

Taiwan Fellowship Research Project:

# Digital Democracy in Taiwan: The Sunflower Movement and its Legacies

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## Overview:

The 2014 Sunflower Movement has had broad implications for Taiwanese politics. It has encouraged a wide range of actors to participate in political processes, has shifted the power-relations between the established political parties, and has led to the founding of a new party. These outcomes are tied to the movement's creative use of digital technologies. But considering how such technologies are themselves governed by certain media logics, the rationales of the political economy, and the design choices of platform providers, how should we assess the role of such technologies in crucial political processes? To explore these issues, this project studies the legacies of the Sunflower Movement five years on and relates them to ongoing debates about the nature of 'new social movements' and digital politics. The study consists of interviews with activists and established political actors in Taiwan, as well as analyses of social media networks and discourses (on Twitter and, where possible, on Facebook). The aim is to establish how the Sunflower Movement deployed digital technologies and how this technology usage has changed political expectations and processes in Taiwan.

## Overarching Question:

How did the Sunflower Movement deploy digital technology in its organizational activities, and how has the legacy of this movement and its use of digital technology shaped Taiwan's democratic politics more broadly?

### **Interviews:**

To study the role of digital media in the Sunflower Movement, as well as its legacy in Taiwan's politics, this study will deploy a multi-methods approach, consisting of digital media analyses and, importantly, qualitative interviews.

Interviews: The goal will be to establish how activists, policy-makers, and administrators make sense of digitally-enabled political activism in Taiwan today, and how they assess the shifts in Taiwanese politics brought about in the wake of ubiquitous digital technology usage. This will mean conducting interviews with three groups of actors:

1. Activists involved in the Sunflower Movement: these interviews will help establish how participants in the movement used digital technologies at the time, what meanings they attribute to that media usage in retrospect, and how they view the legacy of their activities today.
2. Policy-makers and administrators from Taiwan's two main political parties (DPP and KMT): these interviews explore how established political actors evaluate the Sunflower Movement, its relevance, and its effects on Taiwan's political system, with a specific focus on the relevance of digital technology.
3. Members of the New Power Party: these interviews aim to find out how this party extends the rationale of the Sunflower Movement to institutional politics in Taiwan, and how it uses digital technology to facilitate its activities.

Interviewees may freely decide whether they would like to remain anonymous or speak on the record, and they can withdraw from the project at any time.

The interviews are meant to be open-ended, semi-structured conversations that allow the interviewees to elaborate on aspects of the topic that matter most to them. As an overarching structure, the interviews will start with a short introduction, followed by questions about the events of 2014. After discussing this backdrop, the interviews turn to contemporary political developments in Taiwan, with a specific

focus on the changing nature of grassroots activism, democratic participation, deliberative politics, and the use of technology.

**Output:**

The project will lead to a research article, to be submitted to a leading peer-reviewed area studies journal, e.g. China Information, the Journal of Contemporary China, or the Journal of Contemporary Chinese Affairs. The paper is tentatively titled: 'Taiwan's Sunflower Movement: How Digital Media Activism Is Shaping Taiwanese Politics'.

The research on this project will also feed into a textbook I am currently writing, titled 'Studying Political Communication and Media in East Asia', for which it will provide crucial case study materials from Taiwan.

**Institutional Support:**

In Taiwan, my research will take place at National Taiwan University (NTU) in Taipei, where it is funded by the Taiwan Fellowship, awarded by the ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administered by the National Library. In Leiden, this project is supported by the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies, which has kindly arranged a sabbatical, for the spring semester 2019, to allow me to spend the semester at NTU. The project is further part of a collaborative Leiden University research project, with Hilde de Weerdt and Bart Barendregt, on how digital technology is affecting the cultures and societies of Asia, and it thus connects to wider networks interested in digital politics in the region.