology of Taiwanese independence and freedom represented. Overlap within all the thematic functional categories of its posts were punctuated with consistent recourse to the expressive as a way of reaffirming ideology, retaining, generating and reviving solidarity among protesting members, and constructing a broad identity among differing political campaigns and issues through expressive articulations of a general political ideology pushed to higher levels of abstraction. As such, expressive content may be said to attract the most participation, but must be accompanied with the fact that this theme was also identified across other themes.

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish this paper from an overt network analysis. Twitter, Youtube, and other social media platforms are not fundamentally online free spaces. As aforementioned, free spaces are fundamentally institutions located outside the control of those in

power (Evans and Boyte 1986; Morris 1984; Scott 1990). It follows that the interactions allowed on a Facebook page place it closer to being such an institution than those allowed on pages from Twitter, Youtube, etc., which are much more overtly nodes in a network. Adopting this as a point of departure, the core of my methodology and theoretical position are *not* network analysis. As such, a qualitative content analysis was best suited to the aims of this paper, in spite of NodeXL’s growing popularity as a method for investigations concerning social media (Smith 2015). In this capacity, this paper *operates as a sensitizing mechanism* for the need and potential for future network analysis in online spaces and the areas of political science and political sociology that they represent, whilst better establishing the method as a vehicle to assess motives and arguments in politics: evaluating an online free space in terms of how it is managed and used as a place interaction (its logistic dimension) and the intended functions behind its material (thematic dimension) enables a specific understanding of its political viability and anticipates the campaigns and struggles it will connect itself to, as well as the extent to which certain types of actions will be successful in attracting support. Assembling results from these two dimensions produces a narrative to uncover characteristics of the life cycle of an online free space, predicated on the basis that online free space persists beyond the termination of a protest. Decline and rise of participation in this space is governed by the congruence of the content its organizers share with issues in the public consciousness, the frequency of its posts (activity of inactivity), the function of the post (or how it is framed) according to the four themes.

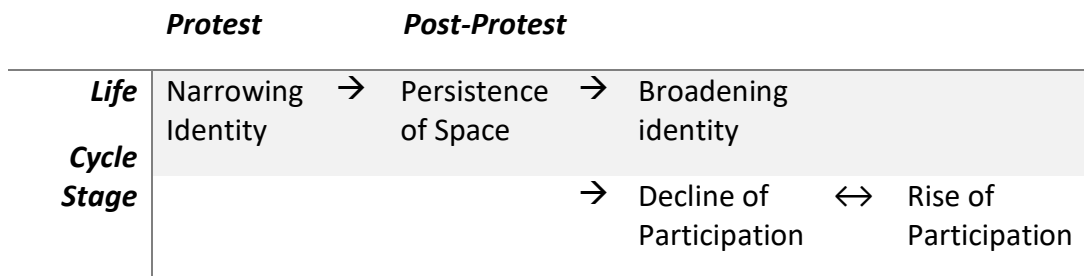


Figure 3 – Stages of life cycle of a protest from narrowing identity (last stage of its conclusion) to post-protest activity within an online free space

Online free spaces alert us to how “free spaces” generally facilitate the development of oppositional identities: the *online characteristic* of an online free space by default distances users from government actors of coercion (Hirsch 1990) in a way that *prepares for* the development of oppositional identities, *but does not inform characteristics of these identities*, a trait that is very much known, cherished, and defended among its members, as evinced by the backlash in a post on June 25 toward how Lai Chung-chiang, a lawyer for the anti-CSSTA protests, was blocked from his own Facebook account; it is largely the belief systems ensconced in these spaces (Polletta 1999), embodied in the political ideology running through online free spaces as nodes to and through which various political campaigns are connected, *that informs the characteristics of the oppositional identities cultivated within them* – which were, in this case, independence, democracy, and freedom.

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