

CHAPTER

3



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POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

GLOBALLY, youth participation and representation in institutional political processes and policy-making is relatively low. As a group, young people are not adequately represented within formal political structures, as evidenced by the low rates of parliamentary involvement, political party participation and electoral activity among youth worldwide. One aspect of the problem is the lack of regulatory mechanisms facilitating youth participation; in many countries, for example, only individuals aged 25 years or above are eligible to run for parliament.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ United Nations Development Programme. *Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle: A Good Practice Guide* (New York, 2013), p. 11. Available from http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/electoral_systemsandprocesses/enhancing-youth-political-participation-throughout-the-electoral.html.

With the global youth population standing at 1.2 billion, the exclusion of young people from formal political processes threatens the legitimacy of political systems and structures, as a huge cohort remains unrepresented or underrepresented—which in many cases leads young people to find alternative means of political engagement.

This chapter examines the reasons behind the changing trends in youth participation in political and electoral processes (James Sloam) and explores the role young people now play in defining emerging political landscapes (Nur Laiq), in particular through digital activism (Erhardt Graeff), as well as through engagement in negative or extremist activities (Akil N. Awan)

ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

The past several decades have been marked by declining levels of youth participation in electoral processes. Voter turnout tends to be significantly lower among youth than among the older population, and young people are less likely to become members of political parties.¹⁰¹ Exacerbating the situation is the fact that in many of these structures,

young people are not visible; typically, for example, individuals under the age of 35 are minimally represented in top political leadership positions.¹⁰²

The lingering impact of the global financial and economic crisis—in particular high unemployment and its disproportionate effect on youth—has intensified the feeling among many young people that traditional institutions of governance and electoral participation provide ineffective tools for meaningful political engagement. This feeling of disconnection has led to disengagement from institutionalized processes and widespread apathy among young voters,¹⁰³ with the result that many have turned to alternative methods of political participation.

THE POWER OF PROTEST

One avenue of political expression has been protests and demonstrations, through which young people have found a vehicle to voice their dissatisfaction with and grievances against the political establishment. While protest and demonstration are not new phenomena, through the advance of newer ICTs and social media more young people are becoming mobilised to actively engage.

Discontent with the status quo has been articulated—via both traditional and contemporary protest formats—across the Middle East and North

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Africa (MENA), Europe, Latin America and elsewhere. Spain's 15-M Movement (Movimiento 15-M), Mexico's Yo Soy 132, the global Occupy movement, and other youth-led protests and movements have challenged the political elite in a number of countries.

Through protests and demonstrations, young people have been instrumental in bringing about change and forcing authoritarian regimes from power, and in doing so have successfully challenged existing structures and rule and redefined the role of young people in governance.

TRANSITIONS IN POWER: THE ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Although youth have played a visible and prominent role in demonstrations and protests and have often been instrumental in bringing about changes in governance, the position of young people following political transition remains largely undefined. In part due to the complexities involved in democracy and institution building, there is often no mechanism for the meaningful inclusion of young people in the new and emerging political landscape. As such youth are often still not fully involved, represented or regularly consulted.

One important reason for their lack of political integration is that while youth are instrumental in breaking down existing structures, the same blocks and

foundations are being used to rebuild those structures. What is needed in many cases is a whole new framework for political participation and governance that can bring about the type of political structures and processes that are genuinely responsive to and inclusive of young people.

Even the passive exclusion of young people from governance structures is not without consequences. There is evidence that failing to purposefully and meaningfully include youth in the building of new political processes and institutions can lead to increased frustration and resentment among young political activists, destabilizing democratization and accelerating conflict dynamics.¹⁰⁴

Finding a way to facilitate youth engagement through institutionalized processes while also integrating less traditional forms of political engagement is an emerging challenge for Governments and policymakers—one which, if left unresolved, may threaten the stability and security of countries.

104 United Nations Development Programme, *Enhancing Youth Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle: A Good Practice Guide* (New York, January 2013). Available from http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Electoral%20Systems%20and%20Processes/ENG_UN-Youth_Guide-LR.pdf

NEGATIVE ENGAGEMENT

When young people feel that their grievances and frustrations are being ignored or trivialized and are not given adequate consideration in governance and decision-making, they may in some cases resort to violent and extremist activities. As Akil N. Awan notes, “where ‘legitimate’ forms of protest prove unsuccessful, individuals may begin to countenance illegitimate and violent forms of protest, including rioting, public disorder, sabotage, and even terrorism.”¹⁰⁵

Countries experiencing power vacuums are particularly susceptible to the infiltration of violent groups and extremist elements. Young people can often be coerced or otherwise forced (out of economic necessity, for example) to join groups or organizations that espouse violence.

From young neo-Nazis and urban gang members to those joining extremist religious groups, youth involvement in negative and even violent forms of social and political expression is not a new phenomenon. As with other cohorts of society, young people’s views are far from homogeneous. Youth who hold extreme or fundamentalist views can and do engage in youth structures, advancing ideals and undertaking activities that run counter to efforts aimed at promoting human rights and peace.

Therefore, no discussion of youth political engagement can take place without acknowledging and examining the various ways in which such political engagement can be not only negative but harmful, as well as the myriad circumstances that might lead a young person towards such engagement.

In recent years, such groups have become more and more adept at using and manipulating social media and leading online campaigns. Having expanded their reach to a global level, they are able to attract young people from all over the world, drawing them in through a false glamorization of what their involvement entails.

Although considerable attention has been focused on the role of these youth in the past few years, most youth who engage politically and socially do so in a positive manner, many working to counter extremism through activities such as peacebuilding.¹⁰⁶

105 Akil N. Awan, “Transitional religiosity experiences: contextual disjuncture and Islamic political radicalism”, in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Comparative Perspective*, T. Abbas, ed. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 207-230. Available from http://works.bepress.com/akil_awan/8.

106 Chapter four of the present publication focuses on peacebuilding and other positive forms of community engagement.

ONLINE ACTIVISM

The availability of ever-growing numbers of online and social media outlets and other web-based tools has played a huge role in bolstering young people's activism and participation, providing a vehicle for young people to learn about, participate in, and mobilize around political and social issues.

Through the power of social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and other sharing platforms, information on protests and demonstrations beginning in one country can now spread quickly, triggering mass activism and similar demonstrations elsewhere.

The reach of young people's online presence and activity is broad and extensive. The ability of youth to develop and utilize online tools and forums to create spaces and respond to needs in the local and global community has allowed them to engage in a multitude of ways and on a variety of topics at any given time. However, while the number of "connected" youth throughout the world is high, there are still many who do not have adequate access to broadband and open Internet or to the mobile tools and devices needed to make participation possible. The Broadband Commission for Digital Development notes that while 3.2 billion people (43% of the global population) were connected in 2015, Internet is only accessible to 35% of people in developing countries.

Moreover, 90% of people in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) do not have access to any kind of Internet connectivity. Ensuring the active inclusion and involvement of "unconnected" youth as the "connected" world forges ahead remains an important challenge.¹⁰⁷

Widespread Internet connectivity and web access have changed the game in the most fundamental way. For those who are connected, it has become easier to engage in a variety of causes and campaigns from local to global level. However, the extent to which cyberactivism translates into sustained political engagement over one's lifetime is unclear owing to its nascence and to the dearth of research on the long-term outcomes of participation in online media and web-based engagement. Ongoing research is needed to determine the impact of ICT on political participation, with particular attention given to the extent and long term sustainability of such engagement.

107 The Broadband Commission for Digital Development: International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). *The State of Broadband Report 2015* (Geneva, 2015), p. 8. Available from <http://www.broadbandcommission.org/documents/reports/bb-annualreport2015.pdf>

YOUTH ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

James Sloam

INTRODUCTION

Democratic societies need to provide opportunities for each new generation of young people to express political opinions and to represent younger citizens' interests in policymaking processes. Across the world today, many young people feel disillusioned with mainstream politics and disadvantaged by public policy. The Millennial Generation is much less likely than older cohorts to be interested in electoral politics and to vote in national elections. The World Values Survey data presented below illustrate this point and identify groups of younger citizens that are particularly disengaged.

Young people are interested in "politics" in the broader sense, however, and participate in a wide array of political activities—at the ballot box, in the streets, on the Internet, within political parties, as members of student associations and environmental groups, and in rallies and demonstrations. The problem, then, is not an all-encompassing political apathy, but rather a disconnection between youth politics and electoral politics.

This thought piece examines in some detail the patterns of youth political participation across different regions of the globe. These trends are largely related to the impact of the financial crisis and the subsequent wave of youth protest. Emphasis is placed on the dangers of denying young people a political voice. Finally, four practical recommendations are

offered for Governments and public institutions to rejuvenate the democracies of the world.

DECLINING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

In recent decades, academics and policymakers have become increasingly concerned about declining levels of youth participation in electoral politics. Many have viewed this decline as representative of a crisis in citizenship.¹⁰⁸ Others have argued that political participation has evolved rather than declined.¹⁰⁹ Disillusionment with electoral politics is certainly not confined to younger citizens. In most established democracies, declining voter turnout is a long-term trend, as each generation of young people becomes less likely to vote than the last. What is known is that voter turnout has decreased in almost all democracies since the 1980s, and that this "turnout decline is concentrated in the youth."¹¹⁰ These changes have been accompanied by a process of voter dealignment, as many of those young people who do vote have turned away from mainstream political parties.

108 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000).

109 Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, revised ed. (Washington, D.C., CQ Press, 2009).

110 André Blais, "Political participation", in *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in the 21st Century*, 3rd ed., Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris, eds. (London, Sage Publications Ltd., 2010), p. 168.

Data from Wave 6 (2010-2014) of the World Values Survey indicate that relatively poor voter turnout among youth is a global phenomenon. Survey results from a sample of 33 countries¹¹¹ indicate that close to 44 per cent of young adults aged 18 to 29 years “always vote”, compared with almost 60 per cent of all citizens (see table 3.1 and figure 3.1); among those over the age of 50, the corresponding rate is more than 70 per cent. Although voter turnout is almost equal among young men and young women (45.2 and 43.9 per cent respectively), educational status does make a difference;¹¹² 52.8 per cent of young graduates say they always vote in national elections, in comparison with 43.6 per cent of all 18- to 29-year olds.

There are some important regional variations in political participation among the countries surveyed. Young people are most likely to vote in South

America and least likely to vote in Africa and the United States.¹¹³ In almost all areas, the propensity to vote is greater among the general voting-age population than among youth alone, with the largest gaps found in the United States, South-Eastern Asia and Europe (see figure 3.2). India is the only country among the 33 surveyed in which younger citizens are more likely than older citizens to cast their ballots.

The Survey findings show voting rates to be roughly equal among young men and young women across all regions except Africa, where 37.7 per cent of young men and only 32.3 per cent of young women say they always vote. Voting is highly correlated with education level (and, by extension, socioeconomic status) in the developed industrial democracies of the United States and Europe; around three quarters of young graduates always vote in these regions, which is double the overall rate of youth participation. Elsewhere, voting appears to be a socially equal political act.

Another recent feature of electoral politics in mature democracies has been the sharp decline in political party membership—particularly in Europe, where membership numbers have fallen by almost half since the 1980s.¹¹⁴ Young members of the present generation are reluctant to commit to centralized and hierarchical political institutions, which they believe do not represent their interests—largely because such institutions are dominated by older people, and quite often by men with a middle or higher income background. Youth wings of political parties can play a pivotal role in channelling youth engagement into political parties. However, these groups are often closely controlled by older adults and are frequently

111 The sample of 33 countries includes Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tunisia, Zimbabwe (Africa); Cyprus, Estonia, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden (Europe); Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay (South America); Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Republic of Korea, Taiwan Province of China, Thailand (South-Eastern Asia); India (Southern-Central Asia); and the United States (Northern America).

112 Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995); and James Sloam, “New voice, less equal: the civic and political engagement of young people in the United States and Europe”, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 47, No. 5 (April 2014), pp. 663-688.

113 Many of these voting trends mask underlying problems with systems of voter registration that make it less likely that young people will appear on the electoral roll. In countries with large social inequalities in participation, it is much less likely that young people from less privileged backgrounds will be on the electoral register in the first place.

114 Ingrid Van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke, “Going, going, . . . gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe”, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 51 (2012), pp. 24-56. Available from https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/undergraduate/module-outlines/ss/political-parties/PolP/VanBiezenMairPoguntkeEJPR12.pdf.

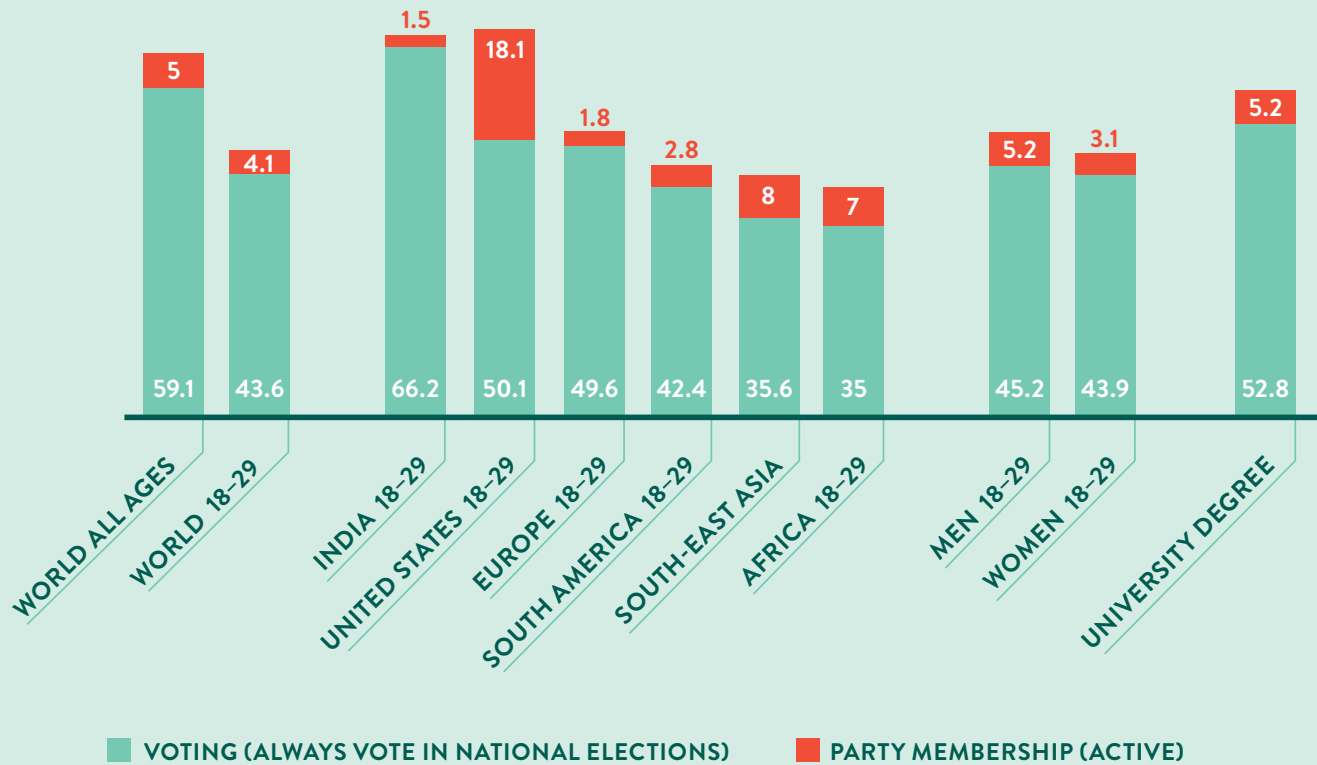
TABLE 3.1.
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY AGE,
GENDER AND GRADUATE STATUS (percentage)

	VOTING (ALWAYS VOTE)	PARTY MEMBERSHIP (ACTIVE)	JOINING A BOYCOTT	SIGNING A PETITION	PARTICIPATING IN A DEMONSTRATION
WORLD	59.1	5	6.5	20.9	13
WORLD (18-29)	43.6	4.1	6.1	15	14.3
AFRICA	44.2	7.9	5.1	7.1	13.6
AFRICA (18-29)	35.4	7	4.9	6.1	7.6
EUROPE	65.4	2.4	8.4	34.4	15.8
EUROPE (18-29)	49.6	1.8	5.9	32.9	14
INDIA	48.3	17.9	18.9	20.9	22.8
INDIA (18-29)	50.1	18.1	21.1	20.6	23.9
SOUTH AMERICA	80.1	2.4	5.2	25.1	16.4
SOUTH AMERICA (18-29)	66.2	1.5	6.1	21.1	17.7
SOUTH-EAST ASIA	64.3	3.1	3.8	17.2	5.8
SOUTH-EAST ASIA (18-29)	42.4	2.8	3.8	12.1	5.9
UNITED STATES	57.8	14.5	15.5	60.1	13.7
UNITED STATES (18-29)	35.6	8	9.7	41.6	9.8
MEN (18-29)	45.2	5.2	6.9	14.6	16.7
WOMEN (18-29)	43.9	3.1	5.4	15.3	11.8
UNIVERSITY DEGREE (18-29)	52.8	5.2	6.7	21.6	16.3

NOTE: The numbers in parentheses indicate age ranges.

SOURCE: World Values Survey, WVS Wave 6 (2010-2014). Available from <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>

FIGURE 3.1.
YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL POLITICS (percentage)



SOURCE: World Values Survey, WVS Wave 6 (2010-2014). Available from <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>

composed of young people from a narrow range of social backgrounds who are “encouraged” to toe the party line.¹¹⁵

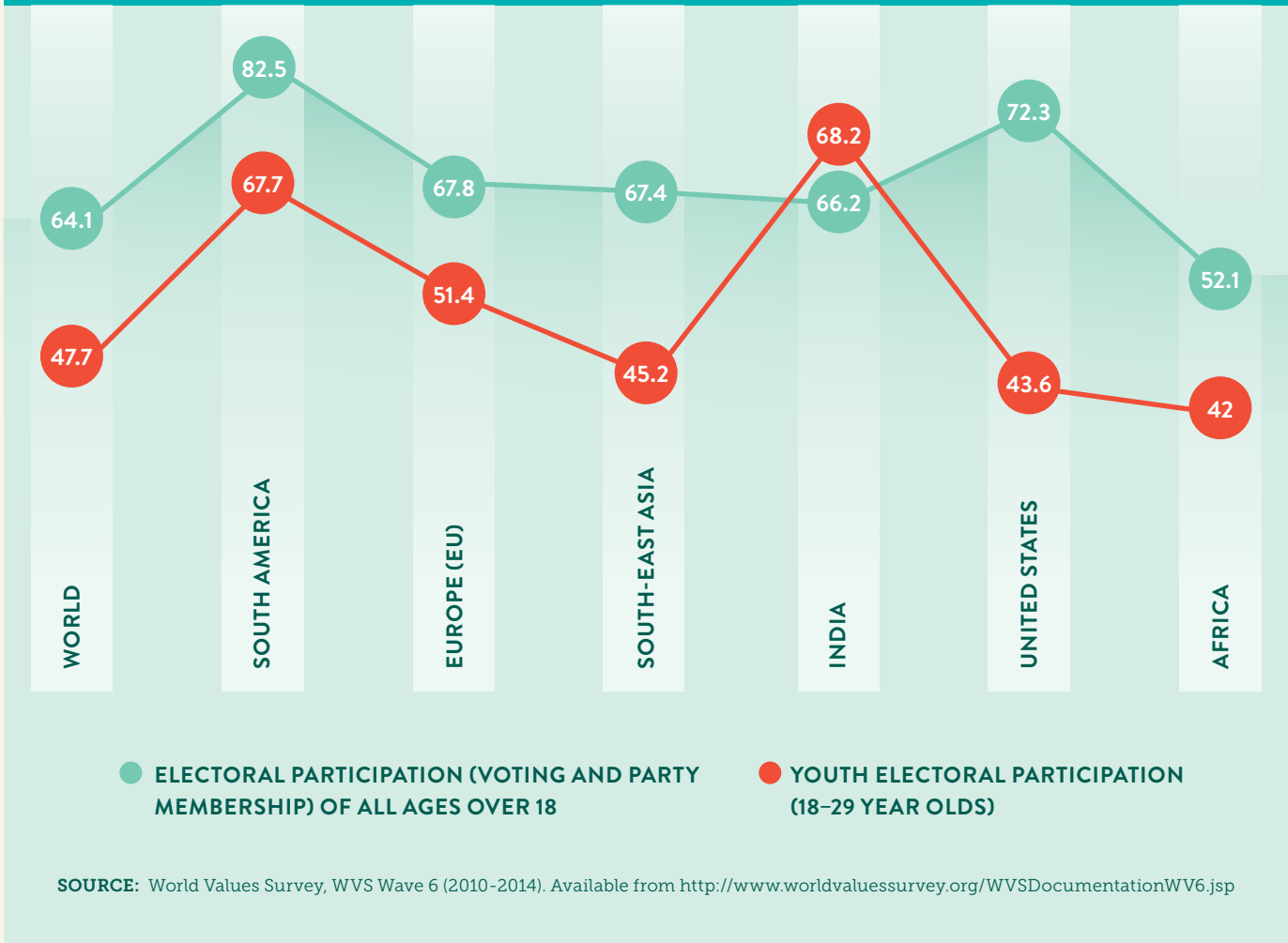
Data from the 33 countries surveyed show that active political party membership is less prevalent among those under the age of 30 than among older adults (see table 3.1 and figure 3.2). Only 4.1 per cent of 18- to 29-year olds are active party members, compared with 5 per cent of all adults. Another area of concern is that party membership, unlike voting,

varies with gender. Worldwide, 5.2 per cent of young men but only 3.1 per cent of young women claim to be active party members. Similarly, young graduates are much more likely than all 18- to 29-year olds to join a political party. The issues of youth

¹¹⁵ The large variations in membership in political parties reflect the roles they play in different countries. Political parties in some countries can be characterized as electoral machines. Elsewhere, they are strongly tied to ethnic or national groupings. In developing countries, parties often act as clientelist networks that distribute material goods; see Herbert Kitschelt, “Linkages between citizens and politicians in democratic polities”, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 33, No. 6/7 (September 2000), pp. 845-879.

FIGURE 3.2.

PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL POLITICS (VOTING AND PARTY MEMBERSHIP) AMONG 18– TO 29–YEAR OLDS COMPARED WITH ALL THOSE OVER AGE 18 (percentage)



activism and gender activism are particularly important when one considers the underrepresentation of young people and women in national parliaments. According to recent international reports published by the United Nations Development Programme and Inter-Parliamentary Union,¹¹⁶ only around 5 per cent of parliamentarians are under the age of 35, with figures ranging from just 2 per cent in Northern America to more than 10 per cent in Africa. Likewise,

in spite of recent improvements in female representation in parliaments, the world average is only around 20 per cent,¹¹⁷ ranging from 12 per cent in

¹¹⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme, *Global Parliamentary Report: The Changing Nature of Parliamentary Representation* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.11.III.B.19). Available from www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/gpr2012-full-e.pdf (accessed 23 April 2015).

¹¹⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliament: 20 Years in Review* (Geneva, 2015). Available from www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/WIP20Y-en.pdf (accessed 23 April 2015).

Asia to between 20 and 25 per cent in Africa, Europe, Northern America and South America. This matters because of what Anne Phillips has described as the “politics of presence”,¹¹⁸ which posits that if women and youth are not well represented in national parliaments, they will not see politicians as “people like them” and will therefore not aspire to those positions.

There are some interesting variations in political party involvement across the different countries and regions. Party membership is highest in India, where 18.1 per cent of youth claim to be actively involved. Again, India is the only country among the 33 surveyed in which 18- to 29-year olds are more likely to participate than older citizens (see table 3.1 and figure 3.2). In Africa and the United States youth party membership is relatively high (7 and 8 per cent respectively), but the gap between 18- to 29-year olds and older adults is much higher in the United States than in any other region (see figure 3.2).

118 Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995).

119 Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

120 Eric Arná and Joakim Ekman, “Standby citizens: diverse faces of political passivity”, *European Political Science Review*, vol. 6, No. 2 (May 2014), pp. 261-281.

121 W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013).

122 The Portuguese Indignados, for example, were inspired by song, came into being through a Facebook event page, and manifested themselves in mass protests in town squares across Portugal; see James Sloam, “‘The outraged young’: young Europeans, civic engagement and the new media in a time of crisis”, *Information, Communication & Society*, Special Issue: The Networked Young Citizen, vol. 17, No. 2 (2014), pp. 217-231.

Gender plays a significant role in defining party activism throughout much of the world. In Africa, Europe, South America and South-Eastern Asia, young men are about twice as likely as young women to become active in a political party. In India and the United States, however, these gender disparities are not seen. Educational status has a particularly strong correlation with party activism in the United States, South America and Europe. In these areas, young graduates are more than twice as likely as all young adults to be active party members.

ISSUE-BASED ENGAGEMENT: “REINVENTING POLITICAL ACTIVISM”

Over the past few decades, the world has witnessed a shift in focus from politics to policy—from engagement in institutionalized electoral processes to greater involvement in cause-oriented activism.¹¹⁹ As a consequence, young people’s repertoires of participation have expanded to include many alternative forms of political engagement such as e-petitions, fair trade “boycotts”, poetry slams and flash mobs. Young people engage in politics on a case-by-case basis, embracing personally meaningful causes or issues¹²⁰ that are often manifested through peer networks supported by new communication technologies.^{121,122} Young people are clearly interested in politics but are often disillusioned with, alienated from, or even intimidated by electoral politics.

National economic issues are the predominant concern for older generations and therefore define their political engagement. In recent times, citizens’ values and interests have become more diverse, and the geographical boundaries that once

circumscribed political action have become blurred. Today's young people are much more concerned than previous generations with human rights and environmental causes—though material interests remain central.¹²³ Owing to social and technological changes, the Millennial Generation is also more likely to view political issues as “glocal” or “intermes-tic”. For example, recent youth-led protests in Brazil used the upcoming 2014 FIFA World Cup as a focus for action and drew on other international move-ments for inspiration (including Outono Brasileiro) but mobilized locally on the domestic issue of trans-port costs.¹²⁴

The data in figure 3.3 highlight three of the most com-mon forms of non-electoral participation—petitions, boycotts and demonstrations—in order to provide a snapshot of issue-based political engagement. These modes of engagement are well-established (rather than new) and are used by all generations. Figure 3.4 indicates that there is little difference between youth and older adults in terms of their involvement in tra-ditional forms of issue-based political activism. Young adults are less likely than all adults over age 18 to sign a petition (15 versus 20.9 per cent), marginally less likely to join a boycott (6.1 versus 6.5 per cent), and slightly more likely to participate in a peaceful demonstration (14.3 versus 13 per cent).

Gender plays a variable role across these three types of political action. Young men are much more likely than young women to participate in a demonstra-tion (16.7 versus 11.8 per cent) and somewhat more likely to join a boycott (6.9 versus 5.4 per cent), but young women are marginally more likely to sign a petition (15.3 versus 14.6 per cent). This shows that styles of participation are important. Young people

in general are more likely than older adults to par-ticipate in overt and perhaps more radical forms of issue-based engagement such as demonstrations, but this is particularly the case for young men.

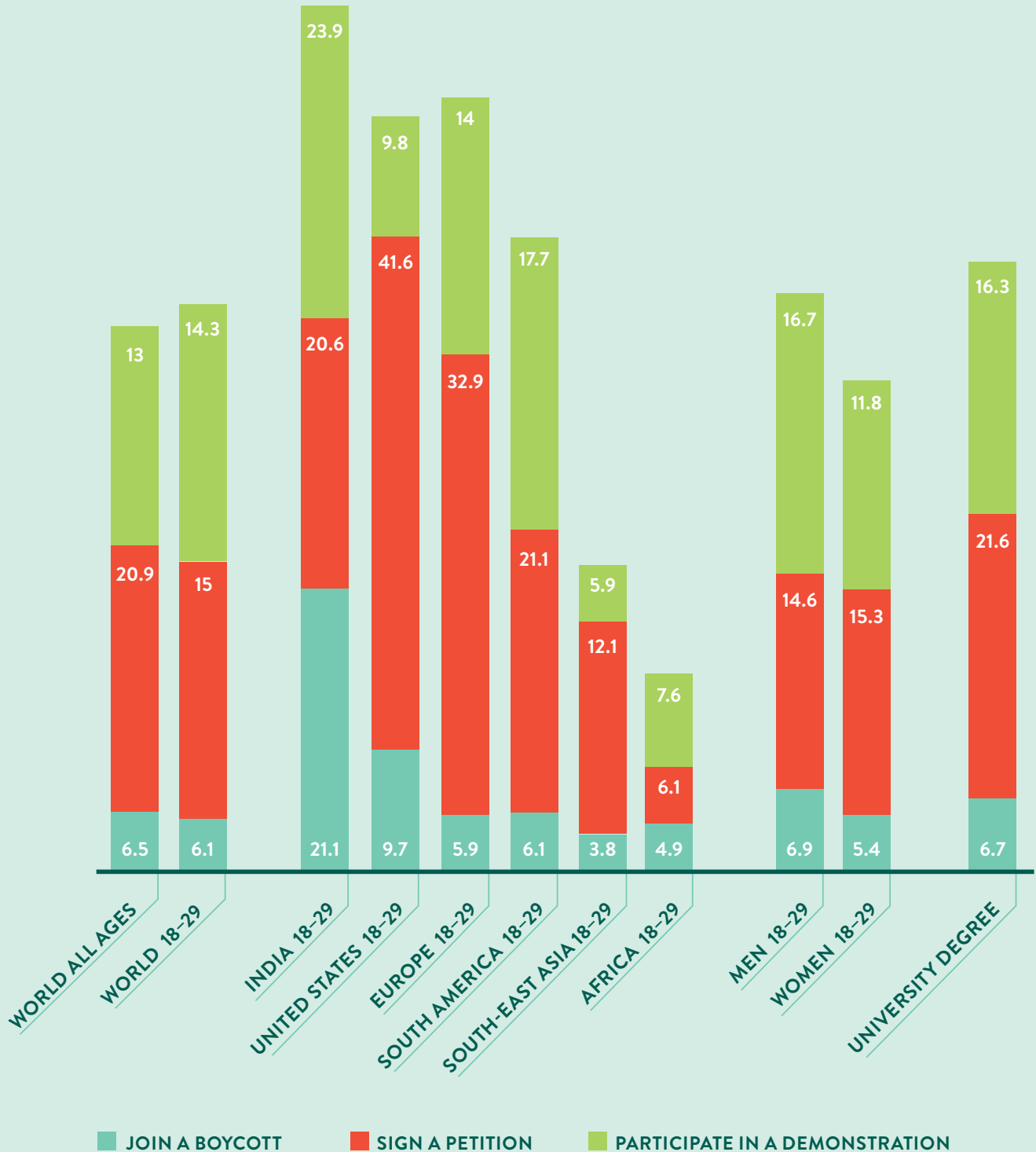
Participation in issue-based politics is roughly equal across age groups and varies minimally across gen-ders but diverges more noticeably across education levels. Young graduates are somewhat more likely than all 18- to 29-year olds to participate in boycotts and demonstrations and much more likely to sign petitions (see table 3.1). Indeed, youth with higher levels of education are more likely than the general adult population to engage in all three modes of par-ticipation (the reverse is true for voting). Given the solid correlation between education and socioec-onomic status, this supports existing evidence that such forms of engagement are strongly linked to an individual's economic resources.¹²⁵ The participation gaps based on educational attainment and socioec-onomic status are large in Europe, South America, South-Eastern Asia and the United States. In South-Eastern Asia, young graduates are more than three times as likely as their non-graduate peers to engage in these three types of political activities.

123 Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005).

124 Similarly, the Spanish Indignados were inspired by events in North Africa and the Middle East (the so-called Arab Spring); concen-trated mainly on national but also on European Union political issues (political corruption, youth unemployment and financial austerity); and mobilized locally in town squares.

125 Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1995); and Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba and Henry E. Brady, “Weapon of the strong? Participatory inequality and the Internet”, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 8, No. 2 (June 2010), pp. 487-509.

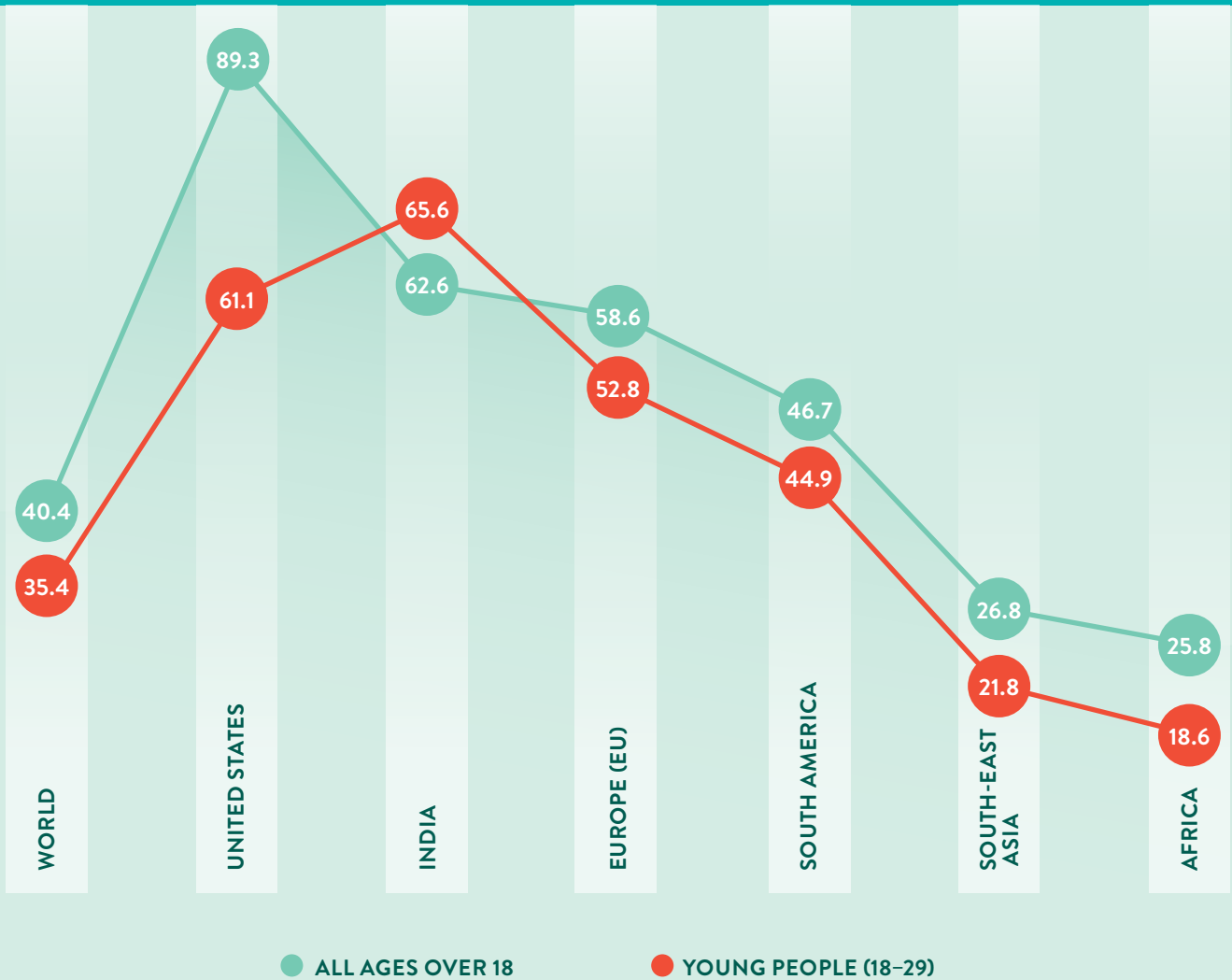
FIGURE 3.3.
YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ISSUE-BASED POLITICS (percentage)



SOURCE: World Values Survey, WVS Wave 6 (2010-2014). Available from <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>

FIGURE 3.4.

PARTICIPATION IN ISSUE-BASED POLITICS (BOYCOTTS, PETITIONS, AND DEMONSTRATIONS) AMONG 18- TO 29-YEAR OLDS COMPARED WITH ALL THOSE OVER AGE 18 (percentage)



SOURCE: World Values Survey, WVS Wave 6 (2010-2014). Available from <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>

Regional variations across these issue-based forms of participation are particularly wide, and it may well be that other issue-based forms of participation not included in the World Values Survey are relatively common in the low-participation areas identified in figure 3.4. Nevertheless, some countries may be said

to specialize in the particular forms of political participation highlighted here. For example, demonstrations and boycotts are comparatively common in India, while petitions are very popular in the United States. Age is a much less important indicator of participation across these three forms of engagement

than is the case for electoral politics (see figure 3.4). In issue-based political activism, youth participation again surpasses the participation of older adults in India—but this is also true for 12 of the other 32 countries. The gap between youth participation and overall adult participation is well under ten percentage points in all of the regions except the United States (where the gap is almost 30 percentage points).

YOUTH PROTEST

Youth participation in electoral politics has been declining for several decades in most established democracies. Younger citizens feel increasingly disillusioned with mainstream politics and disadvantaged by public policy. These problems have been greatly exacerbated by the global financial crisis, with young people disproportionately affected by increased levels of unemployment and underemployment.¹²⁶

Young people have also borne the brunt of severe cuts in public spending, experiencing increased university tuition fees, the closure of youth centres, and reductions in youth social services. Given the relatively low levels of youth voter turnout described above, there is a suspicion that cuts in youth-oriented public services are viewed as politically expedient.

In this context, the recent wave of youth protest is hardly surprising. Uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, protests against the rising costs of higher education, rallies by the Spanish Indignados against youth unemployment and political corruption, and the Occupy movement against social inequalities and corporate greed that started in New York and spread across the world are all manifestations of young people's anger at public policies that

have favoured older generations and established elites. Since 2011, youth protest has filled the political landscape as young people have engaged with one another through hybrid media systems¹²⁷ and across hybrid public spaces,¹²⁸ from Twitter to the town square¹²⁹.

However, in line with the findings articulated above, a large proportion of these young people hail from middle-income or more economically advantaged backgrounds. In this sense, the economic crisis has provided the ideal conditions for a quickening of youth protest—an intensification of political participation (through digital engagement) among young, highly educated citizens in search of a mouthpiece for their “indignation”.¹³⁰ These youth movements have also fuelled support for alternative political parties. Europe has witnessed the growth of parties (such as Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy) that oppose economic austerity and rail against the political establishment.

126 In 2014 the global youth unemployment rate stood at 13 per cent, or three times the adult rate for that year. See International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015: Scaling Up Investments in Decent Jobs for Youth* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2015). Available from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_412015.pdf.

127 Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, Oxford Studies in Digital Politics (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013).

128 Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Polity Press, 2012).

129 A town square is an open public space commonly found in the heart of a traditional town, often used for community gatherings.

130 W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013); and James Sloam, “The outraged young: young Europeans, civic engagement and the new media in a time of crisis”, *Information, Communication & Society*, Special Issue: The Networked Young Citizen, vol. 17, No. 2 (2014), pp. 217–231.

While many highly educated, relatively well-off young people have found a mouthpiece for their indignation, the lack of effective political representation has led to the radicalization of many young people from less privileged backgrounds. This has fuelled the rise of populist and nationalist anti-immigration parties in Europe (such as the National Front in France) and the rise of religious and political extremism in other areas of the world. The dangers of marginalizing young people from electoral politics are clear and present.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this thought piece, it has been shown that youth political participation is evolving rather than declining. Although young people vote less and are unlikely to be active members of political parties, they participate in a wide range of alternative political activities. However, there is a worrying disconnection between young people and electoral politics. Low voter turnout can lead to a vicious circle of political disengagement; if young people do not vote, they are more likely to be ignored by politicians and policymakers, which leads to greater disillusionment among younger citizens—and the cycle continues. The situation has deteriorated further in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, with high levels of youth unemployment and government efforts to rein in public spending contributing to even greater political disenchantment among young people.

Disillusionment with electoral politics is not confined to younger citizens; indeed, it is a recurrent theme across all age groups. However, focusing on youth political participation offers a glimpse of the future

of today's democracies.¹³¹ If existing political institutions are decreasingly fit for the purposes for which they were created, undermined by a lack of public engagement, they may need to incorporate the emerging forms of political participation introduced by young people in order to stay relevant. Clearly, there is a dire need for democratic institutions to find ways to communicate and interact better with citizens, and for political and State institutions to offer stakeholders more effective opportunities to influence politics at local, regional and national levels. These adaptations can be supported by new information and communications technology (ICT) and channelled through civic institutions.

Of course, not all young people are the same. The study shows varying levels of gender and socioeconomic inequalities in youth political participation across different regions of the world. In a broad sense, there is worrying evidence of a lack of engagement in political parties among young women, which is probably connected to the persistent gap between male and female representation in national parliaments. By and large, youth turnout in elections is socially equal in many newer democracies and less socially equal in established democracies. However, there is a stronger and more consistent link between socioeconomic status and non-electoral forms of political participation. If young people are voting less and engaging more in alternative political activities, it is a concern that young people from less privileged backgrounds are being left without a political voice.

¹³¹ Marc Hooghe, "Political socialization and the future of politics", *Acta Politica*, vol. 39, No. 4 (December 2004), pp. 331-341.

Governments, public institutions and non-governmental organizations need to harness the political energy that has been so visible in the recent and ongoing wave of youth protest. The following recommendations are offered for key stakeholders:

Strengthen interactive communication. Pay more attention to youth issues and prioritize younger citizens' concerns; communicate interactively with them face-to-face, via the Internet, and through various social media; and enlist the support of young people (including youth protest activists) in finding solutions to the problems that affect them most.

Empower young people through social networks. Use peer-to-peer contact—young people's social networks—to promote and facilitate youth engagement. Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign in the United States empowered many young Americans to work for the Democratic Party and mobilize their friends¹³². "Champion schemes", which involve recruiting enthusiastic young people to encourage "people like them" to become politically engaged, have also shown great promise.

¹³² Scott Keeter, Juliana Horowitz, and Alec Tyson, *Young Voters in the 2008 Election*, (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 13 November, 2008). Available from <http://www.pewresearch.org/2008/11/13/young-voters-in-the-2008-election/>

¹³³ Judith Torney-Purta and others, *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen* (Amsterdam, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2001). Available from http://www.iea.nl/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Electronic_versions/CIVED_Phase2_Age_Fourteen.pdf Also see Wolfram Schulz and others, *Initial Findings from the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study* (Amsterdam, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2010).

Improve youth representation and the politics of presence. Consider measures to improve youth representation and the representation of young women in national parliaments and other decision-making bodies. This may be achieved in a number of ways; for example, steps can be taken to establish quotas, to develop all-female candidate shortlists, and to ensure a more equal presence for women and lower socio-economic groups in youth wings of political parties and youth representative bodies (such as youth parliaments and councils).

Educate on democracy. Ensure that effective standardized citizenship education is provided at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. It is well known that greater knowledge and the practice of democratic politics in supportive environments can foster civic and political engagement. This can be achieved through the implementation of evidence-based citizenship education in schools and colleges.¹³³

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TRANSITIONS IN POWER: YOUNG PEOPLE'S ROLE

Nur Laiq

INTRODUCTION

Youth comprise a quarter of the Earth's population. In the global South, this figure rises to between 60 and 70 per cent, resulting in a "youth bulge". Young people make up a significant proportion of the world's population, but they are marginalized both politically and economically and have been taking to the streets in ever-growing numbers to voice their aspirations. Youth-led protests have been occurring in countries across the world.

Young people have been the driving force behind the Arab uprisings, Occupy Wall Street and its satellite demonstrations, the anti-corruption rallies in India, the demonstrations for political rights in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the protests for economic justice in Brazil, Chile, Spain, Greece and Israel. The last five years of youth protests mark youth out as group drawn together by shared anxieties and shared aspirations.

The protests reflect a new geography of discontent that cuts across old divides of rich and poor countries, of North and South, where youth are the contesting actors. In taking on political and economic inequalities, youth through activism have re-energized the notions of public empowerment and citizenship at a moment when many across the world feel the social contract between citizen and State is broken. They

are a compelling force because of both their demographic weight and their mobilizing power.

However, can youth deliver change, especially in the post-transition period? How do they engage on the street and within institutions, and what are the ideas that drive them? How sustainable is their political activism? And finally, how can youth and other stakeholders ensure the meaningful participation of young people within governance structures?

The trajectory of youth engagement in Egypt and Tunisia is reflected in two rich and very different accounts of activism and political participation in a transition environment. Egypt witnessed a focus on building the machinery of civic engagement through protest politics, while Tunisia saw an emphasis on the institutionalization of power through the building of structures within political parties.

Egypt and Tunisia are used as case studies here in order to explore the directions youth participation can take and to identify relevant challenges and opportunities. On the basis of this analytical review, the author offers policy options for the creation of sustainable frameworks for the meaningful long-term involvement of youth in decision-making and politics.

The present thought piece is based on the author's fieldwork conducted in Egypt and Tunisia in the

post-transition period and draws upon dozens of interviews conducted with youth politicians and activists. Zooming in at the ground level provides a more concrete understanding of youth political participation. It also offers an authentic context from which to identify lessons learned and best practices, even though the Egyptian and Tunisian transitions have since taken different directions and represent significantly different political environments. While the focus is on a specific region, the implications for building venues for genuine youth participation in governance and political life are universally applicable.

In Egypt and Tunisia, young people engage politically both within formal structures and through informal channels. The majority of youth still view formal politics with antipathy and contempt and prefer to engage on governance issues through civil society activism or informal political activity.

MANOEUVRING WITHIN THE FORMAL POLITICAL ARENA

In Egypt and Tunisia, political parties—both old and new, State sanctioned and independent—are perceived to function along vertical lines, with little horizontal decision-making or idea generation. Egyptian youth have not been integrated into party structures, as few parties have given any thought to including them in committees or creating a youth wing. Most youth in political parties have been left to fend for themselves, which for some has had its own appeal for the autonomy it has allowed. Within the realm of political activism, youth have placed greater emphasis on the importance of protest politics and have focused less on building structures, messaging, or positioning themselves within the party.

In comparison with Egyptian youth, young people in Tunisia have been better integrated into party structures. Nearly all political parties have engaged with the youth issue, but this is primarily because Tunisian youth have been adamant in demanding a seat at the table. As a result, most parties have some youth representatives on their central committees or have a youth wing. While this structure tends to function along hierarchical lines, it also offers a political ladder to climb within the system. This translates into a political activism among youth that centres on preparing for party congresses, developing policy platforms and messaging, and campaigning for a greater youth voice internally. It has also meant that youth activists in Tunisia are less disaffected than their counterparts in Egypt.

SEIZING INFORMAL POLITICAL SPACE

Most youth political activism in Egypt and Tunisia, and indeed globally, has taken place through informal channels, with much of the activity occurring in the civil society arena. Young people have a huge presence in this sphere, ranging from youth movements with tens of thousands of members to individual activists who might be lawyers, labourers, bloggers or graffiti artists.

Most youth-led civil society organizations focus on putting the citizen at the centre of the political process. In Egypt, many groups have worked to raise awareness of political and socioeconomic rights. In Tunisia, there has been greater emphasis on playing a direct role in establishing monitoring bodies or watchdog groups in an effort to ensure the accountability of the Parliament, the constitution-drafting committee and the election commission.

Young people in both Egypt and Tunisia affirm that achieving political and economic justice is a top priority. In pursuing this objective, however, they are keen to move away from old models of thinking and governing. In the early days of the transition period their ideas for change bore a laser-like sharpness, in part because the youth were able to present a united front.

The transition process itself, though, soon divided youth as it pulled them in different directions. This, coupled with a tendency to fight for single issues as opposed to linking them to a wider political platform, has led many youth to retreat into their own silos from which they can only fight disjointed campaigns. Such a move has risked reinforcing the old mechanism of functioning, with the State offering to exchange specific entitlements for broader political rights—a trade-off sometimes seen to have been made between Governments and previous generations of activists.

Yet youth remain different from the older generation in that they also have a parallel narrative that places strong emphasis on promoting the idea of equal citizenship. To paraphrase a young Tunisian activist, they believe that a Pandora's Box of issues has been opened but that the only solution is to overcome the legacies of the past. Thus, while polarized, many youth argue that there is no option but to work through the post-transition crisis of governance.

In both Egypt and Tunisia, youth activism is based on horizontal organizational structures rather than vertical hierarchies of leadership. Nearly all youth activists in both formal and informal politics face structural and financial constraints, as well as challenges related to strategy and long-term planning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What are the implications of this for the future, and how can stakeholders respond?

Youth-led protests show that there is a great desire to change the system. There is a common aspiration for a new political culture, which above all is about accountability. Youth see themselves as a counter-balance to power and during the uprisings spent much energy on trying to expand political and civic space. They have utilized social media and crowd-sourcing platforms to develop more innovative ways of engaging with challenges, finding solutions and fostering new citizen-based structures. For many, their legitimacy is grounded in a politics that exists beyond the structures of the State.

It is important, however, that civic engagement and political engagement, as well as the relationship between citizen and State, be reconciled and better integrated. Many youth recognize that informal political activism cannot be a substitute for the institutionalized politics of parties, elections and Governments.

The lessons learned and best practices observed through interviews with youth politicians and activists can inform the development of effective strategies for enhancing youth participation in governance through both formal and informal channels. The recommendations presented below are intended for stakeholders at the United Nations agency, national and local levels.

In the informal or civil society arena

Ensure that mechanisms exist for direct interaction between government officials and young people, as witnessed in Tunisia, where youth groups have played an active role in setting up parliamentary watchdog groups.

Decentralize power by giving all youth access to the political process and the opportunity to have their voices heard. In Tunisia, youth groups have brought Members of Parliament to local constituencies to consult with young people on the issues that concern them most, including education and unemployment.

Use the normative framework of the United Nations Secretary-General's Five-Year Action Agenda and the 2011 United Nations General Assembly resolution on mediation¹³⁴ to guide programme development. Relevant measures might include offering training on conflict mediation and strengthening avenues for youth participation in community decision-making, as seen in Yemen. Encouraging inclusive dialogue to resolve conflict at the community and national levels in post-transition countries is key. The process can be further enhanced through the creation of mediation modules and texts that can be used by political parties and for training programmes undertaken by youth-led civil society organizations.

¹³⁴ See United Nations General Assembly resolution 65/283 of 28 July 2011 on strengthening the role of mediation in the peaceful settlement of disputes, conflict prevention and resolution (A/RES/65/283). Available from [http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/GARes_StrengtheningTheRoleOfMediation_ARES65283\(english\)_1.pdf](http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/GARes_StrengtheningTheRoleOfMediation_ARES65283(english)_1.pdf).

In the formal political arena

Involve youth directly in the electoral process. Young people can function as election observers—a strategy implemented by the Carter Center in Egypt and Tunisia. Youth can also serve as polling station workers and have seats on national election commissions.

Build strong youth wings in political parties but also have youth quotas for representation in central bureaus and decision-making committees. Young people who have a direct voice in policymaking can call attention to youth priorities in general policies on education, health, employment and other areas of special concern.

Introduce quotas for youth on parliamentary lists and in national dialogue processes, as has been done in Yemen. Quotas and legal frameworks are important, but they mean next to nothing if there is no commitment to ensure the meaningful participation of young people in all stages of the electoral process (before, during and after elections) and in other key political processes.

In both formal and informal political arenas, young people are actively engaged in horizontal experience sharing. This trend should be supported, with youth encouraged to strengthen communication through peer-to-peer networks across political parties and civil society so that they can profit from lessons learned and best practices.

Youth political inclusion is a key component of United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's

Five-Year Action Agenda. As the international community seeks ways to address the monumental challenges that face youth, initiatives based on capacity-building are important. However, it is the engagement of youth as relevant and meaningful stakeholders that is essential to building a stable political and economic future.

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NEGATIVE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: INVOLVEMENT IN RADICALISM AND EXTREMISM

Akil N. Awan

INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that youth civic participation and political engagement are essential components of a healthy, functioning society. Youth engagement is vital to political socialization and participation; young people represent future electorates and publics, and initial experiences of democratic engagement are likely to resonate into adulthood.¹³⁵ However, it is also crucial in helping to build human and social capital, and at the most fundamental level, it strengthens young people's understanding of their own roles as citizens and the attendant rights and responsibilities.

An alternative to positive youth engagement may simply be apathy and disengagement, which remains a significant problem worldwide.¹³⁶ However, disaffected youth can also choose to engage in what may broadly be termed radical or extreme activity.

This might range from simply espousing intolerant, extreme or fundamentalist views to actively participating in radical or extreme groups and causes or engaging in illegal political activity such as violent protest and even terrorism. This is the potential negative side of youth engagement that, far from promoting human rights, social mobility, civic responsibility, political socialization and youth development, actively works against them and is the focus of this thought piece.

Defining radicalism or extremism can be somewhat problematic. Historically, radicalism has often reflected the predominant political ideologies and social currents of its time, either by resonating with or echoing some aspect of them or by emerging in opposition to the status quo. Consequently, the definition of what is radical is largely contingent upon the milieu from which it emerges. Another consideration is that many movements initially considered radical or extreme gain acceptance and legitimacy over time and eventually enter the mainstream; examples within the past century include the emergence of movements advocating decolonization, civil rights, women's liberation and environmental concerns. It is essential, then, that extremism or radicalism be considered within its contemporary sociopolitical context, and that those exploring this

135 Robert Arthur Franklin, *Packaging Politics: Political Communications in Britain's Media Democracy*, 2nd ed. (London, Arnold, 2004).

136 United Nations Development Programme. *Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle: A Good Practice Guide* (New York, 2013), p. 11. Available from http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/electoral_systemsandprocesses/enhancing-youth-political-participation-throughout-the-electoral.html.

concept remain cognizant of the historical subjectivity that accompanies the identification and labeling of an individual or group as radical or extreme.

For the purposes of this thought piece, it is posited that radicalism or extremism involves at least one of the following:

1. The acceptance or espousal of beliefs, ideas and attitudes that clearly contradict or fall outside the range of acceptable or mainstream views within that particular society; an example would be the racist and intolerant attitudes of neo-Nazi groups in contemporary Europe.
2. The employment of illegitimate methods or strategies to actualize ideas and beliefs, irrespective of the legitimacy and mainstream acceptability of those ideas. For example, while most people would accept that animals have rights and should be protected from unnecessary harm, violent attacks on people and research facilities that carry out testing on animals would be considered illegal and an example of radical or extreme activity.

Radicalism and extremism operate on or outside the periphery of mainstream society and are characterized by the espousal of beliefs and ideas or the use of methods and strategies that are not considered acceptable within a particular societal context.

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT TRENDS

Radicalism and extremism are largely perceived as youth phenomena. Indeed, historically, certain youth demographics have been drawn disproportionately

to these sorts of activities and movements, and exceptionally large youth cohorts, or “youth bulges”, often make countries more susceptible to political violence.¹³⁷ It is also possible to identify violent groups that not only target youth audiences, but whose very existence centres around a youth identity. For example, the Red Guards in China were a violent paramilitary youth social movement mobilized from universities by Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the very name of the group may sometimes reflect a youth demographic; the name al-Shabaab in Somalia literally means “the Youth” in Arabic,¹³⁸ and the name of the Taliban in Afghanistan stems from the Pashto word for “students”. Most strikingly today, jihadism, in the guise of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, is almost exclusively associated with young men under the age of 25¹³⁹ and originates in regions experiencing a substantial youth bulge.

While extremism predominantly draws young men to its fold, women are not entirely immune. Indeed, not only have women been drawn to political radicalism and extremism throughout history, but they have also played crucial leadership roles in movements associated with women’s rights, universal

137 Henrik Urdal, “A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence”, *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 50, No. 3 (11 September 2006), pp. 607-629.

138 The group’s full name is Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (Movement of Striving Youth).

139 Akil N. Awan, “Transitional religiosity experiences: contextual disjuncture and Islamic political radicalism”, in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Comparative Perspective*, T. Abbas, ed. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 207-230. Available from http://works.bepress.com/akil_awan/8; and Marc Sageman, “Islam and Al Qaeda”, in *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: Globalization of Martyrdom*, Ami Pedahzur, ed., Cass Series on Political Violence (New York, Routledge, 2006).

suffrage, civil rights, and animal and environmental rights. In the 1970s, when extreme left-wing radicalism was prevalent throughout much of Europe, women were sometimes considered far more ideologically extreme than even their male counterparts. For example, West German counterterrorism units were apparently ordered to “shoot the women first” when encountering the Baader-Meinhoff Gang owing to the supposed danger they posed as the group’s most ideologically committed members.¹⁴⁰

However, this perception of women as ideologically extreme has been the exception rather than the rule. Women involved in radical or extremist groups have generally been depicted using biological, psychological or sexualized stereotypes linked to assumptions about what is “appropriate” female behaviour,¹⁴¹ thereby divesting them of political and personal agency. Even today, at a time when women are increasingly drawn to radical movements, this characterization still appears to hold. For example, young women who have attempted to join the Islamic State, in contrast to their male counterparts, have been labelled sensationally by the media as “jihadi sex brides”, with terms such as “vulnerable” and “sexually groomed” used to account for their actions.

140 Eileen MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First*, 1st ed. (New York, Random House, 1991), p. xiv.

141 Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics* (London, Zed Books, 2007).

142 Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1994).

143 Akil N. Awan, “Antecedents of Islamic political radicalism among Muslim communities in Europe”, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 41, No. 1 (2008), pp. 13–17.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE RISE OF YOUTH RADICALISM AND CONDITIONS THAT FOSTER YOUTH EXTREMISM

There is no simple cause-and-effect calculus that accounts for the rise of youth extremism; however, it is possible to identify certain critical factors that might make young people more susceptible to radical narratives or provide the impetus for their participation in radical structures and activities. Three of the most important factors—identity crises, political disenfranchisement, and socioeconomic inequality—are explored below.

Identity crises

The nexus of radicalism, extremism and youth is primarily the transitional stage of development into adulthood and the presence of unresolved issues relating to identity formation.¹⁴² Of course, this search for identity and belonging is an intrinsic part of adolescence and early adulthood and occurs among young people everywhere. However, as the case studies of many radicals will attest, this process appears to take on an urgency and prominence in these individuals that belie its ubiquitous and often mundane nature. Identity crises inspired by alienation, racism, dislocation, globalization, changing value systems, anomie and a host of other issues produce a heightened state of vulnerability and might compel individuals to seek solace in beguiling narratives that offer a safe and welcoming community of like-minded “outcast” individuals.¹⁴³ In this respect, the need to belong and the dynamics behind the appeal of such groups as the Islamic State, which offers an identity based on a global religious

fraternity of believers, or of Neo-Nazi groups, which offer an identity based on racial purity and cultural solidarity, are not entirely dissimilar to the appeal of gang culture identities to some young people.

The nexus of youth radicalism also stems in part from the exposure at this formative stage to new ideas and theories provided by expanding social networks and educational opportunities. The university is both historically and pedagogically the home of radical ideas, revolutionary beliefs and subversive thoughts, precisely because it is often the setting in which students receive their first independent exposure to the political world around them. Many of the great political movements first emerged on university campuses and were no doubt considered unorthodox or radical at the time. Intoxicated by new causes that animate them and struggles that inspire them, students are inevitably filled with genuine—if somewhat naïve and unrefined—enthusiasm and idealism. However, that is part of growing up, of healthy political socialization and development; students experiment not only with sex, drugs and music at university, but also with ideas.

Add to this heady mix issues relating to rebellion against social and parental mores, crises of authority, and intergenerational conflict, and it is easy to understand why radicalism often takes root among youth. In West Germany in the 1970s, young people rebelled against the State and society by joining extreme left-wing groups. These young people broke starkly with their parents by labelling them the “Auschwitz generation”, pointedly accusing them of lacking a moral compass and of being complicit in the Holocaust.¹⁴⁴ Even today, many of the anti-austerity and inequality movements such as Spain’s Los Indignados (15-M), Mexico’s

Yo Soy 132, and the Occupy movement in the United States are partially founded on the principle that young people are unwilling to pay the price for the excesses and fiscal irresponsibility of earlier generations.

Political disenfranchisement

Increasing political disenfranchisement and disillusionment with traditional political processes, institutions and structures¹⁴⁵ are also central to understanding young people’s alienation from conventional politics and mainstream civic and political engagement. Young people who do not believe that the issues of concern to them are being addressed through politics and public policy¹⁴⁶ often take to the streets and engage in protest and demonstrations. Where “legitimate” forms of protest prove unsuccessful, individuals may begin to countenance illegitimate and violent forms of protest including rioting, public disorder, sabotage and even terrorism.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, a gravitation towards radicalism or extremism might be interpreted as one of the ways in which young people seek to air their frustrations and grievances and to attach themselves to structures that ostensibly allow them to feel that they are being empowered socially and politically. Radicalism

144 Hans Kundnani, *Utopia or Auschwitz: Germany’s 1968 Generation and the Holocaust*, Crises in World Politics (London, Hurst Publishers, 2009).

145 Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge, eds., *Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics* (London, Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom, 2014). Available from https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/PSA%20Beyond%20the%20YCC%20FINAL_0.pdf.

146 David Marsh, Therese O’Toole and Su Jones, *Young People and Politics in the UK: Apathy or Alienation?* Political & International Studies Collection (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

147 Akil N. Awan, “Transitional religiosity experiences: contextual disjuncture and Islamic political radicalism”.

or extremism may be particularly appealing to young people at this stage of their lives, especially if their initial tentative yet idealistic forays into political activism have failed to produce the desired results.

Socioeconomic inequality

Socioeconomic pressures can play a key role in influencing a young person's susceptibility to radicalism and extremism. High rates of global youth unemployment (exceeding 10 per cent over the past three decades)¹⁴⁸ and other, broader forms of socioeconomic inequality have been the focal point of youth grievances for some time. The anti-austerity and inequality movements in Europe and the United States and the violent protests that have erupted in Cairo, Caracas and many other parts of the world are largely predicated upon the sorts of socioeconomic inequalities that disproportionately impact young people. Indeed, the youth bulge within many societies in the Middle East and North Africa and the associated lack of employment and other opportunities for youth are widely seen as constituting one of the principle precursors of the risings that took place in that region.¹⁴⁹

148 International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends 2013: Recovering from a Second Jobs Dip* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2013), p. 11, available from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_202326.pdf; and International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2013: A Generation at Risk* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2013), available from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_212423.pdf.

149 United Nations Development Programme, *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.08.III.B.3), available from <http://arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2009e.pdf>; and United Nations Development Programme, *The Arab Human Development Report 2012—Empowerment: The Will of the People*, 10th ed. (New York, 2012).

Young people today are facing an uphill climb that has become dauntingly steep. Many have limited prospects for employment, decent shelter and upward social mobility. Poverty, low educational attainment, and disproportionately high crime rates among youth have become endemic in certain settings. Youth experiencing these challenges as well as prejudice and societal marginalization may find “solutions” to their predicament in extreme organizations and movements. The two young Frenchmen who carried out the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in early 2015 hailed from one of the *banlieues* situated around the capital. These largely working-class suburbs are often characterized as environments with high rates of unemployment, crime and drug use, as well as institutional racism and endemic cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. It is in these types of settings that radical groups might offer an escape from a potentially bleak future or a criminal past.

War and conflict have a tremendous impact on negative youth engagement. Young people in conflict zones, and particularly those in “failing States” (which often result from periods of long, drawn-out conflict), are likely to gravitate towards violence or violent actors because, somewhat ironically, such contexts are seen to offer security and a chance to meet basic survival needs. Many young people in the Syrian Arab Republic and Afghanistan, for example, have joined the Islamic State and Taliban respectively, not necessarily because of any ideological commitment or religious appeal, but simply out of financial necessity and the need to survive.

Periods of insecurity or poverty heighten young people's vulnerability, rendering them far more susceptible to coercion and manipulation by extreme

demagogues, gangs and violent criminals. It is believed, for example, that Ajmal Kasab, the lone surviving terrorist from the 2008 Mumbai attacks in India, may have been coerced to participate after his impoverished family was promised Rs 150,000 by Lashkar-e-Taiba upon the successful completion of his operation.¹⁵⁰

SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH AUDIENCES

Online platforms, in particular Internet-based social media and web 2.0 platforms, have collectively become the principal arena for youth political and social engagement over the past decade. This is largely a positive development, as these platforms are ostensibly conducive to the “levelling” of hierarchies of knowledge and power¹⁵¹ and have reinforced the democratizing and egalitarian nature of the new media environment. However, the appropriation of these technologies has also contributed significantly to the rise and increased visibility of youth radicalism and extremism.

There are a number of reasons that might account for the intersection of youth, technology and radicalism. Principally, this nexus is a function of young people being “digital natives” rather than “digital immigrants”.¹⁵² The former are defined as native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet. Conversely, those who were not born into the digital world but have at some point adopted various aspects of the new technology are considered digital immigrants. For young people today, there is little that is new about the new media environment; rather, it is the only media environment with which they are familiar. For this

younger generation of political actors, social interaction and other everyday activities take place largely within this media environment, whether it be social networking, shopping, dating, playing video games, watching movies, reading news, listening to music, or learning. In fact, most activities in the “real” world now have virtual counterparts that may appear to be more appealing to a certain age cohort (digital natives), so it is not surprising that their political activism or radical escapism should similarly take place within this arena.¹⁵³

One of the paradoxes of the new media environment is that while it provides access to staggering amounts of information and data and exposes users to new perspectives and experiences, it also allows individuals who gravitate towards extremism to find (or consciously place) themselves in highly cloistered, immersive environments that effectively cocoon audiences from alternate realities and interpretational frameworks. These online environments can give rise to an insular virtual community that venerates the radical ideology or community at the expense of all else while stifling almost any form of debate, discussion or dialogue.¹⁵⁴ These forums essentially act

150 Akil N. Awan, “Spurning ‘this worldly life’: terrorism and martyrdom in contemporary Britain”, in *Martyrdom and Terrorism: Pre-Modern to Contemporary Perspectives*, Dominic Janes and Alec Houen, eds. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 248.

151 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).

152 Marc Prensky, “Digital natives, digital immigrants”, *On the Horizon*, vol. 9, No. 5 (October 2001). Available from <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>.

153 Akil N. Awan, Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin, *Radicalisation and Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology* (London, Routledge, 2011), p. 55.

154 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

as echo chambers or rhetorical force amplifiers, predisposing users to unreserved acceptance of the radical perspective and effectively grooming vulnerable young people online for extremism.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Radicalism is not always a bad thing. It usually indicates a political awakening among young people—the presence of latent energy and a desire to change the world for the better. One might contrast the negative youth engagement of radicals (no matter how problematic) with the widespread political apathy among youth in recent years, as evidenced by chronically low voter turnout in virtually all democracies. The most important question one might ask is how the very same energy hijacked by extremists and radicals might be directed towards positive, healthy outcomes. Achieving such a goal requires that certain key issues be addressed, as outlined in the recommendations below.

Support political empowerment. The best way to address political disillusionment and disenfranchisement is to restore political agency to young people. They must be provided with the means to become agents of positive change within their own societies. Conventional political literacy and socialization are important, but alternative forms of engagement that may be more appealing to youth

need to be supported as well. Young people must genuinely believe that they can become effective agents of change.¹⁵⁵ They require access to mechanisms through which they can air their grievances against the political establishment. Further, when young people express dissatisfaction with political elites or the status quo through protests and demonstrations, they must be taken seriously, and appropriate action must be taken to mitigate their concerns and address their grievances. If their criticisms and frustrations are ignored, they may seek resolution through more negative modes of political engagement. It must be acknowledged that in some cases it will not be possible to cognitively change extremist beliefs and attitudes. However, in these scenarios, it may be possible to disengage young people from violence, to delegitimize violence as a response, and to aim for political socialization focused on more legitimate modes of political engagement.

Create inclusive identities. Every effort must be made to create progressive and inclusive forms of citizenship and belonging, to prevent the marginalization of youth and other disadvantaged populations, and to respect diversity. Human rights and individual freedoms must be protected. Steps must be taken to ensure that avenues for youth civic participation are created so that young people feel they have something vested in the State and society. Grievances and narratives of victimhood, whether real or perceived, must be addressed so young people can see that their concerns are taken seriously. Intolerance, sexism, racism and xenophobia must be eliminated, and their highly corrosive effects on community cohesion, healthy identity development and civic responsibility must be acknowledged.

¹⁵⁵ James Youniss and others, "Youth civic engagement in the twenty-first century", *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, vol. 12, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 121-148.

Address socioeconomic inequality.

Governments and other stakeholders must address all forms of socioeconomic inequality. In much of the developing world, there must be a push for better governance and transparency and greater democratization. The international community must uphold its responsibility in tackling these issues, particularly in post-conflict settings. In the developed world, policymakers must address democratic deficits, income disparities and fiscal irresponsibility and work to eliminate barriers to upward social mobility.

As has been demonstrated by the examples offered here, young people can be powerful agents for change.¹⁵⁶ In order to ensure that their efforts are directed towards positive change, young people must be provided with the tools and means to achieve their potential. This must be done not only to diminish the appeal of radicalism and extremism but because all individuals deserve to live in free and fair societies. It is essential to invest in younger generations, as they represent the shared future of society.

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156 See, for example, the roles of youth in post-conflict reconstruction in Stephanie Schwartz, *Youth in Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change* (Washington, D.C., United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

YOUTH DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Erhardt Graeff

INTRODUCTION

The terms “civic engagement” and “activism” traditionally evoke images of voting and volunteering for campaigns or marching in the streets, banners hoisted high. While these are still fixtures of political participation, a broader set of practices enabled by digital technologies is being created and applied by young people. Cathy J. Cohen, Joseph Kahne and others call this broader set of practices “participatory politics”, defined as “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern”.¹⁵⁷ They emphasize that “these acts are not guided by deference to elites or formal institutions”.

This is part of a larger trend of youth avowing low confidence in national decision-making bodies and disaffection with elected officials and their ability to address issues. The biannual Harvard Institute of Politics poll indicated consistently declining levels of trust in government institutions among 18- to 29-year-old Americans between 2010 and 2015.¹⁵⁸ According to a 2013 LSE Enterprise study, when European 16- to 26-year olds reflect on voting and institutional politics, they find “the political ‘offer’ does not match their concerns, ideas, and ideal of democratic politics”.¹⁵⁹ At the same time, there are high levels of youth participation in issue-oriented activism, boycotting and buycotting, and protest activities.¹⁶⁰ W. Lance Bennett refers to this new generation of young people as “actualizing citizens”, “who favour loosely networked activism to address

issues that reflect personal values”, in contrast with “dutiful citizens”, who maintain a more collective and government-centred set of practices.¹⁶¹ Similarly, Cohen and Kahne found that interest-driven participation was a strong predictor of engagement in participatory politics among American youth.¹⁶²

If one thing defines this era of youth digital activism, it is the ability to make and widely share media. It is possible for “widely distributed, loosely connected individuals” to work together to solve a problem or create something new—a practice called

157 Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne, *Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action* (MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics, 2012), p. vi. Available from http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/default/files/publications/Participatory_Politics_Report.pdf.

158 Harvard University Institute of Politics, *Executive Summary: Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes Toward Politics and Public Service*, 27th ed., Harvard Public Opinion Project (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 29 April 2015). Available from http://www.iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files_new/IOPSpring15PollExecSumm.pdf.

159 The London School of Economics and Political Science, *EACEA 2010/03: Youth Participation in Democratic Life, Final Report, February 2013* (London, LSE Enterprise Limited, 2013), p. 9. Available from <http://www.lse.ac.uk/businessAndConsultancy/LSEEnterprise/pdf/YouthParticipationDemocraticLife.pdf>.

160 W. Lance Bennett, “Civic learning in changing democracies: challenges for citizenship and civic education”, in *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning for Democratic Participation*, Peter Dahlgren, ed. (New York, Routledge, 2007), pp. 59-77; and Scott Keeter and others, “The civic and political health of the nation: a generational portrait” (College Park, Maryland, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 19 September 2002). Available from <http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/>

161 W. Lance Bennett, “Changing citizenship in the digital age”, in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, W. Lance Bennett, ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 1-24. [Civic_Political_Health.pdf](#).

162 Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne, *Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action*.

crowdsourcing or peer production—because the costs of building loose networks of contributors and disseminating information digitally are nearly zero.¹⁶³ When people make their own media they can assert power by framing issues in ways that compel others to change their minds or to adapt to new realities and perspectives. This form of “media activism” is not a new theory of change in itself; however, its practice is being transformed by the use of digital technologies for coordination and amplification. Agenda-setting power is shifting to a broader set of political actors with the necessary tools, savvy and timing.

Mobile computing, in particular, is allowing a new generation of citizens to access the Internet and enjoy lowered coordination costs. In Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, 9 in 10 Millennials have a smartphone and spend 50-100 per cent more time on their mobile device than on a desktop computer.¹⁶⁴ Affordable wireless Internet access and mobile phone ownership around the world constitute the most potent force for expanding the pool and potential of young digital activists.

However, the young people best poised to transform the practice of democracy around the world are those who not only create media but also build the tools and platforms through which they are made, shared and organized. Lilly Irani calls this new movement of civic hacking and cultural remaking “entrepreneurial citizenship”.¹⁶⁵ This represents a small but powerful cohort that is taking its cues for solving the world’s problems from Silicon Valley, identifying primarily as social entrepreneurs and designers and secondarily as political or as activists.

These new forms of digital activism are not without problems and controversy. Many youth are still excluded from civic and political participation. That is why it is important to comprehend the wide range of contemporary tactics, tools, and trends and the unique challenges youth digital activists face in connection with current laws, norms, market forces and educational practices. The current thought piece outlines these trends and challenges but also highlights relevant opportunities and offers recommendations for supporting youth digital activism.

TRENDS IN DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Digital activism is a rapidly growing phenomenon on a path to expand Cohen and Kahne’s already broad definition of participatory politics. The sources and targets of activism, the tools used, and the relevant outcomes vary across countries and are constantly evolving; at present, the communities coming together via Facebook, Twitter and other networks are incredibly important.¹⁶⁶ Several of the genres that best illustrate the breadth of youth digital activism’s expansion and legitimization are highlighted

163 Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006). Available from http://www.benkler.org/Benkler_Wealth_Of_Networks.pdf.

164 Adam Lella, Andrew Lipsman and Ben Martin, *The Global Mobile Report: How Multi-Platform Audiences & Engagement Compare in the US, Canada, UK and Beyond* (comScore, 2015).

165 Lilly Irani, “Hackathons and the making of entrepreneurial citizenship”, *Science, Technology & Human Values*, vol. 40, No. 5 (2015), pp. 799-824.

166 Frank Edwards, Philip N. Howard and Mary Joyce, “Digital activism and non-violent conflict (November 2013). Available from <http://digital-activism.org/download/1306/>.

below; they include networked social movements, issue-oriented activism, participatory politics through participatory culture (such as fan activism and political memes), civic hacking, and hacktivism.

Networked social movements

Social movements are defined in part by their means of communication, what brings people together, and how it happens; networked social movements are participatory because they rely on “self-configurable,” “fluid”, and less hierarchical networks of communication.¹⁶⁷ This means more entryways to leadership for youth participants through decentralization, and it also demands adequate skill in the use of digital media.

Uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa on Twitter and Facebook

During the 2010/11 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and replicated in the organization and broadcast of later demonstrations and protests throughout Europe, Latin America and the United States, the skilful use of Twitter hashtags and the leverage of social networks such as Facebook helped spread and legitimize uprisings in several countries in the MENA region. The movements had their seeds in long-standing networks of activists working towards regime change and masses of citizens exasperated by high youth unemployment and food shortages across the region. However, it was the savvy use of Facebook and Twitter to develop solidarity among those across the region and Arab diasporas, and then to influence the coverage of Western journalists, that allowed these movements to gain serious momentum. Local bloggers and activists worked together to create and disseminate

carefully crafted messages and images during each revolution, which were retweeted by Western journalists who could amplify the message to a global audience. This audience included the bloggers’ and activists’ fellow countrymen, who could witness the solidarity with and legitimization of the revolutions reflected in the global response.¹⁶⁸

Participating in these uprisings online was as easy as retweeting new information shared via Twitter or changing or modifying a profile image in a way that displayed one’s support. Individually, these might appear to be very personal and ineffective forms of participation, but in aggregate they represent a formidable display of solidarity with the social movements that helped to encourage supportive reporting in the Western press and the material support of foreign benefactors and Governments.

Issue-oriented activism

Another wave of networked social movements even more strongly connected to youth and new forms of digital activism began in 2011 with the Occupy movement originating in New York City and the 15-M Movement in Spain and continued through 2014 with the Umbrella Movement (Occupy Central with Love and Peace) in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. In these cases, youth disaffected by institutional politics chose to occupy prominent civic spaces

¹⁶⁷ Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Polity Press, 2012), p. 15.

¹⁶⁸ Gilad Lotan and others, “The revolutions were tweeted: information flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions”, *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 5 (September), pp. 1,375-1,405.

and use an array of media activism tactics to change their societies' perspectives on specific issues such as income inequality, austerity policies and democratic rule. There was little expectation by the activists that traditional politics could achieve such goals. Rather, the tactics aimed at changing perceptions and social norms and calling for elites to respect youth and student voices and to witness a more democratic and participatory way of running society.

This is part of a larger trend of youth participating, sometimes fleetingly, around specific issues that resonate with their personal values. Prominent examples of campaigns that successfully activated youth along these lines are Invisible Children's KONY 2012 campaign and the promotion of the red equal sign by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). Invisible Children was a single-issue advocacy organization targeting youth in high schools, colleges and

churches on the principle that they had a moral imperative to raise awareness about warlord Joseph Kony's use of their fellow youth as soldiers in Eastern and Central Africa.¹⁶⁹ In 2012, they launched an ambitious campaign called KONY 2012 using a 20-minute documentary about the warlord, imploring watchers to make Kony the most (in)famous person of 2012 and calling for action by the United States in pursuing him. Supporters were asked to tweet celebrities en masse with links to the video; comedienne and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres received 36,000 tweets asking her to respond.¹⁷⁰ The campaign went viral, prompting reactions from many prominent celebrities and politicians and attracting 100 million views on YouTube in six days. The media awareness campaign worked so well that it included a massive critical response targeted at the organizers of Invisible Children for their tactics and portrayal of the issue, which led to the organization's demise.

In the case of the red equal sign campaign, HRC was organizing around two United States Supreme Court cases relating to marriage equality in March 2012. In addition to traditional coalition and event organizing, including a video message of support from prominent politician and presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton, HRC created a pink-on-red version of their equal sign logo intended to be shared by those wishing to express their support of marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples on social media. Millions of supporters,¹⁷¹ including straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth wanting to signify their solidarity on an issue on which they had an overwhelmingly more progressive stance than their parents' generation,¹⁷² changed their profile image to a version of the red equal sign logo and drove millions of visits to the HRC website and social media properties.¹⁷³

169 Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and others, "Experiencing fan activism: understanding the power of fan activist organizations through members' narratives", *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 10 (2011).

170 Gilad Lotan, "KONY2012: See how invisible networks helped a campaign capture the world's attention" (14 March 2012). Available from <http://giladlotan.com/2012/03/data-viz-kony2012-see-how-invisible-networks-helped-a-campaign-capture-the-worlds-attention/>.

171 State Bogdan and Lada Adamic, "The diffusion of support in an online social movement: evidence from the adoption of equal-sign profile pictures", in *Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing, Vancouver, B.C., Canada, March 14-18, 2015* (New York, Association for Computing Machinery, 2015), pp. 1,741-1,750.

172 Joel Penney, "Social media and symbolic action: exploring participation in the Facebook red equal sign profile picture campaign", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 20, No. 1 (January 2015), pp. 52-66; and Pew Research Center, "Changing attitudes on gay marriage" (29 July 2015). Available from <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/07/29/graphics-slideshow-changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>.

173 Human Rights Campaign, "Marriage at the U.S. Supreme Court: a transformative moment for equality" (2014).

PARTICIPATORY POLITICS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Fan activism

Issue-oriented campaigns such as KONY 2012 and the red equal sign campaign represent the mainstreaming by networked social movements of a set of culture-creating practices known as “participatory culture”. In fact, participatory politics is an extension of the broader participatory culture, wherein consumers are no longer passive recipients of professionally produced cultural content but instead are encouraged to create and share their own content and form communities to do so.¹⁷⁴ This has long been true in fan communities, which generate their own homages and original material as part of their fandom. Fan activism, which has a history of pressuring media corporations to be responsive to fans’ wants and values, has now become a potent force for broader political activism in the form of communities such as the Harry Potter Alliance.

The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) was founded in 2005 to organize fans of the Harry Potter stories to come together and fight against the evils of “our world” the same way the novels’ characters did in theirs. HPA has been extremely successful at drawing parallels

between themes addressed in young adult fiction and major issues such as fair labour and marriage equality and using those narratives to energize a network of members to volunteer, to take actions such as creating their own testimonials and signing pledges, and to donate money and books to those in need. The organizing of these largely online and global actions has been enhanced by the development of a network of local chapters spanning 25 countries; the individual chapters coordinate their own actions and enable HPA to have local, national and global platforms.

Political memes

A mainstay of the activist repertoire and participatory culture is humour. For digital activists ranging from the Harry Potter Alliance and the Human Rights Campaign to the Occupy movement, political memes are one of the core tools. The most popular form is the easiest to create and share: the image macro meme takes an image easily recognizable to the audience and overlays a bold white caption on it. Numerous websites host generators that make it easy for users to make their own image macro memes. Given the universality of political humour and the simplicity of image macro-based memes, it is not surprising that this practice has spread to even the tiny online populations of countries that have only recently gained Internet access.¹⁷⁵

Prominent examples of political memes enlivening international political discourse have been those created to poke fun at terrorists. Terrorist organizations exemplified by the Islamic State are adept users of participatory culture for recruitment and information warfare, so it is only fitting that memes are used

174 Henry Jenkins and others, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2009). Available from https://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free_download/9780262513623_Confronting_the_Challenges.pdf.

175 Thant Sin, “Political memes, welcome to Myanmar”, *Global Voices* (27 May 2015). Available from <https://globalvoices.org/2015/05/27/political-memes-welcome-to-myanmar/>.

against them. Several lampooning memes came out of Osama bin Laden's demise—image macros featuring bin Laden's image and captions such as "Hide and Seek Champion 2001–2011."¹⁷⁶ More recently, in August 2015, "ISIS Karaoke" was launched on Twitter by a 32-year old who combined lyrics of pop songs with images of militants from Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) wielding microphones.¹⁷⁷ This has spawned a growing collection of memes contributed by others using the hashtag #isiskaraoke.

Civic hacking

Some youth are going beyond making media and are making or using data for civic and political ends. Others are even building the next generation of technologies for their fellow digital activists to use. The open data movement represents a community of technologists and activists who are pushing for the release of government data in countries around the world in order to support a range of practices. Recently, they have been arguing for the commercial and efficiency benefits of providing open

government data to coders. As a result, civic hackathons are being supported at the highest levels of government in some countries. The longer history of this movement is one aligned with the political cause of transparency and accountability—the argument that citizens can better monitor the performance of the Government and ensure that it truly represents citizens' best interests when they are able to access and analyse its data.

Civic hackers building tools for making their own data or organizing civic and political communities in new ways have had high-profile success. Activist-oriented civic hacking projects include the precursor to Twitter—TXTmob—built by young activist technologists who wanted a distributed SMS-based tool for coordinating protests.¹⁷⁸ On the humanitarian side, tools have been developed to establish or strengthen community response mechanisms. For example, youth in the Russian Federation used the Ushahidi crowdmapping platform to create Help Map, which coordinated peer-to-peer mutual aid efforts during the 2010 wildfires in the Russian Federation.¹⁷⁹ Those working with the Government rather than against it have been supported by organizations such as Code for America and Code for All.¹⁸⁰ A number of Governments have a strong interest in creating opportunities for these talented youth to practise the kind of entrepreneurial citizenship Irani describes.

Hacktivism

Other groups of technologically adept youth, attracted more to anti-government and anti-corporate politics, express themselves through hacktivism. Unlike civic hacking, which is largely constructive while also potentially activist, hacktivism represents

176 "Osama Bin Laden's death", *Know Your Meme*. Available from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/osama-bin-ladens-death>.

177 Hussein Kesvani, "This Twitter account is hilariously mocking ISIS with popular karaoke songs", *BuzzFeed* (24 August 2015). Available from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/husseinkesvani/isis-karaoke-twitter-account>.

178 Micah L. Sifry, "From TXTMob to Twitter: how an activist tool took over the conventions", *TechPresident* (25 August 2015). Available from <http://techpresident.com/news/22775/txtmob-twitter-how-activist-tool-took-over-conventions>.

179 Gregory Asmolov, "Virtual Rynda—the Atlas of Help: mutual aid as a form of social activism", in *Global Dimensions of Digital Activism*, Ethan Zuckerman and Lorrie LeJeune, eds. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Center for Civic Media, 2014). Available from <http://book.globaldigitalactivism.org/chapter/virtual-rynda-the-atlas-of-help-mutual-aid-as-a-form-of-social-activism/>.

180 See codeforall.org.

a more controversial genre of digital activism that views the Internet as a site for disruptive protest. Within the hacktivist repertoire are projects such as Wikileaks—with clear political goals similar to those of many open data activists—leaking sensitive documents and helping to maintain the infrastructure for anonymous submissions.

More controversial have been hacktivists—most notably those affiliated with one or more of Anonymous’s many incarnations—who have developed tactics for culture jamming (vandalism of online property (replacing web pages with political manifestos), picket lines and roadblocks (distributed denial-of-service, or DDOS, attacks to take down web servers), and leaking private personal information in support of radical transparency (data exfiltration from private servers). Most versions of the offline analogues of these tactics are illegal, even if they are recognized as political acts; computer law is no different. The United States and many other countries treat such tactics as dangerously criminal and even terroristic. Harsh punishments can be meted out to participants, who may do little more than click a button on a software application that instructs their computer to send large amounts of data to a target web server; some hacktivists have been fined hundreds of thousands of dollars and threatened with long prison sentences to persuade them to accept felony plea deals.

Anonymous affiliates who participated in operations between 2010 and 2011 were arrested in six different countries. Many were identified by their computers’ IP addresses after participating in DDOS attacks. The string of hacks certainly captivated the attention of the media and terrified companies and Governments

the world over. In this case, the spectacle was successful in setting the media agenda. However, Anonymous struggled to maintain a frame for its work that was political rather than criminal.¹⁸¹ In fact, the tactics used by Anonymous during its most notorious operations were disavowed by early hacktivists such as Oxblood Ruffin, who developed tools for censorship evasion, firewall penetration and obfuscation.¹⁸²

This new brand of digital activism is considered well outside the mainstream, and it represents a tiny fraction of the digital activism universe.¹⁸³ It is unclear if hacktivist tactics such as DDOS will even stay within the repertoire of fringe digital activism. However, because government-affiliated hackers use these same tactics for cyberwar and espionage and because new forms of hacktivism can be expected to emerge, it is important to understand that certain practitioners view this as their contribution to participatory politics.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Hacktivism is only the most extreme of the many challenges to traditional notions of legitimate political participation. Digital activism faces numerous obstacles to its growth and efficacy. More directly,

181 Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (New York, Verso, 2014).

182 Molly Sauter, *The Coming Swarm: DDOS Actions, Hacktivism, and Civil Disobedience on the Internet* (New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

183 Frank Edwards, Philip N. Howard and Mary Joyce, “Digital activism and non-violent conflict” (November 2013). Available from <http://digital-activism.org/download/1306/>.

it can pose risks to participants themselves, either legally in the case of the Anonymous hacktivists, or socially in the case of women who exercise their political voice in misogynistic parts of the Internet.

Unclear impact and slacker activism

Digital activism has been referred to as slacktivism or clicktivism, criticised on several fronts as being lazy, cowardly, ineffective,¹⁸⁴ and perhaps even harmful to the larger process of civic renewal.¹⁸⁵ Critics consider individualized, networked participation a poor substitute for traditional forms of collective activism exemplified by well-worn reductionist versions of 1960s-era campaigns such as the United States civil rights movement.¹⁸⁶ It is fair to assert, as Peter Levine does, that digital activism may be able to achieve scale and diversity but not depth or sustainability—that online campaigns may all prove evanescent and lack an ability to handle and overcome valid criticisms or lack the infrastructure necessary to invite and train youth from apolitical networks to replace current leaders the way traditional political organizations could.¹⁸⁷ The Invisible Children and the uprisings in the MENA region exemplify these problems with participatory politics.

It cannot yet be said whether youth digital activism is a poor substitute for traditional forms of youth activism, and it is hard to evaluate the direct effects of media activist tactics on long-term targets such as social norms. It is known that digital structures and tactics used in the uprisings in the MENA region, by Invisible Children, and even by the Harry Potter Alliance have had an impact on the world. Furthermore, with rates of volunteerism and informal political participation remaining high among

youth—especially marginalized racial and ethnic groups in the United States—scholars such as Ethan Zuckerman see the potential for a new “ladder of citizen participation” leading from lightweight forms of digital activism such as sharing memes to political participation involving the same level of time and personal commitment as traditional activism.¹⁸⁸ Although there are some concerns about social movements founded on participatory politics, successful and sustainable networked social movements may already be emerging as hybrids of new and traditional youth organizing around issues such as undocumented immigrant rights in the United States.¹⁸⁹

Unprotected civil rights and an unfree Internet

Outside of Western countries with strong free speech and assembly protections, the slacktivist critique of digital activists as lazy or cowardly does not

184 Evgeny Morozov, “The brave new world of slacktivism”, *Foreign Policy* (19 May 2009). Available from http://foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the_brave_new_world_of_slacktivism.

185 Micah White, “Clicktivism is ruining leftist activism”, *The Guardian* (12 August 2010). Available from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism>.

186 Malcolm Gladwell, “Small change: why the revolution will not be tweeted”, *The New Yorker* (4 October 2010). Available from <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>.

187 Peter Levine, “Democracy in the digital age”, in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis, eds. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, forthcoming).

188 Ethan Zuckerman, “New media, new civics?” *Policy & Internet*, vol. 6, No. 2 (27 June 2014), pp. 151-168; and Sherry R. Arnstein, “A ladder of citizen participation”, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, vol. 35, No. 4 (1969), pp. 216-224.

189 Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets! Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrant Rights Movement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2014).

hold up. Many countries have long track records of harassing and imprisoning online activists. In 2015, Reporters Without Borders counted 170 imprisoned “netizens” around the world.¹⁹⁰ Several countries run extremely sophisticated national programmes of Internet filtering and information control; some have even developed State-run alternative social networks to move domestic Facebook users into a more easily monitored space, and “patriotic hackers” may be tasked with taking down dissenting websites.¹⁹¹

Digital activists in some countries have invented ways to evade censors and share their own brand of political memes using clever language and imagery that stand in for political topics.¹⁹² However, pervasive censorship and surveillance undermine online political participation by creating a kind of “disciplinary society”, wherein users discipline themselves and cultivate a kind of political disaffection and apathy.¹⁹³ This is a threat not only in countries perceived as authoritarian. Edward Snowden’s leaks have exposed

massive unwarranted surveillance operations by Western Governments, which may have chilling effects on citizens in countries used to the assurance of being innocent until proven guilty and free to say what they want, especially in spaces perceived as private. Following Jürgen Habermas’s formulation, losing those private spheres deprives individuals of a safe place to develop their political identities and can undermine their ability to participate effectively once they are in their public spheres.¹⁹⁴

These threats to Internet freedom are increasing as the world moves further into the mobile computing era and are likely to have a negative impact on the ability of youth to express themselves in contemporary forums. With an ever-growing percentage of online interaction channelled through apps controlled by private companies such as Twitter, Facebook, Google and Apple, users have less control over their data and expose themselves to more risk as companies share their data with Governments and other third parties. Millions of users in developing countries who have received free access to Facebook on their mobile Internet plans do not realize they are actually on the Internet;¹⁹⁵ they are not aware that their data are traveling through the same Internet cables that several Governments are surveilling, looking explicitly for social media metadata. Moreover, free access to Facebook is not access to the Internet and its rich array of information sources and communication forums. This is creating new digital divides in the name of addressing old ones.

Digital divides

For many youth, the biggest barrier to joining the world of digital activism is still some form of the

190 Reporters sans frontières, “2015: netizens imprisoned”. Available from <https://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-barometer-netizens-imprisoned.html?annee=2015>.

191 Ronald Deibert and others, eds., *Access Contested: Security, Identity, and Resistance in Asian Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2011).

192 Rebecca MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom* (New York, Basic Books, 2012).

193 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, Vintage Books, 1977).

194 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Polity Press, 1992).

195 Leo Mirani, “Millions of Facebook users have no idea they’re using the Internet”, *Quartz*. Available from <http://qz.com/333313/millions-of-facebook-users-have-no-idea-theyre-using-the-internet/> (accessed 9 February 2015).

digital divide or digital inequality.¹⁹⁶ While the proliferation of mobile computing means that cheaper Internet connections are being offered to more people worldwide, the Facebook example suggests that it might not be a full, free Internet they can afford to access. This means that people who have the greatest access and the time to develop their skills and realize their full potential will pull away from their fellow citizens in terms of political agency. Moreover, this select few will be those civic hackers empowered to design and fully exploit the next generation of civic and political technologies.

In studying youth engagement in participatory culture, Henry Jenkins and his colleagues identified an insidious “participation gap”, finding that youth with poor access to the necessary hardware and software and to safe, scaffolded environments in which to develop skills for creating and sharing media will fall behind.¹⁹⁷ Essentially, such youth do not have equitable opportunities to engage in participatory politics and digital activism. The gap is even worse for girls, who on average have significantly less access to educational opportunities than boys do in many countries. There is already a need to develop advanced digital skills in combination with traditional political knowledge and critical thinking skills if one wishes to participate fully in contemporary politics. Youth who do not have access to their own computers, smartphones, or even feature phones will be less able to practice the digital skills of media making and online participation necessary to fully join the online public that are increasingly shaping the political agendas around the world.

Technologies and communities that oppress

Even when youth make it online and have the skills necessary to participate, they can still be marginalized by oppressive cultures of misogyny and racism, as traditional forms of sociopolitical inequality bleed into online spaces. Many of the most open online spaces for political discourse—sites such as Twitter and reddit—also play host to bad actors who belittle and harass women and racial and ethnic minorities for creating and sharing political messages of empowerment for their respective groups.

Harassment in the digital age is insidious because it follows the victim home and inherently expands the size and scope of the public witnessing the shaming and intimidation. This may result in the spread of fear across whole communities and desensitization to violent language and imagery.¹⁹⁸ In many countries, Internet-based violence directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals is a common occurrence, with the oppression sometimes amplified by practices such as videotaping and uploading episodes of abuse online. In addition, several countries pay for or otherwise promote harmful disinformation

196 Paul DiMaggio and Eszter Hargittai, “From the ‘digital divide’ to ‘digital inequality’: studying Internet use as penetration increases”, Princeton University Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies, Working Paper #15 (Summer 2001). Available from <https://www.princeton.edu/~artspol/workpap/WP15%20-%20DiMaggio%2BHargittai.pdf>.

197 Henry Jenkins and others, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2009). Available from https://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free_download/9780262513623_Confronting_the_Challenges.pdf.

online, drowning out anti-government voices on social media and in comment sections across numerous websites, which adds to and encourages online violence by authorities. This type of systematic ideological oppression is something technology companies should be working to address.

Twitter still struggles to identify nefarious bots on its platform; these automated software programs posing as and posting like real Twitter users have been used by a number of politicians around the world, sometimes simply to artificially inflate the popularity of a candidate but also to silence legitimate political speech.¹⁹⁹ In one instance, during a 2012 national election, all the political parties were allegedly using Twitter bots to repeatedly send out messages to make their statements trend on Twitter; one party even co-opted opposition hashtags and activated tens of thousands of bots, in effect drowning out legitimate public speech.²⁰⁰

198 Andrés Monroy-Hernández and others, "Narcotweets: social media in wartime", in *Sixth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (Palo Alto, California, AAAI Press, 2012); and Munmun De Choudhury, Andrés Monroy-Hernández and Gloria Mark, "'Narco' emotions: affect and desensitization in social media during the Mexican drug war", in *CHI '14 Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York, Association for Computing Machinery, 2014), pp. 3,563-3,572. Research paper available from http://research.microsoft.com/pubs/208580/affect_desensitize-v29.pdf.

199 Philip N. Howard, *Pax Technica: How the Internet of Things May Set Us Free or Lock Us Up* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2015).

200 Mike Orcutt, "Twitter mischief plagues Mexico's election", *MIT Technology Review* (21 June 2012). Available from <http://www.technologyreview.com/news/428286/twitter-mischief-plagues-mexicos-election/>.

201 J. Nathan Matias and others, *Reporting, Reviewing, and Responding to Harassment on Twitter* (Women, Action, and the Media, 13 May 2015). Available from <http://womenactionmedia.org/cms/assets/uploads/2015/05/wam-twitter-abuse-report.pdf>.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Support the growth of a free and open Internet

Millions of youth still need reliable, open access to the Internet, not just for political purposes but also to meet their educational and economic needs. This does not mean providing free Facebook access. Free and open access to the whole Internet also means continuing to combat online censorship and mass surveillance activities around the world, as these undermine political expression. Finally, this also means continuing to support efforts to address oppression online, including those undertaken by Women, Action, and the Media (WAM!) to audit Twitter's harassment reporting mechanisms and to recommend changes.²⁰¹

Teach digital and civic skills together

To ensure that even those youth with complete access to the Internet can participate fully using contemporary technologies, steps must be taken to provide sufficient scaffolding for young people so that they are able to gain experience and an understanding of how these new systems of change and power operate. Youth should be developing their digital media skills (both media production and programming) while also being exposed to political knowledge and critical and systems thinking applied to social and political problems and changemaking. Educators should find opportunities for application of these skills in practical changemaking projects at the local level that help youth test their theories of change, construct new media or technologies with a purpose, and gain confidence in their ability to assume a civic leadership role.

It is essential to look to the future of digital activism, as the next set of online platforms and civic technologies will be designed by today's youth. Ensuring that future technologies are inclusive and representative in terms of who can use them and how they can be used requires a community of designers characterized by diversity—in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, language and socioeconomic status—who can design with that diversity in mind. Providing access to digital tools, relevant learning opportunities, and pathways to political participation that validate youth as effective citizens will be critical to expanding youth political participation.

Fund digital activism impact studies

Research on digital activism is rapidly expanding, but that does not mean it is keeping up with innovation in the sector. Moreover, most of the current research efforts are theoretical or descriptive. Case studies can provide detailed representations of successful digital actions, though cases of failure need to be studied as well. In addition, efforts must be made to understand the real impact of individual digital activism tactics such as online petitions, meme sharing, or calling for celebrity attention on Twitter. Causal studies are needed to better understand this space and to inform the design of future forms of activism and civic technology. Politically engaged youth can and should be at the forefront of performing this research as both practitioners and scholars. The upcoming generation of researchers deserves funding to make sense of the important innovations in digital activism their fellow youth are devising.

Take the lead and take responsibility: musts for youth and Governments

Youth should and undoubtedly will continue to invent new forms and uses of media and technology to express themselves, set agendas, organize politically, and press for change in the world. Digital activism represents a space in which youth practitioners are uniquely positioned to serve as civic and political leaders by repurposing existing platforms for new civic purposes and capitalizing on the democratic opportunities available to those with the requisite skills and technology access. Youth should support their peers through collaboration, mentoring and advocacy to ensure that more young people can participate civically and politically using digital tools. Importantly, youth who ascend to leadership roles in traditional institutions of corporate or government power should push for reforms that make those institutions more accessible, transparent and responsive to current and future generations of actualizing citizens. Governments may be able to address the mistrust and disengagement characteristically associated with traditional political processes by engaging more authentically with youth both online and offline. This means not only promoting civic hacking or creating more efficient channels of official communication, but also strengthening protections for freedom of speech, assembly, the press, and privacy so that youth digital activists do not suffer the chilling effects of government and corporate censorship and surveillance and are not criminalized or castigated for non-violent political activity.

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