

# Analysis of Mobilization Mechanisms in Social Movements in the Internet Era: A Case Study of the "Fandom Expedition Campaign"

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## Abstract

This study explores how internet communication technology affects the mobilization mechanisms of social movements, with a focus on the "Fan Circle Expedition Movement" on Weibo. Through this case, the paper examines how the internet reshapes social movements in terms of identity formation, resource dissemination, and mobilization structures. The study argues that digital technology not only enriches the forms of social movements but also creates new models of collective action, making it easier for instant, multi-point transnational online movements to take place. Finally, the study notes that while the rapid development of internet communication technologies empowers actors through media affordances, mobilization capacity is still constrained by censorship mechanisms and access limitations. Therefore, while media affordances offer empowerment, they also introduce structural constraints for social movements. Future research should further explore how to balance the empowerment and limitations brought by technology to ensure effective communication and mobilization in social movements.

## Keywords

Internet; Affordance; Online Social Movements; Mobilization Mechanisms.

## 1. Introduction

Since its inception, the internet has been continuously redefining the concepts and boundaries of "political participation" and "social movements." With the development of communication technology, fan communities on social media platforms actively and routinely engage in discussions on political issues, even organizing and mobilizing social movements in the form of "expeditions" (Castells, 2015). For example, the "Fandom Expedition Campaign" on Chinese social media platforms is an internet-based social movement primarily driven by fan communities.

The "Fandom Expedition Campaign" has significant social background and research value. In June 2019, the Hong Kong SAR government amended the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance, which led to riots in Hong Kong. Amid the chaos, many Chinese celebrities expressed their support for the Hong Kong police on social media, but they were met with insults and threats from Hong Kong protesters. Consequently, fans of different celebrities united for a common cause and "expedition" to major international social platforms on the night of August 14, occupying the comment sections of numerous social accounts on platforms like Facebook and Twitter by posting comments with flag emojis.

This campaign not only showcased the strong mobilization capabilities of fan communities in the digital age but also highlighted the crucial role of internet social platforms in modern social movements (Leong et al., 2020). Through the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," this paper will explore how this type of online action leverages the communication characteristics and topic mechanisms of social media to achieve efficient organization and mobilization.

## 2. Crisis Literature Review and Research Questions

### 2.1. Communication Technology and Social Movements

Social movements are one of the collective expressions of the interests and demands of social groups, and they are key variables that influence the evolution and development of political power and social structure. Communication technology deeply participates in the entire process of social movement development, first promoting the connection of individuals into a collective, then helping organizers use media to produce and disseminate information, and finally effectively expanding participation in social movements (Earl and Garrett, 2020: 98).

Throughout the history of social movements, activists have always used the latest communication technologies to recruit members, share and disseminate information, and mobilize support (Berberoglu, 2019: 373).

From a historical perspective, Anderson (2016) in *Imagined Communities* argued that print technology was a key factor in promoting the imagination of communities beyond face-to-face interactions, forming a collective imagination of unknown groups. With new printing presses producing large quantities of newspapers and novels, people evoked or appropriated collective memories and constructed the imagination of group identities using plural nouns. However, in the era of mass communication, activists primarily relied on print and mass media to convey information, with media professionals controlling the content, leaving activists relatively passive. In the social media era, activists as users primarily use social media to actively generate, disseminate, analyze, and comment on information (Kietzmann et al., 2011), and to mobilize support.

After the "Arab Spring" movement in 2010, scholars began to explore the impact of social media communication technology on social movements (Allagui and Kuebler, 2011: 1437). During the Arab Spring movement, videos themed on protests and political commentary were widely circulated on Twitter, with the top 23 short videos garnering nearly 5.5 million views (O'Donnell, 2011). In this process, the activists' sense of subjectivity and their interaction with the affordances of social media created complex dynamics, leading to large-scale collective action events.

### 2.2. Theoretical Perspective: Affordance

Affordance emphasizes the guidance, constraints, and limitations that the environment (media) imposes on individuals. British sociologist Ian Hutchby was the first to propose the concept of communicative affordance, emphasizing the potential for action that arises from specific technological forms. He analyzed the relationship between communication practices created by technology and the shaping of identity using the example of the telephone (Hutchby, 2013).

Building on Hutchby's work, scholar Andrew Richard Schrock further developed the theory of affordance. Schrock (2015: 1229) argued that communicative affordance explores the interaction between users' perception of utility and the objective properties of technology, and how this perception and interaction change communication practices or habits.

In recent years, many Chinese scholars have proposed comprehensive indicators for the affordances of new media: the affordances of information production, such as editability, replicability, scalability, and associability; social affordances, such as addressability, expressivity, coordination, and connectivity; and mobile affordances, including portability, accessibility, capability, and compatibility. This reflects the proactive role of users as prosumers (producers and consumers) of information on new media (Li and Chen, 2021).

The perspective of affordance can be used to explore the mechanisms by which activists utilize social media for social movement mobilization, as well as to analyze the impact of communication technology on important elements of social movements, such as identity

construction, mobilization of communication resources, and the shaping of mobilization structures (Gill, 2017: 105).

### 2.3. Case Study: Fandom Expedition Campaign

The mobilization of online social movements is profoundly influenced by communication technology and the characteristics of the internet society. This paper uses the "Fandom Expedition Campaign" to reveal the new mechanisms of online social mobilization.

The term "fandom" originates from Henry Jenkins' book *Textual Poachers*, where it refers to a group of enthusiasts for a particular public figure or thing, organized into individual units (Jenkins, 2012). Fan individuals naturally gather in social environments based on similar interests, with teenagers being the primary demographic, forming a unique fandom culture phenomenon. With the widespread use of the internet and new media among teenagers, fandom culture has gradually shifted from offline to online spaces and continues to expand.

This paper adopts a case study method, analyzing the relationships between various elements of a classic case to generalize universal laws from specific instances and form a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Through the review of the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," this paper raises the research question: how do activists utilize internet communication technology to influence and change social movements?

Based on the literature, previous research on communication technology and social movements has not regarded technology as an isolated influencing factor but has examined it within broader social and historical contexts. This approach, which considers communication technology alongside social, cultural, and political factors, is highly valuable and illustrates how these factors collectively promote the construction of group identity and the formation of imagined communities.

In analyzing the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," this paper also notes that internet communication technology is not merely a tool for information dissemination; it also integrates with fan culture, internet nationalism, and youth identity, collectively driving the formation of this social movement. From a practical perspective, studying this movement helps us better understand how technology and social movements interact in the Internet era, creating new mobilization mechanisms and modes of collective action.

From a theoretical perspective, interpreting the relationship between activists, communication technology, and social mobilization mechanisms through the lens of affordance can highlight the importance of activists' subjectivity and the platform resources of social media.

## 3. Investigation of the Mobilization Mechanisms and Action Modes of the "Fandom Expedition Campaign"

The "Fandom Expedition Campaign" represents a form of collective action within internet fan communities. Specifically, it refers to new media users with similar values utilizing mobilization-capable social network platforms to engage in coordinated expressions within the same internet space and time dimension. Fans use text, images, and emojis to voice their opinions to society, which not only demonstrates their identity but also serves as a symbolic performance in public. In these campaigns, fans and official media leverage group communication and interpersonal interaction between nodes to mobilize participants. The operational mode reflects a non-organized or semi-organized management style, with participants sharing common goals and values.

The Hong Kong riots intensified international skepticism about China. Out of patriotic beliefs and a desire to defend their idols, fans from different fandoms united under a new common "idol"-the nation. This led to a rapidly escalating, mobilized online event triggered by specific incidents.

Combining the perspective of affordance and relevant scholarly research, this paper summarizes several key factors contributing to the emergence of collective action:

- Structural Facilitation: Social structures or surrounding environments that promote collective action.
- Structural Repression: Oppressive conditions existing within society.
- Common Beliefs: People's perceptions and beliefs about the problems in their environment formed through their recognition of these issues.
- Triggering Events: Incidents that prompt collective behavior.
- Action Mobilization: The mobilization mechanisms and behavior patterns of the group.

In the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," structural repression, common beliefs, and triggering events can be analyzed comprehensively. The Hong Kong riots intensified international skepticism about China. Simultaneously, driven by patriotic beliefs and the desire to defend their idols, fans from different fandoms united under a new common "idol"—the nation. This eventually led to a gradually escalating and mobilized online event triggered by specific incidents.

The focus of this paper is on analyzing the impact of the internet on social movements. Communication technology primarily influences the shaping of the communication environment, the gathering of activists, and the mobilization mechanisms.

### 3.1. Gathering Participants: Connection between Nodes

The transition from individual awareness to collective action is the result of individual nodes continuously connecting, interacting, and gathering through networked groups. In internet society, the "node" is the most basic unit. Castells (2010) argues that "nodes" and "hubs" are crucial components of the "space of flows" in the network society, with "nodes" also referred to as "individual accounts" on social media platforms like Weibo. Each node is linked to an extensive social network.

Organizers of the "Fandom Expedition Campaign" used Sina Weibo as the platform for gathering participants and disseminating information, creating the "Anti-Slander Station for the Motherland" super-topic homepage. Within a single night, topics like "We all have an idol named China" trended on the hot search list, garnering billions of views. From the perspective of affordance, the topic settings provided a basis for identifying relevant Weibo posts, while the hot search list offered a quick pathway for users to join the collective action. Specifically, the more clicks, comments, and shares a topic received, the higher it ranked on the hot search list, attracting more participants to the collective action.

In the social media era, activists utilize the technological features of social media, such as information subscription and algorithm recommendations, to create a platform for expressing opinions and emotions. This effectively establishes a low-cost, high-efficiency "political discussion forum," enabling the public from different interpersonal networks to quickly and effectively connect and engage in political discussions. This process of connecting, gathering, and interacting accelerates the establishment of group identity, promoting online collective actions.

Information dissemination is crucial for social movement mobilization. Effective acquisition of communication resources empowers social movements. Resource mobilization theory posits that the availability of resources and the efficiency with which activists utilize them are critical (Isa and Himelboim, 2018). In online social movements, information spreads among nodes without clear organizers and is not confined to specific communities. It propagates through public opinion and internet memes, converging through the unique mechanisms of social media platforms (topic settings, algorithm recommendations, etc.). In this process, content or

behaviors with "meme" characteristics are more likely to spread widely and be imitated, forming a specific action mode suitable for particular online movements.

### **3.2. Formation of Action Modes: Internet Memes and Self-Organized Division of Labor**

The "Fandom Expedition Campaign" achieves its goals through extensive imitation and replication, forming cultural "memes." Memes are units of cultural transmission involving information, behaviors, or styles. Any object capable of carrying and projecting information, such as books or CDs, can be a medium for memes. However, with the advent and development of the internet, the transmission of memes online has been amplified many times, leading to the concept of "internet memes" (Mina, 2019).

Unlike the top-down guidance in the traditional media era, the spread of memes in online actions is spontaneous among nodes. Visual symbols, textual features, and language styles are easily recognizable, memorable, and replicable.

In the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," fans adapted their organized, disciplined ways and unique language styles to the "defense campaign." For instance, they used their familiar fan jargon, emojis, and comment bombing to maximize attention for their idol (China), including creating cute images with globally recognized emojis.

The large-scale, sustained collective action of the fandom is coordinated and orderly, relying on the self-organizing system formed over the years on the Weibo platform. Due to the "traffic is king" principle in the Chinese entertainment industry-where a star's career is linked to their social media fan base and engagement metrics-Weibo data is crucial for measuring a star's popularity. Thus, fans frequently organize actions on Weibo, such as promoting events, boosting stars' rankings, sharing and commenting on posts, and countering negative information about their idols. This results in a well-coordinated division of labor among fans, enabling the "Fandom Expedition Campaign" to rapidly mobilize and achieve a significant impact.

In the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," the role of self-organizing mechanisms is evident. Led by fan support groups on Weibo, the campaign featured precise task divisions, including organizing personnel, preparing materials, and coordinating expeditions: the comment control group prepared slogans and materials, the translation group translated the facts of the Hong Kong amendments into multiple foreign languages, the material preparation group provided visually striking emojis and videos, the lookout group monitored international social platforms, and the data group handled reporting or coordinated mass actions.

The "Fandom Expedition Campaign" demonstrates the effectiveness of self-organized mechanisms. Despite the temporary assembly of multiple fan groups during the "expedition," the participating fans typically belong to different fandoms. In their united support for "China" as their idol, these groups exhibited extraordinary collective action capabilities.

In exploring how social media changes the mobilization structure of social movements, Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 740) proposed the concept of "connective action," emphasizing that compared to traditional collective action, network users can share information through social media, leading to mobilization. This theory is particularly relevant for analyzing the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," where traditional government-initiated mobilization would be limited in speed, scope, and effectiveness. In contrast, online mobilization relies on interpersonal networks, with multi-nodes quickly linking and replicating information, enabling rapid, large-scale mobilization.

Moreover, although Weibo is primarily characterized by weak ties when faced with nationalistic issues, people are more likely to form emotional bonds and group consciousness, resulting in higher mobilization efficiency.

It is important to recognize that despite the tight organization, such structures only exist for a short time. The attacks dissolve immediately after they end, with the entire mobilization, organization, and implementation process completed online through a series of communication activities. The flash action, which disbands swiftly, surpasses traditional social movement mobilization methods. These well-trained forces resemble an "internet reserve army," dispersed across various communities in normal times but quickly assembling into a tightly coordinated organization when facing national issues.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. Empowerment**

The affordances of media can empower the actions and organizational methods of subjects. In the era of social media, activists achieve empowerment through the production of online content. The affordances of social media for information production make the generation and dissemination of social media content editable, reviewable, replicable, scalable, and linkable. This not only connects users, opinion leaders, and fan groups but also creates a diverse, decentralized network (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017: 153). The mobilization and dissemination of social movements are no longer limited to mainstream media, government departments, and institutional leaders but are completed by different entities within the network. Activists play various roles in the dissemination of information for social movements through multiple social media platforms. As a network-based technology, social media allows all users to create, disseminate, and share various types of content, thus altering the distribution of communication resources.

### **4.2. Limitations**

The affordances of media imply that media does not act indiscriminately on all groups, and thus cannot achieve balanced empowerment for all. The forms, nature, and characteristics of media can impose restrictions or exclusions on specific groups. Although digital media possesses mobility, social, and content affordances, it excludes some people's access, thereby widening the digital divide (Schrader, 2011: 146). For example, while the participants in the "Fandom Expedition Campaign" were primarily fan groups, the topics involved were political issues related to the nation. The fermentation through online platforms allowed young people active on social media to participate widely. However, other groups unfamiliar with social media or uninterested in fandom rarely joined. Historically, collective actions on national issues could mobilize people of all ages. Therefore, while the "Fandom Expedition Campaign" achieved rapid action efficiency and massive mobilization, its demographic diversity was significantly reduced. Affordances can also impose greater limitations on activists. Especially under China's internet censorship mechanism, many international social media platforms (such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) are blocked and cannot be accessed directly. Chinese users need to use VPN technology to connect to servers outside China via encrypted channels, bypassing the internet censorship mechanism to access these blocked sites and platforms. For participants in the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," VPNs are essential tools for posting content, disseminating information, and interacting with international users on international social media platforms. However, such technology is too complex for digitally disadvantaged groups, who may lack the necessary conditions to participate in subsequent actions.

### **4.3. Collective Wisdom or Collective Loss?**

The development of the internet has facilitated connections and gatherings among individuals, enabling them to form groups and providing convenient conditions for developing online collective movements. What outcomes might arise from the gathering and interaction of people within the network?

One perspective suggests that this fosters the formation of collective wisdom, becoming a driving force for social progress. Shirky (2008) in *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* discusses the impact of the internet era, arguing that group formation has become very easy, significantly increasing our capabilities, including sharing, collaborating with others, and taking collective action. These capabilities exist outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations. Scholars advocating for collective wisdom believe that distributed learning and evolution can generate collective intelligence (Woolley et al., 2015: 422). As seen in the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," numerous individual nodes produced content and participated in actions, showcasing the wisdom behind this collaboration in the fluid and intertwined internet space.

The opposing view is that the gathering of network groups leads to a collective loss. Under the influence of group psychology, individuals may lose rationality, resulting in collective stupidity, madness, and blind obedience. From a cognitive psychology perspective, people adopt different information processing methods when faced with varying information. For example, in the "Fandom Expedition Campaign," the topics primarily involved nation and ethnicity, with emotions leaning towards anger and excitement. The complexity of the issues and the involvement of irrational emotions led the group to adopt heuristic judgments, potentially resulting in group polarization.

Both perspectives explore the impact of the internet on the structure, mechanisms, and outcomes of network group interactions. The debate between these views is not simply about right or wrong. Future research should engage in dialectical thinking to gain a more comprehensive understanding of network society.

## 5. Conclusion

Using the "Fandom Expedition Campaign" on the Chinese social media platform as a case study, this paper explored how the internet influences the mobilization and organizational mechanisms of modern social movements from the theoretical perspective of affordance. It also analyzed the characteristics of action modes in online social movements.

This paper posits that activists, through continuously evolving communication technologies, influence elements such as identity construction, communication resources, and mobilization structures in social movements, thereby enriching mobilization mechanisms. Communication on social media significantly reduces communication costs, making extensive, virtual social mobilization more common than face-to-face mobilization. Social media breaks the limitations of time and space, allowing simultaneous and multi-point cross-border network social movements to unfold easily.

Furthermore, the paper suggests two future directions for practical exploration: first, the empowerment and limitations that the internet confers on social movements. While communication technology grants activists greater mobilization and organizational capabilities, it also presents issues such as the digital divide. Uneven technological empowerment reflects structural limitations in internet social movements. Second, the interaction between activists' subjectivity and technological affordance when using social media shapes the form and content of social movements. Understanding this interaction helps comprehensively grasp the characteristics of modern social movements.

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