

Taiwan Fellowship Report:

# Digital Democracy in Taiwan: The Sunflower Movement and its Legacies

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## 1. Introduction

On 30 March 2014, more than 100,000 people came together outside the Presidential Office in Taipei to protest the government's controversial Cross-Straits Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA; see Gold & Pomfret 2014, Ho 2015). The large-scale rally represented the high-point of the Sunflower Movement (see Rowan 2015 for an account), a grass-roots social movement that included students and civil society actors, and that supporters have described as 'an awakening of civil society within Taiwan' and 'a third political force' in Taiwanese politics (Lowther 2014). Indeed, the movement's activities throughout 2014 have had lasting effects in Taiwan. In the short-term, they contributed to delegitimizing the Kuomintang (KMT) government under Ma Ying-jeou, evident in its defeat in the 2014 local elections (Huang 2014) and the win of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in the general election in 2016 (Keim 2016). The movement also saw a new political party emerge and win seats in the legislature, the New Power Party (Horwitz 2016). But maybe more importantly, the movement has shaped the understanding of many young Taiwanese of what participatory politics and activism might look like, in 21st-century Taiwan, and it has had a lasting influence on how political actors of all ideological stripes integrate digital technology into their activities.

The Sunflower Movement and its legacy then offer important insights into how digital activism shapes political processes in a networked society, and especially what role digital technologies play within such processes. The student-led movement brought together tech-savvy young people who coordinated their activities through apps like Telegram and who promoted their agenda on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. In this, the movement took a cue from other movements, especially the Occupy movements around the world (see Graeber 2011), and yet it also refined the strategies that informed such activism, tailoring them to the situation on the ground. At the time of writing, in the wake of the movement's five-year anniversary, it still widely informs politics in Taiwan, whether through the lessons that political stakeholders learned in its aftermath or through the political practices and expectations that the movement established. At the same time, it serves as inspiration and input to other social movements, for instance the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. The movement, its values, and its strategies provide an important reality-check on what drives Taiwan's digital politics today and, more generally, how politics are changing in an age of ubiquitous digital technology usage.

This report explores precisely such connections between politics in networked societies and the use of digital technology. It provides initial findings from a six-month research project, funded through a Taiwan Fellowship from February to July 2019, and hosted by the National Taiwan University's Political Science Department. The project asked: how had the legacies of the

Sunflower Movement and its activities, in particular its digital practices, shaped Taiwan's democratic politics five years on?

To answer this question, I conducted interviews with 15 activists, artists, policy-maker, administrators, and academics in Taiwan who had either played a role during the movement or had been working in politics and activism in its aftermath. These qualitative, semi-structured interviews covered a wide political spectrum. The background of interviewees ranged from politicians and administrators who had worked for the conservative KMT government under former president Ma Ying-jeou to those who were associated with the Tsai Ing-wen administration and the agenda of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). It included both societal actors who supported the kind of concerns usually associated with the 'pan-blue' camp of the KMT and its allies as well as those who supported the 'pan-green' ideals of the DPP and its associates, but it also covered activists, politicians, and civil servants who described themselves as not belonging to either camp. During the interviews, I asked the research participants how they assessed the movement and its impact on Taiwanese society and politics, and how they thought about the role that digital technology played in politics and activism today. Those conversations also touched on major challenges that the interviewees saw, in contemporary Taiwanese society, and the approaches they felt might address such challenges.

In what follows, I will explore the interview data and present some of the initial findings that have emerged from this research project. These findings are by no means conclusive, and I plan to expand them further as I prepare to rework this report into an academic research paper. For the present purpose, I will first discuss the challenges that my informants identified for Taiwan's democracy, and how they discussed various contemporary political risks and issues. Next, I will present the strategies different actors adopted to address these challenges. I conclude with a discussion of the future that digital politics in Taiwan might hold, and with thoughts about the lessons that advanced digital societies might learn from the highly dynamic situation in Taiwan.

## **2. Risks and Challenges in Taiwanese Politics after the Sunflower Movement**

Throughout my interviews, the research participants raised an array of issues that they felt were driving Taiwanese politics today. These issues included arguably familiar transnational problem fields that are not confined to the Taiwanese context, such as environmental concerns, questions about civic rights and equality, the challenge of living with increasingly complex and dynamic socio-economic realities, as well as the impact of hyper-accelerated online interactions on public opinion and civic affairs. In fact, interviewees of all ideological persuasions grappled

with very similar issues, even as they rationalised those problems differently and developed their respective individual interpretations. As diverse as the conversations were, they contained several important patterns, specifically about three challenges that Taiwanese social and political actors struggled with the most: these are Taiwan's highly polarised political environment, the stark generational divide that many observed, and the risks that misinformation and disinformation posed for democratic political and communication processes. Before I turn to the strategies that different interviewees adopted, or at least recommended, as they worked through these issues, it is worth outlining how they viewed these three challenges.

### ***2.1 Polarisation in Taiwanese Politics***

Polarisation is certainly not unique to the Taiwanese context, and much has been made about political rifts in other societies, for instance in the US under President Trump (Ware 2016, Schmidt 2017), in the UK in the wake of the Brexit vote (Farrell & Newman 2017; Freedman 2017), or in the EU during a time of intense debates about migration (Druxes 2016, Vossen 2017). At first sight, polarisation in Taiwan may seem to reflect similar dynamics, particularly those in presidential political systems where politics are characterized by partisan loyalties to two powerful parties. And yet, Taiwan's polarisation is fuelled by pan-green and pan-blue antagonisms that do not readily mirror progressive vs conservative ideological divides elsewhere. This is in part because Taiwan's politics are deeply shaped by questions over sovereignty and identity that arguably unique in international affairs (Chen & Yen 2017, Huang 2017, Hsieh & Skelton 2018, Kwan 2016). Relations with the neighbouring People's Republic of China (PRC) loom large in almost all aspects of Taiwan's politics. As a result, the question of how to make sense of Taiwan's international status cuts across more traditional political fault-lines and informs all manner of economic, social, and political dynamics. Many of my interviewees brought up issues of national identity and relations with China in our conversations, mostly unprompted.

At the same time, my interlocutors repeatedly pointed out that the left-right political spectrum did not readily apply to Taiwan. Most interviewees felt that each of the two political blocks contained 'left-wing' and 'right-wing' aspects, with some progressive activists going as far as calling both the DPP and the KMT 'conservative'. Especially among young interviewees, there was a sense that there was no major 'left-wing' actor in Taiwanese politics, that many DPP supporters were just as sceptical of social change as KMT constituents, and that Taiwanese society was overall oriented towards maintaining the status quo. I will return to these issues below, since they are intimately related to the generational differences that my interviewees unanimously identified as a core challenge in the island's politics.

As much as the established ideological camps may differ from those familiar from other political systems, there was a general sense among my interlocutors that these camps were nevertheless strongly entrenched in their political views. As one activist argued, this was in part because both the pan-blue and the pan-green side benefitted from the polarised nature of Taiwan's politics: it allowed stakeholders to mobilise supporters and shift political debates by falling back on emotive hot-button issues. A civil servant I spoke to outlined how her public relations work for one of the ministries was made difficult by the tendency of her audience to interpret policy-related issues through the lens of partisan politics, even when the issues at hand were not necessarily connected to inter-party animosities. She gave the example of Dengue Fever, and how government announcements about the disease in the southern city of Kaohsiung quickly ignited comments about the controversial Kaohsiung mayor and KMT presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜). In another case, her ministry released announcements about an international organisation, which sparked discussions about Taiwan's status in such organisations, causing the debate to quickly depart from the actual policy issue. The interviewee observed that, over time, her ministry's social media activities created fewer and fewer reactions, but that those reactions were increasingly strong. Specifically, views of her posts on Facebook had decreased from 30,000 to 11,000 over the course of the previous three years, but interactions (i.e. 'likes', comments, and shares) had increased from ca. 500 to about 3,000. 'I think there are fewer and fewer people who see our messages, but when they see them... we are in the bubble', she argued. 'It looks like you have more supporters, but actually you do not'.

My interviewees frequently brought up the risk of being locked into ideological 'bubbles'. Several accused the two major political parties as being caught up in 'group think', and they voiced the suspicion that both camps had created their separate realities that were now difficult to reconcile. Explanations of how and why the pan-green and pan-blue sides were each reproducing their own intrinsic biases varied somewhat, with some interviewees pointing to organisational practices within the major parties, for instance the perceived inability of the KMT to retain young talent or recruit contributors from underprivileged social groups, or the ostensible over-reliance of the DPP on former activists with strong, divisive agendas. Many pointed out that the discourse on each side had become more emotive and less nuanced. Indeed, among my interviewees, both supporters of blue and of green politics criticized the two large political parties of instrumentalising political outrage to garner attention, and they frequently saw this problem amplified by the structural dynamics of Taiwan's media ecology. The workings of social media caused particular unease among my informants. Many pointed to platforms like Facebook or LINE as digital environments that facilitated ideological segregation,

and yet they frequently used precisely these platforms to mobilise their own supporters and collaborators, or to communicate about their activities. Confronted with this contradiction, one activist said: 'there's nothing you can do (*meibanfan* 沒辦法); we have no other weapon'.

Much of the work of my research participants then involved balancing the tension between, on the one hand, the technological affordances and immense conveniences that corporate social media services offered and, on the other hand, the pressures and constraints that these services generate when it comes to creating nuanced, reasoned interventions into political discourse. In fact, several of my interviewees struggled with conflicting values in this regard: they oftentimes acknowledged that complex political issues only received traction in Taiwan's digital media environment if these issues were packaged in interesting, exciting, and straightforward ways, but they also voiced concerns that complex issues were at risk of being 'dumbed down' for mass consumption. In such an environment, the risks posed by online misinformation increase substantially.

## **2.2 Misinformation in Taiwanese Digital Spheres**

A related concern for my interviewees then was that Taiwan's highly accelerated digital media exchanges lent themselves to the spread of mis- as well as disinformation. Many pointed to the 2018 local elections and the referenda that took place at that time as examples of political participation that became warped by false information. Several of my research participants had conducted research on so-called 'Fake News' on Facebook and LINE, and they showed me their data on how misleading stories 'trended' during moments of important political decision-making. There was a general sense that certain demographics were particularly prone to sharing faulty information, specifically citizens with lower levels of education and older users, and that the spread of misinformation was particularly prominent among supporters of populist politician Han Kuo-yu. That said, the interviewees also pointed out ample cases in which progressives had fallen for misleading or faulty information. The struggle to stem the flood of misinformation struck many as a bipartisan issue.

Indeed, much like in other societies, misinformation is not limited to explicitly partisan political issues. Many of my interviewees were involved with finding responses to the ubiquitous spread of unverified information, for instance of the kind that promotes seedy financial hoaxes or questionable health practices. The research participants were keenly aware that these practices were tied to the workings of transnational digital political economies, in which content farms guide traffic either to advertising-driven web content or to dubious business transactions. However, they also distinguished such commercial practices from political campaigns. Several of my interviewees held the strong conviction that much of the misleading political information

circulating through Taiwanese social media spheres stemmed from mainland Chinese actors serving PRC interests. They each pointed to recent geolocation evidence from Taiwanese messaging boards (or PTT), which indicate that inflammatory commentators often join discussions from IP addresses located outside of Taiwan itself, suggesting that there were indeed accounts that systematically used proxy-servers and virtual private networks to conceal their actual place of origin, which was likely the PRC.

Evidence of PRC disinformation campaigns in Taiwan has been mounting (for recent reports, see Monaco 2017 and Schmitt & Mazza 2019). At the same time, several of my informants expressed concerns that Taiwanese political actors were instrumentalising such campaigns. Critics of the Tsai Ing-wen administration were particularly vocal in this regard, alleging that DPP officials were systematically using the charge of rumour-mongering and 'Fake News' to discredit potentially valid criticism of their policies. But interviewees closer to the current administration also expressed worries that allegations of misinformation had become so ubiquitous in Taiwan that they threatened democratic principles like free speech. One civil servant, for instance, felt that often well-meaning attempts to rein in rumours risked turning into censorship of unwanted political opinions. Indeed, many of my interviewees were trying to come to grips with this dilemma in their own work and activism. How to balance the wish for free information flows with the perceived need to intervene in and manage such flows to avoid abuse by malicious actors drove many of the communicative and organisational strategies that my research participants deployed, and I will return to these activities below.

In the present context, it is worth pointing out that these concerns, while shared across political and ideological divides, were subject to precisely the kind of polarisation that the interviewees had themselves criticised. Aside from the generally strong impression that misinformation campaigns were something 'the other side' was most receptive to, the discourse about 'fake news' oftentimes took on an almost existential quality. Interviewees frequently spoke of 'fighting' misinformation, and one interviewee explicitly referred to misinformation as a 'weapon' in a 'hybrid war'. This discourse of a 'war' over public opinion, also reproduced in Taiwanese newsmedia (e.g. Lin & Wu 2019), introduced a high level of anxiety to the discussion, and it is questionable whether these anxieties are helpful for creating the kind of democratic, open society that my interviewees unanimously advocated.

Understandings of the problem then also diverged sharply between what we might call a 'rationalist' and a 'reflective' position. Interviewees who took a rationalist standpoint felt that the problem lay with the verifiability of factual information, and this group strongly believed that transparency and an appeal to facts could remedy the situation. One interviewee, for

instance, explained his position using the analogy of ‘a cold northern wind’ (i.e.: misinformation) that he believed could be dispelled by the ‘warming rays of the sun’ (i.e.: the facts). Those who subscribed to a reflective position, on the other hand, focused more strongly on the social and psychological reasons that might lead people to cling to certain beliefs, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Their solutions entailed social engagement, humorous emotive responses, and careful discursive interventions, and they consequently spelled out an approach that was in many ways incompatible with the more confrontational rationalist position. My qualitative interview data is insufficient for establishing whether these two viewpoints correlate with broader ideological commitments, and future research may need to explore such understandings of ‘fake’ vs ‘true’ information in the Taiwanese context, but I had the impression that rationalist arguments were more common among interviewees whose views aligned to some extent with the ‘pan-blue’ position, whereas research participants of a more ‘green’ persuasion leaned towards ‘reflective’ approaches.

### ***2.3 Taiwan’s Generational Differences***

Another major area of concern for my interviewees were generational differences in Taiwan, and the participants in fact frequently related many of the other issues they spoke of to this specific context: whether it was Taiwan’s polarised public sphere, the perceived propensity of specific demographics to spread or internalise misinformation, or the assessments of various political and communication strategies, the idea of a strong generational divide informed how my interlocutors made sense of Taiwanese politics today.

A frequent argument was that young people under the age of 35 held political views that were diametrically opposed to those held by older generations. Examples included attitudes towards global issues like climate change and the downsides of neoliberal capitalism, civic rights issues for instance in the area of LGBT+ activism, and questions of identity, especially their understanding of ‘Taiwaneseness’. While there was some acknowledgment that there were also young Taiwanese who held divergent views, the general sense was that young demographics indeed support broadly-defined ‘green’ issues and progressive approaches in politics. The explanations that my interviewees provided to make sense of their observations ranged widely. Some argued that progressive attitudes were simply a function of youthful rebellion, and that the current young generation was agitating against the predominantly ‘blue’ agendas of their elders; one interviewee made the case that today’s progressives were quickly becoming tomorrow’s conservatives, as entrenched in their views as their parents. Others felt that the concerns of today’s youth were fundamentally different from youth concerns in the past. As one interviewee outlined, the current young generation grew up in a post-modern society, and this has fundamentally shaped their worldviews and desensitized them to social and political

complexities. Another interviewee pointed out that the young generation today faces much bleaker socio-economic prospects than their parent-generation, and that this pushed many towards political standpoints usually associated with the 'left'.

Whatever the exact causes of these political commitments, the impression was that older Taiwanese had a fundamentally different attitude than these younger generations. Here, too, my interviewees acknowledged exceptions, particularly among early activists who had fought for civil rights under authoritarian rule, but they overall felt that those who were 50 and older held outlooks that supported the status-quo. Explanations frequently pointed to the authoritarian past, and to the hierarchies that the authoritarian system had established and entrenched in Taiwanese society. Some brought up traditional and religious values, whether of the Christian or Confucian persuasion. Intriguingly, there was a broad consensus among my research participants that older generations were engaged in very different identity practices than their younger counterparts. Several of my interviewees narrated how their parents or grandparents had coped with the rifts that had been created in Taiwanese society over who had lived on the island before the Civil War (*benshengren* 本省人) and who had only moved there from the mainland afterwards (*waishengren* 外省人). Whereas these differences were crucial to the politics of aging generations, those who had been born after democratization felt such distinctions less and less, and their self-image consequently clashed with that of older Taiwanese, so the argument went.

Aside from their different politics, the two demographics were also seen as fundamentally different in their social and communicative behaviour. This was particularly noticeable when it came to media consumption. While younger people were generally thought to use digital media more often (and in more sophisticated ways) than older generations, a recurring observation was that the two groups also congregated on different digital platforms. As one interviewee explained when she introduced me to one of the ministry's social media plans, the administration's Facebook account saw mostly users who were under the age of 45, a majority of which was women (ca. 70 percent). In contrast, the LINE account drew mainly users over the age of 50, who made up 82 percent of the followers on that service.

Such observations raised concerns that different demographics in Taiwan were not speaking to each other, but that they were rather retreating into communities of people with similar backgrounds. Generational differences seem to then be both the outcome and a driver of social media bubbles (see Pariser 2012), and for many of my interviewees this raised questions about how to tailor their political and communicative strategies to Taiwan's often fragmented social fabric.

### **3. Political Strategies in a Digitally Accelerated Democracy**

The challenges that the research participants identified directly carried over into their own strategies for handling Taiwan's complex political environment, and into their observation about the strategies of other actors. In what follows, I will discuss four strategic areas that my informants described as crucial to their activities. This includes strategies related to public relations and social media communication, attempts to foster deliberation, various discursive strategies aimed at reframing specific issues, and finally the use of civic technology.

#### **3.1 Public Relations & Social Media**

When it came to their public outreach activities, the activists, politicians, and civic servants I spoke to emphasised the importance of digital media. Several had been involved during the events of 2014 as media workers or consultants, and during that time they experimented with e.g. live-streaming and video-sharing. They took these experiences with them as they later promoted their own activities or those of their partners and clients. This included setting up live consultation mechanisms like 'open mic' events, in which government officials would respond to questions that citizens submitted through online systems. In that regard, generational rifts again came to the fore, as government officials were not trained to engage online audiences, and they remained reluctant to experiment with new, digital outreach initiative. As one interviewee explained, the results were then also often stiff and awkward, and she remained doubtful that online users would be attracted to the format. She felt that such initiative needed to be flanked by more 'hip', grassroots reporting, for instance by inviting popular video producers (or 'Vloggers') on Youtube to report on crucial issues.

Indeed, several of my interviewees mentioned the success of such 'Youtubers' in Taiwan's politics. This included the Vlogger Chen Chih-han (陳之漢), known on Youtube under his allies Kuan Chang (館長), whose endorsement of politician Han Kuo-yu seems to have significantly contributed to Han's later success (see also DeAeth 2019). Others mentioned Chiu Wei-chieh (邱威傑), also known as 'Froggy' (呱呱), a YouTuber who mobilised his fans to win the 2018 local election in Taipei's Xinyi District. The popularity of these new, digital outreach channels was part of what created a tension for many of the research participants as to how politics should be communicated. Several were involved in creating digital media content, and they each felt that it was crucial to create straight-forward, simple messages. One activist emphasised that he intentionally limited his blogging and online commenting activities to single issues, so as not to muddy the waters with unnecessary complexity. Another interviewee, working in public relations, outlined how she created Youtube 'infomercials' for her political clients, and how important infotainment content was for reaching a broad audience: 'that's how we make those

boring policies accessible to everyone', she explained. At the same time, and as mentioned earlier, the interviewees were keenly aware that simplifying complex political processes also came with risks, and that it potentially contributed to the kind of populism in Taiwanese politics of which many remained sceptical. As one of the interviewees explained, the trend in Taiwanese political communication is towards short, polarising arguments. Asked how they felt about being part of this trend, they shrugged: 'I want to win'.

These tensions extended to the social media strategies in which the research subjects had been engaged. One civil servant discussed with me at length how she struggled to engage commentator's on her ministry's Facebook page in a productive manner. She perceived much of the discussion as divisive and polarising, with many users simply expressing emotions rather than engaging in issues. As a corrective, her own social media outreach now entailed posing follow-up questions to establish what caused these strong emotional comments, and to then guide the discussion back to substantive matters, rather than fanning indignation and outrage further. Many of my interlocutors described how they were trying to counter emotional social media narratives, especially those driven by misinformation, and this involved various strategies for facilitating deliberation, whether online or offline.

### **3.2 Deliberation Strategies**

Whether it was activists or established political actors, the interviewees often expressed the need for deliberation in democratic politics, and despite concerns about polarisation and social media bubbles, they generally expressed optimism about the state of Taiwan's public sphere. Some pointed out that Taiwan's government institutions had become significantly more transparent since the Sunflower Movement, and that the KMT-administration's push for 'open government' along with the follow-up initiatives under DDP-rule had enabled more debate about policy-issues. Important actors in this regard had been Jaclyn Tsai (蔡玉玲), Minister-without-Portfolio under the Ma Ying-jeou administration from 2013 to 2016, and her successor Audrey Tang (唐鳳), who joined the DPP cabinet in a similar role in August 2016. Both served their respective administrations as 'cyber ministers', though Tang's portfolio also entails improving inter-generational divides; a direct response to the problem of generational differences discussed above.

Interviewees of all political stripes frequently described the two cyber-experts as trailblazers in Taiwan's digital affairs, and as major facilitators of transparent, open discussion. They also pointed out that, at the heart of the two ministers' activities, lay an important public-private partnership: the relation between the state and the activist collective 'g0v', or 'Gov-Zero'. Active since 2012, g0v encompasses digital activists with an interest in open-source software, 'copy-

left' content, and open data. It is a network of civic hackers that coordinates its activities online, through various data-sharing and collaborative software solutions, and that meets in person during regular 'hackathons'. The network was instrumental in helping the activists of the Sunflower Movement set up their digital communication, and while many of the network's activities have thus aligned with progressive interests, its members make concerted efforts to remain bipartisan; indeed, g0v has assisted numerous civil society actors as well as two different governments with civic tech solutions, and the projects initiated by Jaclyn Tsai and Audrey Tang are examples of this. Both were kind enough to speak with me, and to be identified for the purpose of this research.

As Tsai explained during our conversation, she initiated the contact with g0v in her ministerial role during the Sunflower protests, joining one of their hackathons. Her pitch, at the event, was that there were no effective deliberation mechanisms between civil society and the government, and that the much-needed discussion of Taiwan's politics that the Sunflower activists had kicked off was stalling important societal and governmental processes. She requested that g0v help solve this problem by creating a platform that would facilitate rational discussion within society and then move the deliberation process on to major, actionable political issues so that stakeholders could quickly find potential solutions. The outcome was that over a dozen g0v members volunteered to solve this problem, and within a month they had designed and created the e-participation platform 'vTaiwan'. It was at this time that Tsai met Tang, who would advise her on issues of civic tech, and who would later 'switch' jobs with her after the 2016 presidential election. As Tsai herself put it: 'This was the first time a minister became a hacker and a hacker became a minister'. To Tsai, much of the cyber-activities that followed in the wake of the Sunflower Movement fell outside of ideologically polarised debates and instead picked up on much broader concerns related to transparent governance and participation. She described deliberation as an important component of this, one that allowed people otherwise divided across generations to learn from each other and improve their interaction: 'of course, it's not that once you talk there won't be any disagreement anymore. But at least you've started to talk. There's an interaction.'

Tsai's successor, Audrey Tang, has expanded this agenda, using both online and offline strategies. As she told me in our interview (which is publicly available as Schneider 2019), she regularly travels across the island to engage citizens in deliberative processes, and since some of these locations do not possess advanced ICT setups, she and her staff bring the technology with them. They then help connect communities directly to stakeholders in Taipei, to discuss civic and political issues. Tang also hosts hackathons, seminars, and various civic activities at a community centre in Taipei, and this physical location is specifically meant to bring people

from all walks of life and all generations together under one roof. In addition, she has worked to change practices of political deliberation, for instance by creating online spaces where legislative processes have to be debated and changed before they take effect as actual regulations. As she describes it, ‘there’s no exception. It creates a new norm that new regulations are subject to public debate, instead of people discovering it after the fact’.

The idea that open deliberation was indeed a bi-partisan issue strongly informed the communication strategies of various political actors during my interviews. Many research participants described how they were encouraging young and old people to communicate more. Two interviewees, for instance, had joined a support group on Facebook that focused on how to engage friends and family who held vastly different ideological views. They, and many other interviewees, expressed a strong interest in understanding Taiwanese citizens of often vastly different political persuasions, an issue that came up numerous times in discussions of Han Kuo-yu and his supporters. They also, however, outlined a number of strategies for flipping the script and changing the discourses on social and political issues.

### ***3.3 Discursive Strategies: Changing the Script of Taiwanese Politics***

Many of the research participants to whom I spoke acknowledged that in a world of rapid online information flows, digital echo-chambers, and pervasive misinformation, it was not enough to simply inject more facts into the deliberation process, even though many had developed approaches and even technologies that were meant to do precisely that (e.g. through crowd-sourced fact checking). More importantly, several of the interviewees described how they were trying to change the discourse by reframing central issues, and this was the case both with actors who leaned towards ‘blue’ politics as well as those who associated with ‘green’ positions.

One example is the pro-nuclear energy lobby and its social media activism on the Facebook page ‘Nuclear Mythbusters’. A leading figure in this movement, Huang Shih-hsiu, agreed to speak to me and be identified for the purpose of this study. As he describes it, the group remains sceptical of Taiwan’s green energy initiatives, particularly the degree to which the island’s energy consumption continues to rely on coal rather than on more sustainable sources, and its members consequently argue for a stronger inclusion of nuclear energy into the mix. The group also finds fault specifically with the Tsai Ing-wen administration’s handling of nuclear power issues, which members feel misrepresents the dangers of nuclear fusion. In Huang’s assessment, Taiwan’s environmentalist movement was framing the issue of nuclear energy through doom-and-gloom imagery, using fear tactics to obscure the workings of nuclear technology. He argued that his agenda was to re-frame the discourse and put it on scientific

footing, which he believed would empower informed decision-making. As he put it, ‘we want to establish clear objective facts before choosing subjective values’.

Other interviewees acknowledged the discursive work of the pro-nuclear activists. This included environmentalists who opposed the pro-nuclear agenda. They frequently mentioned the efforts by Nuclear Mythbusters, often unprompted by my questions, to illustrate how actors they perceived as their opposition had innovated with regards to their discursive strategies. One interviewee specifically mentioned the way the group used the ‘scientific frame’ to lead the discussion onto rationalist terrain; another pointed out how Nuclear Mythbusters had adopted the language and iconography of progressive movements, for instance describing the issue as a matter of ‘energy equality’ and connecting it to democratic values. He acknowledged that this was ‘clever’, since it reduced the need to speak about technical issues and instead appealed to contemporary political concerns about e.g. due process and transparent government. In that sense, groups that are often diametrically opposed to the ideals of the Sunflower Movement have come to adopt its styles and strategies to make their own counter-points.

Meanwhile, activists and politicians who associated more with a ‘green’ agenda also invested significant time and effort into discursive innovations. One politician, for instance, described an effort by the New Power Party (NPP) to encourage respectful discussions between parents and their children regarding the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The party had created an article on the protests in the form of a letter by a child to their parent. The goal was to start a discussion and set the parameters for civil discourse, using the parent-child relationship as a means of framing the issue. As the interviewee put it: ‘it’s not an article, but a tool’. Another example came from two participants in the g0v community, who described efforts to create an online petition system for LGBT+ issues. The website (<https://ly.answerfamily.org>) uses the phrase ‘I love family’ (我愛家庭) to appeal both to conservative and liberal audiences; as the activists described it, this frame allowed them to clarify that an issue that is very important to conservatives (family) is actually also very important to queer folks, and that this makes it easier to have a conversation about how homosexual couples might want to have families of their own.

As these examples already suggest, civic activities in contemporary Taiwan frequently feature new technology, such as online petition platforms like ‘answerfamily.org’. Indeed, the interviewees often described digital initiatives, many of which picked up where previous experiences during the Sunflower Movement had left off.

### **3.4 Civic Tech**

One of the legacies of the Sunflower Movement and its activism was that it established a range of online-offline procedures that put digital technology to innovative use in politics (see also Tsatsou & Zhao 2016). This included crowd-sourcing and cloud-sharing technology to facilitate collaboration, e.g. through tools like Hackfolder, SlideShare, Google Docs, or Typeform, and many of the interviewees I spoke to mentioned these technologies and how they had changed civic engagement. My interviewees were explicit in tying these innovations to the events of 2014 and their aftermath. They described how the Sunflower Movement, and particularly its collaboration with the hacker collective g0v, introduced a broader audience in Taiwan to the kind of tools frequently used among software designers. As one member of the g0v community stated: 'During the first days of the Sunflower Movement, the g0v community did not just build an infrastructure of wireless internet around the legislative yuan, they were actually also in charge of creating collaborative sheets for organising logistics and food for the protests'.

These practices were to some degree modelled on previous activist examples, for instance during the American Occupy events a few years earlier, but they would develop dynamics of their own in Taiwan that have a lasting influence on contemporary politics. One example of how Sunflower Movement activists used digital technology to shape politics was a website, created by g0v programmers, that provided information on the controversial Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) that had kicked off the protests. The website and its mobile version mapped government decisions to their potential effects on actual companies, allowing citizens to check which element of the treaty would impact them.

In addition to creating awareness through digital communication and familiarising a wide network of people with collaborative technology solutions, Taiwan has seen several initiatives emerge that aimed to establish new 'civic tech' solutions for Taiwanese politics. These platforms and applications were designed explicitly to facilitate democratic processes, and they cover a number of domains. For instance, the g0v collective created an open-access dictionary that combined Taiwanese Mandarin, Taiwanese Hoklo, and Taiwanese Hakka with English, French, and German, a project that was launched by Audrey Tang in 2013, and that was called 'Ministry of Education Dictionary', or MoeDict (<https://www.moedict.tw/>). Another 'civic hacks' that predates the events of the Sunflower Movement was the practice of creating 'forks' of official websites, that is by creating alternative websites whose URLs ended on 'g0v' instead of 'gov'. These new websites contained information on political issues and processes that the activists felt should have been made public by the respective administrations themselves. Many of these website forks have since been folded into the official websites, directly influencing how ministries and administrative units think about and represent data.

The g0v activists have since extended their activities to various political issue areas. This prominently includes the online deliberation and petitioning systems vTaiwan, which is the platform created by g0v programmers in collaboration with the former KMT administration. The platform is designed to give citizens access to law-making processes and involve them in civic process, both through participatory mechanisms and feedback loops between law-makers and the public, e.g. by leveraging online polling technology. Another initiative is the Join.gov platform, which serves as a digital petition and deliberation system to the ROC's Executive Yuan, the National Audit Office, as well as city and county governments. The system requires officials to respond to issues that have gathered more than 1,500 votes within 45 days of the initial proposal, at which point a process of consultation and deliberation is triggered that may lead to new bottom-up regulations. Much thought has gone into designing these processes in ways that counter polarisation by focusing on manageable, practical issues while leaving larger, ideological conflicts aside.

Another area that has seen the increased use of civic tech is elections, specifically through the Voting Advice Application (VAA) 'iVoter', which was launched in 2010. Taiwan is not the first country to use technology in order to establish, collect, and communicate the political positions of parties and candidates, but the iVoter system localises such efforts to contextualise politics in Taiwan for resident voters. While not a consequence of the Sunflower Movement, the popularity of digital tools like the iVoter illustrates the increased digital affinity of Taiwan's citizenry. As one interviewee described it, the iVoter system saw significant use in the 2016 local and presidential elections, as well as in the 2018 mayoral races (see Hsiao 2016 specifically on the elections of that year). According to the interviewee, the application was particularly useful for young voters who are new to politics, as it tries to condense complex data into accessible information online.

Finally, there have been additional initiatives in the service of public and civic activities, for instance by leveraging the 'internet of things' to create 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) technologies. One example is technology that aims to increase digital literacy and environmental awareness in elementary schools by teaching students how to make their own low-cost air pollution sensors. The initiative has spread across the island and created a network of crowd-sourced air quality detectors that report pollution in real-time. One of my interviewees explained that the project was promoted by the NPP, which assisted the Taiwanese developer EdiMax in distributing the technology among schools. The technology has since gone transnational, with the company launching similar initiatives in Japan and South Korea. Taiwan has seen many such DIY initiatives. Other examples include civil society attempts to poll Facebook data for public

concerns or to provide fact-checking against online rumours on LINE, and such initiatives habitually make use of open-access philosophies or crowd-sourcing practices, or both.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This short report has summarized several initial findings from interviews with activists, politicians, and administrators who acted as ‘stakeholders’ in Taiwan’s vibrant digital political landscape. As I have outlined, the interviewees shared a strong sense of the challenges that contemporary Taiwanese society faces today, and these challenges were intimately tied to technological factors. This included the observation that Taiwan remained a highly polarised society, and that this problem was aggravated by the propensity of contemporary social media services to guide users into echo-chambers and ideological bubbles. It also included the observation that digital media flows accelerated the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which could powerfully shape democratic processes, particularly during referenda or elections. Finally, there was a shared concern that digital divides interacted with generational differences to create strong political gaps between the younger and older generations of Taiwanese citizens, and that these differences had detrimental effects on Taiwan’s public sphere and its politics.

At the same time, my informants also outlined the strategies that they adopted in order to intervene in this complex environment. This encompassed attempts to use social media for outreach, and to leverage new technologies e.g. in the realm of live-streaming to conduct public relations. Importantly, there seems to be a shared sense that deliberation is crucial to democratic politics. While many interviewees were highly strategic in how they used their communication power to shape discussion and frame issues, they were generally committed, across often very different political affiliations and ideological persuasions, to transparent information exchanges, dialogue, and consultative processes. Technology again played an important role in enabling these ambitions, often in unison with ‘offline’ practices, and this was particularly visible in the realm of ‘civic tech’: technology that is used to facilitate open interactions between citizens and the political establishment, and to address specific social and political issues in society. Solutions ranged from voting advice systems and petitioning platforms to initiatives that promoted environmental awareness and digital literacy. Many of the initial technologies had been field-tested during the 2014 Sunflower Movement, which indeed served as a catalyst for civic engagement and technological design initiatives that now powerfully shape politics in contemporary Taiwan.

Granted, this study only covered 15 research participants, and even though all had been either prominently involved in the political watershed moment that was the 2014 Sunflower Movement or were now active as important stakeholders in Taiwanese politics, the interviews themselves still leave room for additional questions. How precisely do the political initiatives that the interviewees described play out in practice? Are the interviewees correct in their assessments of e.g. generational divides, the threat of misinformation, and the relevance of walled gardens on social media? And if so, what effects do their interventions have, if any? These questions will become more important as public attention turns to the 2020 presidential elections, and future research should analyse those events closely to assess what role digital technology plays in the run-up and the actual decision on 11 January 2020. In addition, this report only drew selectively from the interview data to highlight important patterns, and it did not yet follow up with in-depth analyses of the various digital media practices. The goal of the next stages in this project will indeed be to expand on the research data and draw in additional, empirical cases to explore the issues that are raised in this report.

Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, the present report illustrates how different stakeholders in Taiwan's digital politics converge, both on issues of mutual concern and in terms of the strategies that might address them. There is then reason to be optimistic: even as Taiwan struggles with strategic communication campaigns that target its civil society and public discourses, often trying to drive a wedge between already polarised groups, there seems to be a minimal consensus among those I interviewed that Taiwan's society is fundamentally committed to ideals of transparency, tolerance, and exchange, and many of the initiatives that the interviewees promoted were geared at immunising democratic processes precisely through an emphasis on these values. At a time where many societies around the world grapple with similar challenges, Taiwan remains a crucial case for understanding what a digital democracy could look like, and what steps different stakeholders take in order to make this ideal a reality.

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