Media Use and Protest Mobilization: A Case Study of Umbrella Movement Within Hong Kong Schools

Donna SC Chu

Abstract
This study aims to examine the roles of social media in protest mobilization through the case of Umbrella Movement. Instead of focusing in the occupied sites, the study chose to look at mobilization efforts and confrontations within Hong Kong secondary schools. In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 students, teachers and principals from four schools, with an aim to identify how members in schools used different media for information sharing, opinion expression and mobilization. It also reconstructed what actually occurred in the tactful negotiations between school authorities and student leaders during the movement. The findings of this study suggest that how different communication practices are mediated in particular social and cultural contexts remain to be relevant and important, as the stress on “harmony” in local education settings illustrate in this case study. The strong adherence to political neutrality and professionalism suggest that schools could hardly provide the kind of idealistic civic education stated in curriculum documents. The findings prompted for a critical reading of how apolitical civic education in Hong Kong schools constrained a social movement that was supposedly led by the youth.

Keywords
social movement, civic participation, youth, Umbrella Movement, schooling

Introduction
In late September 2014, Hong Kong made international headlines again since its return to China 17 years earlier. On 31 August 2014, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee announced the arrangements for the election of Hong Kong’s Chief Executive. This decision sparked mass protests, which eventually led to direct confrontation. Images of protesters using umbrellas to shield themselves from pepper spray and tear gas prompted some foreign media to dub the protests the “Umbrella Revolution” (see, for example, Rauhala, 2014) and later the “Umbrella Movement” (Tharoor, 2014). During the early stages of the movement, the orderliness and politeness of the protesters who occupied the Admiralty business district was frequently remarked upon in media reports (Buckley & Ramzy, 2014; Dissanayake, 2014). Some hailed the protests as a “social media revolution” (Dastagir & Hampson, 2014), highlighting the roles of Facebook, WhatsApp, and later Firechat in mobilizing the protesters (Anthony, 2014).

Despite the fact that the Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) group had been planning a civil-disobedience campaign since early 2013, many of the protesters rejected leadership of any kind (Deng & Law, 2014), or rather presented the protests as a student movement led by the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) or the Scholarism group (Srivastava, Browning, Khan, & Li, 2014). In a Time cover story featuring Joshua Wong, a prominent student activist who had then just turned 18, the movement was described as a “youthquake” (http://time.com/magazine/asia/3,484,546/october-20th-2,014/vol-184-no-15-u-s-3/) (Rauhala, 2014).

In short, the Umbrella Movement has been portrayed as a student movement or “youthquake” in which social media played an important role. Such impressions remind one of some popular sayings centered around the Arab Spring in 2011. Techno-enthusiasts were first excited about the roles of social media in effecting changes (Robertson, 2015). However, in a review of later studies, Smidi and Shahin...
(2017) noted that some research found that social media only played a limited or secondary role in protest mobilization. Poell (2014) argued that social media could be viewed as tools that facilitated activist communication, yet they were not neutral tools. The complex techno-cultural and political-economic relations embedded in the use of social media need careful consideration (also see Langlois, Elmer, McKelvey, & Devereaux, 2009). Lim (2012), for example, showed that protesters in Egypt were actually mobilized through a combination of interactions on social media and conversations in taxis and coffee houses. Social media were far from the only interface between online activism and offline protests. Despite the seemingly apparent affinity between social media and protest mobilization, their relationships must be considered in their particular technological, social, and cultural settings.

This study aims to examine the roles of social media in protest mobilization through the case of Umbrella Movement. Instead of focusing in the occupied sites, the study chose to look at mobilization efforts and confrontations within Hong Kong secondary schools for two major reasons. First, secondary students had received much attention during the movement. News pictures showing them doing homework, sorting out garbage or studying for examinations had generated much interest. What about their participation in schools? Second, civic education in Hong Kong is characterized by an apolitical undertone. In view of the highly charged and political nature of the Umbrella Movement, how would different members in schools respond to the mobilization for actions?

**Social Media and Protest Mobilization**

Digital media have facilitated a new kind of communication infrastructure for mass protests. Valenzuela (2013) noted that social media are related to social movements in three major aspects, including information sharing, political expression and mobilization. In the first instance, social media are serving as information hubs where users can easily access to different sources of news. They also provide a virtual space for political expression and deliberation. In view of actual mobilization, social media have greatly reduced costs of organization and participation and hence enabled easier online recruitment (Gonzalez-Bailon, Borge-Holthoefer, Rivero, & Moreno, 2011). It is believed that social media have brought forth a notable shift from the logic of collective action to the logic of connective action. In the former case, organizational resources are still deemed to be important in social movements. In the latter case, however, personal action frames could be spread across media networks. Instead of relying on organizationally brokered networks, self-organizing networks become possible (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). There would be more “networked individualism” (Raine & Wellman, 2012) and the political identity and attitudes of young people were increasingly shaped by their social networks (Loader et al., 2014) instead of their local community ties (Fisher & Boekkooi, 2010). The emphasis on interaction, collaboration and user-generated content of social media technologies all point to new participation opportunities in contentious politics and political communication.

There have been cautionary remarks about overestimating the power of social media. Considering information sharing, for example, Poell and van Dijck (2015) had noted that the fast-paced social media could affect how activists shaped their content, which might eventually result in more imitation of mainstream media practices. On the other hand, personalization of protest messages that get viral could produce some moments of togetherness, yet the real test was whether political awareness was raised and whether durable networks were created for change in the long run.

Political expression in social media is another contested subject here. There was much initial enthusiasm about the democratic potential of the Internet, which was believed to provide the infrastructure necessary for political deliberation, and hence participation. However, consumerism, entertainment, non-political networking and chat services were soon found to impede the formation of an ideal public sphere (Barnett, 1997; Buckingham & Martinez-Rodriguez, 2013; Burgess et al., 2006; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Tambini, 1999). Social media are more likely to become “echo chambers” than forums for democratic debate (cf. Sunstein, 2001). Non-participation is increasingly common (Hayes, Scheufele, & Hoge, 2006). To avoid being “unfriended,” some Facebook users remain neutral, while others use humor and jokes for self-protection (e.g., Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Thorson, 2014). Young people who are politically engaged have found various ways of integrating social media with their political activities (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015). Political engagement online is perceived to differ from other Web-based social activities, just as political discussion constitutes a distinct form of social engagement in everyday life, and must be handled with great care. The saying of “Youthquake” in the Umbrella Movement suggested active participation from young people. Yet to advocates of civic participation, political apathy on the part of the young population is the more worrying trend (Henn & Foard, 2014). Compulsory citizenship education was proposed to encourage more participation (O’Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones, & McDonagh, 2003).

Speaking of protest mobilization, it can vary from support generation to behavior activation (Lee, Chen, & Chan, 2017). In a survey with university students in Hong Kong, it was found that social media were significant in terms of online information sharing and providing channels to make direct contacts with political actors in the Umbrella Movement (Lee et al., 2017). Milan (2015) asserted that social media played a broker role and facilitated a kind of “micromobilization.” After a review of related literature, Stein (2017) concluded that the liberation potential of ICTs remained inconclusive. Other than social media, there were clearly other factors in the mobilization process, including but not
limited to physical and urban space, traditional mass media, traditional Social Movement Organizations, and leadership styles (AlSayyad & Guvene, 2015; Lee, 2015; Lee & Chan, 2016; Molnar, 2014; Poell, Abdulla, Rieder, Woltering, & Sack, 2016).

Studies about the Umbrella Movement over the past 2 years raised questions about the roles of media in protest mobilization. Abb (2016) reviewed the performance of traditional media, social media and alternative media during the movement, and observed how interpersonal communication in the occupied venues exerted influence. Lee, So, and Leung (2015) argued that social media only became an “insurgent public sphere” in times of tension. Lee and Ting (2015) studied and analyzed how young activists initiated, organized and mobilized collective actions in the Umbrella Movement. It was found that young people demonstrated high levels of media and information literacy skills in the mobilization process, and that they not only used social media but also traditional mass media and street booths in their campaigns.

The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong Schools

This study focused in local secondary schools, where tensions were escalating before and during the Umbrella Movement. In September 2014, the HKFS, a student organization comprising student unions from eight tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, organized a 1 week strike in the students’ respective universities. Twelve thousand students took part in a sit-in on the first day of the strike. Meanwhile, another student organization, Scholarism, founded by a group of secondary school students in opposition to the introduction of a national education curriculum to Hong Kong, mobilized high-school students to strike for 1 day on 26 September 2014. A few hundred secondary school students took part in a sit-in at the government headquarters, and many others reportedly organized strikes at their own schools on the same day. Scholarism encouraged secondary school students to form “political reform concern groups.” The group published on Facebook a list of more than 80 schools in which, they claimed, political reform concern groups had already formed. This news was later covered by Apple Daily.

Secondary schools present a very different scenario when it comes to protest mobilization. First, unlike university students, secondary school students were required to follow school regulations. The strategies used by secondary school students to mobilize their schoolmates to participate in the movement are of great interest because they had to avoid antagonizing the school administration while advancing their own goals. Second, given that the ultimate goals could be interpreted as civic participation, the Umbrella Movement offers researchers the rare opportunity to examine how contested issues related to civic participation, civic education, and democracy in education are negotiated and debated among students, teachers, and principals.

After all, talking about politics is not necessarily an easy and common activity in everyday life. As Eliasoph (1998) detailed in her study, political conversations could be easily affected by various kinds of “civic practices,” “political manners,” or “civic etiquettes.” She argued that there was a kind of political evaporation in public-spirited conversation. People would rather not talk about politics when there were other audiences. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) had identified three major pedagogical goals in civic education, which ranged from training personally responsible citizens, encouraging participatory citizenship, to promoting justice-oriented citizenship. In most instances, schools were most at ease with the form of citizenship that is devoid of politics and democracy. A brief review of civic education here would show how “apolitical” the Hong Kong-style civic education has been and provide the relevant social and cultural context for further discussion.

Political or Apolitical: Hong Kong-Style Civic Education

The civic education provided in Hong Kong schools has long been shaped by the region’s changing social and political climate. According to Morris and Chan (1997), the schools in colonial Hong Kong between 1945 and 1965 were notably apolitical. Although a subject named Civics was introduced to the curriculum in 1953, its teaching was generally non-contextual and descriptive. The Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 began a process of repoliticization. In 1985, Hong Kong’s education authority issued guidelines on civic education in schools. In 1987, a subject entitled Government and Public Administration was introduced to the curriculum (Yuen, 2007). This has been seen as a watershed development, marking the beginning of the official promotion of politics education in Hong Kong schools. However, after Hong Kong’s handover in 1997, the region’s schools were again depoliticized, or re-depoliticized (Yuen, 2007, p. 152). The plan to introduce Moral and National Education (MNE) as a compulsory school subject led to a debate on how best to teach moral and national issues (Fairbrother & Kennedy, 2011). By 2012, this debate had developed into waves of mass protest. Although MNE was eventually withdrawn as a compulsory subject, schools were required to teach national education in other learning contexts.

In hindsight, the MNE plan reflected the long-term aims of civic education in Hong Kong. The following guidelines for civic education were published by the Education Department in 1996:

In the case of Hong Kong, the civic learner needs to know the cultural and political identity of Hong Kong as a Chinese community, as a British colony for a certain period, and as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region [HKSAR] of China.
from July 1997. At a time of political transition, we need our citizens to actively adopt a new national identity and to be participative and contributive to bring about smooth transitions, to sustain prosperity and stability and to further improve the Hong Kong society. (p. 21)

The Education Department expected Hong Kong’s citizens to actively “participate in and contribute to” social development. Few would criticize this well-intentioned directive. However, Morris and Chan (1997) found that although the Education Department’s guidelines were regarded as worthwhile and important by secondary school principals, encouraging students to participate and contribute was considered less important than helping them to remain competitive within Hong Kong’s education system.

The very nature of school-based education created further difficulties. Indeed, Tse (2000) argued that basic organizational constraints make it impossible to practice democratic education in schools. As custodians, teachers are obliged to be authoritarian and paternal. In schools, rules and regulations are upheld, norms and standards are set, seniority is respected, and professionalism is emphasized. This setting is unlikely to be conducive to the provision of an ideal form of democratic and civic education.

In addition, interpretations of responsible, active and participatory citizenship vary between cultural contexts. Kennedy, Kuang, and Chow (2013) asserted that active citizenship is not a traditional citizenship goal in Asian societies. King, McInerney, and Watkins (2013) argued that students with collectivist cultural backgrounds tend to be group oriented, due to a cultural emphasis on “belongingness” and relational fabric. In an international assessment exercise conducted by Frambach, Driessen, Beh, and van der Vleuten (2014), Hong Kong students were found to receive high scores for both collectivism and individualism. This finding is inconsistent with the common portrayal of Hong Kong youth as lacking in civic knowledge and consciousness and politically immature and apathetic (Fairbrother & Kennedy, 2011).

In summary, civic education is shaped by historical, institutional, and cultural factors. Although calls for civics to be taught in Hong Kong schools have been made for decades, there is a lack of consensus on how civic knowledge and values should be taught. Indeed, as observed by Chan (2013), the post-colonial city is characterized by “a kind of phobia” about “talking about the adult-student relationship in civic action, which may risk hindering rigorous discussion of youth civic engagement” (p. 158).

In view of this fraught history of civic education in Hong Kong, it was not hard to imagine the immense pressures school authorities faced during the Umbrella Movement. On the other hand, it also means that students had to work around the many tacit understanding in school culture when they tried to mobilize their peers to join protests. In effect, the Umbrella Movement exposed the “inconvenient truth” that there was a notable gap between the ideal and the reality of civic education.

**Research Questions**

The occupied sites in the Umbrella Movement had undoubtedly recorded some of the most captivating moments of this mass protest. This study is primarily interested in, however, in the sites where the young go to almost every day. With a focus in school settings, it addresses concerns regarding the possibilities and limitations of social media in mobilizing participation, while keeping the overall media ecology and historical context in consideration. It aims to answer two broad questions: (1) If social media were hailed to be a key factor in protest mobilization, how did they actually work in this specific case? In a broader sense, in what ways did the use of different media, including but not limited to social media, affect different members in schools in information sharing, opinion expression and mobilization?; (2) During the Umbrella Movement, when secondary schools were covered in news stories, the focus was almost always on confrontations between students and school administration. What had actually happened in secondary schools, where student activists were campaigning for a form of civic participation that school administrators might not agree with? How did such negotiation affect the mobilization strategies raised in the first question?

**Method**

To answer these two broad questions, the study conducted 14 in-depth interviews in January and February 2015, after the Movement came to an end in mid-December in 2014.

Through the Wisenews news database, the author identified 30 secondary schools which had been featured in news during the movement. Judging from the negative undertones of media coverage of these events, communication between members of the two generations usually broke down. In most cases, the schools were criticized for limiting students’ freedom to express their political views. However, the said antagonism between the two generations is not further confirmed or refuted in any follow-up reports.

The author approached about 10 of these schools and finally managed to get the consent of 4 schools to participate in this study. Most principals declined to participate right away, without further explanation, a few begged for the understanding that “it is not the time to talk about this.” The four principals who agreed to be interviewed asked to have complete anonymity. To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, the four schools are denoted here as A, B, C and D.

In order to gain a fuller picture of the interactions, negotiations and assumed confrontations between the younger and older generations, the school principal and the core members of the school’s political reform concern group were interviewed in each case school. It resulted in eight
in-depth interviews. In addition, a group interview with three students who disagreed with the occupation was conducted. The researcher also interviewed two senior teachers who had followed the case closely, and a junior teacher who had decided to remain a bystander during the movement. In summary, 14 people were interviewed. Eight of the informants were between 14 and 18 years old, and thus belonged to Hong Kong’s younger generation. Six of the informants belonged to the older generation. Each interview lasted for 90 minutes to 2 hours. The student activists are denoted as SA, SB, SC, and SD, and the principals as PA, PB, PC, and PD. All of the student activists except SD were male, and all of the principals were men in their late 40s or 50s. The other teachers and students interviewed are denoted as T(number) and S(number), respectively. All other details identifying individuals and schools have been removed.

The interviews were structured around two key sets of questions. The first concerned the general habits of the school principals and their students in relation to media. The informants were asked how they normally obtained news and information, and whether this changed after the outbreak of the Umbrella Movement. They were also asked whether they used social media to express their political views. It was used to evaluate the level of information and media literacy of both students and their teachers and principals. The second set of questions concerned the events that caused the schools to be featured in news reports during the movement. The aims of the interviews were to identify the strategies used to mobilize protesters and to reconstruct the interaction and negotiation of two seemingly opposed parties, that is, students and principals.

Findings and Discussion

Sourcing for News and Information

Contrary to popular perceptions that young people no longer read newspapers, all of the eight student respondents reported reading printed newspapers, albeit very rarely. One student usually glanced at the headlines of free newspapers while traveling between home and school. Most of the students read newspapers to which their schools subscribed, especially Mingpao and South China Morning Post. The latter, a daily newspaper in English, was used by the students mainly to improve the quality of their English. However, the students read no other newspapers regularly. They were willing to watch news programs encountered by chance on television, but never listened to news programs on the radio. Instead, one student recalled that when the radio in her father’s car was accidentally tuned to a news channel, she immediately asked to listen to something else (S1, female, F.5).

The students were aware that their infrequent use of printed newspapers might meet with disapproval. One student activist seemed both apologetic and defensive about his methods of news consumption:

I am afraid that I will disappoint you greatly if I tell you the truth...I don’t really read “real” newspapers!...I actually think that reading Facebook is more objective. Think about the biased news stories we get from newspapers. We have to read different newspapers to compare and contrast their views anyway. On Facebook, I ‘like’ all news sources, so I am notified of updates straight away. This makes it easier to see the big picture. (SA, male, F.6)

Another student leader explained his infrequent use of traditional news outlets as follows:

I don’t set out to read newspapers or watch the news on television. If my parents buy [newspapers], I read them. If I go home after school and someone is watching the news on television, I watch too. The news is everywhere anyway. You soon find out what is happening if it is really important. (SB, male, F.6)

The students accessed online news information not only from Facebook but by watching Apple Daily’s Action News. They did not mention any other online news sources. They used search engines to find news information required for homework, or when they were genuinely interested in learning more about a topic. The latter motivation was rare. However, the controversial events before and during the Umbrella Movement led these young people to ask a crucial question: why had the movement happened? Students who had never previously been interested in politics were so puzzled that they began to learn about the electoral arrangements from scratch:

I have never been keen on politics. I don’t know why; I just don’t understand it. But with the tear gas and everything else, and so many people talking about [the movement], I read the relevant news stories and finally understood why people are so angry. (S2, female, F.5)

The students also used online search engines to access other types of information. When organizing forums at school, SB went online to read original documents such as the Hong Kong Basic Law and other government papers. The younger respondents treated the Internet as an archive from which information could be obtained if necessary. The older respondents described certain regular habits of reading and watching the news. All were able to list the newspapers and television channels they used to obtain news information every day. Mingpao and Singtao, two elite Chinese newspapers to which many schools in Hong Kong subscribe, were the most popular sources of news information. The respondents also watched various television programs to gain a broader understanding of the news. However, concerns were raised about the quality of today’s news...
reporting. All four principals expressed disappointment about the preponderance of one-sided news stories, complaining that the press was no longer neutral and impartial. Pointing to a news report in which he featured, PC said, “The reporter even got the basic facts wrong.” T1 explained his lack of enthusiasm about reading newspapers as follows:

In the past, reading newspapers was an important way of taking society’s pulse. Nowadays, Facebook better serves this purpose. Besides, I am getting a bit old. I am no longer as keen to follow the news closely as I used to be. (T1, male, senior teacher)

The older respondents also used the Internet to obtain news information. Unlike the students, however, they did not wait passively for news to be shared on Facebook. Instead, they subscribed to news databases or aggregated-news sites such as WiseNews. In other words, they made active choices about the information they wanted to receive and what they wanted to read. Three of the principals mentioned using smartphone applications to obtain news information. In general, the principals reported glancing through news headlines during their free time to ‘get a feel for what’s happening out there’ (PA).

**Expressing Opinions**

As expected, the use of social media was found to be a distinctive marker of generational difference. While all of the informants had Facebook accounts, the student activists differed noticeably from the teachers and principals in their activities on Facebook, such as adding friends, “liking” posts, sharing information, and creating status updates.

The student activists were active users of Facebook. They added friends on request, and none were able to recall how many Facebook friends they had. Their networks of friends were not limited to their schoolmates. One student reported proudly that “I have numerous friends who are active members of different social movements” (SD, female, F.5). Another student explained that although some of his friends disagreed with his views, this helped to keep dialogue and debate going on Facebook (SA, male, F.6). To ensure that they received regular updates on social movements, the student activists “liked” many fan pages. SC (male, F.3) said, “I like pages from all sides. For and against, yellow and blue. I find them really funny and entertaining.” The students usually shared news and status updates with which they agreed, but occasionally also shared opposing views to “give people a good laugh” (SC).

However, only SA reported using Facebook as a platform to discuss politics with others through status updates. He regularly shared his thoughts and tried to engage others in discussion of issues he considered important:

But you have to do it in a way that works on Facebook. I once created an infographic to explain an idea. It went viral quickly. Sometimes I read articles by the two professors in the OCLP group, and they are simply too long! Who is willing to read 2000 words? Things have to be concise on Facebook. (SA, male, F.6)

Despite his active engagement in political debate on Facebook, SA was uncertain of the reach and influence of this medium. SC, the youngest student involved in the study, was pessimistic: “People keep Facebook on a loop. There is little point in writing too much.” SD agreed, “My schoolmates are not keen on Facebook. It can of course be influential, but not for secondary school students.”

The principals were more cautious in their use of Facebook. PB opened two accounts: one for family and friends, and another for school. He added approximately 400 current students to his school account to enable him to keep an eye on the attitudes and opinions expressed on Facebook by the school community. However, PB’s behavior was an exception; the other three principals were much more selective in accepting friend requests from current students and colleagues. Similarly, all four principals avoided “liking” fan pages, especially those related to the Umbrella Movement. With the exception of PB, none of the principals “liked” the fan pages created by the concern groups in their own schools. Therefore, they were not informed immediately of any updates to the pages. PD believed that it is unnecessary for principals to follow Facebook developments closely. “If something really big happens, someone will tell me anyway.” All of the principals reported that they rarely shared news and never expressed political views on Facebook.

The attitudes of the three teachers interviewed were similar to those of the principals. More notably, the three student respondents who disagreed with the movement also differed markedly from the student activists in their use of Facebook. Although they occasionally shared updates, they consciously avoided “liking” the fan pages created for social movements. S3 (male, F.4) once “liked” the Scholarism page, but decided to “unlike” it during the Umbrella Movement because he no longer agreed with the group’s actions. The students who opposed the movement had a general sense that sharing their political views was likely to lead to conflict with other students. To avoid confrontation, they chose to keep quiet on controversial matters.

**Appropriate and Correct Use of Media**

To sum up, notable differences were found in the use of media by the students and the principals, who belonged to two generations which suggested that they were media literate in distinctive ways. The students did not have regular news-consumption habits. They received news information from a wide array of sources. They did not attempt to differentiate between information provided by traditional news outlets, the Internet, and social media. They simply regarded themselves as surrounded by news sources from which they randomly obtained bits and pieces of information. This...
“ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2010) kept the students informed, albeit rather passively.

However, the younger respondents were active on Facebook. In particular, they “liked” various Facebook fan pages to ensure that they received regular updates from people from different backgrounds. SA saw this process as more “objective” than traditional means of accessing the news. He argued that Facebook offers a wide range of viewpoints at the same time, whereas “if I read newspapers, I have to read one after the other. This is more troublesome” (SA, male, F.6).

In addition to “liking” Facebook pages, the students actively sought out information when motivated to do so. They accessed not only news information but also relevant papers and documents online. They treated the Internet as an archive from which information on the news and other subjects could be retrieved when necessary.

The principals were far more active than the students in organizing their news consumption. They read newspapers and regularly watched news programs on television. They used the Internet to subscribe to news databases to ensure that they received information that interested them. In short, the principals made conscious and balanced choices about their consumption of the news. In contrast, they were extremely passive Facebook users. They avoided making friends with students and awarding “likes,” and never expressed views on controversial issues.

Neither the younger nor the older interviewees felt that they were missing anything. Although the students rarely read news stories, they were confident that information on recent events would reach them if it were truly important. Few of the principals received updates on Facebook, but knew that if something really important happened, they would find out sooner or later. The older respondents had followed the political developments leading to the Umbrella Movement for months; the younger respondents caught up quickly at a later stage. Despite the differences in the students’ and principals’ use of media to consume news and express their own views, they exhibited a relatively similar level of understanding of the overall controversy. Another commonality they shared was reflected in their concerns for “appropriateness.” Students were aware that they might not get approval if they were not reading newspapers but Facebook, while teachers and principals were concerned about the “correctness” of newspapers. To be appropriate and correct are two key assumptions in school culture, and they exert an impact on both information sharing and expressions of opinions.

**Umbrella Movement on Campus**

**Protest Mobilization Without Social Media.** At first sight, the attention paid by news reporters to the involvement of secondary school political reform concern groups in the Umbrella Movement suggested that secondary school students took part in the movement on a large scale. However, this impression dissipated immediately on speaking with the core members of the four concern groups investigated in this study. First, the concern groups each comprised a very small number of students. The largest groups, in Schools A and B, had at most 10 members. The groups in Schools C and D had no more than three members. Second, the activists found it difficult to elicit interest in the development of the controversy from their fellow students. A general atmosphere of indifference persisted until 28 September 2014, when the police dispersed the protesters with tear gas. Until then, alumni and journalists had been responsible for most of the “likes” on the Facebook fan pages created by the concern groups to promote school strikes on 26 September.

The student activists attributed the low response rate on Facebook to the infrequency with which students use Facebook to find out about school-related events. As they meet face to face every day, they do not rely on social media to maintain their relationships with fellow students. Therefore, the student activists were forced to revert to more traditional media, such as leaflets, posters, stickers and banners, to raise awareness about the Umbrella Movement. As yellow ribbons had become the symbol of the movement, the activists also wanted to distribute ribbons at school. The production and distribution of these promotional materials led to direct negotiation between the student activists and their principals.

**Negotiation With School Administrators.** Unlike university students, secondary school students in Hong Kong are keenly aware of the obligation to observe school regulations. They are required to ask for permission to display posters and banners on school premises. If they are absent from school without prior approval, they may be punished for playing truant. Therefore, it was vital for Hong Kong’s student activists to determine their schools’ stances on the strike before attempting to mobilize others. In addition, Hong Kong’s Education Ordinance stipulates that no political activities are allowed in schools. It is not clear whether distributing leaflets and yellow ribbons is a political activity. The Education Ordinance was cited by only one of the four schools to prevent students from distributing yellow ribbons on school premises. None of the principals or students at the other three schools mentioned this regulation.

The student activists voluntarily sought permission before they went to mobilize protesters. They knew that they could disobey school rules and allow school administrators to decide how to respond afterwards. However, none of the students chose this course of action. Having decided to plan a school strike, SC wrote to his school’s principal to clarify the consequences of attending the strike. He received no reply to his letter, and never managed to speak directly to the principal. However, SC’s experience was an exception; in all other cases, the school administrators remained in close contact...
The principal gave me his telephone number. He asked me to inform him of any updates and changes. The school is not our enemy. Why should we make things difficult for the principal? (SA)

I don’t want to make the life of my teacher [who mediated between the students and the principal] hard. I think that the principal is actually obstructing our campaign. Still, I don’t want to have any direct conflict with him, for my teacher’s sake. (SD)

The principal is already having a hard time, because our school has been featured in the news. He has received many critical telephone calls. But none of this was his fault; the news story did not present the whole picture. We [the students and the principal] are on good terms. After all, why would we wish to target our school when the real issue is genuine universal suffrage? (SB)

As the above interview extracts suggest, no direct conflict took place between the school administrators and the student activists. The principals described the challenges involved in sticking to core educational principles in response to the protest activities. PC refused outright to recognize School C’s concern group as legitimate, arguing that the group had been formed non-democratically and could not, therefore, represent the whole population. The same principal maintained the school’s existing regulations on the dissemination of protest-related materials. No printed materials could be displayed on the school premises without prior approval. All stickers and posters were taken down within 15 minutes. The students were only permitted to distribute leaflets outside the school.

The other three principals emphasized the importance of handling the issue professionally. PA saw the movement as an opportunity for his students to develop critical- and independent-thinking skills. He encouraged the students to organize various forums for debate to help them to formulate and express their own views. At School B, a dispute occurred between student activists who claimed to be lobbying for the same cause. PB believed that the students would gain invaluable learning opportunities from resolving this conflict themselves; the role of educators was simply to create a space for deliberation. PD was more concerned about rules and order, but also considered it crucial for schools to guide students’ learning and thinking, particularly at times of crisis.

Political Neutrality. The principals faced pressure not only from their students but from parents, alumni, school sponsors, education authorities and even local people. All received telephone calls from angry parents at the height of the movement. When the schools were featured in news stories, alumni who opposed the movement either telephoned the schools or left negative comments on Facebook. The principals also received calls from people identifying themselves as local residents, who complained about the students’ distribution of yellow ribbons in the streets.

In response to these calls, the principals stressed their political neutrality. They assured the callers that they respected the students’ and teachers’ political views and were committed to ensuring that these views could be expressed. The schools were to provide neutral platforms for the free expression of political views. Accordingly, the principals refused to express either approval or disapproval of the strikes. The students were required to ask their parents for permission to participate in the strikes, and to apply for leave from school in advance. In one case, students were permitted to pin up posters inside classrooms. However, the posters could not be displayed facing the corridor, as they would then intrude upon the “public space.” The same applied to banners bearing the slogan “I want genuine universal suffrage.” In another case, a principal had a lengthy discussion with his students about the wording of a banner’s slogan. “To maintain political neutrality, it is not advisable to use direct statements. I therefore advised them to change the statement on the banner into a question, making its meaning open” (PD).

In retrospect, the student activists felt that they were forced to progressively moderate their mobilization efforts. First, they agreed to change the wording of the slogan on their banners, and to add a question mark. Next, they complied with advice not to hang the banners in public on the grounds that the slogan might be seen by local people and misinterpreted as representing the stance of the school. The final decision was to put the banner on a table, where it could be seen only by members of the school community.

The student activists were frustrated by the limitations placed on their efforts to mobilize fellow students even after they had complied with the above requests. In all of the four schools under study, the response from the school community was rather discouraging before 28 September 2014. Few students participated in the school strikes on 26 September. At one school, despite the activists’ mobilization efforts, only 30 students joined the strike on campus. At another two schools, fewer than 100 students joined each strike. Only three students from one of the schools joined the strike at the government headquarters. One of the student respondents interpreted this low attendance rate as an embarrassing indicator of students’ general lack of interest in the electoral arrangements for 2017. However, things took a dramatic turn after 28 September. Another strike was organized for 30 September. The turnout rate exceeded expectations. One student concluded that “[w]e did not succeed in arousing awareness among our schoolmates. The tear gas did it for us.” News footage of tear gas dispersing the crowd were widely circulated on television and various social media platforms and brought Umbrella Movement into campus.

Social Media Revolution and Youthquake? Despite the evident and widespread use of social media in the Umbrella
Movement, the findings of this study suggest that social media did not play a significant role in mobilizing for the Movement in Hong Kong’s secondary schools. Social media have not been used actively for information dissemination before or after the outbreak. Both students and teachers had different reservations about expressing opinions in social media platforms. Instead, student activists relied on more “primitive” forms of communication to raise awareness of the movement. They used handbills, posters, banners and yellow ribbons: material objects with symbolic functions. The students also relied on interpersonal communication to convey their messages. They realized that their views would be more persuasively expressed face to face than online, and that to gain support, they should not address the issue directly. For example, two of the student respondents described using jokes as a subtle means of convincing indecisive schoolmates to listen to their arguments.

Interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in schools. As students meet on a daily basis, the majority of their interactions occur face to face. In the online environment, it is not unusual to read extremely impolite and insulting comments. Young people often use offensive language online. PB, who friended approximately 400 students on Facebook, recalled advising a student who asked for a recommendation letter to delete all posts on his Facebook profile containing offensive language. Behavior considered normal in the online environment is not acceptable in schools. Being polite and respectful are such etiquettes in school settings, resulting in “political evaporation” (Eliasoph, 1998) even before the negotiation began.

Depolitizing the Umbrella Movement in Schools. Poell (2014) argued that the influence of social media must be considered in light of their techno-cultural and political-economic contexts. The current study aptly illustrated how institutional norms and practices have impacted on the mobilization efforts of student activists. As previously discussed, Hong Kong’s colonial past and recent political transitions have frequently obstructed attempts to introduce civic education to school curriculums. The region’s changing social ethos and political climate have made it difficult to teach politics and related subjects (Yuen, 2007). In addition, as schools are generally run according to authoritarian principles, with particular emphasis placed on rules, regulations, age-based seniority and professionalism, realizing the ideal of democratic education is close to a “mission impossible” (Tse, 2000). However, “genuine universal suffrage” was so explicit a slogan of the Umbrella Movement that one cannot ignore its connection with citizenship, democracy and civic education. News reports featuring “good” students in the occupied areas doing their homework, sorting out garbage and recycling used materials celebrated many of the desirable qualities recognized and promoted by schools. These are all characteristics of personally responsible citizens which have long been recognized. When secondary school students were mobilized to organize school strikes and fought for justice, they moved to participatory citizenship and justice-oriented citizenship. These posed new challenges to both students and school administrators.

The four Hong Kong schools under study managed to contain the “radical” actions of a few student activists during the Umbrella Movement. The school principals distanced themselves from the core debate by emphasizing school rules and regulations, procedures, political neutrality and professionalism. The students’ close interpersonal relationships with their teachers and principals made them reluctant to enter into direct confrontation with school authorities. Indeed, they were willing to meet various standards for and expectations of “good students,” from reading newspapers regularly to seeking approval in advance for their protest activities, from speaking politely and respectfully to teachers.

In other words, the Umbrella Movement was depolitized within Hong Kong’s schools. The students’ right to debate democracy was recognized, yet the opportunity for debate was rare, and any such activities were required to be conducted safely and non-controversially. This containment was not necessarily due to the principals’ self-censorship or control over their students. Rather, the behavior of both principals and students in response to the alarming uncertainties created by political crisis was shaped by norms and conventions, which roots could be traced a few decades back when civic education began to be considered in Hong Kong schools.

Conclusion

Contrary to popular belief, social media played limited roles in mobilizing the Umbrella Movement at the secondary school level. Traditional forms of communication such as face-to-face discussion and negotiation were far more instrumental. Although a generational divide was observed in the use of media, members of the younger and older generations did not differ significantly in their understanding of the movement.

The findings of this study suggest that how different communication practices are mediated in particular social and cultural contexts remain to be relevant and important, as the stress on “harmony” in local education settings illustrate in this case study. The strong adherence to political neutrality and professionalism suggest that schools could hardly provide the kind of idealistic civic education stated in curriculum documents. The findings prompted for a critical reading of how apolitical civic education in Hong Kong schools constrained a social movement that was supposedly led by the youth.

With only four case schools, the number of interviewees is indeed small and hence findings cannot be generalized. In spite of this limitation, all interviews were conducted within 2 months after the movement was officially ended. It was the
time when the informants recalled both vivid details and deeply personal feelings which enabled us to move beyond broad observations and strived to look for details in micro-environments. It hopefully will contribute to further research in (non) participation of youth in both online environment and their everyday life setting.

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**Author Biographies**

Donna SC Chu (PhD, University of Hong Kong) is an associate professor at the School of Journalism and Communication in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include youth media culture, social media, gender, and media literacy.