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Usurping Public Leisure Space for Protest

Social Activism in the digital and material commons

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Abstract

This paper draws parallels between the use of public leisure spaces in the city such as parks and squares, and the use of certain forms of digital networks. Similarities between these two sorts of social contexts are worth considering, particularly their political dimension. This effort situates the current conversation about social media as sites of political mobilization into dialogue with the historical analysis of public parks as spaces that, in a similar fashion, were designed for leisure and consumption but was appropriated as sites of resistance. It brings together the literature on urban parks as centers of democracy and the literature on new media spaces as portals of cyber-protest, extending the spatial history of digital politics.

Keywords: public sphere, leisure spaces, parks, social media, Web 2.0, protest, political activism

Introduction

As political mobilization and expression take place increasingly within public leisure spaces online such as social network sites (SNS) of Twitter and Facebook, there is a need to investigate digital leisure territories as centers of democracy and sites of protest. Events such as the ‘Twitter revolution’ and the Occupy Wall Street movement have rekindled passion and expectation of the virtual realm as a portal of mass activism, where governments, corporations and citizens strive to hijack such platforms to fulfill their own agendas (Shirky, 2011). Simultaneously, we witness public leisure spaces such as parks and squares serving as focal points of resistance, be it the gathering of 50,000 protesters at Tahrir Square in Cairo during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York to the recent Gezi park crackdown by the Turkish police where people congregated, camped and voiced their concerns and anger against the loss of public space and the growing conservatism of the government. In fact, the choice of urban parks and squares for public protest comes from a deep tradition of mass political activism that span across nations (Arora, 2011; Mitchell, 1995; Williams, 2006). This is not to say that urban park spaces are exclusive sites for mass activism as protests often spill over to streets and beyond. Yet, if we are to look at the historical emergence of urban parks, their spatial design and diverse inhabitation, it is astonishing to learn how embedded political action has been within such public domains. As D’Arcus (2006) argues, “given the centrality of public spaces to political protest – and, in the media age, of the more abstract space of a mediated public sphere – careful analysis of how they come to be, how they are regulated, and the precise nature of their connection to power and dissent is essential” (p.7). Thereby, this paper considers why certain public leisure sites attract political action as well as the range of mediations that enable the transformation of these seemingly innocuous spaces into activist spaces. Parallels are drawn between the use of

public leisure spaces in the city, such as parks and squares, and the use of certain forms of digital networks to gain a more integrated understanding. Similarities between these two sorts of social contexts are worth considering, particularly their political dimension as it situates the current conversation about SNS as sites of political mobilization into dialogue with the historical analysis of public parks as spaces that, in a similar fashion, were designed for leisure and consumption but also appropriated as sites of resistance, extending the spatial history of digital politics.

This paper illustrates this argument by comparing the structure and political enactments within urban parks and squares in the United States, United Kingdom and China with cyber-protests within their respective digital networks. Both material and virtual leisure platforms have evoked common reactions: either enthusiasm towards them, seen as a significant expansion of democratic public space to the more dismal view of being prime spaces to disarm and manipulate the masses through their seemingly unregulated leisurely character. In analyzing events and movements that stemmed within urban park locales across these nations, this paper reveals how politics and leisure are historically and dialectically tied. In focusing on the range of social movements across park and SNS geographies, we discover that protests do not so much detract from the park's primary leisure purpose but often are deliberate products of such infrastructures. Further, depending on the regulatory mechanisms of these urban parks, we see protest taking on more creative, play-like forms of expression, creating new rituals of communication among citizens and the state. Finally, we see a plurality of democracies emerge through the complex interplay of the public-private nature of leisure space and political action.

Digital network sites as the new political sphere

“Twitter has been criticized as a time-waster – a way for people to inform their friends about the minutiae of their lives, 140 characters at a time. But in the past month, 140 characters were enough to shine a light on Iranian oppression and elevate Twitter to the level of change agent.” Stating this, Mark Pfeifle (2009), a former national-security adviser, called for Twitter to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for its role in supporting political uprising against despotic rulers across the world. Some argue that SNS platforms such as Facebook lend themselves to political communication far more than traditional media spaces given their unique design affordances (Neumayer & Raffl, 2008). As such, it’s argued that their social architecture allow for groups to form more easily and information to disseminate quicker through their interactive channels. Social technology spaces here are seen as relatively decentralized ‘leaderless’ networks across demographics or what Coopman (2011) terms as ‘dissentworks’ given their unique technological affordances for loosely-distributed political networks. This is seen to go along the new progressive political mappings where conformity and ideology have been replaced by subjectivity and diversity (della Porta, 2005). In fact, della Porta proposes to look at these new forms of political organization as ‘relaxed framing’ which enables people to situate multiple and diverse issues and concerns within the same protest event and space. In fact, new communication technologies have facilitated coordination of protests around common concerns such as the environment, economy, peace, and nuclear disarmament, taking local political movements across geographic and cultural borders. These virtual protest sites are argued as *not* being a singular political space, autonomous from state authority (Poster, 2006); despite the crossing of social, cultural and economic processes across borders, the state continues

to be a key player in mediating movements of people, and defining their rights and benefits online and offline. Furthermore, these political spaces are seen as inclusive and yet fragmentary, creating multiple alliances, “the netizen might be the formative figure in a new kind of political relation, one that shares allegiance to the nation with allegiance to the Net and to planetary political spaces it inaugurates” (Poster, 2006; p. 78). This challenges us to gauge the underlying techno-social communicative infrastructures of these sites that allow for the sharing of common causes. The popular concept of ‘smartmobs’ (Saveri, Rheingold & Vian 2005) has been extended to the political dimension, where social software enables and empowers groups to interconnect, and aggregate for activism. Here, crowds are given a more positive connotation, seen as a “multitude” that “cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different...the plural singularities of the multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of people” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 99). In other words, virtual public leisure spaces are seen as not just giving rise to a new political sphere but also a more sophisticated and complex community of practice.

Perhaps one of the most visible proponents of social media as a political platform is Clay Shirky (2011) who espouses that this networked generation has far more opportunity to engage in public speech and undertake collective action than ever before. While being careful to claim preordained outcomes of liberation and freedom from these architectures, Shirky does state that they “have become coordinating tools for nearly all of the world's political movements, just as most of the world's authoritarian governments (and, alarmingly, an increasing number of democratic ones) are trying to limit access to it” (2011, p. 2). Much in line with the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989), he focuses on the underlying structures of Web 2.0 that allow for engaged dialogue among citizens, believing that in the long run they serve to expand the boundaries of the public sphere. However, Shirky does point out that while

undoubtedly these social media sites are used far more for leisure and social purposes than mass political activism, they are still formidable spaces to contend with. In fact, some scholars have remarked that these leisure properties protect such sites to a great extent from state censorship. Zuckerman (2008) for instance argues through his facetious ‘Cute cat theory of digital activism’ that banal activities like sharing of cat videos make online leisure sites broader in scope, and thereby harder for authorities to crack down and block them. Accordingly, this provides a ‘conservative dilemma’ where the tension lies between using these leisure platforms for government propaganda versus censoring these spaces due to their potential for dissidence. Also, these sites have become grounds of economic activity that the state depends on, serving as an additional obstacle in the banning of such sites. This works to the advantage of activists. After all, while Web 2.0 “was designed for mundane uses, it can be extremely powerful in the hands of digital activists, especially those in environments where free speech is limited” (Zuckerman, 2008, n.p.).

The hype around new media platforms as radical and novel political arenas has been grounded through empirical evidence where for instance, it was found that face-to-face communication served as a key factor in organizing the Egyptian revolution while Twitter was claimed by only 13% of respondents as a medium to coordinate the protest (Wilson and Dunn, 2011). In fact, the celebration of leisure sites as instruments of political change has been viewed as corporate usurping of due credit to political communities in these difficult geographies; “my fear is that the hype about a Twitter/Facebook/YouTube revolution performs two functions: first, it depoliticizes our understanding of the conflicts; second, it whitewashes the role of capitalism in suppressing democracy” (Mejias, 2011, p.4). Such corporate branding of mass activism by Twitter and Facebook are seen as a common ploy to capitalize on the tremendous human

struggle, turning a potential virtual public sphere into another branded empire. As Garnham (2000, p. 41) puts it, “the colonization of the public sphere by market forces” can be observed by the increasing commercialization of the Internet in general and social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube or Flickr in particular. Gladwell (2010) is not convinced of the depth of such online political movements where it takes a mere ‘like’ button on Facebook to express ones’ solidarity to a cause, with a good distance away from actual grassroots movement and commitment. He terms this superficial engagement as ‘slacktivism,’ highlighting the negative effect such digital sites can have on civic responsibility and political participation. He laments that, “where activists were once defined by their causes, they are now defined by their tools” (n.p.). In fact, the fear is that when emphasizing the role of the spatial and technical in political mobilization, there is danger of undermining the essence of mass protest – that being the deep and long-lasting socio-cultural engagements of a diverse public that is struggling to be heard. Hence, while cyber-protest “that reflects the role of alternative online media, online protests, and online protest communication in society” is here to stay, it is essential to gain a more rooted and broader perspective of these platforms as domains for democracy (Fuchs, 2006, p. 275).

Overall, this paper situates claims of novelty and contention on the relationship between virtual leisure platforms and political action by drawing on discourses surrounding a similar public leisure space - the urban park. Through this juxtaposition, we can better understand how to make sense of the hybrid positioning of these sites as propaganda, commercial and activist spaces; how the economics of leisure space can exploit as well as protect; and how the ‘relaxed framing’ of such sites create an inclusive public space for political mobilization and expression.

In essence, this article explicitly maps the relationship of public leisure space and politics, not as a digital invention but as an extension of the rich tradition of the protest parks of the past.

Protest Parks: Case studies from the United States, United Kingdom and China

This section explores the political and historical dimension of urban parks and squares in the United States, China and the United Kingdom as well as the contemporary usage of social media spaces within these contexts for cyber-protest. We examine the permeation of ideology across digital and material leisure spaces and their role in the shaping of these architectures. A range of playful communicative modes are highlighted that demonstrate the agency and creativity of the masses in harnessing these spaces for resistance.

An ideological and symbolic landscape

The urban park is a narrative of spatial democracy and expressed ideology:

From public park to garden city, there have been important moments when the garden in its most civic and municipal manifestations has been used by social movements as the site of struggle, opposition, and innovation. Sometimes, it has been the very topic itself of those activities. These moments can be short-term, temporary, crisis-ridden (as in the aggressive riot in the park), or long-term and intended as permanent (as in the construction of the new green settlement). What is striking is the frequent idealism or utopianism experienced or expressed in this kind of urban public green, as though in some ways the garden itself can function as a special zone for the common articulation of social change, social experimentation, the critical rejection of some aspects of society, and even the confrontation with authority. (McKay, 2011, pp. 12)

These seemingly innocuous public greens tell a story of political communication and activism, at times exhibiting the tension between authority and the masses, and between the elite and the proletarian (Mitchell, 1995). The beauty of the social engineering of public space is that intent and outcome are often misaligned as human ingenuity pushes the boundaries of these spatial imaginaries into realms that are unexpected and challenging. Intrinsic to public leisure space is

the fact that across nations, it can serve as a critical forum for mass dissent, capitalizing on a hybrid identity and unregulated status, at times transforming into a genuine political space for the people (Williams, 2006). Oftentimes, these park spaces were instruments of the state to control and mediate the public through propaganda and were used by the private industry to seduce the consumption class (Shi, 1998; Roberts, 2001). This section expounds on this above proposition, making transparent the parallel to SNS such as Twitter, Facebook and Weibo (China's twitter) where similar discussion abounds on the dictates and permeation of ideologies within these leisure spaces and the intersection of state governance, mass activism and commerce reflecting their public-private nature.

For example, the American urban park was designed to be a 'space of refuge' by the famous park designer of the nineteenth century Frederick Law Olmsted. Commissioned to architect parks in Boston, New York, Washington DC, and Louisville, Olmsted collaborated with geologists, sanitary engineers, public health doctors, and social theorists "to create civilized, peaceful sanctuaries where people could find refuge from the sights and sounds of the nineteenth-century city," and yet "this period saw the emergence of a symbolic landscape of protest, which often co-existed uncomfortably as a place of tourism" (Gough, 2000, p. 213). For instance, People's Park in Berkeley California came to be known as a public protest space with opposed, and perhaps irreconcilable ideological visions dictating the nature and purpose of its leisure space (Mitchell, 1995).

...activists and the homeless people who used the Park promoted a vision of a space marked by free interaction and the absence of coercion by powerful institutions. For them, public space was an unconstrained space within which political movements can organize and expand into wider arenas...The vision of representatives of the University (not to mention planners in many cities) was quite different. Theirs was one of open space for recreation and entertainment, subject to usage by an appropriate public that is allowed in. Public space thus constituted a controlled and orderly retreat where a properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city. (pp. 109)

Mitchell talks about these contradictory visions where the first was construed as a public space where political actors shaped the functioning and scope of activity for mass protest; the second vision was a modern conceptualization where civility, commerce and class were privileged over what was seen as unsolicited political activity not desired by local businesses or the state. In fact, People's Park was also the spatial territory of the hippies who championed a social revolution during the '60s. It was spaces such as this that was usurped by radicals from the Bay Area to pioneer the political outlook and cultural style of the New Left movement, launching into campaigns against militarism, racism, sexual discrimination, homophobia, mindless consumerism and pollution (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996). This is where the 'Californian ideology' was born, seeping into the broader culture and influencing the values that helped shape Silicon Valley, (the home to several new media founders such as Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare) as we know of today:

Who would have predicted that, in less than 30 years after the battle for People's Park, squares and hippies would together create the Californian Ideology? Who would have thought that such a contradictory mix of technological determinism and libertarian individualism would become the hybrid orthodoxy of the information age? (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996, pp.13)

Howard Rheingold (2000), the well-known guru of the Californian ideology advocates values of counter-culture to shape the development of new information technologies and draws a vision where community activists replace corporate capitalism and big government with a hi-tech 'gift economy' or free labor for the common good. Bulletin board systems, free chat facilities, and open source software are manifested efforts at keeping the struggle for social liberation visible and alive. This is despite the lucrative commercial and political involvement in building the 'information superhighway.' New communication technologies, so the argument goes, empower

the individual, enhance personal freedom, and radically reduce the power of the nation-state. Yet, if we are to look at the reality of the situation, these new media platforms would not have been feasible without significant infusion of capital from the American defense budget and the close alliance with the corporate giant IBM. Significant efforts of the users, driven by the Californian ideology to keep these spaces democratic and accessible are ironically in alignment with commercial interests of Apple and Microsoft where products of the social collective continues to play a vital role in advancing such information architectures and designs.

It is worth noting that urban parks and their potential for mass political mobilization is not confined as a western phenomenon but rather, can be witnessed across nations. Take for instance the Beijing Park in China during the early 20th century. This park provided an arena for the city people to participate in China's political transformation from an imperial to a nation state (Shi, 1998). It was designed and positioned at the city center to serve as a standing symbol of social change. This stemmed from a vision of reform-minded officials who sought to transform Beijing into a modern social sphere. The government intentionally designed its urban park to serve their reformist agenda of socializing the public as modern and cultured citizens by offering free exhibitions, reading rooms, and pavilions to emphasize the educational function of its public parks. These spaces also served as propaganda platforms where campaigns were launched to promote public health, encourage moral behavior, and combat illiteracy. However, to the chagrin of the state, these parks became sites for frequent mass rallies:

In spite of a host of rules instituted by the state, much of the activity in parks defied the state's dictate. Far from the intended designs, these parks were used by the people for a range of purposes, at times undermining the established institutions and norms; they served as critical political forums. (Shi 1998, pp. 220)

Another example is the infamous Tienanmen Square where in 1989, it witnessed a mass scale massacre of protesters against the State. This public space was intentionally designed by the state

as a symbol of political might of the Chinese party where the architecture reflected its ethos. While trees lined the east and west edges of the square, the square itself was open, with neither trees nor benches. The square was lit with large lampposts which were fitted with video cameras, serving as a prime space for surveillance of public leisure activities (Davis et al., 1995).

Interestingly, the Chinese government has approached the digital network space in a similar manner wherein instead of blocking the Internet to its citizens, it has used this opportunity to signal its modern image on the global stage by fostering a significant and impressive digital infrastructure with the ‘great firewall’ surrounding its terrain (Jiang and Xu, 2009). China now boasts the world’s largest Internet population of 253 million, 19.1% of its citizenry. They have created e-government portals across provinces to serve as local venues for citizen involvement through online chat forums, serving as symbolic architectures for legitimacy of its authority in the information age. Research shows that some underprivileged individuals are able to publish their grievances on government web sites and “even though only 7.7% of China’s 137 million Internet users visit government web sites regularly, they can be a critical mass for political activism” (Jiang and Xu, 2009, p. 176). Empirical evidence of these portals revealed that while interactive features was not well implemented with close to half of these sites not having any chat forums, places such as Zhejiang attracted as many as 200 postings every month since its inception in 2004 and Guangdong has a monthly average of about 1,000 entries since 2003, compared to an international average of 10 entries per month on similar government forums. Hence, it is argued that “these online structures help deter business or government misconducts and are likely to improve government image and local politics” (p. 185). Furthermore, China has the largest community of bloggers in the world, and they have been instrumental in exposing official and corporate misdeeds (Hassid, 2012). However, it is essential

to note that for the most part, the Chinese blogosphere (much like that in the West) is largely apolitical, wherein bloggers engage in leisure and social pursuits such as sports, cars, the arts, and relationships, and yet, at times political conversation seeps through and gets interwoven within this leisure fabric. Oftentimes censorship authorities are aware of these transgressions and yet as MacKinnon (2008) argues, blogs “serve as a ‘safety valve’ by allowing enough room for a sufficiently wide range of subjects that people can let off steam about government corruption or incompetence...before considering taking their gripes to the streets” (p.33). Overall there is an understanding that while the spatial design of these leisure sites is often deliberately designed and deployed to control and regulate dissent, they also serve to gradually infuse the state with democratic practice and potentially broaden the public and political sphere within China.

Indeed, ideology shaping these spaces can be wide-ranging, from libertarian as in the case of California with a strong drive towards social participation to authoritarianism and state paternalism as in the case of China. However, one must not neglect the power of commercialism over the functioning and usage of these public leisure realms. A case in point are London parks, strategically designed as symbols of a new capitalistic society, intent on leveraging a civic and social sphere for increased consumption (Roberts, 2001). However, they were destined to be marked by mass activism, moving away from the symbol of elitism and cosmopolitanism to that of a proletarian protest space. The royalty soon understood the need for a safety value for the masses and instituted the allowance of a ‘Speakers Corner’ in Hyde Park where the public was free to express themselves. Protesters used this social cleavage to challenge authority through public speech while still functioning within the legality of such spaces. The masses were able to appropriate and play with this space, expanding the symbolism of the urban park and thereby its functioning over time:

The sign ‘speech’ had carved out a distinct geographical and moral space in Hyde Park over a century before 1872. Constituted through the ‘last dying speeches’ of the criminal class of 18th-century London, this subaltern rationality rendered visible the class character of law by disrupting the distancing of legal discourse from governance. Secondly, by undertaking a genealogical investigation of the sign ‘speech’ at Hyde Park, the traces left by scaffold culture were re-combined to slowly translate ‘last dying speeches’ into a more overtly political proletarian public sphere. (Roberts, 2001, pp. 322)

In the late 19th century, a combination of park by-laws, use of the Highways Act and venue licensing powers of the London County Council made it one of the few places where socialist speakers could meet and debate. To this day, London parks host ‘Speakers Corners’ where a range of social issues are covered that reveal the fragmented and pluralistic nature of protest, less political in the conventional sense and more of personalized and issue-based politics. Over the years, we have witnessed marches for a number of issues including disability rights, anti-austerity, trade-unions against cuts, anti-pope rallies, and cabbies against block lanes during the Olympics. Fascinatingly, the Speakers Corner has become an institutionalized entity, forming its web presence and digitally consolidating around a range of ‘Speaker Corner’ projects¹; they have exported their ideology across nations such as Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands including its underlying leisure structures.

It is worth considering to what extent the nature of public participation in these material spaces have semblance to that of digital networks. In contemporary discourse, it is claimed that while group-based ‘identity politics’ of the past were along conventional lines such as class, ethnicity, race and gender, Web 2.0 architectures have fostered more diverse mobilizations where individuals gather and activate around lifestyle values and engage with multiple causes (Bennett, 2012):

Personalized politics has long existed, of course, in the form of populist uprisings or emotional bonds with charismatic leaders. The interesting difference in today’s

participation landscape is that widespread social fragmentation has produced individuation as the modal social condition in postindustrial democracies, particularly among younger generations. (pp. 22)

While indeed the technical affordances of social networks facilitate this process and allow for virtual corners on a range of topics from the profound to the inane, can we continue to view this as a sole attribution to the digital sphere, given the plethora of social issues that triggered activism within urban parks historically? In fact, urban parks due to their unique history of struggle for democratic architectures, have historically allowed for temporal social collectivities around issues of personal concern that permeated conventional group identities, affiliations and politics as we have extrapolated earlier on.

To conclude, be it People's Park, Beijing Park, or Hyde Park, there is a normative ideal or best imagined use of public leisure space endorsed by the state, corporation or imperial entity that stands against the wide spectrum of social practice within these parks in urban societies. Paternalistic intent of the state or private sector interest often drives the design and shape of these public spaces, hoping to convert the masses into modern, cultured, and active consumers of society. These ideals stand for aspirations and expectations, a powerful motif that get transcribed and reified over time. However, through ongoing interaction and participation of the masses, historically these public leisure spaces have morphed into emblems of freedom and human dignity. The continuous public struggle to democratize these leisure realms accumulate and form a rich social memory of these spaces, impacting future ideology and public protest. Of course not all parks serve along the same lines of social activism, much like not all digital networks propel political participation. That said, historically and cross-culturally, there is a critical relationship between public leisure sites such as urban parks and social protest that cannot be ignored. They have served as public platforms wherein a range of ideologies have played out, and within this

social theatre, democratic practices have emerged time and again in spite of architectural manipulations and surveillance infrastructures from above. This is much along the lines of Lefebvre's (1991) distinction between representational space (appropriations and usage of park space by the masses) and representations of space (design and control of park space by the authority). Such leisure platforms take on a hybrid identity where corporate branding, political campaigning and propaganda battle it out. Yet, if we are to take a cue from the history of urban parks, if there is a critical mass that harnesses these leisure spaces for political activism time and again, such human persistence has the capacity to mark them as contemporary protest space that spans the political to the personal.

Corporate intervention, mediation, and creative/playful protest

“It should be clarified that a new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere,” remarks Papacharissi (2002, p.11), reminding us that it is the nature of social mediation and interaction that make a space ‘public’ and not just its underlying architecture. In other words, just because social technologies create the fabric of democracy, it is still contingent on user activities to materialize such ideals. Hence, if you build it, as the popular adage goes, it does not mean they will come. So it should not be a surprise that few digital platforms gained the reputation of facilitating the ‘revolution’ of the Arab Spring while others were barely mentioned. In fact, many of these digital leisure platforms are far from the republic ideals, instead serving as pseudo public spaces as corporations usurp them for commercial ends (Barnes, 2006; Lange, 2007). There is much lament on what is seen as the progressive eroding of the digital public sphere as corporate marketing takes over, threatening civic engagement. In recent years, this conversation has become increasingly complicated with new empirical findings on ‘fan activism,’ a phenomenon where fans appropriate protest practices for personal causes outside the purview of traditional

political movements (Earl and Kimport, 2009). While some view this as empowering for audiences where they are able to actively participate in the shaping of their consumption practices (Jenkins, 2006), others view this as commercial exploitation where corporations leverage on political protest behavior to enhance their business practices and profit-making.

Interestingly, if we pay attention to the trajectory of urban parks across cultures and time, we see a similar and challenging trend. The transformation of parks from relatively unregulated public space to currently corporatized, commercialized and semi-privatized space should give us deep cause for concern (Low, Taplin, & Scheld, 2005). The radical aspect of urban parks of the late 19th century was that they were one of the first public sites that brought “all classes into the easy contact essential for democratic urban life” (Williams, 2006, p. 144). In fact, as regulation started to permeate into leisure spaces, there was much opposition, as we see with that of People’s Park. Homeless Union activist, Andrew Jackson, puts the struggle over People’s Park into a larger context:

They’re tearing up a dream. Ever since I remember this has been a place to come. It’s been a place for all people, not just for some college kids to play volleyball or the white collar. It’s a place to lie down and sleep when you’re tired. (in Michell, 1995, pp. 113)

People’s Park was seen as a place where the marginalized could press claims for their rights but with increasing control, these spaces were becoming discriminatory publics. Furthermore, malls, gated-communities, and corporate plazas have created ‘controlled diversity’ whereby the masses are differentiated based on their consumption patterns, creating a dissipated or a pseudo public (Cameron, 2002). Entertainment and commerce are privileged over politics, argued as instrumental in the shrinking of the political public sphere. This is seen as the ‘disneyfication’ of public space, where “the market and design considerations thus displace the idiosyncratic and extemporaneous interactions of engaged peoples in the determination of the shape of urban space

in the contemporary world" (p. 120). Besides these 'pseudo' public spaces, there are also 'dead' leisure spaces where too much control is exercised on a public space, converting them into sanitized domains that few feel compelled to inhabit. For instance, corporations taking over a plaza where they dictate rules of public engagement or states manufacturing public leisure environments where people must socialize in particular ways can result in low levels of engagement.

This is not to say that people are not resourceful in circumventing and playing with dominant infrastructures, be it corporate or state-initiated and driven. Historically, they have demonstrated tremendous capacity to etch out ways of political enactment, often resorting to playful mediations to get heard. From Beijing to London parks, the masses are innovative in their usage of space, forming human chains, holding humorous signage, dressing in costumes, and using theatre. This creates temporary solidarities, transforming an abstract mass into a united civic group that shares common political concerns (Gough, 2000; McKay, 2011). Mass performance is a way of communicating efficiently across a diverse public, unifying and making visible common messages directed to the authority of concern. "In cities across the [USA in the late 19th century] country, a variety of groups have used public parks to stage parades, heritage celebrations, rallies, and protest as a means of expressing their sense of ethnic, racial, religious and sexual identity" (Bachin, 2003, p.16). Given the inherent challenge of creating a community feeling amongst a disparate group across class, gender, ethnicity and religion, playful and creative means of communication are essential in the formation of mass protest. What is seen as effective is to capture "secular ritual forms which express communal values and sentiments by symbolically abstracting features of the social and normative structures from which they derive"

(Lawrence, 1982, p. 155). In fact, if we look at mass protest within the virtual realm, we see parallels of such creative play.

Take for instance the case of China and their creative modes of communicative practices within public leisure domains. As mentioned in the earlier section, parks in China are open yet deeply regulated, particularly when it comes to mass gatherings. However, there are grey zones sanctioned by the state that allow for crowds to amass for social purposes such as *qigong*, healing through breathing exercises that are popular with the public (Davis et al., 1995). For this activity, groups engaged in this pursuit are allowed to print and distribute flyers, affix signboards and public announcements. Historically, this practice has deeper meaning as during the Mao era, this was considered as a way of fostering private mental spaces in a public setting and herein, “urban constructs of parks give way to private experience” (p. 359). *Qigong* has a long tradition of association with peasant uprisings and heterodox movements such as the Boxers who practiced *qi* exercises and promoted their visions of an utopic society. The popular image of *qigong* founded on media and healing narratives have created a sense of autonomous identity that is well entrenched in urban spaces and city life. It has unsettled the Chinese state as it is perceived to have political revitalization potential. Hence, there is a continuous struggle between the state and the public on what is deemed as public leisure enactments:

people take up qigong because of disenchantment with official ideology and policy. The states presence is inserted into everyday life through surveillance of public arenas such as the parks. Categories of ‘official’ versus ‘false’ qigong are created to permit practitioners of ‘superstitious’ activities to be taken into custody for questioning. Those who continue to practice in parks do so under red banners and white certificates of legitimately recognized schools of qigong. Witch hunts of masters are carried out in the name of corruption. And boundaries of normality are reestablished through creating a medical disorder called qigong deviation. (pp. 360)

This pattern of weaving in discontent within the larger matrix of leisure is evident in the virtual sphere in China. The top 10 Internet activities in China are listening to or downloading music,

reading news, using a search engine, instant messaging, playing games, watching videos, using a blog or personal space, emailing, using a social networking service, and reading literature (Wallis, 2011). The Chinese Internet is mainly perceived as a place for socializing and entertainment as users describe their web-based activities as “fun.” Yet, research has revealed that within this innocuous maze of public leisure, we see the emergence of diverse and creative communicative codes and homonyms that can only be understood by certain groups of participants that share interest in a common cause. For instance, there is a gay realm in the Chinese digital sphere that is socio-linguistically constructed through terms such as *tongzhi* or ‘comrade’ (a euphemism for gay or lesbian) and other inside literature. To Giese, “the real subversive potential of the Internet in China arises not because BBSs (and blogs) are used for overtly political expression, but because of the anonymity, freedom of expression, and opportunity for negotiating identity that such spaces allow” (2004, p. 23). In fact, several events have opened up conversations on issues that go beyond initial personal politics such as the Mu Zimei phenomenon. Here, a young woman in Guangzhou stirred up controversy in 2003 when she began blogging about her active sex life, rejecting conventional notions of romantic love and opening up public debate on other societal matters. Yang (2009) has argued that the ‘personal is political’ in China, although not in the manner in which ‘Chinese politics’ is usually conceptualized in the West.

Furthermore, Chinese users who want to express views the government might frown upon have developed technological solutions like VPNs and anonymizing tools, employing software that changes the direction of text as well as non-technological methods to get their messages out:

For example, after the July 2009 riots involving Muslim Uyghur’s and Han Chinese in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang province, all online discussion, photos, and video of this

event were blocked. To get around such censorship, clever Internet users employed a practice called ‘tomb digging,’ or ‘digging up’ earlier posts about Xinjiang or Urumqi, and then adding comments about the riots... Other means of avoiding censorship include using encoded language through relying on the use of oblique references and metaphors, and through taking advantage of the richness of the Chinese language, with its multiple homophones. Still another practice is to split headers in an otherwise blank posting so that the user has to pull the pieces together... Through these and other creative techniques, Chinese cyberspace has become a realm for polyphonic expressions to exist outside the dominant discourse, and as such, it is constitutive of social change in China. (Wallis, 2011, p. 422)

In fact, recent new media architectures have given birth to the practice of *e'gao*, a combination of the words ‘evil’ and ‘to make fun of’ that signifies a multimedia expression that spoofs or pokes fun at an original work (Jiao, 2007). Through practices such as photo-shopping images, creating lip-synching videos or parodies of famous films, *e'gao* has succeeded in appearing with little agenda and yet has scripted within this play, public resistance. Such forms of implicit protest through creative mash-ups have posed an ongoing challenge for the Chinese state as these are woven deeply in corporate platforms that benefit from such group participation and enactments. Hence, to some extent, the deeply commercial aspects of these infrastructures protect the public from state censorship.

To conclude, boundaries of inclusion and exclusion surface through the architecting, regulating and mediating of public leisure space by those in authority, making visible the rights and status of individuals and groups. Yet, in practice, communities create novel modes of communicative practice and maneuverings that carve out spaces of political expression. Here, corporations hold a complex and often contradictory position of being complicit with the state to regulate their citizens and yet, to create web architectures that commercially feed on such mass innovation and creativity that is, at times, implicitly political.

Conclusion

Much research has been done on social network sites, particularly their potential to facilitate democracy through mass protest. Substantive work focuses on their evolving techno-social infrastructures and practices, compelling researchers to emphasize the unique spatiality of these virtual leisure platforms. When comparisons are made historically, it is usually along lines of old and new media. Hence, to lend a fresh perspective to this popular field of new media research, this paper leverages on a wealth of research from a seemingly disconnected academic discipline – park studies. Given the shared rhetoric between urban parks and social network sites – of being open, free, and democratic, this paper initiates a dialogue between these two fields to lend a more comprehensive perspective on the relationship between public leisure space and political communication. By looking at case studies of urban parks and social media platforms in the United States, United Kingdom and China, this paper argues that public leisure domains are ideologically driven and symbolically marked often by state and/or corporate agendas that can be deemed as authoritarian, paternal or libertarian. Oftentimes, we see openness as deliberately architected into these spaces to serve as a safety valve and a concerted effort to gain state legitimacy through a modern public image. While these spaces have been designed as means of containment of mass politics, they often can serve as a hotbed for protest. Such ‘safety valves’ can over time become powerful pipelines for social movements that span across groups and social contexts through grassroots agency. By examining the range of political communication within these public domains, it is seen that they are interwoven strategically and deeply within acts of leisure, often concealing them from state surveillance. Also, such playful modes allow for the permeation of social causes across conventional group affiliations and help form temporary social collectives that share a common cause. Basically, commercialism serves as a double-edged sword as they exploit protest for corporate gain and at the same time, protect activism from being

controlled easily as they gain commercial validity. Overall, public leisure landscapes within the digital and material sphere share common agendas and architectures that when viewed as a comprehensive and historically embedded space, give insight into the nature of political participation and mass protest.

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