

Contesting Big Brother: Joshua Wong, Protests, and the Student Network of Resistance in Thailand

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While authoritarian regimes continue to depend on hierarchical order and suppression, today's protesters enact resistance in nonhierarchical patterns. With networked communication, decentered individuals stage their acts of resistance to galvanize allies to support their causes. Through a triangulated textual analysis of social media posts, news coverage, and personal interviews, this research examines today's student activists, equipped with technology to mobilize global attention—the currency in the age of distraction. It particularly examines the changing modes of political engagement of student activism, shifting from mass rallies to a series of fragmented events. Thai student activists forged the network of resistance, connecting with nodes with allies in the case of Thai student Netiwit Chotiphathphaisal, who invited Hong Kong student Joshua Wong to inspire young minds. On arriving at the Thai airport, Wong was detained. However, the force of amplified acts of defiance pressed for Wong's release and destabilized truth production, monopolized by the junta. This article has implications for the study of student activism and the changing modes of engagement in politics and students' practice of citizenship.

Keywords: activism in Thailand, student activism, social media and protests, Joshua Wong's arrest, and protests in Thailand

On the night of October 4, 2016, Thai student activist Netiwit Chotiphathphaisal, age 19, and his friends were at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport in Thailand. They were waiting to meet Joshua Wong, 19, the prodemocratic Chinese student who became the face of the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Wong was flying into Thailand with an invitation to address students in Bangkok to mark the 40th anniversary of the 1976 massacre on the past Thai student uprising, a commemoration event titled, "The 40th Year of October 6: Let Chula Look to the Future." The past massacre, as Puangthong Pawakapan argues, still invokes fear among those associated with the event or the victims, indicating the issue remains unspeakable in Thailand ("Culture of Impunity," 2016). During this time, when political expressions and

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protests were prohibited in Thailand, Chotiphatphaisal said, "I want Thai people to have hope" (Chotiphatphaisal, personal communication, June 11, 2018).

Eight hours after Wong's flight into Bangkok had supposedly landed, Chotiphatphaisal learned that his guest was nowhere to be found. To inquire about Wong, he rushed to the Tourism Police and noticed that several Chinese tourists were following him. When he left the airport, he was still followed by a throng of Chinese tourists, whom he believed were probably from the Chinese Embassy (Chotiphatphaisal, personal communication, June 11, 2018). Chotiphatphaisal then posted on his Facebook status, "We contacted the Tourism Police who told us that Joshua Wong was detained at Immigration and we were not allowed to contact Joshua" (Chotiphatphaisal, 2016a). From this Facebook post, the news about Wong's detention traveled rapidly, making headlines around the world within a few hours. Such an act challenged the Thai junta's media censorship, surveillance, and Article 44, which prohibits acts that defy public order and national security.

While it was uncertain what would happen to Joshua Wong, Thai and Hong Kong activists staged protests to demand that the Thai government release him. The protests in both Thailand and Hong Kong were recorded by individuals and disseminated on social media. The absence of his body proliferated the news about his visit, his detention, and the event meant to commemorate the silenced October 6 uprising in 1976. The networked communication disseminated the news of Wong's disappearance. The speed of the technology allowed for instant contestation and intervention. Within less than a day, Joshua Wong was released and allowed to travel back to Hong Kong.

This article examines the tactical practice of student activism with the case of Joshua Wong's scheduled public talk that went awry, at the same time galvanizing allies and attracting global attention that contributed to his release. Through triangulated textual analysis of social media posts, news coverage, and personal interviews, this research illuminates the changing phase of the Thai student resistance in digital networked communication. Heeding the warning of Abu-Lughod (1990) on "The Romance of Resistance" and the bifurcation of inefficiency of the forms and the creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated, my analysis takes into consideration the implication of the changing dynamic in the student movement's forms of resistance that unveil the workings of power.

The article proceeds with the contextual background of the two student activists in Hong Kong and Thailand. Then it traces the existing conditions of normalized surveillance under the military ruling and the tension of severe suppression and political expression. With such conditions, I argue Thai students' resistance has diverged from mass protests on the street. Instead, these students created the space and developed different tactics to fight oppression in the realm of practice of everyday life and cultural appropriation to get global attention and allies. This case study illustrates the digital natives' attempts to galvanize global allies to pressure for Wong's release and contest the Big Brothers' monopoly of truths and silenced truths. The implications of the case illuminate the significance of the changing dynamics of student movements and persistence in the age of networked communication.

Contextual Background of the Event

The history of the student uprising in Thailand could be traced back to its first mass protests in 1973. The event was regarded as the first student-led movement in Asia that toppled a dictatorial regime in 1973 and inspired other student movements, such as those in Greece in 1973 and in Indonesia in 1974 (Kasetsiri, 1993). However, the student uprising in 1976 was brutally crushed by the Thai state; the traumatic memory of the massacre had been silenced (Winichakul, 2002). Such defeat and atrocities stifled student movements in the country. In the 1992 uprising, the movement was mobilized by politicians, professionals, and the middle class (Bunbongkarn, 1993). Students took supporting instead of leading roles in social movements (Kongkirati, 2012). Since the 2014 coup d'état, Thailand has been ruled by the military junta. It was when students came out to oppose the military junta, making visible their creative acts of defiance against the coup makers, that innovative acts of resistance unfolded after being suppressed (Phoborisut, 2016).

Two young students, Joshua Wong, and Netiwit Chotiphathaisal, both aged 19 at the time, shared critical views of their governments' control over their futures. Both questioned the educational systems that limited their freedom. Joshua Wong, the face of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, inspired the people of Hong Kong to take to the streets from September to December 2014 to protest the Chinese government's plan to interfere with the election of Hong Kong's chief executive. Inspired by such a movement, Chotiphathaisal, a Thai freshman in political science, reached out to Wong and invited him to speak along with six other Thai speakers on the 40th anniversary of the October 6, 1976, massacre in Thailand. The talk would juxtapose the two events: Hong Kong's student-led mass protests against China and Thailand's student-led mass protest against dictatorship in 1976.

Networked Communication Technology and Activism

Discussion of activism and technology is often reduced to the dichotomy of whether activism mobilized online can lead to anything beyond instantaneous gratification. Evgeny Morozov (2011) and Malcolm Gladwell (2010) likened online activism to acts that require little effort—"slacktivism" or "clicktivism"—and are unlikely to lead to substantial change. Other researchers, such as Manuel Castells (2012), argue that the Internet empowers individuals, shaping autonomy to reclaim power and disrupt politics. People "subvert the practice of communication as usual by occupying the medium and creating the message" (Castells, 2012, p. 9). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explained the cases of the *Indignados* (Indignant Ones) protests in Spain and the Occupy Wall Street protests that individuals, connected through communication networks, communicated simple, easy-to-personalize messages to facilitate persuasion while embracing different personal reasons to protest the conditions that the protesters shared and wanted to change (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Nevertheless, the role of communication technology in activism has been questioned in the wake of mass surveillance. While it is true that networked communication can make it easier to mobilize mass protests, it also facilitates governments in censoring and surveilling their citizens (Morozov, 2009). In democratic, semiauthoritarian or authoritarian countries, networked communication has been the space that governments attempt to regulate and control. Glenn Greenwald (2017), who exposed the National Security

Agency (NSA)'s mass surveillance program in 2013, confirms that the NSA is capable of surveilling Americans without warrants. In other countries, such as Russia, authoritarian elites deployed networked communication to legitimize their rule (Toepfl, 2018). In extreme cases, such as that in Pakistan, governments have opted for "authoritarian practice"—the Internet shutdown as a way to curb political mobilization and protests (Wagner, 2018).

In China, the country that has invented its social networking sites and has surveilled its citizens, DeLuca, Brunner, and Sun (2016) argue that the Chinese people still strive to practice citizenship, inventing creative tactics to hold local governments accountable for environmental hazards. Shaped by surveillance, their acts of resistance evade suppression. They opt for images when words are censored (DeLuca et al., 2016). In the case of the mass protests in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, when people in Hong Kong rose up against the Chinese government's attempt to change education and electoral systems, people behind the firewall creatively evaded censorship by misspelling words and switching to FireChat, an application that connects users via Bluetooth, instead of relying on a cell phone signal or Internet connection (Parker, 2014). The capacities of the network characteristics lifted the limitations of antecedent technologies and allowed people's creative messages to elude government surveillance (DeLuca et al., 2016).

The students have adopted communication technology to assist their acts of defiance, comprising the practice of everyday life—events that engaged dense nodes of connections to aggregate global attention and alliances.

Joshua Wong, the Face of the Umbrella Movement Protests

Joshua Wong, or Joshua Wong Chi-fung, has been active in expressing critical views on educational and political systems since middle school. He was involved in the historic Umbrella Movement against China, in which people took to the streets of Hong Kong for 74 days in 2014 to call for universal suffrage in elections. Featured on the cover of *TIME* magazine as "The Face of Protest" (Beech & Rauhala, 2014), Wong and his friends were described as a "'youthquake' that's shaking up Hong Kong" (Rauhala & Beech, 2014, para. 1).

Hong Kong was a British colony and was "handed over" to the Chinese government in 1997. Hong Kong's constitution stipulates that it will coexist as part of China's "One Country, Two Systems" for 50 years. That means Hong Kong maintains its own currency, the capitalist system, and the "rights and freedoms of the residents" (McKirby, 2014, para. 13). In 2012, the Chinese government planned to introduce a new "Moral and National Education" subject in schools in Hong Kong. Wong, age 15 at the time, questioned the Chinese government's motive. He used social media to reach out to politicians. According to the Netflix documentary, *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower*, Wong participated in a Facebook event—the most-liked post of which won him the chance to meet with Hong Kong's chief executive-elect (Piscatella, 2017). He then founded the prodemocratic student group the Hong Kong Federation of Students, or the *Scholarism*, which, along with a parents group and a teachers union, staged protests against the Chinese government's new curriculum that potentially "brainwashes" Hong Kong students (Lai, 2012, para.1). More than 90,000 people joined the groups in the protests in July 2012 (Lai, 2012). In two years, the protests evolved into a call for universal suffrage. Scholarism and the Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement, a civil disobedience campaign advocating for a democratic electoral system in Hong Kong (Lo, 2015), started a

sit-in protest against the Chinese Communist Party's screening of the candidates for the head of the Hong Kong government—the chief executive (Iyengar, 2014). The protests were later dubbed the *Umbrella Movement*, as photos of protesters holding umbrellas to fight riot police tear gas were featured in the media (Molloy, 2014). People occupied the streets of Hong Kong from September 26 to December 15, 2014. Although the protesters did not win any political concessions from the Beijing government, Wong became the face of the protest that contested the Chinese government.² Two years after the protests, Wong wanted to make a change through politics. The Scholarism movement evolved into a political party called Demosisto (Lum & Kang-chung, 2018) to advocate for Hong Kong's self-determination.³

Netiwit Chotiphathaisal: A Terrible Student in an Excellent Education System

Similar to Joshua Wong of Hong Kong, Netiwit Chotiphathaisal of Thailand has been critical of the Thai educational system since middle school. In his autobiography, *A Terrible Student in an Excellent Educational System* (Chotiphathaisal, 2016b), he questioned his school's rigid rules and was marginalized as a "troublemaker." Outside school, Chotiphathaisal founded the Education for Liberation of Siam group and the Thailand Educational Revolution Alliance, which called for an end to "mechanistic education" (Fuller, 2013, para. 6). His advocacy for human rights in high school earned him media attention as well as an award from the National Human Rights Commission. But he turned down the award, arguing that the commission turned a blind eye to the 90 people killed in the government's crackdown on the 2010 Red Shirt protesters, who rallied for fresh elections ("Netiwit' korpatiset," 2013). The 19-year-old continued to express his critical views, criticizing Chulalongkorn University's oath-taking ritual in which students lie prostrate at the statues of the kings who founded the University. He argued that the founding king abolished the prostration, considered by Westerners as a primitive practice. He told the Thai media, "It's illogical to continue to do it unthinkingly just because it's become a norm" (Thaitrakulpanich, 2016, para. 3). His criticism, and his walkout at the ritual a year later, was deemed "defiant" to the University (Tanakasempipat, 2017).⁴

Admiring Wong's role in Hong Kong's mass protest movements and his initiative to change politics through founding a political party, Chotiphathaisal reached out to Wong by e-mail. In the summer of 2016, Chotiphathaisal traveled to Hong Kong to meet Wong (Chotiphathaisal, personal communication, June 11, 2018). By the fall of 2016, Chotiphathaisal invited Wong to speak at "The 40th Year of October 6: Let Chula Look to the Future," which Chotiphathaisal and other students organized. It marked the first time

² In early 2018, the Umbrella Movement was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize (Meixler, 2018).

³ In August 2017, Wong was sentenced to three-month imprisonment for his role in the Umbrella Movement. He served two months in prison when the Court of Final Appeal granted him bail and quashed his prison term in February 2018 (Lum & Kang-chung, 2018).

⁴ In 2017, Chotiphathaisal was elected president of the student council at Chulalongkorn University. He, along with seven other students, walked out of the oath-taking ceremony. The male lecturer choke-held one of these students. The incident led to a removal of these students' position on the student council. More than 100 scholars including Noam Chomsky expressed support for Chotiphathaisal's exercise of basic rights in this incident. In 2018, he was invited to speak at the Oslo Freedom Forum, organized by the Human Rights Foundation.

that the commemoration of the October 6 uprising did not feature past activists or those directly involved in the event—the first time that the young generation wanted to reflect on the past student uprising, to ponder the current conditions, and to envision the future.

The State of Normalized Censorship and Surveillance

This section outlines the current conditions of censorship and surveillance in Thailand, which has, once again, been ruled by the military junta. The most recent coup, toppling the elected government in 2014, is Thailand's 12th coup since the 1932 Revolution (Fuller, 2014). Under its rule, the junta has sweeping power under any order protected under Article 44 of the 2014 Interim Constitution to maintain peace and order regardless of parliamentary, judicial process, or accountability. The Thai military junta has exerted strict control over people's political expression on multiple fronts. Any acts of resistance would be suppressed. The Internet Dialogue on Law Reform (2014) reported that 577 people were summoned and 288 were arrested over a period of four months after the 2014 coup. The military also controlled the Thai mainstream media through martial law that limited media freedom for "national security." The Internet became a means for the Thai authorities to control and surveil its citizens. Pinkaew Laungaramsri (2016) argues that the junta has militarized cyberspace and turned social media communication into "an absolute digital panopticon" (p. 200). People's personal communication networks such as Facebook were temporarily blocked in Thailand (Franceschi-Bicchierai, 2014). Reuters reported the permanent secretary of the Ministry of the Information and Communications Technology as saying that he asked for cooperation from social media companies, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, "to help us stop the spread of critical messages about the coup" (Petty, 2014, para. 5). The ban on Facebook sparked outrage among Facebook users; therefore, the censorship lasted only a few hours. However, the junta's attempts to negotiate with Facebook and messaging application Line to censor online posts were persistent ("Thai Junta," 2016).

The Thai authorities also maximized the Internet's network characteristics by promoting peer surveillance. This was evident when the Thai police chief announced the offer of \$15 rewards for anyone who could identify people in individual snapshots of protesters posted on social media (Herman, 2014). Also, the military's surveillance received people's support as seen in the Cyber Scout Program, recruiting more than 120,000 "Cyber Scouts" to create a network that monitors and suppresses contents deemed "unsuitable" and "disrespectful" (Laungaramsri, 2016, p. 204). Surveillance and violence seen in the junta's suppression and arrests have become "normal" parts of people's lives in Thailand, prompting some people to conform to self-censorship and resort to obedience to avoid being arrested—the docile bodies in the totalitarian society (Laungaramsri, 2016).

Forging the Student Network of Resistance: Connecting With the Past Massacre and Global Allies

As Michel Foucault (1978) argues, power relations are neither stable nor static; "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (pp. 95–96). The microphysics of power and discipline, while exerting a pervasive web of control, as Michel de Certeau (1984) argues, could reveal how a society resists being controlled by manipulating the mechanisms of control and conforming to them only to evade them and form "the network

of anti-discipline" (p. xv). While the censorship and surveillance that produced docile bodies may succeed in preventing mass protests on the street, the authoritarian's predicament does not yield complete suppression. In Thailand's case, political expressions and contestations of power have transformed the practice of everyday life and engaged other groups of the population that had not staged protests in the past decade of political struggle—including students. They crafted their tactics of defiance, forging the network of resistance—the network of antidiscipline—and connecting with the silenced history of the 1976 student massacre and global allies.

For the first time since the student uprisings in the 1970s, Thai students emerged at the forefront of the resistance against the military dictatorship in the 2014 coup. Shifting from the 1976 mass protests, the student protests in the post-2014 coup played out in fragmented events, initiated by students from different universities, loosely connected by networked communication technology. They met and interacted at different events (Chonticha Jangrew, personal communication, June 28, 2014). Their series of fragmented events functioned in the way that de Certeau (1984) describes as "tactics" or "the art of the weak" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). These tactics must "vigilantly make sure of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse" (p. 37). The students' tactics of resistance—staging events and reappropriating symbolic acts—evaded the junta's ban on political activities.

Some of these tactics played out in the first six months after the 2014 coup. Students organized an outdoor picnic with a movie screening of *The Hunger Games* at a university in Bangkok, and the movie's three-fingered salute was reappropriated by the Thai protesters as a symbol of resistance against the military junta. One student staged his acts of resistance at downtown Bangkok's shopping mall, eating a sandwich while reading George Orwell's *1984* (Winn, 2014). Subsequently, students flashed the three-fingered salute at multiple events and locations, including the premiere of *The Hunger Games* sequel, *Mockingjay* (Mydans, 2014). Another student group *Dao Din* (Stars on Earth), founded a decade ago by law students in northeastern Thailand to defend villagers' rights (Ashayagachat, 2014), greeted the junta leader with the three-fingered salute during his trip to northeastern Thailand. The students were detained and later released; still, they could later be charged with sedition. In 2015, student group New Democracy Movement organized a trip to the Rajabhakti Park, commissioned by the Thai Army, to illuminate the corruption case surrounding the costs of the park's construction (Sherwell, 2015). A month later, one of the organizing students, "Ja New" (Sirawit Serithiwat), was taken into a van while walking at his university at night. He later said he was blindfolded and assaulted during the military's interrogation about the trip he organized ("Ja New," 2016).

Acknowledging these risks, Chotiphathaisal sustained the dynamic of the resistance and forged the network of student resistance in a new space, connecting with the silenced massacre of the 1976 student uprising by organizing a public talk with today's young activists, media personalities, and Joshua Wong—the student leader and poster child of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement. Chotiphathaisal felt the need to connect with the global community. "I feel that we might not have been succeeded in our acts of resistance since we did not have international allies," said Chotiphathaisal (personal communication, 2018).

Allies—whether international or local—are crucial in network expansion. Conscious of building allies, Chotiphathaisai welcomed people who entered his network. While it seemed that Chotiphathaisai was the leading organizer, the event forged a loosely connected network of hundreds of students from different departments. Some vaguely knew him from the news and contacted him via social media to volunteer to help. When Wong's party in Hong Kong and Chotiphathaisai's professor raised concerns about Wong's safety, Chotiphathaisai addressed this concern by connecting with the ties in his network; "We hired a bodyguard through a student's parents who owned a security company and set up the student team, VIP to protect Wong during his stay," said Chotiphathaisai (personal communication, 2018). However, the VIP team's mission did not take off when Wong was detained at the airport. The event gained international attention in the way that Chotiphathaisai had not imagined as Wong's detention made headlines around the world.

Contesting Big Brother: Getting the World's Attention

With the existing surveillance, the students' tactical moves manifested in the series of the practices of everyday life: Reappropriation of popular culture and events made it possible for them to evade suppression and allow for their acts of defiance to thrive and sustain its network. In digital culture, people are easily distracted by countless social media posts and constant notifications. Getting attention and competing for attention is the currency of networked communication. Zeynep Tufekci (2017) argues that "attention is oxygen for movements. Without it, they cannot catch fire" (p. 30). To contest Big Brother, student activists seek attention in the space of networked communication that the authority uses for mass surveillance. They took advantage of the networked communication's characteristic of reaching a large number of people at great speed to disseminate the news about Wong's arrest. Chotiphathaisai hijacked people's attention and directed it to the junta's oppression. When Wong's body was missing from Thai territory, these students proliferated the presence of his body through digital media, from cell phone screens to mainstream news media public screens, galvanizing global attention and allies to pressure the junta for Wong's release.

On October 4, 2016, after waiting eight hours, Chotiphathaisai learned that Wong had been arrested. Chotiphathaisai took out his cell phone and posted the following Facebook status:

We contacted the Tourism Police who told us that he was detained at Immigration and we were not allowed to contact Joshua. We asked why. The (Tourism) police had talked to Immigration and told us, "The Chinese government has sent the letter to the Thai government regarding this person's entry." We cannot contact Joshua at all. Now it's 4 am. He has been to Taiwan before coming here. He has also been to Japan, including other developed countries. However, there is nothing much we can do except acknowledge this. We are very concerned about Joshua. We cannot communicate [with him]. Neither do we know when he will be able to return. My friends and I would like to ask the Thai government to guarantee his safety and safe return to Hong Kong. (Chotiphathaisai, 2016a)

Along with his Facebook post, digital native Chotiphathaisal also created a visual version of the message—a meme to make it easy for the information to travel virally. It depicted a black and white photo of Wong with a blindfold, a practice the Thai military junta employs when transporting political activists from place A to B (see Figure 1).

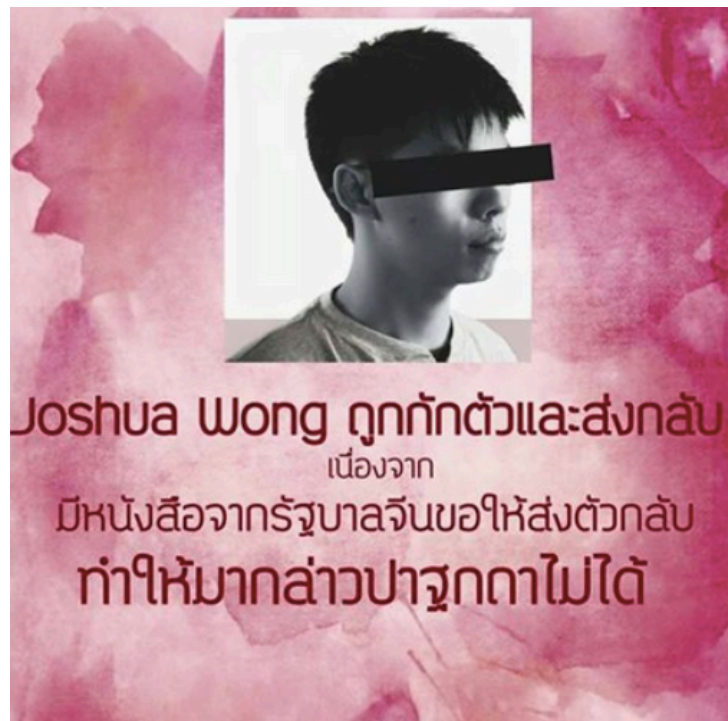


Figure 1. Netiwit Chotiphathaisal created the meme that reads, "Joshua Wong is detained and deported due to the Chinese government's request. He won't be able to give a speech."

Chotiphathaisal contacted Wong's friends and people at Wong's Demosisto Party in Hong Kong. Having not heard from Wong, the Demosisto Party posted on Facebook to condemn the Thai government's act and to request Wong's release (Demosistoō, 2016).

From this point on, their messages from the Facebook feed went viral, taking space online and offline. Chotiphathaisal's meme and Demosisto's post (see Figure 2) were adopted by individuals who shared them on their personal networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Within a few hours, this breaking news converged with coverage from other major news outlets including local, regional, and international news agencies such as the *South China Morning Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *TIME*, among others. These visuals and news coverage broke social media's filter bubbles, amplifying the news about Wong when newspapers and online news media featured the news about his arrest and images. The Thai junta, accustomed to executing clandestine actions on political dissent, could no longer keep its operation under wraps.



Figure 2. Demosisto Party's Facebook meme broke the news on Joshua Wong's detention in Thailand. From Cell Phone Screens to Public Screens

Castells argued in 2001 that the Internet is a communication medium that allows "for the first time, the communication of many to many, in chosen time, on a global scale" (p. 2). Today, social media applications with live broadcast capability once reserved for television stations allow individuals to directly communicate in real time on a global scale. This bypasses the reliance on gatekeepers at major news stations. Fearing that the Thai government might turn over Wong to the Chinese government, Chotiphapthaisal and Wong's friend Nathan Law took advantage of available live broadcast technology from their cell phone screens to public screens, disseminating their statements and amplifying the news about Wong's absence to galvanize support for the call for his release.

Chotiphapthaisal held a press conference, broadcast on Facebook Live, explaining the situation in both Thai and English. "I would like to urge the Thai government to guarantee his safety. At least, the government should release his photo for us to see [that he is safe]," he said in a statement on Facebook Live (Hoktula Chao Chula Mong Anakot, 2016). The announcement was viewed 80,000 times and shared 785 times. Besides, Chotiphapthaisal and 30 of his friends staged a protest at Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Political Science. They showed up with umbrellas, the symbol of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, to show solidarity with Wong, shouting, "Joshua Wong has the right to be here."

In Hong Kong, Wong's friends staged a protest at the Thai Consulate, broadcast on Nathan Law's (2016) Facebook Live, amplifying their voices and demand for Wong's release. The crowd shouted in both Cantonese and English, "Stop human rights violations" and "Shame on the Thai government!" The video was watched more than 60,000 times and shared almost 900 times.

Allies in the Network of Resistance

Bruno Latour (1996) notes that the notion of the word *network* is often thought of as two or three dimensions. However, he posits that a network should be thought of as nodes with "as many dimensions as they have connections" (Latour, 1996, p. 370). Joshua Wong and Chotiphathaisal are dense nodes connected to tens of thousands of people in their personal communications. They are nodes that can draw in allies to support their causes—the network that increased their strength through multiplicities of allies, including local and international individuals and communities, calling for Wong's release.

The news about Wong's arrest sparked people's interest. On the day Wong was detained, the phrase "Joshua Wong" was trending on Twitter in Malaysia and Singapore. International communities such as UN Human Rights Asia (2016) expressed concern about his safety, tweeting, "OHCHR concerned over detention of #HongKong activist #joshuawong in #Thailand. We call for his immediate release." The spokesperson of the U.S. embassy in Bangkok told the media, "We support individuals exercising their universally recognized fundamental freedoms of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association throughout the world" (Holmes, 2016, para. 29).

In Thailand, students and netizens joined hands in pressuring the junta government to release Wong. Chotiphathaisal's allies, such as a student group, the New Democracy Movement, staged a protest in front of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok, generating the visuals of resistance for the public. The group denounced Wong's detention and demanded that the Thai government release him. They read their statements in both Thai and English to the press. On social media, netizens generated and proliferated visuals that critiqued the junta and Wong's detention. Students put up posters and placards at Thammasat University to satirize Wong's detention. These visuals were tweeted by the student activist group League of Liberal Thammasat for Democracy. Some of these placards read, "The lone Wong scares all governments" and "Wong leaves quickly," among other statements. Other allies generated memes to deride the junta through humor. Another meme featured a juxtaposition of Joshua Wong with another Wong—renowned moviemaker Wong Ka Wei, whose films often feature the theme of alienation in big cities. Wong Ka Wei sounds like it can mean "Wong marks quickly" in Thai. Then a pun on the sentence "Wong Klub Wai," meaning "Wong leaves quickly," was added, pointing to the junta's action that forced Joshua Wong to leave Thailand quickly (see Figure 3). These netizens' memes, introduced and shared on social media, multiplied and made visible the allies that protested against Wong's arrest and mocked the junta's action (see Figure 4).

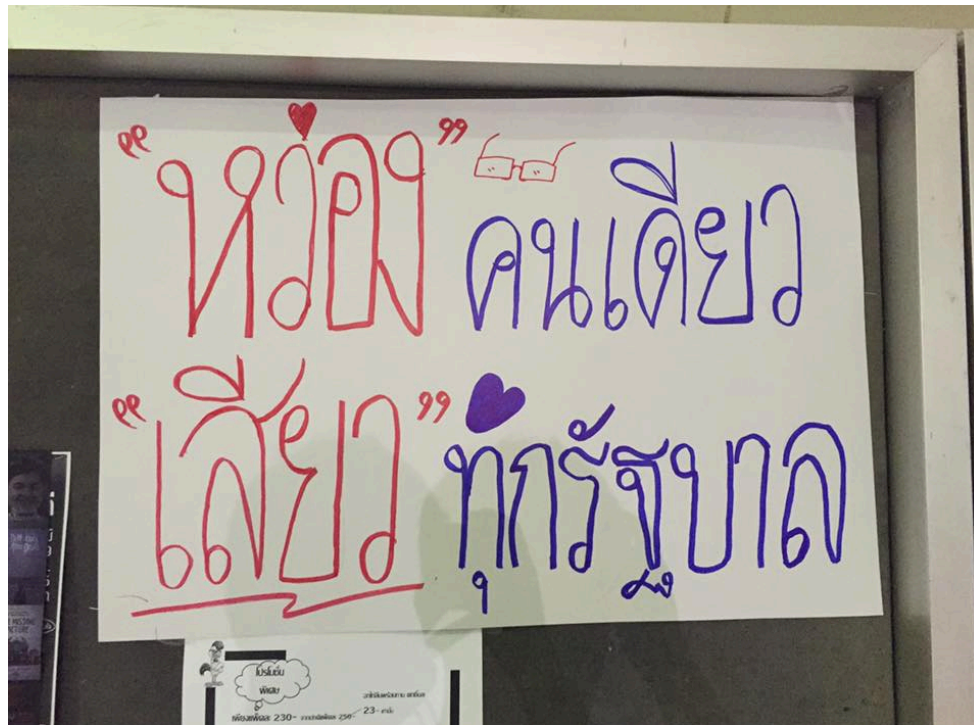


Figure 3. The handwritten poster put up at Thammasat University reads, "The lone Wong scares all governments" (LLTD 2016).

All these allies acted on their own, proliferating criticism of the Thai junta while putting a spotlight on Wong's detention. These allies transmit intensities when disseminating acts of resistance using mediated communication technology, connected to networks of networks. The immense attention from these allies in social networks and the mainstream media created multiple disruptions of the junta government's action. At the same time, the governments implemented their strategies to enervate the strength of the network of resistance.



Figure 4. Popular political cartoon Kai Maew depicts Wong's arrest and deportation (Kai Maew Political Cartoon Facebook, 2016).

The Authorities' Strategies to Stifle the Network of Resistance

When protesters take to the street to get attention, and to increase their strength in the network of resistance, governments curtail the rising attention by implementing a set of strategies in the online terrain and portraying protests with negativity and distorted facts.

The Chinese government's strategies ranged from banning news content to diverting attention. The government banned the news about Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in China. When Wong was detained in Thailand, the searches for Joshua Wong's name in Chinese, 黃之鋒, were blocked on Weibo, China's version of Twitter (Ho, 2016). In addition, the Chinese government has organized strategies to defuse attention. U.S. researchers Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts (2017) confirm the existence of the Chinese government's 50c Party, whose members adamantly post social media messages to distract people from political debates by changing the subject and not engaging in debates or arguments. When Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement caught the world's attention, the Chinese government cautiously handled the protest by avoiding excessive force on protesters; it patiently waited for the protests' energy to fizzle (Tufekci, 2017). In Wong's case, the Chinese government did not take him into custody or generate more

attention. Instead, it acknowledged his detention and revealed in a statement that it respected the Thai government's immigration "in accordance with law" (Law & Kaiman, 2016, para. 10).

Negative news framing and distorted stories have been frequented in protest coverage. For example, in the United States, mainstream media, which conform to the state's ideology, have featured all social movements negatively for fear that such movements may get out of control and interrupt their power and privilege (Gitlin, 1980). This practice remained evident in the Occupy Wall Street movement when the U.S. media marginalized activists by ignoring them and framing them negatively (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012). Similarly, the Thai media has a long history of conforming to the government and people in power. Thai reporters operate as "channels for the pronouncements of 'big shots'" (McCargo, 2000, p. 3), and "the bulk of political news [is] a series of such quotations, without any real analysis, explanation or background" (p. 2). That observation still resonates with today's Thai media, the freedom of which has worsened due to the junta's Announcement 103/2014, prohibiting distribution of information that poses a threat to national security ("NCPO's Announcement," 2014). Drawing from the news coverage of Wong's arrest (October 5–6, 2016), two newspapers, *Bangkok Business* and *Thairath*, simply reported the Thai authorities' denial of Wong's arrival and detention, quoting top officials at the Thai Immigration Bureau and the Royal Thai Police that they did not know about Joshua Wong's arrival ("Kosokterror-porborcho.Sortormor," 2016). The junta leader refuted Wong's detention, but said, "He simply flew over" ("Nayok Pad Ror Bor," 2016, para.1). The junta leader told the press, "He [Wong] has returned to China. The officials took him back promptly" ("Nayok Pad Ror Bor," 2016, para. 2), adding that China and Hong Kong are the same country. Meanwhile, three other newspapers distorted the reports about Joshua Wong. *The Daily News* and *Manager* newspapers, which headlined Wong's detention at the airport, reported that Wong used an alias, Wong Chi-fung, to enter Thailand ("Locktua ka Suvanarbhumi," 2016 & "Locktua 'Joshua Wong,'" 2016). *Manager* ("Locktua 'Joshua Wong,'" 2016) reported that Thai Immigration had been on the lookout at the airport after receiving a tipoff that Wong would travel to Thailand under an alias. This kind of framing incriminated Wong and legitimized his arrest by Thai Immigration. Meanwhile, *Naewna* newspaper highlighted negative opinions about Wong by publishing the former deputy director of Thailand's National Intelligence Agency's Facebook post, accusing Wong of being "the United States' lackey," adding that he is barred from entering all Southeast Asian countries as these governments did not want to be in Wong's plan to denounce the Chinese government ("Nantadech," 2016).

Destabilizing the Junta's Knowledge Production, Calling for Accountability

With such strategies to control the attention and narratives of Wong's detention, netizens proliferated the news about his arrival and detention on people's personal communication networks, and it was subsequently picked up by mainstream media, galvanizing global attention and networks of actors. The global attention subverted the power in Wong's favor. The junta, the powerful institution that has never been held accountable for its actions, was pressured to respond to Wong's absence. Eventually, the junta decided to send Joshua Wong back to Hong Kong instead of China. *Thairath Online* reported that Thai Immigration had prepared to deport Wong to Hong Kong and put him on the earliest flight the day after he was detained.

In addition, the junta's control of knowledge production seen in distorted news reports was challenged. To counter each piece of distorted information about Wong, Chotiphathaisai held a press conference, broadcast on Facebook Live, and featured on *Post Today's* (2016) Facebook Live with more than 50,000 views. He confirmed that Joshua Wong used his name in full, Joshua Wong Chi-fung, not any alias as previously reported in the two newspapers that had distorted this fact. He further provided the boarding pass that showed such name, adding that Wong is often referred to as Joshua Wong. Also, Chotiphathaisai refuted the accusation and speculation that Wong came to Thailand to incite riots; he presented the invitation letter issued to Wong by Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Political Science: "I assure that this is an academic event." Chotiphathaisai asked the media for accountability, accuracy, and fairness for Wong in their news reports (F. Srikhao, Facebook Live, October 5, 2016). His request for accountability was partially met the following day. *Neawna* featured Chotiphathaisai's evidence and corrections, while the *Daily News* and *Manager*, which featured the distorted stories, ignored his request.

The Implication of the Event

Within the architecture of surveillance, suppression, detention, and arrest of student activists, students have not ceased to contest the encompassing power of the Big Brothers. This case illustrates the changing dynamic of student activism and the negotiation of power and tension between the state's domination and the young generation's political expression. For this generation, obedience and loyalty might take a back seat to their struggle for the practice of citizenship during a time when citizens are reduced to subjects of a sovereign state. Citizenship, as Zayini (2015) argues, is not limited to lawful rights, duties, and obligations, but includes "participation, engagement, identification, association, recognition, belonging, and inclusion" (p. 18). Through the practice of citizenship, people renegotiate their relationship with the state, creating political space that can make resistance possible to defy the state's control.

The amplification of the attention mobilized by digital networked communication galvanized global support that contributed to Wong's release. We witnessed the negotiated power when the junta let Wong use Skype to address the Thai students at the university as intended, given that he would not discuss the detention, not criticize the Chinese government, and not incite riots in Thailand (F. Srikhao, Facebook Live, October 5, 2016). The proliferation of the news about Wong's detention energized student activists. Thousands of people showed up for his Skype address. "I was shocked that this many people showed up," said Chotiphathaisai (personal communication, 2018). "Even Thai PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] sent out a team to televise the event," he added. Now that more people in Thailand have learned what Wong was doing, Chotiphathaisai hopes they are inspired.

More importantly, the network of these student activists thrived and expanded with determined plans to change politics. On Facebook, Joshua Wong thanked the four Thai students for their night-long negotiation with the Thai officials for his safety (see Figure 5). Also, Wong officially announced his newly formed Network of Young Democratic Asians, "a mutually supportive platform among social activists in the East Asian countries" (Facebook post, October 5, 2016). The aim is to support young activists to take ownership of their social, cultural, and political narratives and become elected officials in governments (Kwok, 2016). The network, with members from Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan,

Thailand, and Vietnam, provides support for their struggle for “the universal values of freedom and democracy” (Kwok, 2016, para. 20).



Figure 5. Joshua Wong's 2016 Facebook post features the photo of his Thai allies and the announcement of the student network.

Conclusion

While communication technology's characteristic network connects people at unprecedented speed and scale, it also facilitates pervasive government surveillance that can produce disciplined bodies conforming to the orders of a sovereign state. As authoritarian governments limited their citizens' political expression, controlling the space by imposing censorship and control over the dissemination of information, students created space and crafted their tactics to resist being controlled. For the first time since the Thai student uprising in the 1970s, Thai students took leading roles in staging their acts of resistance against the dictatorship after the military junta rose to power in 2014. These students have enthusiastically challenged the junta's control, initiating a series of symbolic events to direct people's attention to the existing oppression under the military regime.

With arbitrary arrests and detentions, the students formulated tactics to express their political resistance in assorted modes of engagement; they employ the practice of everyday life in various forms, including organizing a public talk to envision the future. These students made new connections, linking the

1976 student uprising with high-profile student activist Joshua Wong, the face of the Umbrella Movement. His fight against the Chinese government's political and educational intervention was inspiring to Thai student activist Netiwit Chotiphathaisal. He hoped the talk would inspire global alliances to support the Thai struggle for democracy. The event forged student networks, loosely connected via communication technology to galvanize attention. When Wong was detained, communication on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, increased the intensity of global attention on his arrest and unveiled the oppression of the Thai military junta. The immediacy of these activists' visuals of protests put a spotlight on the fate of Wong. These acts of resistance and their ability to galvanize global attention pressured the junta to respond to Wong's detention while destabilizing the junta's monopoly on truth production, seen in negative and distorted news reports.

This case study illuminated the tension between the state's domination and the young generation's fight for political expression, the students' practice of citizenship, and the workings of power that challenged the hierarchical order. It revealed that the sweeping power exercised by the junta did not render complete subjugation. Aware of the severe suppression, students make cautious moves, looking for opportunities to practice citizenship during the time when citizens are simply subjects of the state. But they are able to mobilize and connect with diverse networks and gain global alliances. These students are determined to defend the freedom of expression and to fight for the future they envision. The road to change is challenging; however, these young minds have started their steps to galvanize support and allies to challenge Big Brother's plan for them. Despite limitations, arrests, and oppression, these young students, connected through networks, persevere in their fight for the time when democracy can flourish. As Joshua Wong ended the talk via Skype on the evening of October 6, 2016, he was confident as he said, "Time is on our side."

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