

Public Participation in Digital Public Sphere: Lessons from Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper uses the concept of the public sphere to elaborate on how the advancement of information technology can shape the environmental discourse of projects. The internet provides space to connect people with different backgrounds. From observations in Hong Kong's EIA practices, it is noted that the public sphere helps digest technical details and helps to expand on environmental concerns. Changes in discourses, especially with regards to social and political concerns can support environmental debate, but is likely to create challenges for environmental assessment systems when addressing public concerns. Implications are still unclear, though and require further study.

Introduction

The IAIA21 meeting is a virtual event. With presentations and discussions being organised through online platforms, it shows the capacity of the current information technologies. In the digital age, portable devices are popular, and internet connections are widely available. The advancement of information technology, the emergence of online social platforms, and the establishment of new medias have changed how people communicate and connect. Today, people's discussions and interactions have moved from face-to-face formats to online formats. The current global pandemic leads to further shifts to online communication. This shift leads to a digitalised public sphere, empowering individuals to develop discourses and organise actions online. If we look at the environmental and social movements around the world in recent years, it is clear that many collective actions were associated with online interactions.

Meanwhile, while public participation is recognised as a crucial component in environmental assessment(EA) practices, it is noted that there has been minimal change to the setting and requirements on public participation in EA. There is little discussion on how changes towards a digitalised public sphere affect environmental assessment practices. In this paper, we use observations of Hong Kong's EIA practices and discourses to establish potential impacts of the digitalised public sphere on EA.

The Digital Public Sphere and Environmental Discourse

According to Habermas (1992), the public sphere is a virtual public domain where people come together to engage in a debate over the general rules governing relations. It is a way to account for public opinion. In this short paper, we do not seek to engage an in-depth discussion of the nature of the public sphere or the mode of deliberation in contemporary political communication; we do however, use the concept of the public sphere as an entry point to analyse and understand the current online phenomenon, in particular with regards to environmental discourses.

In the digital age, not only does the virtual domain move to the internet, the advancement of information technology also brings new elements to its creation. First, the internet is offering a tool and space for contesting issues, including against mainstream media and official discourse (Sampedro

and Avidad, 2018). Second, when it comes to collective actions, it extends and accelerates the mobilisation, also creates new tools for activism (Laer and Aelst, 2010).

In today's environmental discourse, it is not difficult to spot the works of the digital public sphere. One of the most prominent examples is the global climate changes discourse and activism, in which social media are a key platform for shaping messages and forming actions (Vu *et al.*, 2021). However, while we are focusing on environmental assessment practices, the scales of the impact are more localised and the subjects covered are more specialised. It is currently unclear, though, how and what changes result in the public sphere and implications.

Changes in the formation of public opinion and actions

Public participation is currently viewed as a key component in EA practices. Since one of the objectives of public participation is to listen to public opinion, public participation has a direct interface with the works of the public sphere. From cases in Hong Kong, it is noted that during the information exchange and debates in the public sphere, environmental discourses develop in two ways. They help to develop the technical arguments and expand the scope of the environmental concerns, linking those concerns to other subjects.

When members of the public review an EA report, it usually comes with a sense that environmental information and findings of the report should be challenged. In the technical review of the environmental findings, the internet helps solve some of the technical barriers. Since the contents of an EA are primarily technical, it requires specialist knowledge to understand it fully. The internet provides the platform for organisations and individuals to post their understanding and circulate it to others. One of the more prominent examples in Hong Kong is the environmental controversy of the proposed Third Runway System project. In addition to the major environmental NGOs, some notable individuals, such as Mr Lam Chiu Ying, the former director of the Hong Kong Observatory, posted their criticism of the environmental impacts of the project on their blog¹ or online media sites. Their critics were then reposted and forwarded on various campaign and social media webpages². This kind of additional information helps laypeople access the EIA reports' technical contents and participate in the debate. Secondly, sometimes organisations and individuals provide additional information that is not covered in the EIA. For example, Green Power Hong Kong has done extensive works in the Tung Chung area and has years of survey data on the ecology here. In their campaigns against planning projects and EIA predictions in the area, they share their knowledge with other NGOs and concerned groups, which are also available for public access³. As such, in public participation practices, while EA reports are still the primary source of environmental information, they are not the only source. With the internet connecting laypeople and external experts, the building of arguments and the generation of public opinion has become more of a collective work instead of individual work.

When the internet connects people with different backgrounds, it also connects their different agendas and concerns. In the public sphere, there is no wall to divide people's opinions. Looking at the discussions of environmental impacts of a project, this rarely sticks to environmental aspects. For the Third Runway System project mentioned above, there were concerns about the need of the project, as well as cost and benefit distribution. These concerns quickly enter the environmental discourse. In the NGO's construct of campaign messages, it changed from saving the dolphins to

¹ See https://tiandiyouqing.blogspot.com/2014/07/blog-post_17.html

² For example: <http://3rwdolphin.weebly.com/20316327732356027396.html>

³ For example, see their public statements: <https://www.greenpower.org.hk/html5/eng/concern.shtml>

stopping the “white elephant” project that would ruin the dolphins⁴. In these cases, it is shown that in the forming of public opinion, different concerns and agendas meld into one. Even in an environmentally-focused campaign that targets the EA, other relevant concerns would be built into the message and later become inseparable.

Further to the changes in the discourse, it is also worth noticing the changes in public actions when participating in environmental assessment practices. Internet and social media offer new tools for collective action and lower thresholds for organising them (Laer and Aelst, 2010). These benefits also reflect actions against EA processes. The most typical actions would be online petitions and submitting comments, especially through a template. This type of actions probably accounts for the record-breaking number of comments (a total of 19133⁵) received in the public inspection of the Third Runway System project EIA. Besides online actions, it is noted that it has become more common to see NGOs, concern groups, and individuals bring environmental agendas to other parallel processes, such as planning applications or funding processes. That is because extended connections of groups with different backgrounds helps them to mobilise and participate in these parallel processes.

Opportunities and Challenges

With changes in the building of environmental discourse and actions taken, the key question here is the implications on EA practice. It is observed that some opportunities are created, but that there are many challenges for tackling changes.

The most direct opportunity is that the digital public sphere helps the general public participate in the process. Not only does it help in spreading the message for opening public participation windows, the availability of the third party generated materials such as review articles also helps laypersons to access technical content. Moreover, environmental concerns are connected with wider social and political issues discussed in parallel processes. This can help to create more comprehensive environmental solutions.

However, it is observed that changes in communication and interaction modes create friction with the public participation setting of EA. Around the world, the purpose of public participation in EA is to consult the public and collect feedback (Sadler and McCabe, 2002). This setting had remained mostly unchanged. The public participation requirement in the EU is mostly referring to the Aarhus Convention and SEA Directive in 1998 and 2001. In Hong Kong the EIA legislation remains unchanged since it entered into force in 1998. Two problems arise. First, as explained, the scope of the environmental discourse has been expanded to cover many other social and political concerns that are not covered in the EA. In the end, these concerns are no longer only about environmental or technical challenges. The existing consultation based setting has difficulty in addressing these concerns. The potential solutions it can offer are mostly technical, such as additional assessment or mitigation. Meanwhile, the discretionary powers among the authorities do not seem to promote formulation of comprehensive response towards the public concerns. The outdated setting could hardly address the challenges led by the expanded scope of environmental concerns.

Another problem observed is that there is an increase in citizen’s self-mobilisation in EA participation. It means more individuals who participate in the process are not part or members of an organisation (e.g an environmental NGO). These individuals work independently and would have different

⁴ E.g. see <https://www.localpresshk.com/2014/07/airport-the-3rd-way/>

⁵ See <https://www.epd.gov.hk/eia/english/register/aeiara/all.html>

behaviours as compared with a conventional NGO (see Lee, 2015). This may have implications for the public participation process in EA. As individuals would not be represented by another body, it may be more challenging to initiate liaison works with them and find solutions that can satisfy all.

Discussion

While this short paper focuses on the digital public sphere, it must also be stressed that the internet is not exclusive to the public. In recent years, project proponents and their managers also use the internet to communicate with the public. For example, in Hong Kong, MTR and the Airport Authority have been using their project website to respond to or provide additional information for the public. However, the authority seems to remain reactive in the process and seldom responds to the enquiry or critics raised in the public sphere. Making legitimate environmental decisions would require the decision-makers to understand and address the environmental discourses in the public sphere, and it would require changes to the communication model in the EA process. The internet provides the space to connect the decision-makers and the stakeholder, its potential should be explored.

Conclusions

To conclude, the advancement of information technology has created and shaped the digital public sphere. The internet extends the connection of people and provides the space for developing environmental discourse. From the observations in Hong Kong's EA practices, it is noted that the internet helps in digesting technical content for laypeople and connects environmental concerns with wider social and political concerns. However, changes in the nature and contents of the discourses mean that environmental, social, and political agendas appear to meld into one. This creates challenges for addressing public concerns. The existing EA and its public participation settings could only offer environmental (and mostly technical) solutions. It is not able to satisfy an increasingly complicated construct of discourse. Therefore, it is necessary for EA practice to reform its public communication model and connect with other tools and processes to make comprehensive solutions in solving public concerns. Meanwhile, the implications of these discourse changes, also the observed increase of citizen's self-mobilisation are still unclear. It requires further empirical studies to evaluate these impacts.

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