

We Hold These Tweets to Be Self-Evident

*Social media, storytelling and the arts –
the new classroom civics?*



March 2019



New York State
School Boards
Association



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I. Introduction

If the structure does not permit dialogue
the structure must be changed.

– Paulo Freire



Today's youth are refocusing their civic participation away from the formal learning of traditional classroom-based rote memorization. Instead of memorizing constitutional amendments, students are using social networking platforms to connect, mobilize and participate in social justice activism. This phenomenon is creating a growing gap in how youth are learning civics in school compared to how they are expressing their civic selves outside of school.

Students' efforts are manifested as "vivid mash-ups of articles, GIFs, cleverly labeled images, court documents, smartphone videos, stickers and cartoons" about national movements, according to a 2014 *New York Times* [article](#).

The most visible example is the group of student survivors of the Parkland, Florida high school shooting. Those students took to Twitter with #NeverAgain to advocate for gun control legislation and a national voter registration movement at the start of the 2018 midterm elections.

As education policymakers in New York State develop a "civic readiness index" for students in public schools, students throughout the country are taking innovative approaches to civics participation that should prompt educators to rethink what it means to be civic ready.

In this report, we'll explore how new media has influenced students' civic participation, the impact of civic activism on adolescent development, ways to incorporate

aspects of "participatory politics" in schools, and steps that school board members, school administrators and educators can take to ensure students are prepared to understand and engage in our democracy.

*If you want it be the change
Like Gandhi and MLK
Wait up, got to change the system
Need knowledge, power and wisdom*

*- We Got The
Beastie Boys*

PARTICIPATORY POLITICS OR "THE NEW YOUTH ACTIVISM"

Youth civic activism on new media platforms questions previous notions of democracy and citizenship, says Helen Haste, visiting professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "New media" is a term that broadly refers to technology related to the interactive digital nature of online media. And, according to Haste, "...civic participation is much more than voting. ... New media has the power to make youth feel empowered and heard across the globe. No other medium enables youth to start a protest of 10,000 people in one day, so civic education should incorporate best practices in new media use so students can feel effective on these platforms." ¹

¹ Shafer, Leah. What counts as civic participation? Usable Knowledge. Harvard Graduate School of Education. April 28, 2016.

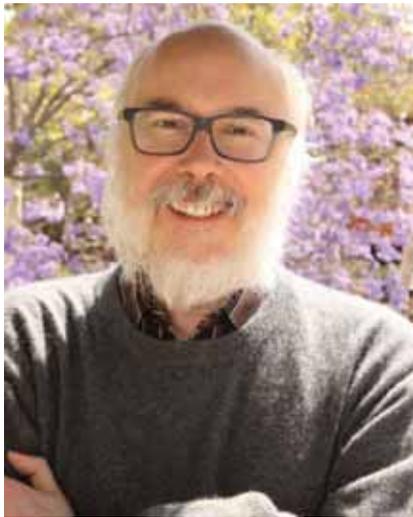
Similarly, Henry Jenkins, provost professor of journalism, cinematic arts and education at the University of Southern California-Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, recognizes the need to shift our understanding of youth civic participation from “simply stuffing envelopes” to what he terms “the new youth activism.” This new activism is what Jenkins calls “participatory politics.” Participatory politics is marked by young adults who are active agents in creating goals and communication strategies of social media movements and who, by one mouse click, bypass the gatekeepers and policy wonk language associated with traditional political processes.² Participatory politics includes interactive, peer-based initiatives that are independent of gatekeepers and traditional institutions. In addition, they are designed to wield both voice and impact on matters of public interest. Participatory politics can include a range of activities from taking part in a poetry slam to blogging about politics and sharing the blog with others.³

For example, Chicago public high schools partner with the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago to host Artists-in-Residence. Damon Locks, one such artist,

worked with students on a civics project by helping them remix and audio edit Martin Luther King Jr. speeches and 60's protest songs, according to Lydia Ross, former manager of the school program at the museum. But this is uncommon in public schools across the country.

Philadelphia teenagers at a LGBTQ youth center explore the “Black Lives Matter” movement by podcasting about overcoming oppression and writing poetry highlighting the media's depiction of people of color.⁴ They explore intersectionality (i.e. how race, class and gender intersect to often culminate in greater discrimination, per the Center's website) through theater performances and radio [podcasting](#).

[University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) researchers highlight a disconnect between school expectations for learning and the rise and popularity of new media platforms used by students outside of school. One way to increase in-school student motivation and learning that corresponds to the production-driven aspect of participatory cultures, according to the researchers, is to partner with youth media arts organizations to produce multimedia student narratives.



Henry Jenkins

Provost, Professor of Communication, Journalism and Cinematic Arts
USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism
and USC School of Cinematic Arts



² Kitazawa, Yosuke. Five minutes with Henry Jenkins. Popular culture and political change 'By Any Media Necessary.' USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. September 22, 2016. <https://annenberg.usc.edu/news/five-minutes/five-minutes-henry-jenkins-popular-culture-and-political-change-any-media>.

³ Cohen, C. & Kahne, J. participatory politics: new media and youth political action. June 2012. https://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/default/files/publications/Participatory_Politics_Report.pdf.

⁴ The Attic Youth Center. Black Lives Matter. <https://www.atticyouthcenter.org/community/summer2015-black-lives-matter>.

II. Hashtag Activism

Youth are often isolated from conventional notions of what it means to be a “good citizen.” They are too young to vote and, in general, do not talk with legislative representatives. Instead of engaging in these traditional political processes, today’s youth are now active in politics through online environments that are not traditionally viewed as political in nature. They are online content creators, remixing and disseminating arts and media productions, according to a 2017 [blog post](#).

The #NeverAgain Movement was started by student survivors of the Parkland, Florida school shooting to call for more stringent gun legislation. Students used Twitter to engage their peers and the public with the hashtag #NeverAgain. They used Snapchat to document the shooting itself. These Snapchat posts were later collected and featured in an article called “High School Shooting.”⁵

The results were more far reaching than using the conventional political process. The #NeverAgain Movement spawned a nationwide protest against gun violence – The March for Our Lives on March 28, 2018. It inspired national school walkouts, the passage of a gun safety bill

in Florida ⁶ and influenced Walmart and Dick’s Sporting Goods to raise the gun purchasers’ ages to 21.⁷

The students’ activism may have, at least in part, contributed to an increase in support for tighter gun control laws and a change in mindset, according to a national Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics March 2018 [survey](#) of more than 2,600 18- to 29-year-olds. The results showed that well over 60 percent of the respondents felt there should be stricter gun control laws in place. By comparison, only 49 percent of this same age group supported stricter gun laws in 2013 after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, notes the Institute.

Parkland students also launched a national voter registration tour, “[Road to Change](#),” which has bridged the gap between modern social media activism and traditional political processes. The students used social media to encourage [voter registration](#) and participation in the 2018 midterm elections.



Source: <https://twitter.com/AMarch4OurLives>

⁵ Salamon, Errol. March for Our Lives awakens the spirit of student and media activism of the 1960s. *The Conversation*. March 24, 2018. <https://theconversation.com/march-for-our-lives-awakens-the-spirit-of-student-and-media-activism-of-the-1960s-93713>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Samuel, Alexandra. What Parkland tells us about teens and social media. *JSTOR Daily*. March 6, 2018. <https://daily.jstor.org/what-parkland-tells-us-about-teens-and-social-media/>

According to the [2017 Cultural Organizing blog post](#), this paradigm shift also makes the political process more accessible for youth of color. This subset of youth tends to engage more in participatory politics than traditional political processes. Traditional school-based civic education underscores aspects of citizenship (voting, volunteering, working on political initiatives) that are predicated on the notion that the American Dream (i.e., that if you work hard, you will succeed in life) is achievable for everyone, according to the 2017 journal article, [Civic Participation Reimagined: Youth Interrogation and Innovation in the Multimodal Public Sphere](#). That might be true in theory, but for marginalized youth, in practice, it is often not the case and it is a message that they are expressing on social media.

For example, following the killing in 2014 of Michael Brown, an African-American adolescent in Ferguson, Missouri, by a white police officer, an African-American youth created the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. He tweeted the hashtag with the caption, "Which photo does the media use if the police shot me down?" and two photos. The first photo showed Brown in a graduation cap and gown; the second photo showed him partying with alcohol. Twitter responders pointed to the media's often unfair stereotyping of African-Americans depicted in the second photo, notes the [journal](#) article.

This dismantling of the American Dream does not fit with traditional notions of civic education or participation that students are taught in school. However, for these youth, this view of the American Dream on social media platforms like Twitter represents their truth. It gives them a voice and their own definition of civic participation. Social media's global reach amplifies those efforts. According to researchers, schools need to embrace these types of online social media youth practices that go beyond participation to actively questioning traditional civic procedures and systems and coming up with new ways of being civically active.⁸

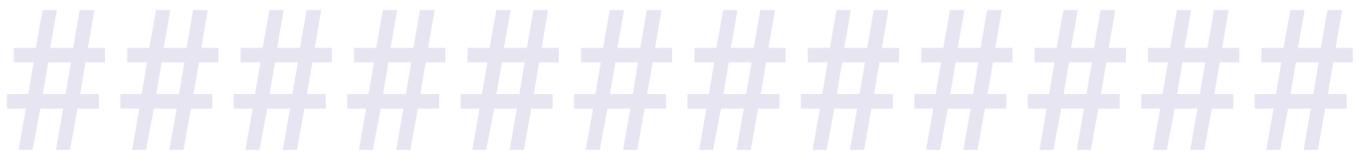
In addition to current events, pop culture is a common theme in youth civic narratives about social justice issues. Many youth, especially those who are disenfranchised,

incorporate elements of pop culture and films into narratives. They adopt symbols of collective identity that appear in popular teenage-oriented films like "The Hunger Games,"⁹ or don blue body paint to symbolize their dedication to the environment like the characters in the film "Avatar."¹⁰ These symbols often resonate, especially with marginalized groups, and serve to empower what Jenkins and his researchers call [civic imagination](#), or "the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions."



The [Harry Potter Alliance](#) is one such example of the power that imagination holds for youth. The global organization is dedicated to eradicating the world's ills like gender inequality, global warming and genocide. Andrew Slack, former director of the Alliance, says the organization harnesses the "cultural acupuncture" of society or the psychological momentum of the culture and redistributes it toward positive change in the universe replete with a cast of characters and references straight out of the Harry Potter films.

The Harry Potter Alliance's work shows how new media, pop culture and storytelling breed fertile ground for youth interest and participation in civic action. For example, the [Alliance's 2017 campaign](#). A World Without Hermione (#Without Hermione), spotlights the global prevalence of inequity in girls' education and access to it. Youth could donate money through a fundraiser, mail [Hogwarts Waitlist Letters](#) to peers and join a WIZARDING Wireless Network called Potterwatch to spread the word about "wizard activism."



⁸ Mirra, N. and A. Garcia. "Civic Participation Reimagined: Youth Interrogation and Innovation in the Multimodal Public Sphere." *Review of Research in Education* 41 (March 2017): 136-158.

⁹ The University of Southern California. The Civic Imagination Project. Civic Imagination: Theoretical Foundation. <https://www.civicimaginationproject.org/theory>.

¹⁰ Jenkins, H. What 'Black Panther' can teach us about the civic imagination. May 22, 2018. <http://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/may-2018/what-black-panther-can-teach-us-about-civic-imagination>.

III. Creating Civic Media in Schools

Supporting students in activism efforts is developmentally important, notes Nancy Deutsch, a professor at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Teenagers need direction and purpose in life and everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging in the world. Civic engagement, says Deutsch, fits that need. It's essential for adults to help students navigate this terrain. When students feel "tied to our social fabric in some way," which activism often provides, it satisfies their need for belonging and purpose. If "a young person's connection to that social fabric is torn, they will look for other ways to meet those needs... extremist groups are all too happy to bring young people into their folds."¹¹

Youth today are constructing narratives about their identities and social issues of relevance to them, notes Jenkins. They are accomplishing this by remixing elements of pop culture into their messages and packaging these narratives for distribution over digital media. So, **story-telling** is an important skill, he says, and one that students need to cultivate along with an understanding of the "digital afterlife" of a project.

Whether school districts are prepared for this new wave of civic activism or not, students are engaging in – and engaged by – everyday efforts to exert social change on the local, regional, state, national and global levels through various forms of new media.



That means school administrators and teachers need to cultivate appropriate digital media skills for students to help them become responsible citizens. USC's Jenkins and his research group, MAPP, dub the desire by students to use new media to effect change, "**By Any Media Necessary**," which was the title to a book and subsequent toolkit for educators which outlines examples, resources and professional development about participatory politics. The toolkit is available at www.byanymedia.org.

One key aspect of this toolkit is an interactive four-part **video** between Jenkin's research group, MAPP, Pivot.tv and HitRECORD. Pivot.tv is a television network that allows the audience to contribute to socially conscious issues. HitRECORD is an open collaborative production company established by actor and filmmaker Joseph Gordon-Levitt.

The National Association for Media Literacy Education conducts workshops across the country on the videos and related resources for high school and college educators. Feedback from these workshops shows that educators enjoy the upbeat vibe of the videos and the well-known host, Joseph Gordon-Levitt. Also, teachers like to have free resources and are hungry for up-to-date material and media forms that students are using. In post-workshop surveys, teachers have indicated the subject of credibility as most important. In the same follow-up assessments, the topic that stumped educators the most was remixing content. This shows that teachers do not really understand what remixing means or how it is applied, which points to a needed area of teacher training.¹²

Students are not waiting for their schools to teach them how to use new media to influence political and social change. At this point, most schools are far behind their students' social media savvy. Currently, school districts in New York seem to use social media in civics education in a limited way. This is based on anecdotal information from the Northport-East Northport Union Free School District in Suffolk County, the Albion Central School District in Orleans County and the Mamaroneck Union Free School District in Westchester County.

Feedback from the three school districts indicates that the transition to using social media in class is slow. For example, in Mamaroneck, social media is not really used in the civics curriculum, although it is not ruled out, if needed, for a civics project, says Joseph Liberti, a high school social studies teacher. Rather, the focus in high school is on a four-year civics program designed to teach total immersion in civics education with action in the field. Social media takes a backseat to face-to-face interactions and "active citizenship" in the local community.

¹¹ Daniels, Ellen. Activism in Youth: It's a Good Thing. Curry School of Education. October 22, 2017. <https://news.virginia.edu/content/activism-youth-its-good-thing>.

¹² Jenkins, H. By any media necessary (part four): The NAMLE/MAPP educator collaboration. Confessions of an Aca-fan. April 6, 2016. <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2016/04/by-any-media-necessary-part-four-the-namlemapp-educator-collaboration.html>.



Northport-East Northport's high school news literacy class.

At Albion, social media is not the focus of civics learning with the exception of researching sources and considering biases and misleading information, notes Superintendent Michael Bonnewell. The district librarian drives this learning for students and “models these ‘smart shopping’ techniques with educators,” which is reinforced by the district’s teachers, regardless of their subject matter.

Northport-East Northport is “just beginning to explore the impact and power of social media as it pertains to our civics instruction,” says Sean Hurley, district chairperson of the social studies department. In a sense, this “beginning” started with the Parkland school shooting. The shooting provided the impetus for the district’s high school students to use social media to relay their viewpoints about school safety and mobilize a protest which resulted in a community forum to discuss concerns, Hurley says. In this vein, students’ social media use was valuable for school administrators because it allowed them to gauge students’ concerns about school safety, he notes. In general though, students’ use of social media in the district has been associated with negative connotations like cyberbullying. In many ways, social media coincides with “teachable moments.”

The district offers a high school news literacy class that teaches students how to discern reliable news information and act responsibly in online environments including social media platforms, says Hurley. In addition, the district’s fifth-grade students work on a First Amendment Moot Court assignment which includes aspects of being responsible citizens and social media use.

Schools need help getting up to par with incorporating new media and new ways of thinking about what constitutes civics into classrooms. Two prominent digital media scholars, Ethan Zuckerman, director of the MIT Center for Civic Media and associate professor of the practice in media arts and sciences at the MIT Media Lab, and Ben Kirshner, professor of education at the University of Colorado Boulder, can help. They offer ways to change teachers’ mindsets about student civic engagement and cite the need for professional development on new media production and helping teachers navigate political discussions in the classroom.

“Making and sharing civic media” is a form of civic engagement for youth today, Zuckerman explains. People need to understand that this type of civic activism is “not just a pathway to ‘real’ engagement with issues,” but rather “it is a powerful and legitimate form of engagement in its own right.” Civic media productions often grapple with topics that kids are passionate about in their everyday lives, which may breed fear among administrators and educators who want to steer away from “politicizing the classroom.” That’s a big reason why success with these mediums tends to occur in informal settings, not school settings, according to Zuckerman. However, he hopes that schools will include this type of learning in civics classes.¹³

Professional development can ease educators’ minds about being viewed as partisan in the classroom, says Kirshner. In addition, training can alleviate the notion that social media use is a distraction from learning and help teachers hone technical skills needed to navigate these platforms.¹⁴



Ethan Zuckerman

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¹³ Zuckerman, Ethan. Communication with G. Simidian. July 2018.

¹⁴ Kirshner, Ben. Communication with G. Simidian. July 2018.



WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS FOR SCHOOL OFFICIALS?

The use of social media platforms, along with the arts and storytelling, represents a new type of civic action that empowers and interests students, is meaningful to them, enables them to bypass traditional political gatekeepers, creates digital collective narratives and identities, and effects change.

Given this paradigm shift in civic participation, educators and school leaders should consider the following research-based recommendations:

1. Understand that there are different ways of being civically active and expressing civic identities such as going beyond mere participation to actively questioning traditional civic procedures.
2. Offer professional development to educators focused on aspects of modern day youth civic expression, such as developing media production competencies, helping students hone storytelling skills and navigating political discussions in the classroom.
3. Partner with public libraries, universities, museums, community arts organizations and other community hubs – especially those that have digital labs and technology equipment and/or offer partnerships with artists – to ramp up student interest in civics and make the subject meaningful to the lives of diverse students.



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