



## Networked counterpublics and discursive contestation in the agonistic public sphere: political jamming a police force Facebook Page

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing from agonistic public sphere perspectives, this study examines the jamming of the Hong Kong Police Force Facebook Page by users from its establishment in October 2015 to March 2016. 203 posts accounting for 96,791 comments were analyzed using a mixed-method approach. Findings showed that the early posts were heavily jammed with three types of counterpublic comments: (1) calls for justice regarding alleged police brutality during the Umbrella Movement one year prior, (2) emotional statements with impolite tone, and (3) accusations of comment deletions by the Page administrators. But, the relative intensity of the three types of counterdiscourses diminished over time. Moreover, despite the extensive use of embedded YouTube videos as counterdiscourses in the comments, there were few URL linkages to Hong Kong's dynamic counterpublic sphere. This study highlights the opportunities and constraints of Facebook's technological architecture for activists and networked counterpublics to challenge dominant discourses in situ.

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On 5 October 2015, the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) formally announced the launch of its Facebook Page with the goals to 'promote Force events and anti-crime messages' and for the public to have 'better understanding on the work of the Hong Kong Police' (HKPF, 2015). In doing so, it provides another media channel for the HKPF to engage in 'police image work' so as to maintain control of its public perception, authority and legitimacy (Schneider, 2016), and reflects a global trend for law enforcement agencies to use social media tools to engage with citizens (Brainard & Edlins, 2015; Crump, 2011). Under normal circumstances, the launch of a police Facebook Page would not receive much fanfare. Yet, for the HKPF, it came at a time of increasing political polarization within Hong Kong society where protests and rallies against the government have become more frequent and increasingly radical, thus challenging the HKPF's ability to appear politically neutral (Hui & Au, 2014). Moreover, the launch came one week after the one-year anniversary of the Umbrella Movement where pro-democracy activists, students, and citizens occupied key roads in Hong Kong for 79 days, an unprecedented protest attributed

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partly to initial baton charges and the firing of teargas by the police on protesters during the Occupy Central protests (Chan, 2016).

The first posted message was fairly innocuous, merely announcing in both Chinese and English the establishment of the Facebook page. Within a day over 3000 messages were posted, and supportive messages were very much in the minority. The majority were negative and featured name-calling (e.g. 'black police') and sarcasm (e.g. 'Please don't hit me!') as well as direct calls for justice (e.g. 'When are you going to arrest the ??'). Other users took advantage of the multimodal affordances of Facebook pages and embedded videos and photos challenging police authority and highlighting unprofessional behavior. Simply put, the HKPF Facebook Page was sabotaged as its attempt to engage citizens online and project a positive image was subverted by a flood of oppositional messages.

This study examines user comments in the HKPF page and the extent in which it has become a site of 'discursive contestation' (Dahlberg, 2007b) through the use of political jamming techniques (Cammaerts, 2007). A guiding framework is adopted that integrates insights from public sphere theory (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974) and its subsequent critiques (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Mouffe, 1999), together with the more recent concept of networked publics (boyd, 2011). In doing so, this exploratory study adds to previous works of online counterpublics that have focused on online news and blogs (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015) and social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr (Jackson & Welles, 2015; Renninger, 2015), and sheds light on how a Facebook Page can engender a counterhegemonic voice in an online space that was created for the purposes of disseminating dominant discourses.

## Literature review and theoretical framework

### *The internet and the agonistic public sphere*

Predicated on the works of Habermas et al. (1974), early scholarship and commentary on the impact of the Internet on politics generally focused on its ability to realize and 'revive' the deliberative public sphere and the extent it would facilitate open, equal and rational deliberations among people with different points of views so as to generate consensus and public opinion (Benkler, 2006; Papacharissi, 2002). Such a perspective has served as the dominant lens for much Internet and political communication research, even though the core tenets of public sphere theory has been the subject of much critique. Gitlin (1998), for example, doubted whether a single public sphere is possible given the pluralistic character of democracy and raised the possibility of Internet communications to support a myriad of 'public sphericules' based on diverse identities and interests that segment different strata of society. Critical theorists further challenged the theory for not addressing the issues of power and inequality given that discourses are inevitably set and sustained by dominant groups, such that 'members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives and strategies' (Fraser, 1990, p. 66). In this context, discourse is defined as 'the socially contingent, taken-for-granted and value laden systems of signification that constitute all understandings, identities, actions, and institutions.' (Dahlberg, 2007a, p. 133). Fraser used the term *subaltern counterpublics* to describe public spheres where 'members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional

interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (p. 67). Thus, the struggle for meaning through discourse becomes a struggle for hegemony in an *agonistic public sphere*, and discursive contestation between and among the public and counterpublic sphere(s) is an integral aspect of political communications because it ensures the 'multiplicity of voices' and their different claims in a pluralist democracy (Mouffe, 1999). Accordingly, Dahlberg (2007a) points out that the Internet from an agonistic perspective can support counterpublics in three interrelated ways: (1) provide online spaces where counterdiscourses can be initiated, shared, and sustained, (2) link up excluded and autonomous counter public spheres, and (3) directly contest discourse in dominant public spheres. How these relate to Facebook Pages are explicated next.

### **Facebook Pages as spaces for counterdiscourse and links to counterpublics**

To date, few studies have examined *Facebook Pages* as platforms for counterdiscourses and counterpublics even though they are used by millions of businesses and organizations to connect with users. Therefore, a brief description of its architecture is necessary. According to Facebook (2012), a 'Facebook Page is a public profile that allows anyone including artists, public figures, businesses, brands, organizations, and charities to create a presence on Facebook and engage with the Facebook community.' It is a public space in the sense that any registered Facebook user can view the page and interact with its content (i.e. 'Like', 'Share', 'Comment'). However, only the page administrator has the right to post original content on the page's news feed, an asymmetry that reflects the underlying purposes of pages to influence users and drive referral traffic for the benefit of the page owners. This represents an architecture quite different to the Twitter where anyone can post and view messages based on the hashtag. In the case of Facebook, users who 'Like' or 'Share' a Facebook Page or specific posts within it merely indicates a 'preference' and it is the Facebook algorithm that ultimately determines whether subsequent page content will appear on the news feeds of users' and their friends. By posting a comment or series of comments to page posts, users can also directly add text, photo and/or video content to the Facebook Page itself. Again, the action informs the algorithm and increases the possibility of later exposure to the page content, especially if other users interact with the comment.

Facebook has over 70% penetration in Hong Kong. Therefore, Facebook Pages provide an essential distribution channel for online alternative media that is historically tied to the pro-democracy movement and activist groups demanding greater social justice and equality in the city state (Chan, 2017). One notable exemplar is *inmediahk.net*, which features news stories and opinions pieces on political and social issues typically neglected by the pro-government mainstream press. Moreover, it provides a discursive space for activists and social organizations to raise awareness, articulate their demands and issue calls to action (Yung & Leung, 2014). Indeed, in recent years, the number of online alternative media in Hong Kong has increased exponentially with the establishment of online news platforms such as *Passion Times* and *Bastille Post*. Whilst the missions and goals of these news sites may be different they broadly share an antiestablishment stance and their development and growth have paralleled with the increased polarization and radicalization of politics in Hong Kong. They are also all reliant to a large degree on their own respective Facebook pages to disseminate their stories and reach new audiences since they

lack the financial resources to promote their platforms. This is reflected in the design of the websites that are closely integrated with the Facebook architecture. These include such elements as embedded icons that are conspicuously placed at the top of the websites that encourage users to 'Like' or 'Follow' their Facebook pages, and 'Share' icons next to individual news stories that allow readers to disseminate the story among their own Facebook networks with a click of a button.

To date, the three mentioned websites have accumulated a combined 1.8+ million 'Likes' on their Facebook pages, which provide a ready-made distribution network for counterdiscourses to be disseminated among users' social networks. Granted, it is highly probable that only those individuals who hold congruent political and ideological leanings with the pages will 'Like' them in the first place. However, their subsequent interactions with the content means that counterdiscourses can potentially cascade through networks of individuals who had no previous exposure to the content. Tremayne's (2014) network analysis on the evolution of the Occupy Wall Street movement on Twitter demonstrated the networking affordances of social media, and how counterdiscourses disseminated under the #OccupyWallStreet hashtag helped to broker connections among previously autonomous counterpublics, and in doing so, exponentially increased the scale of counterdiscourse against social and economic inequality, which then helped to mobilize subsequent offline protests. This example demonstrates some of ways in which social media can facilitate what Dahlberg (2007b) calls 'intra-discursive contestation', a kind of discourse within and among counterpublic spaces where people can obtain information and articulate issues and identities, as well as strategize and coordinate collective actions. Such is the case in Hong Kong where online alternative media are utilizing the affordances of their Facebook pages to further disseminate their messages and expand their audiences. In this regard the concept of *networked counterpublics*, which draws from boyd's (2011) term *networked publics*, is useful because it encompasses both the online space in which counterpublics congregate and the recognition that certain features and affordances of SNSs can shape the form and content of people's communicative behaviors in the online public sphere.

### **Facebook Pages as sites of discursive contestation**

Of particular interest to this study is how counterdiscourses can directly challenge dominant discourses *between* the boundaries of the public and counterpublic spheres (i.e. 'inter-discursive contestation', Dahlberg, 2007b). Such contestations are possible in Facebook Pages due to one key technological feature: the inability of page administrators to turn off user comments to page posts. This is in keeping with Facebook's emphasis on 'engagement,' yet also offers networked counterpublics an entry point in which to infiltrate a public sphere in situ with counterdiscourses. A well-publicized example was the 'hijacking' of the New York Police Department's #myNYPD Twitter hashtag in 2014 (Jackson & Welles, 2015). Intended to build community relations by asking the public to share photos of themselves with NYPD officers, the Twitter feed was instead inundated with photos of police brutality as well as sarcastic comments, memes and expressions of outrage. Thousands of tweets were added within hours, with activist organizations and citizen journalism groups serving as hubs to direct traffic to the hashtag while the NYPD had no way to remove nor cancel the flow of counterdiscourses. Such acts

represented the appropriation of ‘political cultural jamming’ techniques, which can ‘be seen as a way of dealing with the messiness of reality, as subverting meanings, and thereby using humor, mocking, satire and parody’ (Cammaerts, 2007, p. 72).

Thus, compared to other media, social network sites like Twitter and Facebook are unique because they afford scalability of user content by providing spaces where public and counterpublic spheres converge, and an interconnected network structure where discourses and counterdiscourses can cascade exponentially across both spheres in rapid time. However, as compared to the architecture of Twitter, Facebook Pages are much more hierarchical because page administrators can delete or hide complete posts as well as ban individual users. Moreover, who gets to see what content is wholly dependent on the Facebook algorithm. In sum, the technical architecture of Facebook does afford the potential for networked counterpublics to disseminate counterdiscourses by directly affecting what content appears on Facebook Pages. How this is done and what it looks like in the context of the HKPF Facebook Page will be examined after explicating the broader context of state, police, and society relations in Hong Kong.

### ***Caught in the middle: The HKPF and radicalization of politics in Hong Kong***

For over 100 years while Hong Kong remained a British colony, the HKPF operated under the principle of ‘policing strangers by strangers’ with the primary function to maintain public order among the indigenous population rather than enforce laws (Jiao, Lau, & Lui, 2005). The shift to a more service-orientated and modern police force started in the 1980s through a series of reforms and over the next two decades the HKPF earned a global reputation for its professionalism and contributing to Hong Kong’s very low crime rate. As an institution the HKPF answers to the government’s Security Bureau while the Police Commissioner is nominated by the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. Moreover, police officers are part of the civil service and receive generous pay and benefits relative to the general working population. Despite these deep-rooted ties to government, the HKPF has until recently been generally perceived as an apolitical organization with relatively high citizen satisfaction ratings (HKUPOP, 2018).

The HKPF’s ability to maintain a perception of impartiality and political neutrality has, however, become increasingly difficult in the past decade because of Hong Kong’s increasingly polarized society and the rise of ‘radical politics’ (Cheng, 2014), characterized by the increasing number of public protests and demonstrations making diverse demands and expressing discontent towards the government (Hui & Au, 2014). The most vocal has been the demand for democratic reform. Unable to make headway through the legislature because of a fixed system that guarantees a majority of seats for pro-government parties, the radical wing of the pan-democratic political parties, civic groups, social activists, and ‘post 80s’ youth have adopted populist strategies and methods to voice their demands. One outcome has been increased physical confrontations and provocations with the HKPF during street marches and protests, which have come under intense scrutiny from the mainstream media as well as alternative media, which would upload photos or videos of any supposed police infraction or bias to be shared among and across networked counterpublics. For all intents and purposes, Hong Kong politics resembles an agonistic public sphere on several levels. As the symbolic representation of the state at the street level, the

HKPF often becomes the proxy through which pro-democracy activists and protesters vent their anger, frustrations and demands towards the government on a variety of issues.

The nadir of police/protester interactions was the firing of teargas by the police to disperse large crowds during the Occupy Central protests in September 2014, an unprecedented action that shocked and galvanized parts of the population, leading to the 79-day occupation of key roads by citizens, activists and students. Although the occupation of public space was a direct challenge to public order and hence required a direct police response, the government adopted an attritional strategy to wait out the protesters. In the end, waning public support, lack of a coherent strategy, and the realization that the government would not budge on its stance, contributed to the end of the occupation and the HKPF was able to clear the public spaces and roads. Yet, several incidents of alleged police misconduct during the Umbrella Movement, including the beating of an activist by seven police officers (Chan & Cheung, 2014) and excessive use of force by a superintendent to disperse pedestrians (Ng, Siu, & Lau, 2014) put the HKPF in a negative light. Videos of the acts were widely reported by the media and circulated across networked counterpublics. As a result, the HKPF's satisfaction rating dropped to an all-time low of 50.4% in 2015 (HKUPOP, 2018).

It is within this context that the HKPF launched its Facebook page on 5 October 2015. Its stated purposes to 'promote' police events and 'portray stories of police officers', however, suggested a strategy focused on unidirectional information dissemination rather than two-way interactions with citizens. Given Facebook's popularity in Hong Kong, it presents the HKPF a channel to connect with citizens and supplement its traditional media outreach efforts. One can only speculate on the HKPF's decision to launch the page at such close proximity to the one-year anniversary of the Umbrella Movement, and to what extent they assessed the risk of potential negativity considering that Facebook users in Hong Kong tend to be younger and more educated, the same demographics that participated in the Umbrella Movement. This is not to say that all young and educated people are anti-police and support the pro-democracy cause. It is entirely feasible that dominant discourses would also receive their share of 'likes' and supportive comments. In fact, it is the very confluence of positive and negative comments that engender the possibilities for discursive contestation and the formation of an agonistic public sphere.

### *Research questions*

Based on the above discussions, this exploratory study has three interrelated research questions. Because users can directly affect the content of Facebook Pages, and Page administrators cannot turn off the commenting function, the first question asks (RQ1): To what extent are counterdiscourses disseminated on the HKPF Facebook Page upon its launch and in what forms do they take? Because this study examines posts and comments across the first few months of the page, the second question thus asks (RQ2): To what extent are counterdiscourses on the HKPF Facebook Page sustained, expanded or diminished over time? Finally, because of the prominence of online alternative media as an influential counterpublic sphere in Hong Kong, the third question asks (RQ3): To what extent do counterdiscourses on the HKPF Facebook Page draw upon content from or build connections with networked counterpublics?

## Method

### *Data extraction and overview*

Facepager, a third-party software that facilitates Facebook Page data extraction through Facebook's Application Programming Interface (API) was used to extract HKPF Page posts, user comments to posts, replies to comments, and engagement (i.e. likes and shares). Data collection was staggered with a gap of 14 days between date of post and date of extraction. For example, data from the November 1 post was extracted on November 15. Data from 5 October 2015 to 31 March 2016 was collected.<sup>1</sup>

The data comprised 203 posts, 96,791 comments to posts, and 26,274 replies to comments. In general, a new post was published daily with the exception of public holidays (e.g. New Year's Day). Two coders categorized the 203 posts according to their basic function and agreed on 100% of the cases. Most common were 'updates' of typical police activities such as special crime prevention campaigns and introducing different police force functions (33%). This is followed by 'cautionary' posts that encourage vigilance to certain crimes such as phone scams and online fraud (30%). Next were 'advisory' posts that are often related to traffic arrangement announcements for festivals and special events (9%). Of all the functions, only 'appeals' involved explicit calls for direct citizen participation with police investigations, such as assistance with finding a missing person and calls for witnesses to a crime. In terms of direct engagement with users, the administrator of the Page replied to user comments on only four occasions between 17 October 2015 and 11 November 2015. The lack of substantive interaction between the page administrator and users is not too surprising considering that the Page was presented by the HKPF in its press release as a promotional tool rather than a channel for two-way communication with the public (HKPF, 2015).

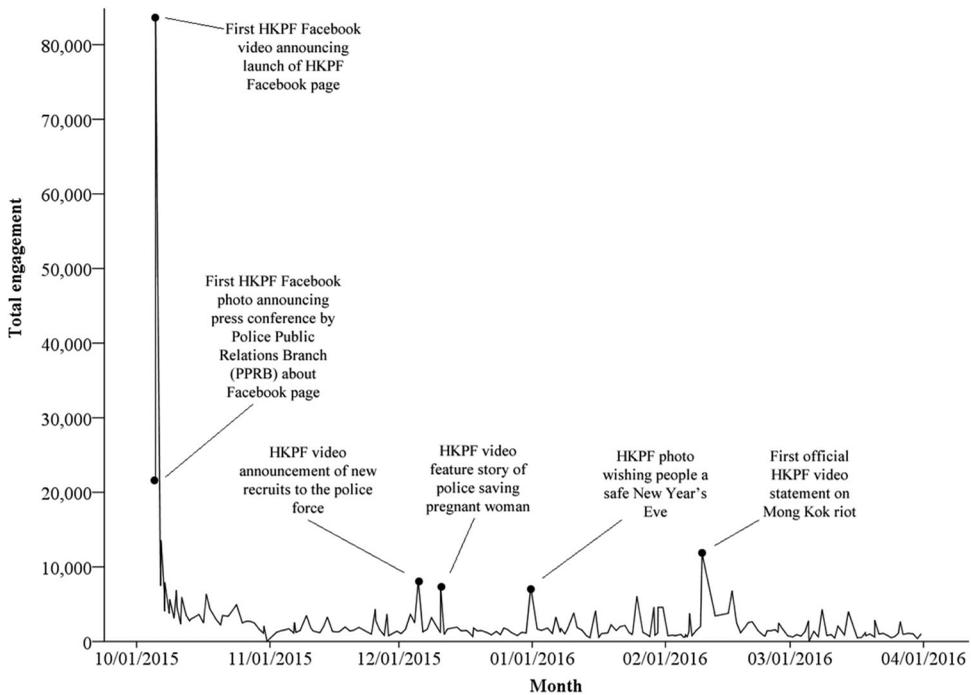
Figure 1 summarizes the fluctuating level of user engagement with HKPF posts during the time period. The first post was published at 7:40 am and the second at 7:57 am with both formally announcing the launch of the Facebook Page. Engagement from users for the two posts was huge with over 40,000 comments. The comments for the whole of October alone accounted for 83% of the total sample. User engagement eventually fell and stabilized. In 2016, the most commented post ( $N = 1229$ ) was the official HKPF statement on the Mongkok Riot that took place during the Lunar New Year. As with the Umbrella Movement, the riot was unprecedented in terms of the physicality and level of violence exhibited between the police and protesters that included the hurling of bricks at the police, lighting of fires on the street, and police firing of warning shots into the air to disperse crowds. Such scenes have not been seen in Hong Kong for decades.

## Analysis and findings

### *RQ1. Extent and types of counterdiscourses following page launch*

#### *Qualitative analyses*

An inductive mixed-method approach was adopted to analyse the posts. First, an in-depth reading of 141 comments from the first post ( $N = 29$ ) and second post ( $N = 112$ ) that had obtained 10 or more 'Likes' from other Facebook users were conducted using Toepfl and Piwoni's (2015) three 'discursive practices' of counterpublic discourse as an organizing



**Figure 1.** Total engagement of each HKPF Facebook post from 5 October 2015 to 31 March 2016.

Note: Engagement = sum of (1) comments to post, (2) reply to comments, (3) likes to post, (4) likes to comments, and (5) shares of post.

framework. Based on the criteria and close reading, 116 (82%) were identified as counter-public comments (see Table 1) while only one can be described as ‘mainstream’ (i.e. ‘Support the police to strictly enforce the law!’). Ten comments (10%) featured URL links to external content, which will be examined in greater detail as part of RQ3. The remaining could not be classified, either because they featured only emoticons or non-sensical expressions that were difficult to interpret.

Sixty-six comments (57%) engaged in *argumentative countering* by completely ignoring the post announcements of the Page and instead redirected focus on the alternative issue-specific frame of the seven police officers who were videoed beating an activist, and the case of a police superintendent hitting pedestrians with a baton during the Umbrella Movement. At the time, the videos were widely reported in the mainstream media and the actions appeared to be unequivocal, but more than a year later no formal charges had yet been made on the police officers. These comments thus revived a year-old issue and asked when the police officers would be formally charged and arrested. Comments ranged from very short questions (i.e. ‘When will the seven be charged?’) to longer comments, such as:

Dear police public relations officer,

Regarding the officers who gave false testimonies in court, will they be punished? If the police were the ones who raised the charges, and they were the one who gave false testimonies, does that mean this should be a criminal case? If it is lawful for police to give false testimonies in

**Table 1.** Type of comments and prevalent keywords used in the comment sections of the first two Page posts.

|  | Post 1<br><i>Announce HKFP Page launch<br/>(Photo)</i> | Post 2<br><i>Announce HKFP Page launch<br/>(Video)</i> | Posts 1 and 2<br>combined |
|--|--|--|---------------------------|
| <i>Qualitative analyses</i>                  | <i>N = 29</i>  | <i>N = 112</i>   | <i>N = 141</i>            |
| Mainstream discourses                        | 1  | 0  | 1                         |
| Embedded URL Links                           | 2  | 12   | 14                        |
| Unclassifiable                               | 0  | 10   | 10                        |
| Counterdiscourses                            |  |  |                           |
| 1. <i>Argumentative countering</i>           | 11   | 55   | 66                        |
| 2. <i>Strengthening identity</i>             | 13   | 26   | 39                        |
| 3. <i>Deconstructing power relationships</i> | 2  | 9  | 11                        |
| % comments as counterdiscourses              | 90%  | 80%  | 82%                       |
| <i>Quantitative analyses</i>                 | <i>N = 7432</i>  | <i>N = 32,729</i>                                      | <i>N = 40,161</i>         |
| Most frequent keywords                       |  |  |                           |
| 1. <i>Argumentative countering</i>           |  |  |                           |
| '7 police officers'                          | 602  | 3388   | 3990                      |
| Names of 7 police officers                   | 2879   | 8119   | 10,998                    |
| Name of superintendent                       | 406  | 1566   | 1972                      |
| 2. <i>Strengthening identity</i>             |  |  |                           |
| Variants of 'Black police'                   | 824  | 3077   | 3901                      |
| 3. <i>Deconstructing power relationships</i> |  |  |                           |
| Variants of 'delete'                         | 1988   | 9205   | 11,193                    |

court, how can citizens protect themselves? Please reply, thank you. Also, when will the seven police officers [*post lists the names of 7 officers and their collar numbers*] be charged? I support the police's stern upholding of the law. [Original in Chinese]

Words that occurred frequently included '7 police' ('七警' or '七警') as well as the actual names of the officers and in some instances their 5-digit collar number.

Thirty-nine (34%) comments were in the form of *strengthening identity*, mostly in the form of emotional and sarcastic statements that portrays the police negatively (i.e. 'Everyone knows that HKPF = Triads', 'Shame on the Hong Kong police!') as well as several instances of impolite and threatening tone that goes beyond acceptable mainstream social discourse (i.e. 'Death to black police and their families!', 'I want to ask if the police really rapes citizens on a daily basis'). The adjective 'black' (i.e. '黑') is used frequently, most commonly to refer to 'corrupt police' ('黑警') and sometimes to 'triads' (i.e. '黑社會').

Eleven comments (9%) can be considered as *deconstructing power relationships* and come in two forms. The first kind refers to the police force as an accomplice of the government that acts against the interests of Hong Kong citizens (i.e. 'When will you stop perpetuating "white terror"? When will you stop acting as political tools against protestors and citizens?'). The second refers to administrator/user power relations within the Facebook Page, with some accusations that the Page administrator was actively deleting user comments and thus diminishing their voices (i.e. 'Why are you deleting our comments?'). Both Chinese (i.e. '刪') and English (i.e. 'del') expressions were used. In some cases, comments featured a combination of discursive practices, such as the following that have elements of strengthening identity and deconstructing power relationships:

Dear HK Police, if you can't stand people telling you the truth, get off Facebook. Hide inside your stations, pull the shutters down, and shoot tear gas out if anyone says "boo!" You should hang your heads in shame for your rapid descent into thuggery and cronyism. Oh, and if you need help deleting critical posts, I hear there are plenty of experts up North. [Original in English]

The label 'up north' mentioned above is one of many labels used to describe Mainland China, which is always portrayed negatively as a hegemonic power controlling Hong Kong's government and institutions. This is sometimes combined with the element of strengthening identity so as to further distinguish the self from the other (i.e. "The Communist Party basically controls the police. It is a matter of time before tanks are used against Hongkongers"). Overall, the close reading of the 141 user comments using Toepfl and Pivoni's (2015) framework showed that counterdiscourses were very prevalent.

### **Quantitative analyses**

The next step is to examine the extent in which the counterdiscourses identified in the close-readings (i.e. post-Umbrella Movement grievances and calls for police accountability, emotional statements, accusations of comment deletions etc.) are generally representative of the comments in Post 1 ( $N = 7432$ ) and Post 2 ( $N = 32,729$ ). Because a list of keywords and phrases related to counterdiscourses have already been identified from the close readings, computer-aided content analysis based on a 'closed vocabulary approach' would be appropriate (Kern et al., 2016; Su et al., 2017). In brief, this entails creating a dictionary of keywords based on the close-readings, cross-referencing the keywords with all the comments, and then examining their collocations to provide some indication of the context in which the keywords were used. Using the previous 'Dear police public relations officer' as an example, if this counterdiscourse demanding action on the seven police officers is a recurrent one, we would expect the keywords 'seven police' and 'charge' to collocate closely with each other. The analyses were performed using the *Voyant Tools* software and three recurrent themes were identified in line with the three types of counterdiscourses explicated in the close readings (see Table 1).

1. ***Grievances against police officers' behaviors during Umbrella Movement.*** Variants of the keywords '7 police' ( $N = 33,583$ ) and 'false testimony' ( $N = 34,872$ ) as well as the names of the seven police officers ( $N = 33,624$ ) were by far the most mentioned and they collocated with each other very strongly with the keyword 'charge' ( $N = 10,610$ ), suggesting that the demands for the seven accused police officers to be formally charged was the predominant counterdiscourse. Collocations with other contextual keywords such as 'protester' ( $N = 488$ ) and 'Occupy Central' ( $N = 311$ ) were relatively lower, suggesting that the comments did not provide much context to the demands. It should be noted however that the number of keywords is not indicative of the number of comments since the same keywords can be used multiple times in a single comment. A closer examination showed that the combination of the keywords co-occurred in over 10,000 of the 40,000+ comments. Moreover, the 'Dear Public Relations Officer' comment with only minor variations appeared 7720 times and was posted by 3084 unique users. It is unclear whether there was any coordination among users who made the similar comments. What can be surmised however is the prominence of

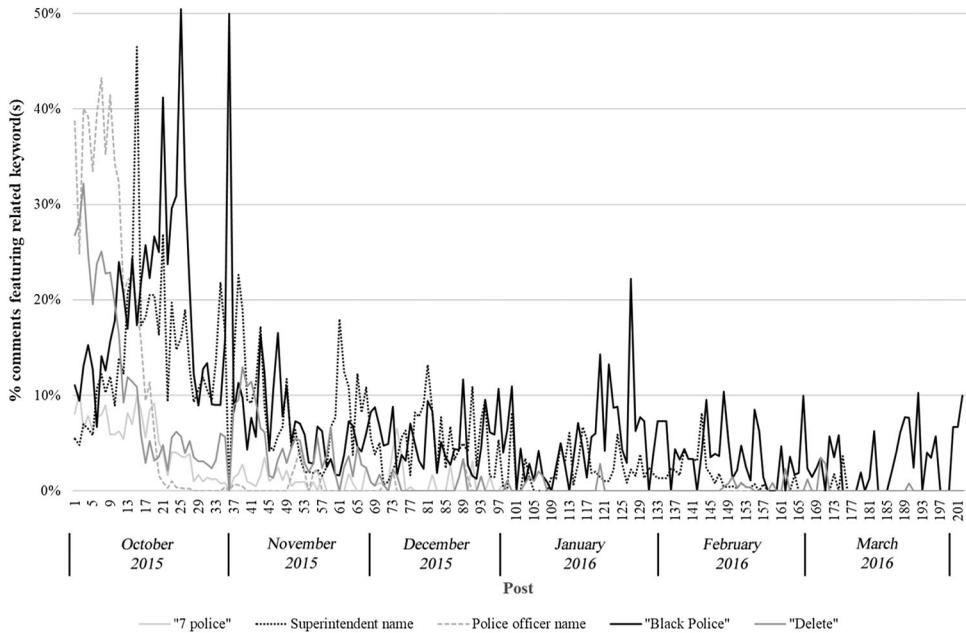
counterdiscourses via *copy and paste jamming*. This relates to boyd's (2011) notion of the 'structural affordances' of networked publics that can amplify, record and spread information. By copying and pasting existing content, users can easily and conveniently replicate posts to increase their salience and length of exposure. Indeed, from the first appearance of the comment at 1:25 pm to 9:00 pm on the first day of the first post, there was a sustained barrage of an average 4.5 'Dear Public Relations Officer' comments every minute, ensuring that any user visiting the Page during this period would very likely see the comment seeking justice against police actions during the Umbrella Movement.

2. ***Emotional statements and impolite tone.*** Whilst the comments calling for justice were generally civil, the pejorative 'black police' ('黑警') was used over 12,000 times with varying degrees of impolite tone. In one extreme case, the two Chinese characters were repeated 398 times in a continuous chain to form a mosaic, thus ensuring that the comment dominated the feed in the HKPF Facebook page. The two most frequent collocates were 'Death' ( $N = 1045$ ) and 'whole family' ( $N = 892$ ), which suggests that the 'Death to black police and their families!' expression found in the qualitative analysis was quite prevalent.
3. ***Accusations of post deletions.*** Variants of the keyword related to 'delete' appeared in many of the posts ( $N = 11,193$ ) and closely collocated with the word 'message' ( $N = 8446$ ). This suggests the Page administrator was actively involved in surveilling and deleting comments. Users comments included: 'Hello? Where did my comment go?' and 'Where is my question??? Deleted!!! What is the function of this Page???' However, the actions may have inadvertently provoked an even greater response from users. It is relevant to note here the architecture of Facebook page administration that does not provide a 'mass delete' function for comments. Instead, administrators have to manually hover above individual comments and delete them one by one. Thus, when faced against determined and sustained copy and paste political jams, the Page administrator would have faced an uphill task to stem the flow of comments. Some users were probably aware of this as some comments actually taunted the Page administrators (i.e. 'Let's see if you can delete faster than I can post!').

## **RQ2. Prevalence of counterdiscourses over time**

Analyses of the first two posts demonstrated that the three types of counterdiscourses were very prevalent. The next logical step of the analysis is to examine the extent in which these counterdiscourses were sustained in subsequent posts. Because of the very skewed distribution of comments among the 203 posts, examining absolute frequency of keywords may not be the most appropriate approach. Rather, it is more useful to explore the percentage of comments within each post that feature the keywords. In doing so, the relative salience of the counterdiscourses within posts over time can be ascertained. This is summarized in [Figure 2](#) using the five most common keywords representing the three counterdiscourses.

The results showed that a substantive percentage of comments in the first few days of the HKPF Facebook Page was concerned with calls for justice relating to the seven police officers. In the first 11 posts between October 5 and 9, 24.8–43.8% of comments included the real names of the police officers and their collar numbers, but the proportion soon dropped precipitously to the extent that their names are no longer mentioned at all in



**Figure 2.** Percentage of comments that feature counterdiscourses in the 203 posts from 5 October 2015 to 31 March 2016.

2016. In comparison, comments regarding the superintendent followed slightly different trajectories and his name was mentioned up until post 176 (8 March 2016) although the relative proportion of comments was quite low by then. This is part of an overall trend where the sustained political jams in the first week soon subsided. One noticeable exception is the use of 'black police', which appears more frequently, most notably in post 127 (26 January 2016) where it appears in 22% of comments. This post was titled 'A year in review' and announced a HKPF press conference reporting key law enforcement developments and statistics in Hong Kong for 2015. Thus, the nature of the content may have drawn more counterdiscourses because it was directly related to police image and reputation building.

Taken as a whole, it is safe to say that the main counterdiscourses were not sustained over time to the extent that in 2016 the calls for the seven police officers and the superintendent to be charged for their actions during the Umbrella Movement, as well as accusations of comment deletions by the Page administrator, rarely comprised more than 10% of comments for each post. There could be several reasons for these trends. First, when the Page was first launched counterpublics were more motivated to use the platform to make their voices heard. But over time it is feasible that the proportion of sympathetic publics and discourses increased over time as part of HKPF public relations and promotions to engage citizens at large. Second, Page administrators may have changed their surveillance strategy. Rather than spend time blocking individual comments, they may have decided to actively block or ban individual users, thus removing their ability to engage further with the Page. This strategy may be particularly effective for the 'hard core' users. An examination of Post 1 and 2 for example showed that 20 users were responsible for 16% of the

44,019 comments (range 147–1444). Therefore, banning these users is exponentially more effective in stemming the volume of counterdiscourses than deleting individual comments, though it is not clear from the analyses that this is what actually happened. Third, it could simply be the case that the counterpublics themselves lost the motivation to constantly go to the Page to disseminate counterdiscourses.

### RQ3. Appropriation of counterdiscourses and links to counterpublics

#### Qualitative analyses of URL links

As mentioned in the literature review, Hong Kong has a very active counterpublic sphere in the form of online alternative media that are ideologically aligned with the pro-democracy cause and activists. Therefore, it is worth examining the extent in which users attempted to build linkages to these external counterpublics and counterdiscourses. A close examination of the 14 URL links in Post 1 and 2 showed that all but one featured links to YouTube videos, 8 of which were related to police confrontations with protesters during the Umbrella Movement. Two reasons may explain the preference of such videos as counterdiscourses. First, research on the role of YouTube in political and social activism has highlighted its important role as a form of ‘witnessing’, especially with regards to recording and broadcasting injustices committed by those in power (Thorson, Ekdale, Borah, Namkoong, & Shah, 2010). Second, the Facebook Page automatically creates a thumbnail and preview screen for the news story, the headline and video content when URL links are embedded in the comments. Facilitated by Facebook’s architecture, little effort is required for users to embed a video to provide a vivid counterdiscourse that takes up space on the comment feed *as well as* link to external counterpublics.

#### Quantitative analyses of URL links

An examination of the 203 posts showed that there were 20,223 URL links, of which 12,512 were embedded links to YouTube videos (62%). By far the single most popular video with 7076 links featured a video from a mainstream news media channel broadcasted a prior that records the alleged beating of an activist by the seven police officers. The next four most linked to videos were also counterdiscourses intended to portray the police negatively and were also derived from mainstream news sources (see Table 2). Similar to the initial findings in RQ1, most of the YouTube videos focused on

**Table 2.** Top 5 YouTube videos linked to from the HKPF Facebook page.

|   | Video description   | Originally published | Source                       | FB Links in Post 1 and 2 | FB Links among sample |
|---|---|----------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Seven police officers use force against activist during Umbrella Movement | 15 October 2014      | Official media (Apple Daily) | 4                        | 7076                  |
| 4 | Police officer in heated argument   | 24 April 2014        | Official media (Apple Daily) | 2                        | 767                   |
| 2 | Police clearing protest area during Umbrella Movement                     | 14 October 2014      | Official media (TVB News)    | 2                        | 332                   |
| 3 | Superintendent hitting pedestrian   | 26 November 2014     | User-edited media (DBC)      | 1                        | 199                   |
| 5 | Superintendent hitting pedestrian   | 22 July 2015         | Official media (Apple Daily) | 1                        | 143                   |

Source classifications: Official media = online version of mainstream news media | User-edited media = edited content using official online media.

seeking accountability for the actions of the seven police officers and the superintendent. This relates to the generic affordances of the Internet (i.e. ‘searchability’ and ‘persistence’, boyd, 2011) as these videos were archived online and is readily searchable by others, recycled, and reappropriated for use at a later time as part of a counterdiscourse to challenge the police.

In the next analysis, the 7711 non-YouTube links were examined to assess the extent in which the posts linked to networked counterpublics. For example, a post that contains a link to an online news article or opinion piece from *PassionTimes*, an online alternative media news platform noted for its strong anti-government stance, would be considered a linkage to a networked counterpublic. Yet, the results showed that most of the links were directed to online versions of mainstream media rather than online activist or alternative media. For example, the pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily* was linked to the most ( $N = 1249$ ) with many news stories that generally highlighted police behavior in negative ways. Yet, there were also links to mass dailies that are considered pro-China, such as *Wen Wei Po* ( $N = 1059$ ) and *Oriental Daily News* ( $N = 347$ ).

Overall, there was little evidence of users using the comments on the Page to create external linkages to networked counterpublics so as to further promote or coordinate an activist agenda. Hong Kong has a thriving and dynamic online alternative media that constitutes an influential counterpublic sphere (Lee, So, Leung, Lee, & Chan, 2017). Linkages to alternative media could have helped direct more traffic to these networked counterpublics and perhaps lead to more coordinated action, as evidenced by previous studies of Twitter (e.g. Jackson & Welles, 2015; Tremayne, 2014). Nevertheless, the findings showed that linkages to such media as *Stand News* ( $N = 114$ ), *Passion Times* ( $N = 15$ ) and *Bastille Post* ( $N = 3$ ), which have a combined 1.6 million+ ‘Likes’ on their Facebook pages, were minuscule.

## Discussion

The rapid rise and diffusion of social media have led to much research in the past decade examining the democratizing potential of the technology to facilitate the Habermasian public sphere where citizens engage in rational and civil deliberation about political and social affairs. Fewer works have examined the public sphere from an agonistic perspective, which is more concerned with the struggle for meaning through discursive contestation by counterpublics. Recent works have begun to examine the dynamics and tensions when discourses and counterdiscourses or in close vicinity to each other (e.g. Jackson & Welles, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015) and this study contributes to this line of research by being one of the first to examine inter-discursive contestation in a Facebook context.

Findings from RQ1 clearly showed that the Hong Kong Police Force Facebook Page was overwhelmed with counterdiscourses in the first few days of its launch. Several conditions made it possible. First, it is important to note that counterdiscourses are only possible because Facebook do not allow Page administrators to disable the commenting function. Though guided purely by a commercial logic to increase user attention, engagement and traffic, this pivotal decision provides an opening for counterdiscourses to be disseminated in close vicinity to mainstream discourses and publics. Another aspect of the architecture is the ease and convenience in which external content can be integrated into Facebook through its embedding and thumbnailing functions for videos. Again, it

was certainly not the intention of Facebook to encourage the political jamming of Facebook page content and subverting a Page's dominant discourses, but the architecture and design nevertheless facilitates such actions. Second, the HKPF Facebook page was launched at an extremely sensitive and polarizing time in Hong Kong politics, just only a few days after the one-year anniversary of the end of the Umbrella Movement and the ongoing cases of whether some police officers would be charged for their actions during the Umbrella Movement. Thus, when the page was launched, it provided an opportune moment for those seeking justice to express their views directly to the police, and the expressions related to the seven police officers came together to form a set of powerful personal action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2015). Of course, self-expression can be just one motivation for making comments. Another could be to attract the attention of 'third parties' or 'neutrals' so as to gain their sympathy and support (Rucht, 2004). However, given the general tone of the political jams and the frequent use of the pejorative 'black police' it is not clear whether such posts would have gained much sympathy or traction from mainstream publics.

In fact, as found in RQ2 and RQ3, the calls for justice diminished over time as the Page underwent a period of normalization and there was little effort in the user comments to broker connections with established counterpublic spheres. In other words, while there were certainly counterpublic comments, they were not organized nor disseminated by what can be considered a 'body' of counterpublic entities or groups that have recognizable identities or agendas. Unlike the political jamming of the NYPD (Jackson & Welles, 2015), there was little evidence demonstrating interest or advocacy groups actively driving traffic to the HKPF page. As mentioned earlier, it is possible that individuals may have lost interest or drive in following the Page; or they were outright banned. Unlike the case of Twitter, where a core narrative can be organized and sustained through a single hashtag (e.g. #OccupyWallSt, #blacklivesmatter), Facebook pages have a decentralized hierarchical structure based on page 'posts' and 'comments'. In Twitter, political jams by networked counterpublics are directed to the hashtag. In Facebook, political jams are directed towards individual posts, which are automatically relegated and archived when new posts appear. The same with user comments within each post. Collectively, this means that the relative visibility of counterdiscourses in Facebook has a relatively short lifespan, especially the case with the HKPF Facebook Page as the administrators have been very consistent in posting new content almost every day.

Thus, in order to maximize the exposure of counterdiscourses, it would be necessary not only to comment on every new post, but to do so on regular intervals within each individual thread of each post. This was apparent in the first few posts of the Page where comments related to the '7 police' were dominant and sustained for days. Needless to say, this form of political jamming can be quite time consuming to conduct individually. But as this study shows, it is achievable when there is a critical mass of users adopting copy and paste tactics to flood the comments section of each post. Some may consider such tactics a form of 'clicktivism', but the surge of counterdiscourses in the first few days *did* influence the frames in which the mainstream press reported on the launch of the HKPF Facebook Page, especially among the pro-democracy press and online alternative media, which featured headlines such as 'Police Force establishes a Facebook page, netizens inquire about 7 police case' and 'Police Force Facebook Page Launches: Netizens ask when will "7 police"

and [officer name] be charged?’ In this regard, one may argue that the political jams were quite successful, at least initially.

## Limitations and future research

This study has certain limitations that open further avenues for future research on discursive contestation in social media. First, given that the findings were based on a single case study more similar studies are needed to examine the dynamics of counterdiscourses and counterpublics in Facebook Pages, especially given the platform’s global influence and its use by many organizations and institutions to disseminate dominant discourses. For example, more emphasis can be placed on the structure of user participation as well as their motivations for doing so, especially among the ‘superparticipants’ who are disproportionately more active and influential in driving the narrative of online discourses (Graham & Wright, 2014). However, as Facebook has recently revised its API to restrict access to user identities, such an analysis may not be possible. The second limitation relates to the methodological approach. This study followed previous recommendations to adopt a complementary approach that blends close reading with computational methods when analyzing large datasets (Lewis, Zamith, & Hermida, 2013; Su et al., 2017). The advantage of this approach adopted for the study is that counterdiscourses can be specified *a priori* based on existing theories and typologies. One disadvantage was that it only focused on counterdiscourses in the first two posts and the extent they were sustained while other possible alternative counterdiscourses that may have appeared in later posts would not be detected. For future longitudinal studies of Facebook Pages, close readings may perhaps be better employed throughout the time period. One suggestion would be to conduct close readings for posts that are tied to important announcements or societal events where new counterdiscourses may be introduced, which can then be further tracked using quantitative methods.

Despite these limitations, this case study highlights the potential for decentralized and spontaneous counterdiscourses to sabotage a Facebook page in situ. In doing so, they were able to disrupt the dominant discourses of an influential government institution. Given the initial effectiveness of the political jams in what appeared to be a largely uncoordinated affair with little strategic coordination, the question arises about the potential of such political jams when there is indeed a more cohesive and longer-term strategy put in place by social movements, activists, and other counterpublics to disseminate counterdiscourses in Facebook Pages in ways that not only highlight social grievances or injustice for mainstream public consumption, but also actively build linkages to networked counterpublic spheres so as to raise the visibility of their voices and agendas. Of course, the ability to achieve this depends ultimately on the architecture of Facebook and its algorithm and whether the preexisting asymmetrical power dynamics between Page administrators and users may become even wider in the future.

## Note

1. It should be noted that while Facebook did launch an expanded set of reactions (e.g. love, anger etc.) in late February, the API to access the data was not made available to developers until mid-April with the update of its API to version 2.6. Therefore, the new reactions do not form a part of this study.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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