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Social media live streaming as affective news in the anti-ELAB movement in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the theory of affective news to examine social media live streaming during the 2019 Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement. We argue that this specific form of affective news was enabled by the affordances of the Facebook Live platform, collectively produced by journalists who were not bound by conventional detached practices and audiences who actively engaged in emotional reactions and discussions, and offering an immersive, unpredictable, sensational, and dramatic experience of collective witnessing through the unique content and format. This case enriches our understanding of the emotional turn of journalism and provides implications for digital journalism and social movements.

KEYWORDS affect; emotion; affective news; social media; live streaming; social movement; Anti-ELAB Movement

Introduction

The most significant difference in news reporting during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement, when compared with previous social movements in Hong Kong, was the central role of social media live streaming (SMLS), particularly live streaming sessions on Facebook and YouTube conducted mostly by professional media outlets, such as *Apple Daily* and Stand News. According to a survey by the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Center for Communication and Public Opinion Survey (CCPOS) in August 2019, Hong Kong citizens viewed live streaming as the most important source of information about the protests (scoring 8.12 out of 10), surpassing traditional media (6.85), social media (6.01), Telegram (3.87), other instant messengers (5.35), LIHKG (4.20), and other online forums (3.73). As we argue in this article, SMLS is not only an

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informational channel, but also a powerful journalistic tool for *emotional* engagement. Live streaming sessions can be understood as a form of affective news jointly shaped by social media platforms, journalists, and audiences.

It should be noted that live streaming as a media technology is not new to social movements. Activists during the 2008 Wild Strawberries Movement in Taiwan (Hsu, 2010), the 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement in the U.S., the 15 M Movement in Spain (Kavada & Treré, 2020), and the 2012 Quebec Student Strike (Thorburn, 2014) all live streamed their protests online. However, professional media's systematic adoption of SMLS as a major journalistic tool was first seen during the Anti-ELAB Movement. The case provides a unique opportunity for us to examine how an emerging journalistic genre was created in the contemporary media and social environment, and how emotion occupies a central position in this genre. We emphasize in this article that news gathered through SMLS, as an affective news medium, is created through constant interactions among various agents, including media professionals, protesters, audience members, and social media platforms, rather than by journalists alone. Therefore, we took a multi-perspective approach to examine this emerging practice.

This article is based on data collected for a research project on SMLS during the Anti-ELAB Movement. In the following sections, we first review previous literature on affective news, then discuss why SMLS during the Anti-ELAB Movement could be viewed as a medium for affective news from four aspects: platform affordances; content and format; journalistic practice; and audience engagement. We conclude by discussing the implications for our understanding of the relationship between news media and social movements.

Affective news and the emotional turn in journalism studies

This article draws from previous works on affect and emotion in journalism mainly by two scholars who have made particularly important contributions—Papacharissi (2015a, 2015b) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2020a, 2020b)—using different terminology in their works: Papacharissi prefers “affect,” whereas Wahl-Jorgensen uses “emotion.” Scholars have pointed out the differences between the two terms. Massumi (1995) characterizes affects as uncontained bodily intensities and emotions as limited and contained expressions of affects first felt by the body and recognized only afterward as particular emotional states. Affect is viewed as more fundamental to understanding human cognition and motivation processes due to its relatively clear biological categories (Tomkins, 2009), while emotions are complex and muddled, i.e., affect is experienced individually, whereas

emotion is relational, “evolving out of the interactions of individuals with culture and underlying social structures” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020a, p. 177). Despite these distinctions, *affect* and *emotion* are used interchangeably in some studies, as they are very closely related. In this article, we view the two terms as having the same meaning, referring to both the relational, experiential state and intensity in individual bodies, and to their potential to become public and collective through shared construction. This follows previous conceptualizations when engaging with the literature (e.g., “affective news” and “emotional turn”).

Previous journalism studies have deliberately ignored affects or emotions. To a large extent, this likely stemmed from journalism’s traditional role in liberal democracies ideally as an objective source of news (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020a). Journalism was expected to be objective and free of emotions, and journalists as professional narrators were required to present a detached view of the news (Maras, 2013; Schudson, 2001). Therefore, affects were viewed as polar opposites of objectivity or rationality.

This view of affects in journalism has attracted increasing criticism from scholars, who emphasize the complex role that affects and emotions play in journalism. Thus, an “affective turn” or “emotional turn” in journalism has been identified (Clough, 2008; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020a). Scholars have argued that journalistic works never excluded affects during their production, consumption, and circulation, and that affects are necessary components in creating an experience of involvement in news stories (Peters, 2011). For instance, Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) found that Pulitzer Prize-winning journalistic works pervasively have adopted a strategic ritual of emotionality to achieve a better reading experience while balancing objectivity and subjectivity. Moreover, scholars have also found that journalists routinely predict and manage audience emotions during their interviews and other interactive activities, consciously or unconsciously. They always must work to manage feelings, i.e., “emotional labor,” to balance their reporting and subjectivity (Glück, 2016; Hochschild, 2012).

Social media have intensified and amplified emotions’ influence in journalistic work. On one hand, traditional boundaries between journalists and audiences have been blurred, with non-professional news producers introducing more emotion-laden content into news media. On the other hand, professional journalists have also incorporated more elements of emotions to adapt to the social media environment and increase audience engagement. From examining Twitter streams during the Arab Spring, Papacharissi (2015b) argued that content which networked actors produce on social media is “affective news,” which is “news collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion, all sustained by and sustaining ambient news environments” (p. 27). Several characteristics of affective

news have been proposed in her work: It is generated through an ambient and always-on news environment; it emerges out of collaborations among journalists and citizens; it is a product of hybrid news values, including those that professional journalists neglected in the past; it reflects the intensity accumulated in reaction to news events; it is characterized by instantaneity; and it is rhythmic (Papacharissi, 2015b).

In the context of Hong Kong social movements, extant research has indicated that participation in the 2014 Umbrella Movement was driven significantly by live TV broadcasts of tear gas floating over the cityscape, creating “mediated instant grievances” among the public (Tang, 2015). It demonstrated live broadcasting’s power in shaping people’s emotional reactions. Compared with live TV reporting, SMLS as a new tool during the 2019 protests had the potential to be even more powerful in constructing affective narratives and eliciting emotional responses. Informed by theoretical discussions on affective news, we examined SMLS during the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement from four perspectives.

Platform affordances

With the popularization of smartphones and 4G and 5G networks, live streaming gradually became a journalistic tool for covering public issues. Facebook Live’s launch in 2015 and Twitter’s acquisition of Periscope that same year lowered the live streaming threshold further and fostered its popularity among the public and media organizations (Rodriguez, 2015). To understand the affordances that SMLS platforms provided, we used the walkthrough method to engage with Facebook Live’s mobile interface and examined “its technological mechanism and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences” (Light et al., 2018, p. 882). We focused on the “everyday use” part of the walkthrough process, as Facebook Live is embedded in the Facebook application and does not require additional entry and exit processes. We identified the following function and design characteristics in this platform:

Immersive watching

Facebook Live’s default interface includes two parts: a video window and comment window. Users can swipe right across the screen to hide comments, creating an immersive viewing experience. As previous research has indicated, SMLS is adept at providing an immersive experience for users, eliciting emotional responses (de la Peña et al., 2010). During our research, we repeatedly heard people describing their experience of watching live

streaming sessions as watching “real-person VR (virtual reality),” confirming this platform feature’s immersive nature.

Emoticon reactions

The comment section includes three functions that allow users to interact with the video: share; comment; and emotion buttons. Comments and emoticons simultaneously pop up on top of the live video. Users can choose from six preset emoticons: like; love; haha; wow; sad; and angry. All are affective expressions that allow users to engage with the SMLS sessions emotionally. These emoticons could be tapped indefinitely, i.e., the more frequently you tap on an emoticon, the stronger its visual impact will be on the screen. Compared with comments, emoticon reactions have a much lower threshold for participation and were used much more frequently during the live streaming sessions during the protests.

Assigning emoticons to comments

Aside from tapping the emoticon buttons to react to video streams, users can also attach emoticons to others’ comments. For example, in the live streaming sessions during the Anti-ELAB Movement, comments supporting the police and government often elicited a dozen “angry” emoticons from other users. This function further facilitated affective engagement during the SMLS sessions—not only between users and the video stream, but also among users.

Co-watching with friends

Facebook Live emphasizes the co-watching experience among friends. When users start watching a live streaming session, they can see whether any of their friends are also watching it. When you have several friends watching the same session, you may receive a system notification inviting you to join them. Furthermore, while watching live videos, users can share them with their Facebook groups and invite friends to watch, discuss, and comment in a smaller audience group. This co-watching experience may enhance affective engagement further, as friends watching the same session may form echo chambers in which people discuss issues in a more emotional and polarized way.

To sum up, Facebook Live immerses users into an intensely affective environment with emoticons, as well as shared and immersive watching experiences, encouraging people’s affective interactions with video streams and other users, and providing the infrastructure for affective news.

Content and format

Throughout our research process, we watched hundreds of hours of live streaming sessions that five media outlets conducted: *Apple Daily*; Stand News; RTHK; HK01; and *Oriental Daily*. They not only were among the most active live streamers during the protests, but also represent a relatively diverse set of political views, ranging from pro-democracy to neutral to pro-establishment. We identified the following features of affective storytelling from these SMLS sessions.

In terms of content, several affective features characterized live streaming sessions. First, considering that they captured the ever-changing protest scenes in real time and were “news of the moment” (Papacharissi, 2015b, p. 36), the live videos conveyed a sense of unpredictability and anxiety. Journalists often had to act on their projections and anticipation of the unfolding protests. Such anticipatory gestures could be viewed as “premediation” (Grusin, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015b), which is rich in affect and pushes news reporting in the direction of intensity without substance.

Second, the live video content tended to feature episodes of violence, confrontations, and clashes, which were sensational and dramatic, appealing to audiences’ emotions. The most significant example occurred during the July 21 Yuen Long attack, when thugs attacked a female journalist and indiscriminately were attacking citizens without police intervention, knocking them to the ground during live streaming. Her live video fully captured and broadcasted the attack, and it quickly went viral. The incident, particularly live video clips, triggered an escalation of protests, as many perceived that the police intentionally allowed the attack to happen (Lee, Yuen et al., 2019; Luqiu, 2021).

Third, the live videos of the protests were viewed as a form of witnessing in which police brutality was recorded. As Peters (2001) argued, people love liveness because they want to be involved in history (the happening), not historiography. Therefore, “liveness serves as an assurance of access to truth and authenticity” (J. D. Peters, 2001, p. 719). In the context of the 2019 protests, live streaming sessions provided collective witnessing of the city’s largest social movement and “sousveillance” of the police. Particularly for pro-democracy citizens, the live videos had normative commitments.

In terms of format, SMLS provided a first-person view of the protests (Kavada & Tréré, 2020). The live videos were shaky, sometimes blurry, and not of high resolution, but they conveyed a strong sense of authenticity. Interestingly, the video streams’ limited viewing angles amplified the feeling of anxiety and depression. A frequent watcher of the live streaming sessions shared with us that her experience watching the live videos and being physically present at the protest scene differed significantly, i.e., she felt extremely stressful when watching the live streaming sessions, but

found the protests to be mostly peaceful when she joined them in the streets. Thus, the differences not only lied in the selective representation of violence and clashes during the live videos, but also resulted from the more intense and anxiety-heavy atmosphere that the live-video format created.

Journalistic practice

While some view live streaming as a useful journalistic tool (Narro & Hornsby, 2020), journalists largely have viewed it as user-generated content, rather than a journalistic format (Cooper, 2019). SMLS during the 2019 protests in Hong Kong provided an unprecedented chance for journalists to use this tool for content production and engagement. To understand how live streaming journalists perceived and used SMLS, and how it influenced journalistic roles, we interviewed 12 such journalists for this research project. We also found that they had mixed feelings about the new tool. On one hand, they found it to be extremely powerful for documenting events in real time and connecting with audiences. On the other hand, they felt uncertainty and uneasiness because traditional professional practices, which emphasize objective and detached reporting (Tuchman, 1972), were challenged deeply in the specific SMLS setting. Thus, journalists had to step into the unfamiliar territory of subjective and affective reporting practices.

The live streaming videos they produced were unfiltered raw materials that did not go through the usual gatekeeping stages of news production, i.e., no editors or producers cut and edited the video footage. Furthermore, live streaming practices were much more informal and unpredictable than those of live TV broadcasting. Newsroom routines that help shape the detached narrative largely were absent in SMLS. Journalists on the ground, most of whom did not attend any formal training sessions on how to conduct live streaming, decided on their own what to shoot and how to describe the scene, which led them to reconsider the notion of objectivity. Some acknowledged during the interviews that their live reporting was full of subjective decisions, but they gradually learned to work with the new norm and felt more comfortable with occasional expressions of emotion.

In actuality, it was quite difficult for journalists to avoid expressing any emotions during their reporting of the Anti-ELAB protests, which were highly emotional, filled with anger, disappointment, anxiety, and pride. Journalists had to interact constantly with various actors in the movement, and these interactions inevitably elicited emotional reactions. They also had to interact with police, who wound up pepper-spraying or tear-gassing, accidentally or intentionally, numerous journalists during their live

reporting, when police tried to control protest crowds. The police also increasingly restricted the areas where journalists could be positioned during the protests, leading to more clashes between the police and journalists. Although journalists avoided criticizing the police directly, their visceral reactions to the attacks and clashes often were documented during the live streaming sessions.

Journalists also interacted with protesters, many of whom had expectations for the news media, particularly the pro-democracy media. One journalist interviewee shared a story during her frontline reporting: While reporting at a protest one day, she lost her helmet in the chaotic environment, and a protester gave her his own helmet, which was an essential tool for self-protection against the rubber bullets. Many journalists said they heard protesters call them friends or “fellow travelers (同路人).” Some were nicknamed by protesters, such as “Sister Stand News (立場姐姐).” Although they distanced themselves from the protests for most of the time, some journalists offered their help by live streaming arrests of protesters when the arrested activists shouted their names so that their friends and family could bail them out of jail as soon as possible. These intimate interactions further challenged the boundaries of objective reporting.

Furthermore, unlike live TV journalists who do not interact with viewers, SMLS journalists had a much more direct and intimate relationship with audiences on social media platforms, who were sending overwhelmingly emotional comments during the live sessions. Although some journalists chose to ignore the live comments, many attempted to have conversations with the audiences, particularly when the audiences expressed concern for the journalists and their safety. Such direct and personal interactions became an essential part of the affective news of SMLS.

In terms of the blurred boundaries, our findings echoed Papacharissi’s argument that affective news is “personal and emotive, blending opinion and fact to the point where distinguishing one from the other is impossible and where doing so missed the point” (Papacharissi, 2015a, p. 277). Journalists noted that unlike what they produced in other types of reporting, they were unable to differentiate facts from opinions, and personal observations from objective descriptions clearly. Some even deliberately adopted a more personal tone in their voiceovers, further strengthening the affective feature. However, they also emphasized that they were trying their best to maintain balanced reporting and careful selection of framing that presented both sides of the protests. Therefore, the changes in journalistic practices should be understood as a struggle among journalists to navigate in a new environment, rather than a deliberate shift toward emotion-charged reporting.

Audience engagement

In conceptualizing “live,” Auslander (2012) emphasized both performers and audiences’ co-presence experience. SMLS is an example of such experience—the platform’s aforementioned affordances make the affective news conveyed through live streaming a product of not only the journalists, but also the audiences. Similar to affective storytelling, audience engagement with live videos is also highly emotional.

We collected live comments during 11 Facebook live streaming sessions during the movement and analyzed the sentiments from 360,900 live comments using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) package (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). The results indicated that 40.36% of the comments were deemed affective, with more than half the commenters (58.25%) posting at least one affective comment. Compared with non-affective comments (14.83%), affective comments (20.48%) had a higher probability of receiving emoticon responses, i.e., they were more likely to get affective responses during the live streaming sessions.

In a close reading of a randomly selected sample of live comments, we found that they often deviated from the video itself. Some became a means of catharsis, while others turned into discussions and quarrels among users. For example, during an anti-mask law protest, many comments were nothing but curses against the government. Notably, 10.66% of the comments contained profane language, which is much higher than the 2.8% uncivil-language rate in online comments identified in previous research in the Hong Kong context (Lee, Liang et al., 2019).

As for the comments that were relevant to the live video, we found that the commenters mostly were “talking” to different actors using emotional expressions. To the protesters, they wanted them to “be water” and “be safe,” and sent their blessings. To the police and the government, they expressed anger and even hatred, using phrases such as “black police.” To journalists, they thanked them for their efforts and reminded them to protect themselves. To pro-government users/trolls, they shared censored information on the mainland (e.g., the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident) and labeled them the “fifty-cent party.”

Located atop the live videos, the emotional comments became an essential part of the affective news. Perhaps for the first time in the history of journalism, audience-generated content (live comments) was presented simultaneously with journalist-generated news reporting (live streaming videos) on the same screen. Together, they formed a genre of hybrid and affective news.

The high level of emotional engagement among the audiences during the SMLS sessions potentially could translate into a strong emotional connection with the movement. In the August 2019 survey mentioned at the

Table 1. Linear regression predicting the strength of emotions (combined index of anger, fear, worry, and despair) about the movement.

Variables	Effects (β)	Standard Error	Significance	t-score
Perceived importance of ...				
Traditional media	-.04	.03	.21	-1.24
Online forums	.07*	.03	.03	2.15
Instant messenger	-.03	.03	.34	-.96
Social media	.06*	.03	.05	1.96
Live streaming	.21***	.04	.00	5.27
Constant	4.61***	.29	.00	15.90
R ²	.08			
Degree of freedom	5			
Number of cases	794			
F score	14.08***			

Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Source: Center for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

beginning of the article, we found that for citizens who viewed live streaming as the most important source of information about the protests, they also tended to have strong feelings about the movement. As shown in Table 1, the perceived importance of live streaming was the strongest predictor of levels of anger, fear, worry, and despair about the movement. After controlling for respondents' gender, age, income, and education, live streaming became the only medium that still significantly predicted the strength of emotions ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$; data not shown in the table).

Conclusion

In this article, we argue that SMLS during the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong is a type of affective news. It was enabled by the affordances of the Facebook Live platform, collectively produced by journalists who were not bounded by conventional detached practices and audiences who actively engaged in emotional reactions and discussions, and offering an immersive, unpredictable, sensational and dramatic experience of collective witnessing through its unique content and format.

The affective news of SMLS was also related to the Anti-ELAB Movement's features—a decentralized and highly fluid movement with impressive longevity largely driven by the high level of emotional engagement by citizens (Lee, 2020). It provided a perfect environment where this type of affective news could flourish. In return, SMLS might have contributed to the movement's solidarity and longevity by promoting emotional connection and engagement further. Data in Table indicate that a mutually reinforcing process might exist between SMLS and emotional engagement.

The affective news of SMLS also elicited negative implications. As Lecheler noted, the forms of affective or emotionally driven journalism "aim

to create reporting that leads to an intimate and trustful relationship with the audience. They operate based on the assumption that creating this bond can be achieved through the elicitation of emotional responses among audiences. Yet, whether and how this works, and whether increased emotionality is actually a 'good thing' is, largely unexplored" (Lecheler, 2020, p. 287). Our analysis suggests that audiences in an affective journalistic environment are more likely to comment and reply with affective words in particularly uncivil language that often prevents construction of meaningful conversations. The live streaming sessions may have also contributed to affective polarization among citizens.

To be sure, live news is not a new thing, as live TV broadcasts have existed for decades. Watching live reporting of important events on TV can also create a sense of collective witnessing and shared ritual (Couldry, 2002). However, as this study illustrates, significant differences exist between SMLS and live TV, leading to intensified affective influence among SMLS audiences. Compared with live TV, social media platforms' affordances help create a more immersive and participatory watching experience, with journalists no longer adhering strictly to conventional norms and routines, and instead adopting a more casual and authentic tone, and viewers actively engaging with live video and other audience members, often in highly emotional ways. These characteristics suggest that SMLS is not simply live TV transported to Facebook and YouTube, but rather a new form of journalistic practice and product.

This article enriches our understanding of the emotional turn of journalism by studying a recent case on a new medium (live streaming platforms) in a new context (social movements). It shows how an affective journalistic practice has been shaped by various actors. In the hybrid media system, news production is much more open and subject to influences from platforms and their audiences. To study affective news, we must examine related actors beyond those in the journalism industry.

Future research could focus on specific emotions—e.g., anger and sadness—instead of remaining at the general level (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020a). Our data indicate that among the six emoticons offered, people expressed anger and sadness more than the others while watching live streamed protests. But this may change in different contexts. Furthermore, scholars could pay more attention to affective journalism's effect on altering audiences' political perceptions, particularly in the context of social movements. Previous research has revealed that affective news is suitable for breeding and forming virtual communities with like-minded individuals (Papacharissi, 2015a). How would such features influence people's political perceptions, and would they increase polarization? These are critical questions waiting to be answered.

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