

On Emma González's Jacket and Other Media: The Participatory Politics of the #NeverAgain Movement

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“CALLING BS” ON THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION (NRA), thousands of young people are taking to the streets to promote an alternative vision of America's future: one without school shootings. Coalescing in response to a deadly mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida that claimed the lives of 17 students and teaching staff, #NeverAgain is a rising social movement advocating for stricter gun control and challenging the role of big money and big media in driving the national agenda. The movement, built slowly over several years, is driven by people directly affected by gun violence in the United States, and is particularly notable for its visible teenage leaders, such as Emma González and David Hogg.

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Latinx, female, bisexual, with a shaved head, Emma González has become an icon of youth empowerment. Stepping in front of over 800,000 people gathered at the March for Our Lives in Washington D.C. (and many more watching via live-stream and on cable news networks), González stood fearlessly through a six-minute and 20 second moment of silence as she asked her audience to reflect on the short time span it took for her classmates to die at the hands of a school shooter.¹ Her green bomber jacket, covered in patches, buttons, and

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pins, reflected an anarchist visual vernacular: a revolutionary Cuban flag, the Apollo 11 mission insignia, the words “We Call BS” and “Not too shabby,” and colorful ribbons tied to unique causes (including a rainbow LGBTQ pride flag). Some of these patches no doubt had personal associations, some subcultural, but the assemblage suggests the diversity of identities and affiliations to which contemporary youth seek to lay claim. Her jacket helps us to trace the roots of this movement through other recent examples of networked activism—Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, the Dreamers, the LGBTQ movement, and many others. These patches position González and her peers as intersectional figures bridging different populations, forging a new coalition for social change.

Her symbolic choices demonstrate an awareness of the multiple media contexts in which her message will spread. The jacket, especially the Cuban flag patch, became a focal point for right-wing television and radio pundits. Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa) described González as wearing a “communist flag” and suggested that “your ancestors fled the island when the dictatorship turned Cuba into a prison camp, after removing all weapons from its citizens.”² Others suggested that the Cuban flag be understood “not as a symbol of political orientation.... but rather as a sign of national belonging, independent of ideological belief.”³ As politicians and political commentary tried to nail down the meaning of this one patch among the many on the jacket, her young supporters began to construct their own jackets, embracing the attire as a symbol of youth empowerment to be worn at rallies across the country.⁴ The shared fashion statement expresses solidarity even if the selection of patches allows each participant to express unique aspects of their identity. While many discussions of networked activism start and stop with the digital, González’s jacket helped her to embody the change she wants to inspire. During her extended moment of silence, the television cameras fixated on her jacket, signaling who she is and what she cares about.

This young activist’s resourcefulness and commitment contrasts sharply with wide-spread critiques (especially in the popular press) of American youth as disconnected from politics or as engaging in forms of online expression that can be easily dismissed as “clicktivism” or “slacktivism.” As one critic explains, “The end result is the degradation of activism into a series of petition drives that capitalise on current events. Political engagement becomes a matter of clicking a few links. In promoting the illusion that surfing the web can change the world, clicktivism is to activism as McDonald’s is to a slow-cooked meal. It may look like food, but the life-giving nutrients are long gone.”⁵ The clicktivist critique often describes online campaigns as involving limited risk or exertion and having superficial impact on institutional politics.⁶ Typically, such critiques isolate

what takes place online from its larger context within a social movement, so that much of what we will discuss in this essay would not surface in such accounts.

The authors of this essay are part of the Civic Paths research group at the University of Southern California, which has been tracking, for almost a decade, the political culture of American youth; our research considers what young people are doing with new media platforms and practices, but we do not end there. We adopt a “by any media necessary” or transmedia approach, which maps the flow of messages and movements across a broader array of media, as young people tap whatever resources are at their disposal to promote social change through participatory politics. We are interested in the logics which link Emma’s jacket as a material practice with the forms of digital activism conducted through social media. Participatory politics allows “do-it-yourself” expressions of youth voice, signals connections across groups and causes, inspires quick tactical responses in ongoing campaigns to change policy and public opinion, and routes around legacy media.

Throughout this essay, we will draw on the participatory politics framework Henry Jenkins and his collaborators developed for their book, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism* and on original research done by Rogelio Alejandro Lopez observing and interviewing #NeverAgain activists throughout California. This essay will trace the various opportunities for civic and political participation offered by the #NeverAgain movement and the ways they are helping to foster civic skills that may be deployed across a broader range of social movements in the future. (So far, our research has dealt exclusively with young activists in the United States and, for that reason, we mean to restrict our claims to what is happening in the United States, though there is some emerging research documenting similar trends and patterns elsewhere.)⁷ A focus on participatory politics argues against too narrow a focus on specific platforms (YouTube, Twitter), too easy a separation from online and offline politics, and too quick a distinction between networked and institutional politics, since the Parkland youth move quite fluidly across all of these different contexts.

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PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

Youth today often express their civic agency through alternative forms of political participation where culture, media practice, and social networks coalesce. According to Joe Kahne et al., working with the MacArthur Foundation-funded research network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP), participatory politics are “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to

exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern.”⁸ YPP researchers found that young people who engaged in participatory politics were almost twice as likely to vote as those who did not.⁹ Young people have been the focus of voter suppression efforts; candidates often talk past young people, not only ignoring their issues, but also using insider language which can be hard for many voters (young and old) to parse (e.g., six-point plans involving multiple governmental agencies).¹⁰ Despite all of this, by almost any measure youth involvement in participatory politics has dramatically increased over the past decades and

Networked political practices allow participants to stay linked, develop strong social ties, and generate shared perspective.

contrary to those who dismiss slacktivism, these practices often involved deeper commitments of time, energy, social capital, and knowledge than those of institutional politics. Social media may enable quick, superficial mobili-

zations intended as rapid responses to an immediate concern, but networked political practices also allow participants to stay linked, develop strong social ties, and generate shared perspectives, all of which can result in young people protesting, registering to vote, or lobbying political leaders.¹¹

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Between 2011 and 2014, our Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics Project, an outgrowth of the Civic Paths research group at University of Southern California, interviewed more than 200 young activists to map their “civic paths” toward political participation.¹² Traditionally, by the time a student graduates high school, parents’ political affiliations, high school civics teachers, after-school organizations, and volunteer experiences greatly influence whether or not a youth becomes politically active.¹³ The practice of participatory politics offers new pathways into civic engagement, helping youth find their voices as activists before traditional political organizations would allow them to do much more than lick and stamp envelopes. Through participatory politics, young people can shift agendas, take leadership roles, frame media messaging, and identify new tactics that may promote the issues they care about.¹⁴

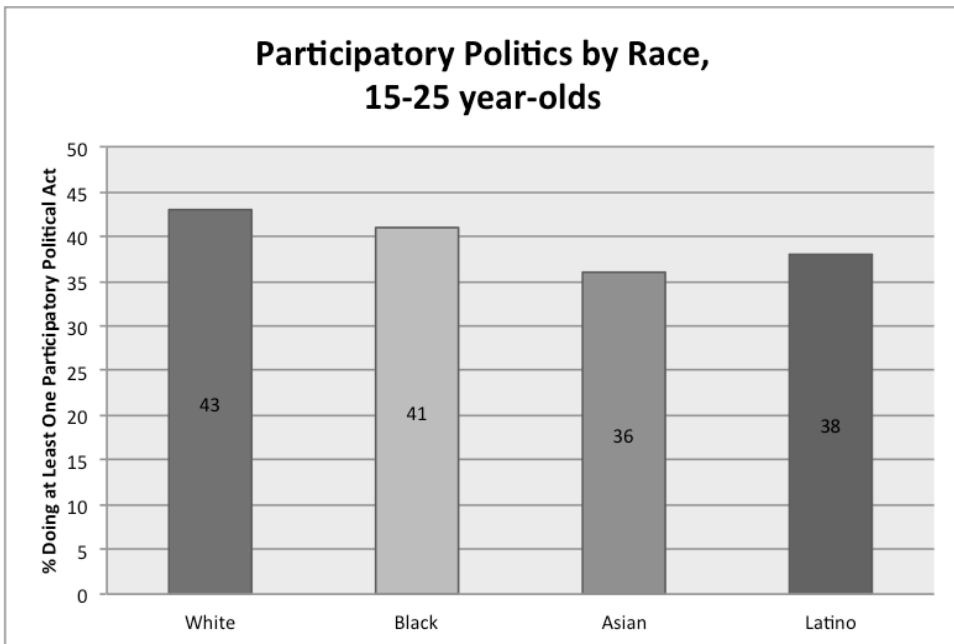
In their 2018 book, *#NeverAgain: A New Generation Draws The Line*, David and Lauren Hogg suggest the merging of these old and new pathways to youth engagement:

We are growing up in a time when technology gives us the confidence to assume that we can do things and figure out the world in ways that it hasn’t been figured out before. No permission necessary. Stoneman Douglas is a big piece, too, because teachers there put such a huge

emphasis on studying real problems in the world today, so we already knew a lot about politics and social issues and just presumed that we could do something about them.¹⁵

Some of the Parkland students acquired skills through high school debate, student government, newspaper, drama clubs, A/V groups, and through their civics and public speaking classes. These new activists are also fans, gamers, and bloggers. All these experiences inspired their participation and built capacity, but the shootings were their catalyst. As David Hogg wrote, “Before February 14, we thought we had plenty of time. We wanted to do something that would make the world a better place....But first we had to finish high school....When it happened to us, we woke up....We had to make the world a better place *now*. It was literally a matter of life and death.”¹⁶

Figure 1: Participatory Politics by Race¹⁷



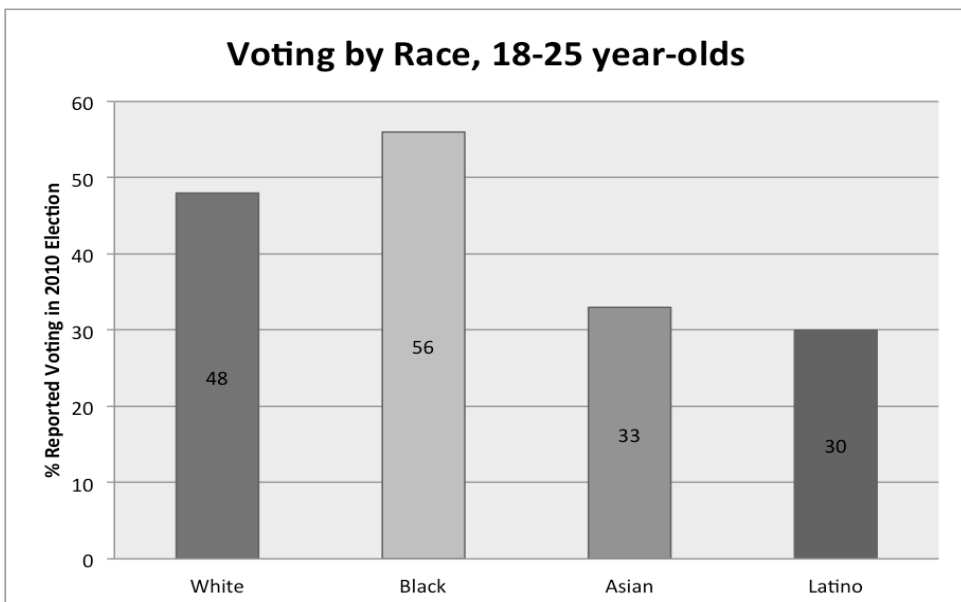
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The YPP survey found far less difference in terms of the number of youth who self-reported engaging in at least one act of participatory politics in the past year (43 percent of white respondents, 41 percent black, 38 percent Latino, and 36 percent Asian American) as compared to the number who self-reported voting during this same period of time (which ranged from 52 percent among young African Americans to 27 percent among Latinos).¹⁸ Networked activism offers

a unique opportunity for coalition-building across racial divides. The original Parkland students, González being a notable exception, were overwhelmingly white and middle to upper middle class, but they embraced youth from other communities also struggling with gun violence—for example, youth involved in the #BlackLivesMatter movement in Oakland and Los Angeles. As Robbie Martinez, a Latinx teen from South Gate, Los Angeles, put it: “I don’t know anyone from Florida. I’ve never even been there, but I think just to see it happening again...I couldn’t even understand how it was possible that we hadn’t put an end to it.”¹⁹ Inspired by the March for Our Lives (MFOL) organization, this student worked with a leadership advisor to organize a walkout at her school. Critics had noted the disproportionate media attention given to the Parkland shooting compared to those shootings being identified by #BlackLivesMatter, reflecting systematic discrepancies in coverage along racial lines.²⁰ MFOL’s Road to Change—a tour of 46 states in the United States and over 1000 high schools in an effort to register young voters for the 2018 midterm election—organized stops at locations (such as Aurora, Colorado; the Standing Rock Reservation; and Oakland, California) directly impacted by gun violence, and movement leaders “called out” their privilege. “It’s not fair that we got so much media attention in Parkland, while communities of color that have been impacted by gun violence for years rarely get coverage,” said David Hogg at a candlelight vigil in Huntington Beach.²¹ “I don’t think there have ever been this many white people at once in this park,” said a longstanding resident when talking about

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Figure 2: Voting by Race



attendance at the community BBQ at DeFremery Park—a central organizing location for the original Black Panther Party.²²

With smartphones in hand and apps loaded, young people responded to the call to march for their lives. As one participant explained, “I’m going to use social media to let people know [about pressing issues], and it’s a good thing too because I’m pretty sure a lot of people feel the same way, but they’re just scared to say something because they think they’re alone.”²³ From Hogg and González’s personal Twitter accounts to the MFOl website, YouTube channel, Facebook page, and Instagram, #NeverAgain reflects a media strategy that rivals those used by long-standing professional organizations. This is made possible not just by the plethora of digital tools now available to virtually all young people with access to a smartphone, but also the practices and strategies behind them—ranging from collective to individual storytelling through networked mobilization. “A lot of it [our work] is making sure the story is being put out in the right way,” says Chief Strategist Matt Deitsch. “It’s not controlling the narrative, it’s telling the truth. If everyone was living in reality and saw what was going on day-to-day in this country, they would all be pissed.”²⁴

In an oft-cited essay, “Small Change,” Malcolm Gladwell draws a contrast between what he sees as the relatively superficial political engagement and weak social ties involved in what he calls “Twitter Revolutions” and the deep and long term commitments required for earlier civil rights movements.²⁵ In doing so, Gladwell confuses the affordances of specific platforms with the much broader media strategies social movements embrace. The Civil Rights Movement deployed long-distance telephone calls to bridge different movement leaders, yet we would never refer to this vital social movement as telephone activism because the cause was being waged across multiple communication technologies. The same is true for more contemporary activists. Writing about immigrant rights movements, MIT media scholar Sasha Costanza-Chock defines transmedia organizing as “strategies to become visible across platforms, to open up the movement narrative to participatory media-making, to link attention to action, and to do all this in ways that remain accountable to the movement’s social base.”²⁶ March for Our Lives, the organization Parkland youth founded, offers young people various means to participate across different media platforms and local actions, inviting them to be co-creators of the #NeverAgain movement. Participatory politics does not simply remain on a symbolic or expressive level (as some critics of clicktivism might suggest). Social media lowers the threshold for young people to enter the political process and may initially result in some relatively superficial engagements. Young people may find their voices online,

and yes, some of them may go no further into the political realm, but a growing number find others with similar views via social media and work together to mobilize for marches, rallies, and town halls, and from there—they hope—to the ballot box. The MFOL activists gave voter registration their own Gen Z spin through a special American flag t-shirt featuring a QR code which could be scanned to link youth to state registrars: “Now you can register people to vote wherever you are by wearing our shirt in your neighborhood, and we can’t be accused of being unpatriotic!”²⁷

This is how young people “do politics” today. Isolating the digital from other communications practices, these groups take risks simplifying and distorting what is taking place. Youth’s social media tactics may be striking to an older

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generation, but for the youth themselves, Twitter is simply one media platform among many through which they can direct their messages. Social media offers American youth a “no permission necessary” means of routing around traditional gate-

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keepers who limit what can be said and thus what can be done. These young people can also re-shift the agenda of a CNN Town Hall Meeting, forcing U.S. Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) to address questions about campaign funding received from the National Rifle Association.²⁸ Networked communication (and digital activism) has expanded the opportunities that earlier generations had to participate in social change movements; participatory politics offers a model for how to deploy such tools to empower young people to play more active, visible, and decisive roles in shaping such efforts.

CALLING ALL YOUTH! #NEVERAGAIN AND PARTICIPATORY POLITICS SKILLS

According to the Gun Violence Archive, there have been 231 mass shootings in the 2018 calendar year as of August 2018, a trend that has held consistent in recent years.²⁹ However, Parkland was different. Just three days after the shooting, rather than the usual calls for prayers and empty promises from political leaders, the nation was captured by the emotionally charged yet evidence-based appeal of 18-year-old Emma González. While González’s “We Call BS” speech identified various parties culpable for inaction on gun reform, no single entity has been as central as the National Rifle Association (NRA). Only four days

after the shootings, Cameron Kasky, a Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School student, created a GoFundMe page which raised over 3.5 million dollars in crowd-sourced funds as well as celebrity donations as of August 2018.³⁰ This support enabled the Parkland students to found the non-profit organization “March For Our Lives.”³¹ Although strong responses surrounded the Columbine shootings almost twenty years before, no such movement emerged, perhaps because networked politics were too new. The victims at Sandy Hook were too young to speak for themselves, with their grieving parents leading the charge. But, in this case, a generation that has come of age with networked activism deployed a range of media tactics to share their *own* stories and demand actions from adults in power.

The March for Our Lives demonstrations on March 24 showcased young people’s demands for life and safety, as they displayed unity through posters, merchandise, and chants (“vote them out,” “we call BS”) in mass numbers from across the nation. Since this monumental day of action, #NeverAgain has sustained their momentum toward gun legislation reform, and their efforts are yielding real results. Since the Parkland shooting, as of writing this piece, 26 states have passed 55 gun laws.³²

The Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network (YPP) identified five practices as central to participatory politics—investigation, dialogue and feedback, circulation, production, and mobilization.³³ All of these practices are reflected in the #NeverAgain movement. Political scientists Cathy Cohen and Joe Kahne write, “The participatory skills, norms, and networks that develop when social media is used to socialize with friends or to engage with those who share one’s interests can and are being transferred to the political realm.”³⁴

From González’s “We Call BS” speech to the various town hall meetings, #NeverAgain adopts an evidence-based discourse, inviting challengers to test their arguments and *investigate* the facts on their own. When asked “What makes for an effective debate, especially against the NRA?”, MFOL Chief Strategist Matt Deitsch simply responded “we use facts, and the facts are on our side”—noting how gun reform inaction in Congress is often perpetuated by NRA-funded politicians, the profit-driven logic of the “a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun” narrative that benefits gun manufacturers, and the increased vulnerability of African American communities to gun violence—at the hands of police or otherwise.³⁵ Urging participants to not ignore the gun related deaths in domestic violence that disproportionately affect women, Deitsch asked a crowd in Los Angeles, “How many of you think we should not be arming domestic violence perpetrators?” and then responded to the room filled

with raised hands with “then we probably should not be very comfortable with police officers being armed either, since research shows they are more likely to be personally involved in incidents of domestic violence.”³⁶ Furthermore, Deitsch and his fellow Parkland activists regularly draw from publicly available data about gun violence and mass shootings to contextualize the impact and severity of the issue, while also highlighting the personal accounts of survivors, which is a practice that has been embraced by #NeverAgain supporters at large in the form of posters meant for protest, print and digital infographics, and artistic quilts.³⁷ MFOL makes sure they are visible online, attracting youth seeking information about the gun control debate and encouraging investigative practices.

The #NeverAgain movement encourages dialogue, not only through social media, but also through town hall meetings. One Los Angeles-based activist mentioned how she stays up to date with the movement: “All of the different members of March for Our Lives, Emma and Jackie and all of them, they’re constantly tweeting. I have the notifications on, so I get all their tweets. But also for Road to Change, they’re getting their point across by going around and actually having these conversations with people, in person. It’s not just online.”³⁸ As of August 2018, David Hogg had a total of 867,000 followers on his personal Twitter account (@davidhogg111) of five years (created September, 2013), and Emma González (@Emma4Change) had 1.65 million—she joined Twitter shortly after the Parkland shooting in February 2018. MFOL Social Media Manager Kyrah Simon sees Twitter as a vital platform for the movement: “I’ve been on Twitter since I was like 11, and I think Twitter is probably the most useful platform to be able to put out a quick story and get a lot of people’s attention, get a lot of impressions, and get a lot of people to look at it.”³⁹ Similarly, Hogg’s tweets encourage people to get involved with local actions, such as the campaign against the Publix grocery store chain due to its acceptance of NRA funding.⁴⁰

From pushing out calls to action to sharing relevant news, #NeverAgain widely circulates movement information. Part of the challenge for prior gun violence activists has been sustaining public attention—which quickly diminishes into compassion fatigue—and media coverage.⁴¹ Much like #BlackLivesMatter before it, #NeverAgain has prolonged public engagement by organizing actions around new incidents of gun violence and circulating the new media coverage they attract. Here, circulation fits local incidents into a systemic perspective on a national issue.

The movement has also relied on celebrity allies, including Lin Manuel-Miranda, Oprah Winfrey, and Demi Lovato, to amplify its messages. Harnessing celebrity power is not new—witness MTV’s *Rock the Vote*, or for that matter,

Harry Belafonte, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan at Martin Luther King's 1963 March on Washington.⁴² Young people see politics and culture as intertwined, using their familiarity with shared cultural symbols to navigate the political world, and for many, their favorite celebrities—including, now, the Parkland youth themselves—help draw important issues to their attention. Itself a subcultural symbol, González's jacket has become a uniform for young people around the country where this icon has been adopted and adapted for their own expressive purposes.⁴³ Huge lines of teen and tween supporters engulfed Hogg and Gonzales, wanting to share words and take a "selfie." "I can't believe I'm standing in front of Emma González," said one Los Angeles teen who bore the buzz-cut-and-green-bomber-jacket look that González popularized.⁴⁴ Sharing cultural symbols forges ties between community members, helps them grasp core information, and feel empowered to make a difference.

To understand the important role of media and cultural production, consider MFOL's YouTube Channel, created on 19 March 2018, which offers "testimonial" style videos by movement activists. For example, in one video series, David Hogg speaks directly to the camera, questioning what a different world can look like: "What if our politicians weren't the bitch of the NRA?" "What if we all voted and said this was not ok?" "What if we stood up for Americans and fought for our freedom and for our lives?"⁴⁵ The videos tapped into a remix aesthetic that has become popular for youth political commentary, critiquing clips from Donald Trump and other NRA-supporting politicians. While these videos were created by the MFOL organization, production extends into the movement's base, as young people create and share movement content online. According to Cathy DeForest, founder of VisionQuilt—an organization that works with young people to create art as a means to counter gun violence—many Northern California youth have been inspired by #NeverAgain to create art that raises awareness using information gathered through investigation.⁴⁶ YouTube, Instagram, and other media sharing platforms do for these new youth movements what underground newspapers or people's radio stations did for student protestors of the 1960s, providing an alternative channel without having to pass through traditional gatekeepers. A steady stream of such videos—top-down from organizers, bottom-up from supporters—spread across the internet.⁴⁷ Such videos demand a clear call to action, in this case to register to vote—a message echoed by other forms of cultural production.

Since González's movement-building speech in February, hundreds of thousands of people have mobilized in support of #NeverAgain, many of them being young people. The March for Our Lives on 24 March 2018 alone mobi-

lized countless sympathizers across city centers: 800,000 in Washington D.C., 175,000 in New York City, and 55,000 in Los Angeles.⁴⁸ The March inspired more than 800 additional events across the nation and globally, held in solidarity with their March 24 rally—rivaling only the 2017 Women’s March in scope and scale.⁴⁹ Many local efforts were self-organized by young people, often with guidance from adults. One young woman explained how she got involved: “My teacher realized how into all of it I was, and somehow he was in contact with people from Women’s March, and there was a sense that they were looking for students because they wanted students to be the ones organizing and leading the march—they wanted a student movement.”⁵⁰ Well attuned to this generational trajectory, MFOL’s website leverages various digital tools that can help young people get involved—a “take action” tab providing resources for voter registration, guidelines to establish local chapters, and even printable cost-of-life “price-tags” that showcase how much money politicians have accepted from the NRA per state.⁵¹

The national high school walkouts on March 14 and April 20 are another testament to the movement’s impact. “I kind of organized the whole walkout and we were set, people were ready to do it,” mentioned South Gate’s Robbie Martinez before discussing some of the barriers to student activism at her high school.⁵² “The day before the actual walkout, we got an announcement that anyone who walks out of the school the next day will not be allowed to prom.”⁵³ The walkout happened after all, and she added that it was an eye-opening lesson in youth empowerment: “I think all of this helped me realize that we have more power than we think we do. Especially in schools, you’re told ‘sit down,’ ‘don’t speak,’ ‘raise your hand if you need to go to the restroom or drink water,’ ‘do this,’ ‘don’t do that.’ It’s kind of like you’re controlled a lot.”⁵⁴ While social media did play a role, this teen highlighted the importance of word of mouth: “I made sure to be posting a lot on Instagram and Twitter, and I made people know that it was okay if they had any questions to come to me. And I did take it upon myself to go around the school and talk to them about the importance of being involved.”⁵⁵

This focus on participatory politics skills helps us to reframe the affordances of particular digital platforms in terms of the functions they serve within a larger movement. The tools themselves are less important than the ways young people are deploying them to investigate and engage in a dialogue about social issues, to circulate information and produce media intended to mobilize their supporters. Such functions are central to any movement of social change, but these young people are identifying new ways to deploy emerging media to their

own ends, translating established practices (such as voter registration) into new forms (such as QR codes on t-shirts) which speak to their generation.

WHERE OLD AND NEW MEDIA COLLIDE

Consider the degree of media literacy—not to mention sheer courage—necessary for young activists such as González or Hogg to move, in a few weeks, from speaking at high school assemblies to addressing the masses from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Watching how adeptly they handle interviews on national news programs or televised meetings with the president, it is easy to forget that many of the movement's leaders are still in high school. Their appearances across mass media often showcase moments of possibility as these young people, beholden to no political parties, deep-pocketed contributors, or sponsors, ask direct questions, challenge authorities, and dismiss established wisdom. Such direct questions shifted the parameters of debate and forced Rubio and his colleagues to take on-the-record positions on questions they had previously avoided or ignored.

As they step into the national spotlight, these youth confront conservative critics who have scrutinized every aspect of their lives, accusing them of being “crisis actors” cast by some progressive agency to play parts in a national drama. An awkward photograph of Hogg's rather stiff-armed waving was removed from context to suggest he was giving a Nazi salute, as gun rights advocates searched for some foreign ideology with which to dismiss what these young people were trying to say. Ben Shapiro wrote in the *National Review*, “What, pray tell, did these students do to earn their claim to expertise?...Children and teenagers are not fully rational actors. They're not capable of exercising supreme responsibilities. And we shouldn't be treating innocence as a political asset used to push the agenda of more sophisticated players.”⁵⁶ Most were skeptical that #NeverAgain could be what it seemed—a youth-led movement impacting national policy debates.

Social media exists in relationship to so-called “legacy media,” which sometimes amplifies its messages and sometimes seeks to discredit or marginalize participants. Social media also provides an alternative channel through which to frame and circulate a response, and these young activists used it effectively to rebut their critics. As Hogg explains, “Don't let all of that nonsense upset you. It's a distraction, which is exactly what they want....They're just giving you a bigger stage—use it to upset them.”⁵⁷ When Laura Ingraham of Fox News told a national television audience that Hogg had been rejected for admission

by several California colleges, Hogg used Twitter to urge his supporters to put pressure on Ingraham's sponsors. Nine sponsors, including TripAdvisor, Hulu, Nutrish, Johnson & Johnson, and Nestle, dropped their ads; Ingraham publicly apologized and was sent on a leave of absence.⁵⁸ The boycott and the resulting controversy generated another wave of media coverage, keeping the Parkland youth's perspective in the national agenda. NRA supporters also know how to deploy social media—the Parkland youth are often the target for negative memes that circulate among guns rights advocates.


While participatory politics scholars are often interested in how these practices can strengthen democracy, it is important to keep in mind that such practices are not inherently progressive, and can be equally wielded for regressive or nefarious purposes, such as the widely circulated doctored “gif” image of Emma González tearing apart the U.S. constitution, which was originally a shooting-range “target poster” in a video shot by *Teen Vogue*.⁵⁹ While the image may be dismissed as harmless parody at first glance, counter-protesters circulated the image on Gab, a conservative social networking platform, and Twitter as a means to discredit the movement as many confused the doctored image as authentic.⁶⁰ Earlier this summer, David Hogg was “swatted”—a practice emerging from competitive online gaming culture where a false police report is forwarded to local authorities with the intent of having a highly armed SWAT team kick down their door.⁶¹ Although meant as a prank, swatting can have deadly consequences. These acts provide a glimpse into the darker side of web politics, used not to enable, but rather to silence youth voices. The struggle for participatory politics has been a struggle to expand the range of voices that are heard in public policy debates; however, these same platforms and practices assume negative dimensions when they are deployed in ways to marginalize and block participation. They are an effective means of getting information into circulation but they are misused when they are deployed without accountability over the information being spread or in ways intended to consciously distort the truth. These connective practices help establish stronger social ties within communities, but they always run the risks of also functioning as resources for mob rule. And so as we move beyond a focus on digital activism and toward participatory politics, we need to articulate ethical norms and best practices.

While networked technologies grant youth unprecedented control over the production and circulation of content, young activists still see mass media as a highly relevant way to reach people, especially adult policy makers and influencers. Here, again, a focus only on digital media is misleading: young people would use more traditional media if they had greater access. They are

rarely invited to share their views as political commentators or even interview subjects in news coverage, their voices are rarely heard through op-eds, and they historically have lacked the resources to purchase ad time for their messages. Young people's heavy reliance on social media says as much about how their voices are silenced or marginalized by mainstream journalism as it does about any specific preference for these technologies. In this case, the Parkland youth have been able to translate their online visibility into greater access to traditional media. MFOL has taught many young people how and when to speak to the media, as well as warned them against doing so in situations where their words are apt to be distorted or decontextualized. As such, the organization is building capacity for the #NeverAgain movement and preparing young people for future civic leadership.

Across this discussion of #NeverAgain, we have focused less on digital activism and more on participatory politics, less on Twitter, Facebook or YouTube as platforms and more on the ability of networks of young activists to spread their message "by any media necessary." Young people lack financial independence, so they turn to lower-cost means of communication. They engage in expressive forms of online politics—making videos, podcasts, memes, blog posts, and the like—but they also show up at public rallies and register people to vote, seeing participatory practices as a bridge into institutional politics.

Deploying online tools allows them to investigate social issues, deliberate on and shape public opinion, build alliances across geographic, cultural, and racial divides, and reach more loosely affiliated participants when needed for immediate collective action. Traditional politics places young people in subordinate roles, whereas participatory politics builds youth voice and capacity. Through the #NeverAgain movement, young people are emerging as leaders helping to define the national agenda and bringing fresh perspectives that advance long-standing debates about gun violence. These young activists merge on and offline practices at every stage. We should be interested in those instances where old and new media collide (for example, the use of Twitter to boycott a cable news outlet), but equally so in those where they work together (such as when #NeverAgain circulates high points of the CNN town hall through their social networks). We should investigate how digital practices (such as livestreaming) augment on-the-ground tactics, and how mass media can amplify social media messages. Recent developments have focused attention on the many ways that the online world can be profoundly anti-democratic, from demagogic statements and flame wars to fake news, bots, and hackers. The digital offers no refuge from what is wrong with contemporary American politics. However, it does provide an entry point

for many young people who want to make the world a better place. In the long term, American politics will benefit enormously from their participation. And, as Emma González's jacket tells us, that's "not too shabby." 

NOTES

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Network. The data that informs the graph can be accessed at: Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne, "Youth Participatory Politics Survey Project," *Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research*, 2013, <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/civicleads/studies/36849/version/1>.

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