

## **Citizen Camera-Witnessing: A Case Study of the Umbrella Movement**

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### **Abstract**

Citizen camera-witness is a new concept by which to describe using mobile camera phone to engage in civic expression. I argue that the meaning of this concept should not be limited to painful testimony; instead, it is a mode of civic camera-mediated mass self-testimony to brutality. The use of mobile phone recordings in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement is examined to understand how mobile cameras are employed as personal witnessing devices to provide recordings to indict unjust events and engage others in the civic movement. This study has examined the Facebook posts and You Tube videos of the Umbrella Movement between September 22, 2014 and December 22, 2014. The results suggest that the camera phone not only contributes to witnessing the brutal repression of the state, but also witnesses the beauty of the movement, and provides a testimony that allows for rituals to develop and semi-codes to be transformed.

**Keywords:** *citizen journalism, media witnessing, social media, social movement, visual culture*

## 1. Introduction

Mobile phone pictures and videos have now become important elements of global media's witnessing of news events, with some mobile recordings produced by non-journalists and other normal citizens going viral and generating significant eyewitness imagery for a global audience (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2011). Examples include the recordings of the 9/11 attacks, of the 7/7 London bombings, and of the protests of the Arab Spring (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014).

The ability of citizens using mobile camera phones to connect with a global audience via digital networks has attracted academic discussion and studies (Allen, 2006; Barlow, 2007). Some herald the empowerment of ordinary people, as individuals now have an extraordinary network power that bypasses established censors and filters (Castells, 2009; Readings, 2008). It has become easy for them to show personal images and videos that they have made to a large global audience. This can produce an alternative voice to that of the mainstream media, which is always under the gaze of the state (Allen, 2006, Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014).

Frosh and Pinchevski (2014) argue that the emergence of this new powerful media testimony "marks the age of [the] post media event" (p. 594). The new technology positions audiences as witnesses to events, and as producers of media reports, as they can share these audiovisual records immediately around the world. This draws not only the attention of the local community but also the wider world. While this new media phenomenon has led to a number of scholastic studies, the meanings of media witnessing using mobile camera phones are still under-researched and under-theorized (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2014, Readings, 2009).

A number of scholars have criticized past studies of media witnessing for not having defined "witnessing" (such as Tait, 2011).

Andén-Papadopoulos (2014) argues that we should distinguish photographic and videographic recordings of everyday lives from citizen camera-witnessing. The former does not necessarily relate to civic expression and engagement, whereas the latter refers to camera-wielding political testimony that features moral engagement with the event. Political activists produce public recordings in the face of brutal state repression to fight against the unjust events, using mobile phone technology and global networking (Morozov, 2010). Andén-Papadopoulos (2014) believes that the citizen camera-witness resonates with the ideas of martyrdom, with dissidents using the pain and suffering shown in their video footage to indict the unjust power of the state. However, in this article I argue that Andén-Papadopoulos (2014) had not conducted any empirical research when she developed this new concept. The meaning of the citizen camera-witness should not be limited to painful testimony; instead, it is a mode of civic camera-mediated mass self-testimony to brutality. This self-publication connects the political activists and suffering others with the viewers. The meaning of the citizen camera-witness can be enlarged to different aspects of the diversity of social movements and civic engagement.

As a point of departure, the use of mobile phone recordings in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement is examined to understand how mobile cameras are employed as personal witnessing devices to provide recordings to indict unjust events and engage others in the civic movement. The Umbrella Movement, one of the largest pro-democracy demonstrations ever seen in Hong Kong, began on September 28, 2014 (Philips, 2015). The movement was originally initiated by a civil disobedience campaign that advocated genuine democratic reform, and was set up by Benny Tai 戴耀廷, a law professor at Hong Kong University. In January 2013, he argued in the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (信報財經新聞), a Hong Kong elite-orientated newspaper, that

the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) government was not committed to undertaking reform to allow genuine universal suffrage. He proposed occupying the roads of Central, a financial district of Hong Kong, as a weapon of civil disobedience that would force the government to respond to the request for genuine democratic reform (Tai, 2013). He joined with sociologist Chan Kin Man 陳健民 and Reverend Chu Yiu Ming 朱耀明 to launch a campaign promoting the ideas of Occupy Central, “Occupy Central with Love and Peace” (讓愛與和平佔領中環 / 和平佔中). One-and-a-half years later, students initiated a demonstration at Hong Kong’s government headquarters, which quickly provoked the beginning of the Occupy movement, which later became a 79-day occupation known worldwide as the Umbrella Movement<sup>1</sup> (Lee, 2015).

In the following section, I argue that the Umbrella Movement shared many of the characteristics of other recent social demonstrations that have taken place around the world. The Umbrella Movement therefore serves as a good case study to illustrate the role of mobile phone cameras in civic engagement and media witnessing. I then further discuss the importance of media witnessing and the limitations of this concept.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. A New Form of “Self-Help” Social Movement***

In recent decades, many social movements have sprung up in different regions and countries, including the United States, Spain, Mexico, and Chile (Bennett, 2012; Juris, 2012; Rovira Sancho, 2014; Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012). Lee, So and Leung (2015) suggest that the Umbrella Movement shares the common ethos of these other movements, which is the spirit of “self-actualization”. Participants in

these social movements considered themselves to be autonomous individuals, and believed that every protestor was equal and that they were not submitting themselves to any authority. Instead, their actions were facilitated via consensus. These social movements were very different from conventional social movements, which have formal organization and leaders. Bennett (2012) asserts that this new form of “self-help” movement allows room for individual creativity and diversified action.

At the same time, these social movements are characterized by the active participation of the young generation. Young people are born into, and live in, the digital environment, and are good at using online networks to maintain the momentum of a social movement. The distinctions between online and offline identities are blurred in their eyes (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Wilson, 2006). They like graphics, and they work best in the digital environment (Prensky, 2001). The rise of this new form of social movement, especially among the youth, has sprung up around the world, and is the result of a strong mistrust among the young people of mainstream media and political parties, as well as a decline in group loyalty in society (Beck, 2006; Bennett, 2008, 2012). As a result, alternative media, such as mobile phones and social network sites, serve as an important tool to establish alternative public forums and initiate collective action. The Umbrella Movement is no exception (Lee, So and Leung, 2015).

According to Hong Kong government statistics, the penetration rate of mobile subscription is 229.1% (OFCA, 2015). Another study, conducted by Google and Ipsos MediaCT, found that 96% of smartphone users go online on a daily basis. Hong Kong has the highest mobile Internet usage rate in the Asia-Pacific region (Kao, 2013), and also has the fastest Internet access in the world (Go-Globe, 2014). Facebook and WhatsApp on mobile phones and the Internet were the

major channels used to share information among participants during the Umbrella Movement (Li, Tam, Yeung, Yip and So, 2015; Wu, 2014). Given the high mobile Internet usage rate in Hong Kong, the Umbrella Movement serves as a good example through which to understand how the audio and visual devices of mobile cameras can bear witness to events, which in turn facilitates connectivity in this new form of social mobilization.

## ***2.2. Global “Visual Economy” and Media Witnessing***

Images and videos that bear witness to events have become more prevalent with the development of media technology. The availability of images extends from television, newspapers, magazines, and film to online networks. The quality of the images has also greatly improved (Mitchell, 2011). The new generation – the digital natives – now prefers images to text (Premsky, 2001). As a result, pictures and videos play a significant role in influencing public understanding of social events and political movements. Mitchell (2011) has named this phenomenon as “a war of images” (p. 2). This means of representation plays a significant part in political struggles and contestation of power.

Poole (2007) suggests that the idea of a visual economy is a better concept by which to describe the current situation than is the notion of a visual culture. Visual economy implies that the field of representation involves the struggle for power and the imbalance of social relationships. Campbell (2007) argues that visual images are not simply carriers of information, as they also have the power to shape the collective memory and affect geopolitical power distribution.

In recent years, the media has transferred the images of distant others to a mass audience. In other words, mass audiences can bear witness to the experience of distant others via new media technology. Frosh and Pinchevsk (2009) have called it “media witnessing”, which is

“the witnessing performed in, by and through the media” (p. 1). Jacques Derrida (2000) suggests that the nature of witnessing is two-fold. First, the event being witnessed is instant and singular. It is an unrepeatable incident in terms of time and space. However, the event can be repeated, reproduced, and recognized again through testimony. In the age of network societies, contemporary audiovisual media has reproduced the event through their mediation, even though the event is a singular incident. Media contributes to the collective memories of audiences around the world. Frosh (2006) asserts that media witnessing allows the audience to build social relations with distant others. It creates a condition for the moral participation of the audience in an event that is far from them in space and time. Media witnessing is not just the experience of that incident; it also creates a discourse that influences the actions of the audience (Peters, 2001).

### ***2.3. Mobile Witnessing***

In the past, mobile phones were used for communication only, but the invention of the smartphone and the global digital network has enabled audiences to use them to create digital memory and public testimony. As mobile phones are now becoming smaller, lighter, and more handy (Reading, 2009), Campbell and Park (2008) argue that the mobile phone is not only portable, but is also wearable. In other words, a mobile phone can be regarded as an extension of one’s hands. This handiness of the phone has had a transformative effect. Taking pictures or videos is becoming the standard and immediate response towards crises and important events. The mobile phone serves as a powerful tool to record the experience of a trauma (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009; Zelizer, 2002).

At the same time, mobile phones are being widely adopted worldwide, including in developing countries, such as China, Myanmar, and India (Hopper, 2007; Readings, 2009). In recent years, mobile

camera phones have played an important part in generating eyewitness imagery of important events, such as the demonstrations in Myanmar (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). With mobile phones and global networking enabling the ordinary citizen to produce a public record of events, the differentiation between professional journalists and amateurs has become more difficult (e.g., Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010). Using the mobile phone as a personal witness to brutal reality becomes a common engagement of normal citizens. The personal experience turns into a public mediated record. It can be easily copied and shared with audiences worldwide through digital networks (Readings, 2009). The sharing of experience via visual images has become a common global phenomenon of a new generation (Van Dijck, 2007), with ordinary citizens now having an unprecedented networking power.

#### ***2.4. Citizen Camera-Witnessing***

Some scholars argue that the term “witnessing” is not well defined, and that a distinction should be made between the recording of normal daily lives and the witnessing of brutal repression (e.g., Tait, 2011). The latter is different from the former in terms of the purposes of the recording, as it is purposefully performing an act of witnessing as a kind of resistance against the brutal repression. Andén-Papadopoulos (2009) further argues that this action is related to the political notion of citizenship. She has named this practice as “citizen camera-witnessing”: citizens use their camera phones as tools to create a personal testimony to persuade a public audience to support their political action.

True witnessing is not only a kind of testimony to those who are not present at the event, but it is also a kind of evidence of the evil and injustice at play (see Margalit, 2002). Some scholars suggest that true witnessing should involve self-sacrifice. This can be linked to the tradition of Christian martyrdom; the word “martyr” comes from the



Greek word “witness”. Individuals respond to the call to bear witness, and this results in their suffering pain and death. It provides irrefutable evidence of their moral motives and actions (Peters, 2001; Thomas, 2009). The camera phone provides a new powerful capital in creating a public witness to challenge the existing power and produce a counter-view of political forces (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). As Ashuri and Pinchevski (2009) argue, witnessing can be perceived as a field that needs to compete for the trust of the public audience. The field implies that the use of the camera phone is related to issues of power and politics.

Citizen videos have several characteristics that can highlight the authenticity of their stories. The “raw sound”, shaky images, and constantly shifting focus powerfully signify the realness of the video. The affective response of the victims, like desperate screaming and yelling, provides a powerful testimony to persuade the audience and evoke its sympathy (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). However, the camera phone also provides citizens with a chance to participate in the event and to act beyond the role of mere spectator. Ordinary citizens become active participants who edit and actively shape the telling of an event (Mortensen, 2011a; Seaton, 2005). Those who are witnesses are not innocent of politics (Rentschler, 2004); they can document the event as part of a strategic plan of political action (Zelizer, 2002).

In her pioneering work, Andén-Papadopoulos (2014) establishes the notion of citizen camera-witnessing, and points out its importance in political struggles. However, she has not conducted any empirical research to support the development of this notion, and she focuses too much on testimony that involves pain and suffering. This makes the concept too narrowly defined, and ignores the diversity of social movements and witnessing. Instead, this study uses the Umbrella Movement as a case study to examine the role of the camera phone in

witnessing the events and demonstrations. This study has examined the Facebook posts and You Tube videos of the Umbrella Movement between September 22, 2014 and December 22, 2014. The results suggest that the camera phone not only contributes to witnessing the brutal repression of the state, but also witnesses the beauty of the movement, and provides a testimony that allows for rituals to develop and semi-codes to be transformed.

### **3. Results of the Findings**

#### ***3.1. Witness to Brutal Repression***

The first category is about being a witness to brutal repression. On September 28, 2014, the date when the Umbrella Movement began, the police used tear gas and pepper spray to disperse the demonstrators. Many citizens recorded this moment with their mobile phone cameras and shared it via the Internet. One video<sup>2</sup> shows a demonstrator who is facing away from the police. When a policeman deliberately touches his shoulder to make him turn around, he turns, whereupon the policeman removes the man's eye mask and pepper-sprays him at very close range. Netizens regarded this video as evidence of the abuse of police power.

The videos taken by protestors also testify to misbehavior and unjust incidents. For example, even though some videos captured footage of a gangster beating up protestors<sup>3</sup>, the police released the suspect<sup>4</sup>. Another video<sup>5</sup> shows a young female protestor being sexually assaulted by government supporters. All of these videos were produced by ordinary citizens, not by professional journalists or cameramen. The images of these videos are shaky and full of noise, which in turn increases the sense of their realness. As Zelner (2002) argues, the recording marks the presence and participation of the citizen in the historical event. Protestors put their lives at risk to produce the record,

which provides inconvertible public evidence of the unjust event (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014; Peters, 2001).

### ***3.2. Witness to the Beauty of Human Nature***

The second category is about recording the goodness of humankind, which previous studies about citizen camera-witnessing have ignored. Although mobile phone witnessing is usually of crises, disaster, and brutality (e.g., Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009), it is not necessarily related to pain and suffering. Instead, those who bear witness to the beauty of the demonstrators and victims highlight the imbalance of the political structure and the injustice of the event. As Thomas (2009) argues, photography is not just an imagery technology that records an event; it also has the power to transform the event for public discourse and make it a reality in the eyes of the public.

Videos and pictures that provide testimony of the beauty of the demonstrators shape the public images of them. There are plenty of examples during the Umbrella Movement. For example, one picture on Facebook<sup>6</sup> shows a female student asking an 82-year-old lady to leave the protest site when police are clearing the barricades of protestors. However, the old lady refuses to go. The post says, “She (an old lady) said she doesn’t want to leave the student alone, and she wanted to stay with them. A female student asked her to leave, but she refused and it made this female student cry. The old lady said, ‘Why are you crying? You are no longer able to go to school if you are arrested. I am too old and do not need to do homework anymore, I am not afraid of arrest.’ ” The story of this old lady touched many netizens, with more than 2000 people sharing this post and more than 6000 liking the post. In addition, citizens also recorded images and videos showing citizens helping one another voluntarily, including clearing up the toilets<sup>7</sup> and tidying up the rubbish.

### 3.3. *Witness to the Ritual of Performance*

Goffman (1956) regards rituals as worldly and informal activities to which symbolic meanings have been attached. Scholars therefore examine the meanings of ritual via the observation of daily lives. Collins (2004) believes that ritual is a system by which to share emotion and create a shared reality. Rituals also play a role in strengthening relationships and creating a shared memory. At the same time, rituals both create culture and consolidate the existing culture. For example, the music concert is one ritual in modern society (Lo, 2014). The crowd focuses on the same event and shares the same experience and feelings at the concert, which is an experience very different to listening to music at home. This study argues that many different forms of activities at a protest site can also be regarded as rituals. During the Umbrella Movement, the protestors sang the pop song *Under a Vast Sky* (海闊天空) by the rock band Beyond, and open lectures and public forums were held at the protest sites. All of these activities drew the focus of protestors and created a shared emotion, passion, and experience for them. This further strengthened their sense of common identity.

The demonstrators captured this moment of singing *Under a Vast Sky* with their camera phones and shared it via digital networking. Those who were not present at the event could thereby share the experience and emotion, and thus increase their sense of identification. This shared experience extended beyond time and space. For example, more than a thousand citizens gathered in Taipei to support the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. They, too, sang the pop song *Under a Vast Sky*, lit up by the flash lights on their phones, and recorded the event and shared the occasion via YouTube with Hong Kong and a global audience<sup>8</sup>.

### ***3.4. Witness to the Transformation of Semi-Codes***

Semi-codes are deep structures that determine the meaning of language. Semi-codes are rooted in cultural systems. A semi-code can be easily understood by ordinary people without anyone saying anything, which indicates how powerful a semi-code is (Swidler, 1986). When Theodore Caplow (1984) conducted a study about the giving of gifts at Christmas, he found that, while the middle class in the United States criticized the purchasing of gifts, believing it to be a waste of money and the result of commercial advertising, they were still willing to buy Christmas gifts for their friends and relatives. Caplow (1984) asserts that the giving of Christmas gifts has a semi-code, which represents the relationship between the parties. If a Christmas gift is not sent, it will be interpreted as a signal of neglect and indifference, and may probably hurt the relationship. Social movements can shape semi-codes inhibited in a culture. Subculture purposely transforms the notion of beauty (Hebidge, 1979), for example. The transformation of semi-codes shapes the values of individuals, and in turn influences how people interpret one another's actions and behavior.

During the Umbrella Movement, there were many examples of semi-codes being created and transformed. The umbrella itself is one example. In the past, umbrellas were only used as tools to protect people from the sun and rain. However, on September 28, 2014, demonstrators used their umbrellas to protect themselves from peppery spray and tear gas. As discussed earlier, when this moment was captured by the foreign media, the movement was named the "Umbrella Revolution". The umbrella has thus become a powerful semi-code of this social movement. For example, supporters recorded a video with their mobile phones to demonstrate how to make a paper umbrella<sup>9</sup>. In another example, university students used the yellow umbrella in their graduation ceremony to show their support of the movement, an incident

that was recorded by others with camera phones and shared via the Internet.

Citizen camera-witnessing can also transform the meaning of semi-codes. A number of hikers hung a pro-democracy banner reading “I want real universal suffrage” (我要真普選) at the top of Lion Rock mountain (獅子山). The whole process was recorded and then shared via YouTube<sup>10</sup>. The original semi-code of Lion Rock is praising the spirit of steadfastness and the preservation of the Hong Kong people. It comes from a 1970s TV series *Below the Lion Rock* (獅子山下), which features Hong Kong people working very hard and being willing to share their ups and downs with their neighbors, even though life was very difficult at that time. So when the supporters hung the pro-democracy banner on the mountain, they transformed the semi-codes of Lion Rock and added the pro-democracy element.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

To conclude, the citizen camera-witness should not be limited to the testimony that reveals brutal repression, but should also extend to that which reveals the beauty of human nature, the rituals of performance, and the transformation of semi-codes. Although the citizen camera-witness plays an important role in providing public evidence for a historical moment, and bypasses the traditional censor and filters, it is difficult to say whether it can change the news framework and public opinion. A past study showed that more than 60% of Hong Kong people read a newspaper every week, and 40% of respondents read the news via their mobile phone and the Internet. These findings suggest that a large proportion of Hong Kong people are still relying on legacy media to get information. Future studies should examine the influence of the citizen camera-witness on the legacy media and public opinion.

On the other hand, online media is an important platform for political struggles. The government, professional journalists, and citizens all want to make their voices heard on this platform. Future studies should examine the citizen camera-witness from the citizen's perspective, and see how the ordinary citizen strategically makes use of the camera phone, and makes their videos go viral on the Internet. At the same time, online media is not a utopia – the censorship of the government and the digital divide still exist – and so future studies could examine how these factors influence the citizen camera-witness.

## Notes

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1. This protest was called the Umbrella Revolution, or Umbrella Movement, by the foreign media. This name is based on images captured when the police fired tear gas and pepper spray to disperse the crowd, and the demonstrators had only umbrellas to protect themselves.
  2. Please refer to <<http://news.sina.com.hk/news/20140929/-2-3386826/1.html>>.

3. Please refer to <<https://youtu.be/6i2p7K8ZnYQ>>.
4. Please refer to <<https://youtu.be/CJoHQ5wv-IU>>.
5. Please refer to <<https://youtu.be/-00fypOWmU4>>.
6. Please refer to <<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1015>>; <<https://www.facebook.com/TheNewsLens/posts/718928824843276>>.
7. Please refer to <<http://lifestyle.etnet.com.hk/column/index.php/internationalaffairs/talkofthetown/27989>>.
8. Please refer to <<https://youtu.be/qxKfWMLzrLc>>.
9. Please refer to <<https://youtu.be/pShmMCMbKEY>>.
10. Please refer to <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEQ2rj-7DDE&feature=youtu.be>>.

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