# Civic intentionality in youth media participation: the case of Hong Kong

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to discuss changing perspectives observed and collected from 10 focus groups conducted with teenagers in Hong Kong between 2012 and 2017. It has identified a growing sense of distrust and fear about online participation. It found that young people were increasingly aware of the public nature of social media and exercised great cautions in their online activities, resulting in more notable non-participation. In addition to refraining from various risky behaviours, informants demonstrated a strong tendency of self-surveillance. Despite the normative and affirmative biases generally associated with participation, this paper argued that participation was not necessarily desirable in the eyes of young internet users in Hong Kong. It revisited the meanings of participation in varying contexts, followed by an updated account of Hong Kong situation. Findings from focus groups are presented with further discussion about risky online participation and their implications to media literacy education.

## Introduction

This study discusses the changing meanings of 'participation' in the networked media environment. Findings from 10 focus groups of teenagers in Hong Kong collected between 2012 and 2017 showed how young people used different forms of media and revealed growing fear and distrust about online participation. While these findings appear to contradict with the impressions generated from waves of protests in Hong Kong since the summer of 2019 (Purbrick 2019), which marked 'new forms of youth activism' (Ku 2020), this paper argues that both the findings and latest events point to the importance of 'civic intentionality' in media literacy education (Mihailidis 2018).

## Rethinking 'participation' in the networked society

### Participation as a means and an end

Participation has often been framed in positive terms (Literat 2016). Media literacy education, for example, has long hailed participation as both a positive goal and desirable outcome. Terms such as 'active democratic citizenship' (e.g., Ashley, Maksl, and Craft 2013), 'participatory democracy' (e.g., Kellner and Share 2007), 'critical autonomy' (e.g., Masterman 1985), 'cultural participation and active citizenship' (e.g., Koltay 2011), 'engagement' (e.g., Mihailidis and Hiebert 2005), 'critical and participative dimensions' (e.g., Costa et al. 2018) are often used in the media education literature.

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Critical analysis and media production have both been advocated and practiced, in which participation is again emphasised. It is believed that students can acquire media literacy skills through direct, hands-on experience of making their own media. Active participation is assumed in the process. Here, participation is also a means to an end.

Yet with drastic changes in communication technologies, participation in media is now much easier and can be much more frequent than in the past. Phillips and Milner (cited in Boyd 2018, March 10, https://points.datasociety.net/you-think-you-want-media-literacy-do-you-7cad6af18ec2) commented that a segment of population has become very well-versed in digital communication. Boyd (2018, March 10, https://points.datasociety.net/you-think-you-want-media-literacy-do-you-7cad6af18ec2) argued that in reality young people do not have to rely on schools to teach them digital communication skills: they learn through their everyday media practices and many are already active participants. If more media users are already actively participating in the networked environment, what should be 'taught' in media literacy education?

There have been many well-intentioned projects, designed to promote good civic participation by riding the new wave of digital activism (Jenkins et al. 2016; cf. Mihailidis 2018). Allen and Light (2015) also asked how can one translate 'voice' to 'influence' in the process. Mihailidis (2018) argued for civic media literacies in the age of digital abundance. The common concern here is about how meaningful connections and contributions can be made in a communal and collective sense. In other words, the new challenge for media literacy educators would be to facilitate and foster civic participation.

Mihailidis (2018) argued that in order to make participation actually happen, it is important to build a civic value system. His proposal of civic media literacies is marked by 'civic intentionality'. It refers to participation that involves

> employing and deploying resources to support a specific process or outcomes. It includes the tools that are used to participate … but also and perhaps of more importance, the practices that initiate voice and realise the ways in which people become agent of social change. (Mihailidis 2018, 128)

### Decline of 'good' participation and rise of 'new' participation

Speaking of 'agents of social change', much concern has been expressed about the decline of 'good' participation in the political context, a term which is generally used to refer to actions such as voting and joining political parties (O'Toole et al. 2003; Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014). Although it is clear that factors such as social and educational background influence level of political participation (Henn and Foard 2014), there is evidence that new communication technologies have indeed given rise to new modes of participation associated with 'networked individualism' (Rainie and Wellman 2012). The distinction between dutiful citizens and actualising citizens, for example, highlights differences in style of civic participation (Bennett 2008). Observing the sharp contrast between youth participation in new media and their civic and political participation, Kahne, Lee, and Feezell (2012) asked if online engagement could boost offline engagement. Such questions often focus on how new media practices could contribute to, if not revive, good citizenship. There has also been considerable discussion of how social media can facilitate civic participation; as exemplified in the mobilisation of protesters during the Arab Spring (see Robertson 2015; Smidi and Shahin 2017).

Talking about good and new participation implies the existence of their opposites. Yet just as Jenkins and Carpentier (2013) asked what constitutes participation, simply taking part in something is not necessarily good participation (Carpentier 2009); the notion of good participation is often tied to notions such as power, agency, engagement and empowerment (Literat 2016). The presence or absence of these elements depend on other factors. For example, the more optimistic and celebratory undertones of earlier days quickly gave way to more critical evaluations of the presumed power of social media. Attention is drawn to the infrastructure and affordances of various social media platforms (Poell 2014), because such features could constrain or facilitate participation. Lim (2012) and

Chu (2018) also argued that traditional media and means of communication retain their specific roles in facilitating participation in social movements, despite the advent of social media. In fact, the rise of connective actions notwithstanding (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), some have questioned whether social media is actually promoting a form 'slacktivism' (Rotman et al. 2011), involving easy, but minimal participation, which is not considered to be 'good' participation in the traditional sense.

### Non-participation as participation

Participation is not inherently good. What about non-participation? Lutz and Hoffmann (2017) classified forms of participation and non-participation based on type of activity, agency and social valence. A detailed taxonomy of positive and negative, active and passive participation, is devised to illuminate the complexities of online participation. This taxonomy suggests that although active participation might be observable and even countable, non-participation is far from insignificant, despite its relative invisibility (Casemajor et al. 2015).

In fact, as Hayes, Scheufele, and Huge (2006) noted, non-participation was adopted as a form of self-censorship in the polarised opinion climate found on Facebook. Some of the features particular to Facebook, including the existence of imagined audiences and the unpredictable comments one might receive, have resulted in social ambiguities or 'social groundlessness'. It gives rise to an emerging need for different rules for interaction and participation. Thorson (2014) found that young users responded to the uncertainties of the context by stressing their neutrality, employing humour or simply ignoring unwelcome posts. There have also been instances when 'conspicuous non-consumption' of social networking sites has been used by resisters and rejecters to signal total non-participation in that world (Portwood-Stacer 2012; Neves et al. 2015).

All these reflections have complicated the definition and manifestation of participation. Matters are further complicated when we take into account of how different societies have developed different forms of active citizenship (Dahlgren 2003, 2006). In addition to technological affordances, participation is also shaped by the culture of a society and the agency available to its members. In short, it is important to discuss the conditions required for 'good' participation' (see also Banaji and Buckingham 2013), which is not only about the skills and competencies to participate but also about facilitating the intentionality and willingness to participate. The unique political system of Hong Kong provides an illuminating case of how 'civic participation', as well as conditions of participation, are undergoing different interpretations after 1997.

### Changing media and politics in post-1997 Hong Kong

This study considers these questions about changing forms of participation and civic intentionality in the context of Hong Kong. Hong Kong was returned to China in July 1997, after 150 years of British colonial rule. Despite the promise of 'one country two systems', there were worries about potential changes to freedom of speech in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Journalists Association 1997; Kraar and McGowan 1995; The Economist, June, 28th, 2007). It is believed that through changing media ownership, interference through commercial operations and increasing self-censorship, press freedom in Hong Kong has been tightened (Lau and To 2002; Chan and Lee 2007; Fung 2007). Recent studies have found that legacy news media are under increasing pressures in reporting about 'sensitive issues' related to the Mainland China (Luqiu 2017; Frisch, Belair-Gagnon, and Agur 2018). Internet media are becoming more important as an alternative space in news dissemination and opinion expressions (Kwong 2015).

In September 2014 Hong Kong appeared in international news headlines as the Umbrella protests broke out. Demands for 'genuine universal suffrage' had once again been refused by the Beijing authorities. Legal scholar Benny Tai first proposed 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace' (OCLP) as an act of civil disobedience in 2013. The original plan did not materialise because of various factors but eventually, three sites were occupied in Hong Kong during the 79 days of protests. OCLP, together

with other civil society organisations, were generally considered to be the leaders of the movement. Social media, including social networking tools like Firechat and Telegram, are said to have played a notable role in dissemination and mobilisation of information (Lam 2014, December 12, https://medium.com/@tclam/social-medias-role-in-hong-kongs-occupy-central-8b52d47088b0; Tsui 2015). The clear divide between the pan-democrats and pro-establishment camp was also clearly reflected by the echo chamber effects in social media (Lee et al. 2018).

Five years after the Umbrella Movement, in the summer of 2019, the Water Revolution (Anferlini 2019) broke out. It first started when the Hong Kong government proposed to pass a bill that would have allowed them to send extradites to mainland China in February 2019. It ignited mass demonstrations which led to severe confrontations and numerous controversies regarding police brutality and human rights abuse. Unlike Umbrella Movement, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests are characterised by a strong emphasis on being leaderless, yet participants from different fronts take part in a great many forms and showed a high level of solidarity (Lee 2020). Clearly, digital media have an important role in the networked protests (Ting 2020). Lee et al. (2019) have conducted on-site surveys and found that as much as 93.8% of protesters said that they used online media as source of information. Protesters also heavily relied on encrypted messaging apps for information dissemination and protest coordination. Their surveys found that the majority of respondents were aged between 20–24 (26.9%) and 25–29 (22.1%). 11.8% were aged 19 or below. Secondary school students have actively participated when the new academic year began in September 2019. They did not only engage in online protests but also organised offline activities like calling young people to form human chain as protest.

Such active participation in both offline protests and online discussion suggest a strong motivation and willingness in civic participation. However, it is also readily observable there is an acute awareness of various surveillance techniques. Just as protesters wore masks, many internet users opted to stay anonymous or change their social media handles so that they could not be searched easily. These phenomena reflect growing complexities regarding participation and non-participation.

Although this brief summary necessarily cuts a long and complicated story short, it shows the immense uncertainties Hong Kong has been through. Like other developed democratic societies, Hong Kong is experiencing waves of changes due to recent advances in communication technologies. Participation in media is much easier. Unlike her counterparts, however, Hong Kong is experimenting the unprecedented design of 'One country, Two systems', in which the two systems are often in conflicts. The recent trials and prosecution of members of Occupy Central suggest that the stakes can be high when it comes to political and civic participation (Pomfret and Pang 2019). In the summer of 2019, the two systems once again came into direct confrontations. A new form of youth activism (Ku 2020) has impressed the world with the innovative protest tactics and flexible mobilisation. Given the easy and also mundane online participation, it might be a logical development and hence should not be surprising. Nonetheless, when one considers the rapidly changing civic culture in Hong Kong, the recent events are indeed astonishing. As Lee et al. (2019) summed up, the post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong has been going through a period characterised by 'pervasive feeling of powerlessness and desperation'.

Such political development presents a unique scenario in which the meaning of participation, whether in the desirable, political, civic, good or new sense, is constantly in flux. It is against this background that this study is relevant as it asks how the young generation makes sense of the networked environment and their various participation in the media.

## Notes on methods

This paper focuses on youth media participation in Hong Kong. Since 2012, the author has been researching various aspects of media use and youth culture. This has involved the organisation of ten focus groups between 2012 and 2017, for three different research projects on gendered media representation (Chu 2013), protest mobilisation in the Umbrella Movement (Chu 2018) and media literacy. Despite the differing themes, all the focus group discussions included a segment

on 'media use'. Participants were asked to name the major media they frequently used, and for what purposes. There were also a particular section focusing on their social media practices. Questions were open-ended and semi-structured. The aim was to allow participants to express their views as freely as possible. The focus group technique enabled conversations to emerge in a fairly naturalistic way and the group interactions provided rich data (Lunt and Livingstone 1996).

All ten focus group discussions were transcribed. In this study, the transcriptions about the general media use and social media practices have been analysed in detail to identify recurring topics, which eventually centred around general definitions of media, use of media and problems associated with such use. Comments made on similar topics at different times were given specific attention to see if certain patterns emerged throughout the years. Through following up certain comments and questions, the various groups often reached similar conclusions about participation. This is particularly noteworthy given the time span under consideration. Between 2012 and 2017, there was a growing sense of fear and distrust about online participation.

As the main investigator of these three different projects, the author was first intrigued by this trend and decided to review these findings guided by questions about participation. Admittedly, the data reported here were not only collected for different research purposes but over a long period of time. The speed of innovations in communication technologies means that social media applications in 2012 were different from those of 2017. However, the author has been immersed in the findings and would argue that some of the most common concerns are much relevant to an updated understanding of online participation, which in turn has implications for civic media literacies as advocated by Mihailidis (2018).

The demographic characteristics of participants in the ten focus groups are summarised in Table 1. Participants were mainly recruited through schools and social workers. Members of group 6–9 were schoolmates from three different schools, whilst the other six groups consisted of young people who did not know one another beforehand. The following section reports general and changing patterns in media use and common practices in social media, using excerpts from the discussions to illustrate the group dynamics.

## Major findings

### *The useful media*

Participants were asked to name the types of media they used most often. The interviewer simply used the word 'media'. No respondent ever asked for clarification and participants were free to come up with their own interpretations and definitions. Back in 2012 the first mentions included

**Table 1.** Summary of 10 focus groups.

| Date | Number of informants | Sources | Research topic |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| March 6, 2012 | 6 Form 4 to 6 girls | referrals from social workers | gendered media representation |
| March 6, 2012 | 6 Form 4 to 6 girls | recruited from different schools | gendered media representation |
| March 6, 2012 | 6 Form 4 to 6 boys | recruited from different schools | gendered media representation |
| February 9, 2015 | 1 Form 4 boy 2 Form 5 girls | same school | Umbrella Movement |
| February 12, 2015 | 2 Form 5 boys 1 Form 5 girl | same school | Umbrella Movement |
| December 21, 2015 | 5 Form 4 boys | same school | media literacy education |
| December 24, 2015 | 5 Form 5 boys | same school | media literacy education |
| January 3, 2016 | 3 Form 3 girls 2 Form 3 boys | same school | media literacy education |
| January 4, 2016 | 4 Form 3 girls 1 Form 3 boy | same school | media literacy education |
| September 7, 2017 | 4 Form 6 girls 1 Form 6 boys 2 Form 5 girls | recruited from different schools | media literacy education |

popular newspapers, titles of television dramas, radio programmes, followed by YouTube and Facebook. In 2017 the messaging applications Whatsapp and Snapchat were mentioned first, followed by YouTube and Facebook. When a 17-year-old boy hesitantly asked 'Is news counted as media?' the whole group burst into laughter. The interviewer asked why he asked this question and he responded that he was just not sure because no one else had mentioned any kind of news media at all (Focus group 10, September 2017). Others responded by confirming that they did still read and watch news, but they preferred messaging apps.

At first glance there seems to have been a shift in media choices from offline to online, or from traditional to new media: both print and broadcast media are in decline and people now spend more time on various online platforms. Further discussion often showed, however, that young people neither cared about the distinctions between different media nor made conscious and deliberate choices about which to use. For example, although there was considerable criticism of local television, young people still watched a lot television. In a 2015 focus group mention of a television drama series immediately sparked a heated discussion about plot development, which suggested that most had been following the drama series. Participants also read the printed versions of newspapers regularly, both free dailies brought home by parents and newspapers to which their school had a subscription. Some had installed news apps on their electronic devices and received regular notifications of news updates. Reading news was deemed to be necessary for some school subjects and hence remained an important component of media use, although most participants admitted that they did not actively seek news outside what was required for homework. They tended to come across news on Facebook or news bulletin boards on public transport, a form of 'ambient journalism' (Hermida 2010). It was also noteworthy that despite the YouTube slogan 'Broadcast Yourself', none of the respondents in any of the ten focus groups had ever uploaded videos to this sharing platform. Most visited YouTube regularly to watch videos that were trending; in other words, they did not actively seek out particular videos, simply watching what the majority was watching instead.

In summary, for these young people, who were all born after the arrival of Internet in early 1990s, the division was not so much between old and new media as between useful and not so useful media.

## Social media practices

All ten focus groups discussed social media behaviour and phenomena, where social media are broadly defined as social networking sites which enable interactions among users. Facebook, YouTube, Whatsapp and Snapchat were mentioned most frequently. Social media penetration has reached very high levels (see, for example, Smith and Anderson 2018; Anderson and Jiang 2018). This study confirms that use of social media has become part of young people's daily routine. Given the participatory nature of social media, one might expect their use to include 'active participation', but the findings suggest otherwise.

### Likes, comments and shares

Most respondents said that they rarely gave 'likes', made comments or shared posts on Facebook. They were fully aware that whatever they did online left traces for others to see. Liking a post was regarded as more 'harmless' than making comments and sharing posts, yet most respondents still did not 'like' posts unless they strongly agreed with a post or found it really funny. Respondents felt most comfortable making public comments about funny posts and would even tag friends to share the fun. In relation to other content, however, they exercised considerable caution. A 16-year-old girl recounted the dilemma she had faced about sharing a news article.

> When I first read the news, I knew that the press had exaggerated [what had happened]. I knew because I was there and what I witnessed was the complete opposite to the news! I wanted so much to tell my side of story and to share how I felt. I could have left a comment under the news, but I dared not to make my stance public. I wanted to share but I was afraid that I would say something sensitive. I spent a long time wondering whether or

not I should share the news and if I did, what I should write in the heading? Should I frankly share my feelings? Or just briefly say that it [the reporting in this way] was a pity? (Focus group 10, September 2017)

The girl decided to share the news and wrote about her feelings. Nothing happened afterwards and she said that it was because 'no one really cares about my Facebook posts anyway'.

Similarly, when asked whether they would comment about news and public issues on social media, a few students said that no one would really care about their comments, mainly because they were still so young. Nevertheless, they liked reading comments made by others.

I find it really useful to study comments. They say so much about how the public feels about a particular issue. I can also learn more about different opinions. (17-year-old girl, Focus group 10, September 2017)

This girl's focus group discussed what kinds of people would leave comments and concluded that commenters must be older people (aged over 30 years) who were very confident of their own views. The interviewer asked if young people made comments. All seven respondents shook their heads and one said, 'I don't think ordinary young people would. Maybe activists and radical youth would, but not us'.

During the Umbrella Movement of 2014 concern groups were set up in some schools and they created Facebook fan pages to disseminate information (Chu 2018). Two focus groups were conducted in early 2015, one comprised student leaders and the other was made up of students who opted to remain bystanders. The first group had concluded that Facebook was 'useless' as no one really paid attention. No one reacted to their posts: no likes and no comments. They believed that this might be because students met every day anyway in a school setting and therefore had no need to communicate via social media (Focus group 5, February, 2015).

In another school a group of bystanders shared similar observation about limitations of Facebook use. A 15-year-old boy stressed that he would rather have face-to-face conversations with others and would avoid leaving written comments on social media. He believed that comments were less confrontational in the context of direct conversations. Having seen the sharp division of opinion between the two opposing camps young people who participated in the 2015 focus groups were acutely aware that online discussion was mostly futile and 'dangerous' (Focus group 4, February, 2015).

### Dos and don'ts on YouTube

Even in 2012 YouTube was frequently used by focus groups participants. This was a time when many videos exposing different kinds of individual 'wrongdoings' went viral. Respondents noted that there were quite a number of videos showing young couples behaving intimately in public. A 16-year-old girl commented on this phenomenon:

People are caught doing stupid things in public. Well, I don't think that it is right to do this kind of stalking but I don't feel sorry for those people. They need to behave themselves in the first place. (Focus group 1, March 2012)

A 15-year-old boy confessed that he had not known that it was wrong to lean on the handrail in public transport: 'I saw on YouTube that someone was publicly shamed with a video showing this. Then I knew I should never do it' (Focus group 6, December 2015).

Other respondents added to the 'things not to do' list: don't talk loudly on the street; don't take the priority seats even if there's no-one who needs them; don't do strange things; don't look weird; don't wear a special outfit …

Nowadays, everyone has a phone and it is so easy to take pictures and videos. You'd never know; you can be captured because you are too pretty or too ugly. (Focus group 1, March 2012)

### Private and closed groups

After 2015 messaging applications such as Whatsapp and Snapchat generated more discussion amongst focus groups. There was a consensus that in closed groups it was safe to speak up. These

closed groups consisted mainly of family members and trusted friends. A 15-year-old boy explained that in a closed group 'I may say something wrong but I am pretty sure that I will not be publicly shamed because of it'. Young people increasingly turned to closed groups for advice and information because of the sense of trust and security they engender. They were also more ready to speak up and share their own views about sensitive topics in such groups.

On the other hand, just as with other platforms, the specific features of messing apps facilitated or constrained how users communicated. Snapchat, for example, encourages frequent interactions between users by giving out streaks as incentives. In order to accumulate streaks with friends, respondents had to keep chatting and sending pictures whether or not they had anything substantial to share. This kind of participation eventually became a form of peer pressure.

## Discussion

### Media literacy as latent capacity

In 1992 participants in an event at the Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute defined media literacy as 'the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages in a wide variety of forms' (Aufderheide and Firestone 1993). The young people who participated in the focus groups on which this study is based demonstrated their ability to access different media. They were familiar with various media and knew where to look for entertainment and information. They were also aware of the existence of fake news and other forms of misinformation. They read and watched online comments and viral videos but remained sceptical and critical of such content. This can be interpreted as evidence of ability to analyse and evaluate media messages. What was not demonstrated by the focus group data was their ability to create media output, or the lack of intention to create.

Can we therefore conclude that these young people were largely 'media literate'? Zuckerman (2015) argued that media users acquired 'latent capacity' for various media activities that could be eventually utilised for other purposes. After all, most of us are immersed in a media-saturated environment and we all access, analyse, evaluate and create media in one way or another. With or without media literacy interventions, we learn about media in our everyday lives. Ironically, the knowledge acquired through daily use has not facilitated the kind of good and desirable participation educators envisaged. The absence of 'civic intentionality' is particularly remarkable in this case.

### Boundaries of participation

Young people have used their 'media literacy' to devise non-participatory media consumption strategies. Their tacit understanding of the technological affordances of media platforms, the unpredictable nature of social media, with its social groundlessness (Thorson 2014), all taught young people to be cautious in digital spaces. Focus group participants did not readily like, comment or share posts in order to avoid leaving a digital footprint that might come back to haunt them. Like some of their Western counterparts they would take a humorous approach when they did participate in social media (Thorson 2014). Only in very rare instances did they feel compelled to express their views and even then, they would make sure they did it in a way that would not antagonise others. Their strategy was to stay away from controversy in order to avoid conflict and direct confrontations. This was particularly so in polarised political environment, as Hayes, Scheufele, and Huge (2006) found in their study of non-participation and self-censorship, which is corroborated by the data presented here.

A society's talk, particularly civic talk, and practices, routines and traditions regulating such talk, influences how it develops its civic culture (Dahlgren 2003). Vromen, Xenos, and Loader (2015) discussed how young people managed political talks in different settings. The sharp divide in public opinion in Hong Kong, combined with the unpredictability of social media, means that self-

censorship seems a sensible choice for people who feel vulnerable to hostility from other invisible users. It is evident from this study that young people not only limit their communication political issues but on most general issues except matters of humour.

Ito et al. (2010) described three new genres of online participation, namely 'hanging out', 'geeking out' and 'messing around'. Livingstone (2011) added 'playing with fire' to the list, emphasising that risky opportunities were available in open digital spaces (also see Livingstone 2008). An earlier study by Hope (2007) argued that Internet misuse was actually a form of boundary performance for young people: it allowed them to transgress boundaries, albeit temporarily, and learn about norms.

Participants in the focus groups described here avoided risks and carefully maintained boundaries. They kept a close watch on online comments from people they did not know, whilst making sure that they personally did not say anything wrong. As Beck (2006) reminded us, risk relates to anticipation of catastrophe rather than catastrophe itself. These young people had calculated the probability of getting into trouble and on that basis stayed within perceived boundaries, in silence.

Once again, it is important to emphasise the complexity of participation. Lutz and Hoffmann's (2017) taxonomy specifies eight different types of participation. Positive active participation is probably the most desirable, as it is reflected in constructive engagement. Negative active participation involves destructive engagement. Interestingly, Lutz and Hoffman noted that passive participation is also possible, using the term positive passive participation to refer to incidental contributions made in the course of using media and negative passive participation to describe involuntary imposition a user comes across in media consumption. Non-participation can also be divided into positive active non-participation, characterised by abstention and negative active non-participation in the form of self-censorship or silencing, and into positive passive non-participation, characterised by lack of awareness or motivation for more active participation, and negative passive non-participation in the form of exclusion, as in the digital divide.

It is notable that focus groups rarely mentioned or discussed forms of active participation. The exception was the group comprising student activists that was held during the Umbrella Movement (Focus group 5, February 2015). Members described trying to mobilise their schoolmates through Facebook before eventually figuring out that it was 'useless' for this purpose. Despite this disappointment, they aimed for constructive engagement and should definitely be classified as positive active participants in social media.

The dominant and recurring theme of this study is 'non-participation'. Young people were heavy media users, navigating several media platforms to obtain entertainment, news and information. They spent considerable time reading comments from others, but did not join online conversations, regardless of whether or not they agreed with them. This might be interpreted as a form of active non-participation, characterised by conscious, voluntary self-censorship.

### Self-surveillance and participatory surveillance

Finally, there is a form of passive participation that is extending from online to offline contexts. Lyon (2014) observed that there exists a culture of surveillance. Social media have made it easy to see and to be seen, which could become a form of surveillance. Respondents had learned to behave themselves because of viral videos they had seen over the years. They learned what behaviours were deemed socially unacceptable and understood that if they violated social norms publicly they were at risk of having their behaviour captured by phone cameras, which have become ever-present.

None of the participants had actually experienced the ordeal of having supposedly transgressive behaviour posted online, but they could all give vivid descriptions of the awful consequences of failure to observe implicit rules. It is as if they had a built-in camera in their head that functioned as a constant reminder. Both self-censorship and self-surveillance kept these young people from active participation, or developing a stronger civic intentionality. Albrechtslund (2008) argued that the participatory surveillance on online social networking sites could be playful, empowering and productive, but the findings presented here paint a much less optimistic picture. More and more

young people are retreating to the more private messaging apps to exchange views and whilst these spaces make them feel safe enough to speak up, open and public discussion will inevitably become more invisible in the long run.

### Civic intentionality matters

These data, collected between 2012 and 2017, show that during this period young people were savvy media users who became more cautious and restrained in both online and offline participation. Given the constantly changing media environment it is difficult to offer generalisations, but a clear tendency to 'non-participation' amongst Hong Kong youth emerged from the data. As a massive social movement unfolded in the summer of 2019, however, it seemed that yet another pattern of participation is emerging that contradicts the findings.

A major difference lies with the presence of a strong motivation and an urgency to stop the passing of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill. As Mihailidis (2018) elaborated the five constructs for civic media literacies, he emphasised those civic values including caring, persistence, critical consciousness, imagination and emancipation (108). A genuine care for the future of Hong Kong has compelled concerned people to participate in the first place, and the ensuing confrontations have kept the momentum which further sparked a wide range of innovations in protest tactics. The media-savvy youth were able to utilise different media tools and resources. They quickly learned to apply their routine media practices in digital activism. The latent capacity of media literacy is in full swing.

Despite this civic intentionality, it is also very clear that participants are acutely aware of the boundaries of participation and all the potential risks. The use of pseudonyms in social media is a norm and encrypted messages are standard practices in this leaderless protest.

### Conclusion

Although this study did not directly address teaching of learning about media, its findings shed light on three key issues for media literacy education. First, young people have all acquired considerable latent capacity regarding media access and analysis. While it remains debatable whether such capacities are considered to be the same as media literacies, the more 'traditional' goals of media literacy are somehow fulfilled. Second, the kind of non-participation discussed here reflects a deep-seated distrust of the overall media ecology. It is ironic that non-participation is becoming commonplace in a supposedly participatory media environment. This is also a warning sign of a widening participation gap in society (Jenkins 2009). Finally, it is important to keep asking how media literacy education should be designed and implemented in view of these changes. It would be unrealistic, even unfair, to expect media literacy education to fix these big problems, which have much deeper social and cultural roots. Different societies have developed different civic cultures. The case of Hong Kong showed that 'civic intentionality' (Mihailidis 2018) is indeed a crucial element in civic participation. How civic values can be 'taught', however, would demand more rigorous research and discussion.

### Disclosure statement

### Notes on contributor

*Donna Chu*, currently associate professor in the School of Journalism and Communication in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, works on research about youth media culture, gender and media literacy. She obtained her PhD in the University of Hong Kong.

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