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# Digital media use and participation leadership in social protests: The case of Tiananmen commemoration in Hong Kong ☆

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ABSTRACT

During the process of social mobilization for contentious collective actions, some ordinary citizens may play the role of participation leaders by making an early participation decision and calling upon others to join the collective action. This study extends the literature on the impact of digital media on political participation by examining if digital media can influence not whether individuals would participate in offline protests or not, but whether people would take up the role of participation leaders in such protests. Using the annual rally in Hong Kong commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen movement in China as a case study, usage of Facebook, microblogging services, and online alternative media are found to contribute to online political communication activities, which in turn lead to participation leadership. Further analysis shows that the impact of online political communication activities on participation leadership exists only among the young rally participants. Implications of the findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Ever since the popularization of the Internet in the 1990s, political communication researchers have asked whether digital media use could enhance citizens' levels of political participation. Early research suggests that, while overall Internet use by itself does not necessarily lead to political participation, there has been substantial evidence showing a positive impact of Internet use for political purposes on participation (Boulianne, 2009). With the rise of social media since the late 2000s, a bourgeoning literature has also shown that using social media for seeking public affairs information, opinion expression, and/or mobilization can lead to both online and offline political participation (e.g., Bode et al., 2014; Conroy et al., 2012; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Enjolras et al., 2013; Macafee and De Simone, 2012; Skoric and Poor, 2013; Tang and Lee, 2013; Towner, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013).

While the extant literature focuses mainly on whether digital media users are more likely to participate in political activities, this article aims at extending current knowledge by examining whether different levels of digital media use is associated with different modes of participation within the same political activity. Specifically, this study focuses on participation leadership in social protests. Social protests typically involve a mobilization process that unfolds over time. Individual

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citizens make their participation decisions at different time points and under varying circumstances. Some individuals make an early decision to join the protest, while others may decide to participate only in the last minute. Some may make the participation decision independently and then proactively call upon others to join the protest, while others may participate largely because of an invitation from a friend. In other words, among the protest participants, some can be regarded as participation leaders who have contributed to the mobilization process, whereas others can be seen as followers who are mainly mobilized to act. Then, are frequent users of digital media more likely to play the role of participation leader in offline social protests?

This article tackles the research question by drawing upon an onsite survey conducted during an annual rally in Hong Kong commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy movement in China. By focusing on the protesters, this article shares with other studies the recognition that protesters use new media technologies to engage in various communication, mobilization, and coordination activities (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Bennett et al., 2014; Theocharis, 2013). Yet this article is distinctive in its emphasis on participation leadership and, more generally, the possibility of different types of protesters using digital media to different extents. Examining the role of digital media in facilitating participation leadership shall enrich our understanding of how digital media contribute to social mobilization for collective actions and the formation of a more active citizenry.

## 2. Literature review, conceptual model, and hypotheses

### 2.1. Digital media usage and protest participation

There are numerous reasons why digital media can lead to higher levels of offline protest participation. The Internet lowers information costs and makes protest-related messages more readily accessible (Coopman, 2011; Lupia and Sin, 2003). While the mainstream media often exhibit a tendency to undermine or marginalize movement groups (Boykoff, 2006; Chan and Lee, 1984; Sobieraj, 2011), movement groups have the opportunities to communicate directly with supporters and the wider public online. Indeed, the Internet has provided a platform for the growth of activist and alternative media (Harcup, 2013; Forde, 2011), which are important sources of pro-activism information and messages.

Digital media also provide citizens with opportunities of expression, discussions, and various forms of virtual political actions (Earl and Kimport, 2011). Opinion expressions and discussions can lead to further demand for news information (Eveland and Thomson, 2006) and strengthen people's interests in the issue and commitment to a cause, resulting in a virtuous cycle which generates higher likelihood of participation. Although online discussions are often non-deliberative and occur primarily among people with similar views (Wojcieszak, 2010; Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009), concordant discussions are actually more capable of reinforcing pre-existing views and generating actions (Mutz, 2006).

Moreover, digital media allow people to maintain strong and weak ties and develop both bonding and bridging social capital, which in turn promote civic and political engagement (e.g., Gil de Zuniga, 2012; Hampton, 2011; Zhong, 2014). Some citizens' online social networks may even include politicians and activists. Such direct connections with political actors can be particularly effective in generating participation (Tang and Lee, 2013).

While the above arguments are applicable to digital media in general, social media and user-generated content sites have further strengthened the informational, expressive, and networking utilities of digital media. As Valenzuela et al. (2012) stated summarily, "frequent Facebook users are more likely to protest because they engage in activities that are essential for collective action, such as learning information, exchanging and forming opinions about social issues, and constructing a common identity" (p. 303).

### 2.2. The concept of participation leadership

As already noted, this study is concerned with whether digital media use relates to whether a person takes up participation leadership for an offline protest. For the present study, a participation leader can be defined as a person who contributes to the mobilization process behind a political activity by making people around him or her more likely to participate in the activity. In this context, the term "participation" thus refers specifically to taking part in the activity concerned. For social protests, the protest organizers would, by the above definition, be participation leaders, but participation leaders also exist among the ordinary citizens who participate in the protests, since citizens can mobilize and influence each other during the mobilization process. This study is interested in ordinary individuals taking up the role of participation leader in protests.

Participation leadership is, in several ways, similar to the concept of opinion leadership (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1957; Weimann, 1991). Both concepts deal with the flow of social influence through interpersonal networks and point to the possibility that social influence flows mainly from people acting as "leaders" to others acting as "followers." Opinion leaders, as Nisbet and Kotcher (2009) explicated, "did not necessarily hold formal positions of power or prestige in communities but rather served as the connective communication tissue that alerted their peers to what mattered among political events, social issues, and consumer choices" (p. 329). Similarly, the participation leaders in protests are not necessarily the organizers; they may not even be members of organizing groups; they can simply be citizens who have exerted influences on other people's participation decision.

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