

Power Reproduction: An Explanatory Framework for How a Network Struggle is Possible

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Abstract: Power, as an integral part of all social life, cannot be avoided in social struggles. Examining the power relations network among participants in social struggles and elucidating the strategies of power operation can provide a more comprehensive and integrated explanation for the occurrence of social struggles. This article, based on a power-centered explanatory model, further interprets the logic of online struggle phenomena from the perspective of power reproduction. It attempts to explain the specific process of generating counter-dominant power through a three-dimensional analytical framework composed of "space-resource-power," which includes spatial occupation, resource integration, and power production. The study finds that the logic of power reproduction in online struggles involves several stages: first, occupying the public discourse space of network platforms to shift the interactive venue with the power of the struggle object from the real field to cyberspace, thereby constructing a platform for power reproduction; second, accumulating various resources through strategies such as shaping identity structures and leveraging media attention, forming a strong relational network, and gaining powerful influence through relational empowerment; finally, under the combined effects of space and resources, the participants transform their disadvantaged positions, acquire counter-dominant power to resist oppression, and ultimately succeed in the struggle. This path demonstrates that power is crucial in struggles, functioning through resource mobilization, and that resources are closely related to the field of power interaction.

Keywords: Power; Network Resistance; Power Reproduction.

1. Literature Evaluation and Problem Formulation

In today's world, with the rapid development of the Internet and revolutionary advancements in technology, social protests driven by people's expressions of interests and rights have gained new extensions within the context of the Internet. These protests, which have shifted from real-world settings to cyberspace, have not only surged in number but also become increasingly diverse in their themes. Currently, online platforms are becoming a powerful tool for countering dominance, accelerating their application in social movements and political processes. This not only profoundly alters the methods of social protest but also influences its ultimate direction.

What is referred to as online resistance is an emerging phenomenon where the channels for resistance in real-world settings become disrupted and unbalanced, leading to unmet demands. As a result, people turn to online platforms to express their resistance. With the development and spread of the "utopia" of information constructed by the internet, online platforms are increasingly involved in resistance events. Online resistance has become a significant means for people in the information age to voice their interests and achieve power maintenance. Since online resistance is essentially a form of social resistance, it represents a shift in the space where social resistance occurs from the real world to the internet. Therefore, when analyzing the mechanisms of online resistance, this paper continues to use the explanatory model of "grassroots resistance" in the real world. Based on the results of literature review, existing analyses of social resistance primarily revolve around five core concepts: in the "rules" interpretation model, whether resistance actions are legal is the primary issue discussed. Under the "rules" model, social resistance is actually an approved form of rebellion that occurs within the framework of existing laws and policies. This explanatory model

typically views the occurrence of social resistance as a result of the resistance fighters' interests being harmed, with their motivation stemming from trust in legal norms and political systems; the "rights" analysis model, however, argues that the driving force behind resistance is not only to gain economic benefits but also to secure civil and political rights. Yu Jianrong points out that current peasant resistance is not only "resistance according to law" but also "resistance through law." [4] Under the "rights" perspective, the pursuit of rights is the fundamental driving force behind social resistance, while the deprivation or failure to realize these rights are direct causes of resistance. From the "class" angle, Li Jingjun notes that "the class consciousness and class concepts of Chinese workers are gradually reawakening, leading them to fight for their own interests," [1] and "class" analysis focuses not only on the oppressed status of resisters within the class structure but also on their class consciousness, viewing class differentiation and opposition as structural factors that drive social resistance. In addition to the aforementioned explanations, some studies analyze social resistance phenomena from an "ethics" perspective. Ying Xing points out that many resistance events differ from Western "resistance for rights," being instead a form of "struggle for spirit" rooted in Chinese culture. It is the relentless pursuit by Chinese people in a society based on personal relationships to escape social predicaments, gain dignity and status, and earn respect, which makes ethical and moral appeals the primary force behind social resistance. [5]

Based on a critical examination of the four aforementioned analytical models, Peng Bin re-examines the role of power and further investigates the network of power relations among protesters in social struggles. By elucidating the strategies of power operation in social struggles, he proposes a systematic explanatory model centered on power for understanding social struggles. [6] This paper argues that power, as an intrinsic element of all social life, cannot be avoided in social struggles. At its core, social struggle is about the transformation and use of power. In

social struggles, the object of struggle is the party with dominant power, while the protesters are the dominated party. Under the oppression of dominant power, protesters can only achieve their goals by producing counter-dominant power to resist. Therefore, whether it is the protesters or the objects of struggle, they all engage in struggles within the network of power relations. Social struggles cannot avoid power; instead, they are embedded within the power system and occur as a political act. In other words, the occurrence of protest politics is due to the oppression of the protesters by dominant power. The process of social struggle can be seen as a struggle between dominant power and counter-dominant power. It is precisely the production and activation of counter-dominant power that reverses the relative positions between the subjects and objects of power, enabling protesters to influence the anticipated goals of the objects of struggle, thus making it possible to successfully implement protests and alter the course of events. Under the aforementioned theoretical background, this paper shifts its analytical perspective from the real field to cyberspace based on an interpretive model centered on power. It further elucidates the logic behind the occurrence of resistance phenomena in cyberspace from the angle of power reproduction. The paper attempts to explain the specific process of generating counter-dominant power through a three-dimensional analytical framework composed of "space-resource-power," which includes spatial occupation, resource integration, and power production. This is aimed at addressing the question of how cyber resistance is possible.

2. The Nature of the Occurrence of Resistance is to Restrict the Power of Domination -- Resistance

Currently, the academic community largely agrees that the fundamental cause of social protests is due to the oppression of actors by external forces. In other words, protests occur when actors suffer economic, social status, or real or symbolic interests due to external oppression. If this view holds true, then it raises the question: what exactly are these external forces that oppress actors? In social protest events, the oppression of protesters by the object of protest often manifests as the object using its ability to restrict others to impose its will on the protesters, thereby exerting influence and constraint, ultimately damaging their material and ethical rights. In this sense, the so-called external forces that oppress protesters are actually the control exerted by the object of protest over the protesters. This dominant power is precisely the root cause of the oppression generated by external forces. As "domination is the beginning of resistance," [7] the object of protest uses its dominant power to influence, exclude, or deprive actors through decision-making, agenda-setting, preference shaping, and other means in public life. Under the pressure of such dominant power, actors take action against these controlling behaviors, leading to the occurrence of social protests.

With the oppression of external dominant power, will social resistance occur? Under the oppression of dominant power, actors may or may not have the will to resist, and they may or may not possess the ability to resist. Then, what is the source of the driving force for social resistance? Based on the above analysis, this article further explores the mechanisms that drive social resistance. Since actors only engage in resistance when they are oppressed by dominant power, It is self-evident that the essence of resistance is to resist this dominant power. From the nature of things, to prevent the abuse of power, it is necessary to use power to check power. [2]

That is to resist the dominant power in social resistance, one must produce corresponding counter-dominant power. This counter-dominant power is the key driving force behind social resistance. Only by mobilizing the resources they possess can resisters generate counter-dominant power, thus forming the driving force for resistance. The perspective of "power as the right to act" holds that power exists as a capability. In social life, there are no absolute possessors of power; even if an actor's power is negligible compared to another, it cannot be completely monopolized by the dominant actor. Instead, it will always exhibit a dispersed distribution among different actors based on uneven resource distribution. This means that even those actors who are at a disadvantage in society still hold certain economic, social, and cultural resources and can mobilize these resources to shape corresponding power. In social struggles, the power relationship between the two sides is always bidirectional. Strugglers, under the influence of the dominant power of the object being contested, are not entirely passive subjects but can mobilize various resources within the established relational network to produce counter-dominant power, thereby resisting and challenging the dominance they face, and even subverting the positions of power subjects and objects in the struggle. In this way, if strugglers take such actions—by shaping counter-dominant power to intervene in the operation of dominant power—they may, in turn, constrain the object of struggle, affecting its intended goals and altering the predetermined course of events. In this sense, the essence of social struggles can be further explained as: under the oppression of external dominant power, strugglers mobilize their own resources to produce counter-dominant power to resist dominant power. This counter-dominant power not only indicates their willingness to resist but also demonstrates their ability to do so.

From this, it can be seen that placing power as the core concept at the center of analyzing social resistance phenomena allows for a more dynamic analytical perspective to study the mechanisms of social resistance. According to the analysis model centered on power, the essence of social resistance can be explained as the transformation of power, which is caused by actors being oppressed by dominant power. The driving force comes from the anti-dominant power shaped by the resisters mobilizing various economic, social, and cultural resources they possess, with the process manifesting as a struggle between dominant and anti-dominant power. Understanding social resistance in this sense not only compensates for the shortcomings in explanatory models centered on "rules" and "rights," but also provides a powerful explanation for emerging perspectives such as "resistance through weakness," "resistance through personal sacrifice," "resistance through death," and "performative resistance." A careful analysis of these new resistance modes reveals that they merely employ different resistance methods, essentially different production mechanisms of anti-dominant power. The use of these extreme strategies often aims to create stronger anti-dominant power on a larger scale, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful social resistance.

3. The Specific Analysis of the Generation Mechanism of Anti-Dominance Power

Network resistance is essentially a practice based on power relations, containing a power structure that is empowered through the relationships of the resisters and legitimized by the reinforcement of group emotions. This results in resource allocation and relational patterns that differ markedly from those in real politics, thereby subverting unequal power dynamics.

Power operates through resources; the increased availability of these resources is a prerequisite for the functioning of power. Resources are closely tied to the field where power interacts, and the interplay between space, resources, and power embodies the operational logic of network resistance.

3.1. Space Occupation -- Transfer of Power Interaction Scene

Social struggles that occur in real-world settings often see their power dynamics significantly differentiated by the amount of social resources each side possesses, creating a stark contrast between strong and weak positions. This unequal power relationship determines the relative status of dominance and subordination in these struggles, making it difficult for the disadvantaged party to express their interests effectively, thus failing to receive due attention and response, ultimately leading to the obstruction and inability to sustain the struggle. In such circumstances, if the protesters wish to further advance their struggle, they must change their disadvantaged position. Foucault points out, "space is crucial in any form of power operation." [3] The generation and operation of power depend on specific spaces; within certain spaces, actors can transform resources into power through effective integration and skillful use, thereby gaining control over others. When the power dynamics in real-world spaces are stable and unlikely to change in the short term, online platforms, as spaces for the reproduction of power, offer new opportunities for protesters. In this virtual space, exploring new strategies for protest and reshaping power relations becomes more feasible. Unlike protests in real political life, online protests provide a more equal space, bridging the gap in power and status between the two sides. In cyberspace, whoever can dominate the conversation, attract netizens' attention, and gain support from more voices will have more say. Protesters in online struggles achieve their advantage by constructing public spaces and reshaping action rules, thereby opening up new interactive scenarios for power contention.

To successfully engage in online activism, the most fundamental prerequisite is to ensure that events are visible. In cyberspace, actions that fail to capture the center of discussion and do not make it onto the stage of public attention amount to a symbolic defeat. In other words, the first step in online activism is to occupy this public space, making the event visible. On this basis, by generating news, one can seize the opportunity to speak. So, how do activism efforts get into the public eye and become visible? In addressing this question, using appropriate strategies is crucial. Activists often adopt a "victim" perspective to construct conflict scenarios and preemptively publish them on online platforms, thereby creating a new field of power interaction. When constructing these conflict scenarios, activists typically use a series of highly evocative visual codes, where images are paired with relevant text, supporting each other. The images enhance the appeal of the text, providing a sense of "seeing is believing," while the text provides foundational material for netizens to further interpret the images based on their own experiences, often using humorous "jokes" and "buzzwords" to deepen the understanding of the activism events. It is precisely this intriguing combination of images, text, video, and sound that has brought previously suppressed protest events back into public view. The arena of power struggle between the two sides has successfully shifted from the real world to the internet. This preemptive construction of conflict scenarios by the "underdogs" often serves to control public sentiment, undoubtedly fueling further successful protests.

When the stage of interaction between opposing sides shifts to cyberspace, it also implies that the intrinsic rules governing their

actions change accordingly. Unlike the traditional discourse system built on resource monopolies and discursive hegemony in the real world, cyberspace offers a unique set of rules and logic with its distinctive ecosystem. On one hand, cyberspace is highly open, significantly lowering the threshold for expression. This not only frees protesters from the constraints of power dynamics in the real world but also allows them to freely express their demands. Moreover, this space provides more freedom of speech to netizens, enabling them to voice their opinions freely and participate in discussions about protest events, influencing the direction of the struggle. The release of discourse space offers protesters not only a convenient but also an even more effective platform for expressing their concerns and defending their rights. On the other hand, as a highly anonymous and fully open communication platform, cyberspace has clearly altered the way discourse weight is measured and evaluated in the real world. In cyberspace, traditional standards such as the status, wealth, and power of speakers are gradually diminished, while the content of their statements becomes the magnet that attracts netizens' attention. It is evident that in cyberspace, the content of a statement often carries more persuasive power than its originator. The deeply entrenched hierarchical relationships in the real world are gradually dismantled in cyberspace, replaced by a flatter dialogue model and a more egalitarian conversational environment. It is the priority occupation of cyberspace by protesters and their role in the unique rules of action that have changed their passive position, taken the lead in dialogue, and created conditions for them to mobilize resources for their own use to produce anti-dominance power.

3.2. Resource Integration -- Trigger Consensus Mobilization

The use of power is manifested through the utilization of resources. Resources form the foundation of power; only by controlling resources can one become a subject of power. In the power dynamics of online resistance, protesters integrate and utilize cyberspace resources to build a robust network of relationships. By empowering through these relationships, they gain the power to resist domination. The transformation of the power structure, in turn, influences the redistribution of resources. The acquisition of resources is a prerequisite for the operation of power, which drives the allocation and circulation of resources. Together with their interacting fields, these two aspects continuously shape the existing power dynamics between the opposing sides.

1. Build identity structure and mobilize interpersonal resources

A large number of social protest events that occur in real political life show that, in the interest game between protesters and their targets, protesters often appear in a dispersed and atomized form. Compared to those with power and substantial resources, they are undoubtedly at a disadvantage and find it difficult to form effective resistance forces. Therefore, when the scene of power interaction shifts to the internet, protesters need to win more supporters and gain social capital through the social networks woven by the internet to counter their targets. Identity represents a state, involving collective boundaries; its presentation can evoke emotional resonance among people and help netizens quickly align themselves with a particular stance. In online protest actions, protesters leverage their status as the weaker party, using a narrative mode of tragic expression to convey emotions, thereby stimulating emotional recognition and collective participation among netizens, transforming those who were originally mere spectators into closely united collective actors. A key strategy here is the construction of a "binary opposition" identity structure

between the two sides. Looking at recent online protest events, most reveal a "binary" mode of expression, such as government officials/citizens, internet celebrities/fans, business owners/migrant workers, etc. The party on the side of binary opposition is usually the figure with dominant power, while the other side consists of marginalized groups in the social structure. Particularly, cyberspace, as a reverse ecosystem where the weak have reason, has its paradoxical nature in that both strong and weak parties are often labeled with stereotypical tags. This is akin to the entrenched notion that officials must be corrupt and the rich second generation must be arrogant, which has become commonplace in cyberspace. This leads the public to form an automatic association between the strong and original sin. As a result, in this binary opposition, netizens attribute their identities, and sympathy for the weak and hatred for the strong almost become fixed mindsets. In other words, once protesters place online protest events within this binary framework, netizens habitually seek cognitive frameworks from it, activate emotional memories, and rally support for the protesters. Moreover, the nested nature of the internet further amplifies this empathy through interactions such as likes and shares, creating a Matthew effect known as "opinion climate." Consequently, with increasing support from more netizens, the social networks of protesters are maximized, enhancing their ability to access and utilize resources, thus laying a crucial foundation for the reproduction of anti-dominance power.

2. Leverage authority to gather media resources

The protesters have sparked the sympathy of netizens through their identity, achieving initial mobilization. However, how is this public sentiment sustained and even further intensified to escalate the protest? This largely depends on the "momentum borrowing" strategy that attracts media attention. In online protest actions, "momentum borrowing" typically leverages the influence of authoritative media and official platforms, manifesting as leveraging official voices to deepen and expand the maintenance of relational networks. Usually, protesters use a targeted appeal format, addressing government departments, news media, and influential big V bloggers, @government departments, news media, and influential big V bloggers. These proactive actions of proactively engaging with the media and setting agendas for media coverage significantly increase the exposure and discussion of protest activities, amplifying the volume of protest voices. To gain more resources and support, they sometimes create multiple accounts, forming mutual aid alliances among different accounts, like huddling together for warmth. When they take such actions and receive official support, their actions and demands can be widely disseminated and recognized. This not only further strengthens public awareness and engagement in protest activities, creating stronger public opinion pressure, but also, through the involvement of authoritative officials, individual incidents can more easily escalate into collective actions, potentially entering the setting of public agendas. This further promotes the continuous fermentation of discussions, drawing more onlookers who put pressure on the targets of the protests. In summary, leveraging public opinion to achieve emotional mobilization is a critical step for online protests to succeed. The online platform provides a space for protesters to rebuild and expand their network of relationships. In this process, through frequent interaction with netizens and leveraging media mobilization, protesters effectively integrate interpersonal and media resources. On this basis, they form a powerful network of connections, rallying broad support. They transform this network momentum into social potential, exerting strong constraints on the power advantages held by the targets of protest in the real world. The original power dynamics between the two sides shift, with protesters gaining control over

discourse and successfully reproducing power.

3.3. Power Production -- Counter Domination by Balancing Domination

Network resistance is essentially a game of discourse between the resisters and the targets in cyberspace. Whoever has more leverage in this game gains dominance. By shifting the arena of power interaction and aggregating social resources, the status of discourse for both sides can be altered to some extent, giving the resisters greater control over discourse. Through the aforementioned analysis of network resistance, the path of power production begins to emerge.

1. Cyberspace is a place for the reproduction of power

The transformation of space is closely linked to the alternation of power. In online resistance movements, protesters shift the venue for power interactions by occupying cyberspace, thereby creating possibilities for the production of anti-dominance power. On one hand, in cyberspace, any individual can voice their opinions through freely registered social media accounts, bridging the gap in unequal discourse status in real-world spaces. On the other hand, unique action rules within this space alter how discourse weight is measured and evaluated, fostering a more equal dialogue environment between opposing sides. In such a space, resources, as crucial elements in power production, flow rapidly and are no longer monopolized by those in dominant positions in the real world. Instead, they can be shared through information exchange and emotional mobilization, leading to the dispersion of power. Protesters, by shifting the context of power interactions and the unique interaction rules within it, can achieve the reproduction of relational networks, which plays a significant role in reconstructing power relations.

2. Resource mobilization is the mechanism of power reproduction

The primary mechanism for power formation in online resistance is empowerment based on resource mobilization. Among these, interpersonal resources and media resources serve as two core elements, whose processes and logic of mobilization in online resistance are particularly critical. First, interpersonal resources are the prerequisite for the success of resistance actions. To gain influence, resisters must form a collective or a group of people in some form. As mentioned earlier, given the emotional structure of the Chinese people, online resistance often begins with the construction of identity and context. Resisters typically adopt a weak party perspective narrative, constructing conflict scenarios through a "binary opposition" identity structure. This strategy quickly evokes empathy and resonance among netizens, and under the unique nested dissemination mechanisms of cyberspace, this emotional mobilization rapidly spreads. Resisters collaborate with the vast online community in content creation, dissemination, and interaction, forming an inherently ordered relational network, which is the foundation for power production; Second, media resources, as a significant resource influencing resistance activities, play a crucial role in shaping the images of both sides and determining the outcome of the resistance. Resisters use media as a tool to present unique resistance subjects, adopt special forms of resistance, actively seek media attention, and set agendas for media coverage. By leveraging the high reach, high penetration rate, and strong social influence of media, they embed more real-world social relationships into the network, achieving further coupling between online and offline, official and public opinion fields. That is to say, based on the effective mobilization of interpersonal and media resources, the social networks of protesters have been maximally expanded, forming a diverse network that includes authoritative opinion leaders, news media, and ordinary netizens.

Protesters use this network for information exchange and emotional support. In the complex interaction between technology and politics, protesters influence the reconfiguration of capital through relational empowerment, thereby gaining counter-dominant power and reconstructing the power structure.

In summary, the online resistance movement follows a path of "occupying cyberspace to expose resistance incidents — integrating social resources to form public opinion pressure — producing counter-dominant power to force the response of the resisted." First, in the initial stage of resistance, there is an objective power disparity between the two sides. Therefore, to carry out resistance, the protesters at a lower power level often need to continuously empower themselves. The online ecosystem provides a space for this empowerment, which differs from traditional real-world resistance environments in that it makes the disadvantaged resistance actions visible within a broader public domain. On the basis of making the resistance actions visible, protesters then strategically construct their identity structures to gain sympathy and support from netizens. At the same time, they leverage official media to create momentum, further achieving emotional re-mobilization. As the interactive group reaches a certain scale, the relational network accumulates astonishing order and energy, thus triggering fluctuations in power and sudden changes in relative status. This is the mechanism of resource allocation and power empowerment.

Thus, in the process of counter-dominance power reproduction, power primarily functions through resource mobilization, which is closely related to the field of interaction between power and resources. It is precisely the shift from offline to online spaces that, under the unique interactive rules of cyberspace, changes the passive position of protesters. Subsequently, through strategies such as scenario construction and discourse shaping, they activate the resources within these spaces. Protesters use the relational networks formed by resource mobilization to gain the corresponding power to resist dominance, ultimately turning this against the targets of their struggle to achieve restraint, thus successfully implementing resistance.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This article, from the perspective of power, argues that counter-dominance power, as an important form of power, elucidates the fundamental reasons for the success of social resistance from the perspective of protesters. It demonstrates that protesters not only have the will to resist dominance but also possess the ability to do so, revealing the power struggle between dominant and resistant forces in the context of protests. This understanding provides greater explanatory power, comprehensiveness, and integration when interpreting protest actions. Building on this, the article examines the spatial and resource dimensions of online protests and their relationship with power production, specifically discussing the mechanisms of power reproduction in online protest actions. The study finds that power is closely linked to resources and functions through resource mobilization within specific contexts. Online protests typically begin with occupying cyberspace, ensuring initial visibility of the protest event. Subsequently, they build interpersonal and media resources through the construction of a weak party identity and leveraging media mobilization. Within the relational networks constructed by these resources, further relational empowerment is achieved, granting power against dominance. Ultimately, this power is used to counteract the dominance of the target, thereby achieving the goal of the protest.

However, online resistance also has its limits. First, the amount of resources that protesters can mobilize in cyberspace determines

their ability and intensity to produce counter-dominance power. This indicates that the power dynamics between opposing sides are unstable and can easily change due to shifts in resource possession, meaning that the advantageous position gained by protesters may still be altered, as evidenced by the recurring reversals in many recent online resistance movements. Moreover, a key reason for the success of online resistance is the use of public sympathy to gather available resources and gain counter-dominance power from an expanding network of relationships. However, as online resistance becomes increasingly frequent as a means of protest, the public may develop emotional numbness. At this point, whether resource integration based on emotional mobilization can continue to function effectively remains open to debate.

Second, the power relations in protest actions are not as simple as binary oppositions; the involvement of multiple actors makes these power relations more complex. The cyberspace, as a new domain distinct from the real world, can indeed alter the power dynamics between protesters to some extent. However, this power dynamic remains constrained by the structure of the real society. In other words, the power interactions shaped by cyberspace often intertwine with those in the real world. The counter-dominant power generated by protesters cannot escape the boundaries of state power and exhibits clear subordinate characteristics. Therefore, protest actions must consider their social position and implement protests within the bounds allowed by laws and policies. Extreme forms of protest may undermine recognition due to crossing legal and moral thresholds, potentially becoming a restraining factor for protest activities.

Finally, online activism is increasingly becoming a subject of controversy. Constructively, it has altered the unequal power dynamics in real political life, making unbridled dominant behaviors face unprecedented public scrutiny and protecting the legitimate interests of disadvantaged groups, thus striving for relative fairness and justice in society; however, destructively, the highly free cyberspace allows everyone to voice criticism, leading most online protests to be accompanied by rumors, reversals, emotional polarization, and even cyberbullying. It is evident that online activism is an alternative form of power practice, relying on technological innovation and progress in cyberspace, yet constrained by the inertia of social culture, reflecting new issues in the evolution of social contradictions and protest methods at the current stage of social development. Therefore, online activism is not the end goal; the expression of individual interests and the protection of rights ultimately depend on formal institutional arrangements and improvements.

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