

Internet and public opinion toward social movements: Persuasion, support activation, and opinion radicalization

Prof. Francis L.F. Lee

Associate Professor, School of Journalism and Communication,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

While the internet has been hailed as a technology which has facilitated the expansion of social movement mobilization and participation, this article examines if the internet also has implications on the opinion of the larger public toward social movements. Based on considerations of the characteristics of the online information environment and people's online information seeking behavior, we develop the persuasion, support activation, and opinion radicalization hypotheses. Persuasion occurs if using the internet for movement related information would result in more positive views toward specific social movements and their causes. Support activation occurs if using the internet for movement related information results in a stronger connection between general movement support and support for a specific movement and its cause. Opinion radicalization, meanwhile, occurs if using the internet for movement related information results in increased level of acceptance of the more radical actions undertaken by movement activists. We examine these hypotheses using the case of the anti-Express Railway protests in Hong Kong in early 2010. Analysis of a representative telephone survey (N=1007) shows evidences mainly for the support activation and opinion radicalization hypotheses. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: internet and social movements, public opinion, support activation, opinion radicalization, Hong Kong