



social media activism

Browse | Movies | Upload

Clicktivism

There's a growth industry in trying to measure social media's impact on our lives — and politics. Many argue that online political activism is superficial engagement, lacking the personal ties of community that once drove social change. Social media's evangelists demur, declaring that a new code of politics is being written online, altering the political commons but making us more socially connected than ever before. The articles here ask whether the phenomenon of disintegrating social connections Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam described as "bowling alone" still prevails in the digital age, or whether social media activism — call it "bowling online" — harbours the power to strengthen democracy.



The New Political Commons

by Henry Jenkins
page 10



We Are Not Bowling Alone

by Neil Seeman and Adalsteinn D. Brown
page 13



Less Democratic, Not More

by Henry Milner
page 17



The Spectators

by David Herle
page 19



Protesting More, But Alone

by Catherine Corrigan-Brown
page 21

Like

 Add to
 Share

43,256,712

THE NEW POLITICAL COMMONS

HENRY JENKINS

Henry Jenkins, a leading American scholar of social movements, argues that the digital age has opened a new era of activism that offers the next generation new avenues into broader political participation. He argues that critics who contend online activism offers only superficial engagement miss the fact that many of these groups are building ground-level organizations from their digital platforms. But he also warns the online community needs to be better educated in the critical thinking and media skills needed to fully defend their causes.

Selon Henry Jenkins, spécialiste américain des mouvements sociaux, l'arrivée du numérique a engendré une nouvelle ère de mobilisation en multipliant les possibilités d'engagement politique. Et ceux qui taxent de superficiel cet engagement en ligne omettent de voir que beaucoup de groupes militants construisent de solides organisations à partir de leurs plateformes numériques. Une mise en garde, cependant : pour faire valoir les causes qu'elle défend, la communauté en ligne doit développer une vraie pensée critique et acquérir de réelles compétences médiatiques.

Last spring, a San Diego-based human rights organization called Invisible Children released *Kony 2012*, a 30-minute video about the tragedy of child soldiering in Uganda. The group anticipated that its video might reach half a million viewers over a planned two-month campaign to raise awareness about the issue. Instead, it was watched by more than 70 million viewers in the first four days, and over 100 million over the first week. By comparison, America's highest rated television shows reach 15-20 million viewers per week, and *Hunger Games*, the top Hollywood blockbuster during the same week *Kony 2012* was released, drew 15-20 million viewers.

Inspired by the video's own celebration of the power of social media to change the world, Invisible Children's young supporters had demonstrated the capacity of grassroots networks to shift the national media and political agenda. The video's rapid circulation was heavily fuelled by sharing among high school and college students as well as church groups. And it is one of many recent examples of grassroots movements, from Occupy Wall Street and the DREAMer movement in the United States to the Arab Spring uprisings, which have embraced what we are calling "participatory politics."

Henry Jenkins is the Provost's Professor of Communications, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at the University of Southern California, and he is also the principal investigator for the Civics Paths project. He is the author or editor of 15 books.

Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam has described the role bowling leagues and other social clubs played in encouraging civic participation for the Second World War generation, who gathered for fun and fellowship but emerged with stronger social ties and a deeper sense of community involvement. For today's youth, volunteering for a traditional organization can feel like a compulsory résumé builder, no more central to their sense of themselves than working at McDonald's. But groups like Invisible Children work hard to intensify friendships, inspire creative expression and combine hard work with serious play.

Often, such groups mix strong, charismatic leaders with decentralized networked structures: local chapters set their own terms of participation. While some, like Invisible Children, maintain strong, centralized media-production capacities, others are encouraging young people to create and circulate their own media, including blogs, podcasts and videos, reframing their core message for their peers.

Consider for example the case of "pepper spray cop," a University of California-Davis campus policeman who deployed offensive chemicals to disperse a group of Occupy supporters. Over a weekend, hundreds of Photoshop manipulations began to circulate online, many remixing the news photograph with classic paintings, photographs, or film stills, transforming this local incident into an Occupy icon.

While some groups maintain a sharp focus on a single issue, others see their role as helping to connect young activists with nonprofit organizations addressing diverse causes and concerns. Either way, these groups are actively recruiting and training young activists, helping them master basic

CLICKTIVISM



The Kony campaign: the first political exposure can come from a shared video

PHOTO: CP PHOTO

practices that can support a lifetime of social change.

Some of these practices reflect the values of a more participatory culture, such as helping young people to construct and share their own personal narratives in ways that dramatize larger concerns. For example, young DREAMers often create videos where they "come out" as "undocumented," putting a face on America's struggles with immigration policy. Some of the practices are much more traditional (knocking on doors, manning phone banks), but these groups create contexts where these activities become more personally meaningful.

By the time Invisible Children had released *Kony 2012*, they had already produced and circulated 10 films; they had formed local clubs through high schools, colleges, and churches; they had recruited and trained thousands of young activists through intern programs, summer camps, and conventions; and they had demonstrated the capacity to mobilize those supporters through local gatherings and demonstrations across the country. Like the

other groups we study, Invisible Children saw recruitment and civic education as the organization's core mission. *Kony 2012* did not "go viral." Invisible Children had developed strategies of grassroots circulation that succeeded in reaching diverse participants.

Malcolm Gladwell claims so-called "Twitter revolutions" build on weak social ties and do not motivate participants to put their lives on the line. Make no mistake — what we are describing here is *not* a Twitter revolution; these groups conduct their activities across diverse media platforms, including face-to-face conversation, but they use social media to coordinate action across a more dispersed network. In the case of the DREAMers, there is a strong commitment to take material risks, with young activists facing deportation for sharing their immigration status, and some marching into immigration offices and Web-casting acts of civil disobedience.

In a recent paper for the MacArthur Youth and Participatory Politics research network, political scientists Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne define par-

ticipatory politics as "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern." Participatory politics welcomes diverse involvement, enables greater creativity and voice in expressing one's views, and provides a gateway toward more traditional political activities, such as voting or petitioning. Citing data from a survey of more than 4,000 respondents aged 15 to 25, they found that those who engaged in participatory politics (roughly 40-45 percent across all racial categories) were almost twice as likely to vote as those who did not.

By the time they leave high school, young people's political identities are surprisingly fixed. Those whose parents are politically involved, who encounter civics teachers who bring current events into the classroom, who are encouraged to volunteer, and who participate in extracurricular activities are much more likely to engage in future political and civic activities than those who lack these experiences.

The practices of participatory politics create new gateways into political

CLICKTIVISM

involvement. In some cases, youth's first political exposure might come from a video (such as *Kony 2012*) forwarded to them by their friends or classmates. According to the MacArthur survey, 58 percent of American youth forward links or share information through social networks at least once a week. A recent study released by Georgetown University suggests that people who have forwarded socially meaningful messages are significantly more likely to take the next steps, such as contributing time and money, and such acts help grassroots organizations to expand their "latent capacity," identifying casual supporters they can mobilize when they need to amplify their voice.

For others, their interest might be sparked by an imaginative deployment of references from popular culture that help them to connect issues to things they already care about. For example, the Harry Potter Alliance has linked its campaigns around human rights, equal marriage, fair trade, disaster relief and body image to metaphors drawn from J.K. Rowling's best-selling fantasy franchise, asking young people to help form "Dumbledore's Army for the Real World."

Do such activities represent the intrusion of entertainment into politics? Perhaps, but they also represent the hijacking of Hollywood's publicity machine for political ends, potentially reaching people who have already shut out more conventional rhetoric. Often, traditional politics is conducted in a wonkish, insular language that only makes sense if you know what's being discussed. By contrast, the Nerdfighters, a YouTube community organized around a young adult author and his musician brother (Hank and John Green), encourages its followers to identify innovative ways to "decrease world suck."

That said, part of these groups' appeal is that they create a form of politics that works more through con-

sensus than conflict. And this more sociable style of civic participation can be enormously appealing to a generation often sickened by today's harsh partisanship. Yet, for this very reason, Invisible Children's young supporters seemed remarkably unprepared for the criticism that *Kony 2012* drew from many quarters.

The film drew sharp criticism from many established human rights groups and Africa experts, questioning everything from Invisible Children's finances to its "white man's burden" rhetoric, and especially for being out of sync with current Ugandan realities. Many young Invisible Children sup-



Harry Potter goes to Haiti: linking popular culture to social causes
PHOTO: THE HP ALLIANCE

porters lacked the information and the skills needed to defend their position in the face of such intense scrutiny. The group's approach demonstrated enormous "spreadability" (the capacity to "spread" its messages) but limited "drillability" (the ability to "drill" deep into the issues).

Members of traditional party-based and advocacy groups prepare themselves to confront oppositional perspectives. But when the core leadership turned inward to deal with a personal tragedy involving a key leader, Invisible Children's young supporters were left to track down information and construct the arguments against the mounting attacks.

In some cases, they rose to the occasion, demonstrating great capac-

ity to seek out and deploy information quickly. But in others, they lacked the critical skills needed to address skeptical classmates or family members. This crisis is consistent with a core finding of the MacArthur survey: 84 percent of the young people interviewed said that they would "benefit from learning more about how to tell if news and information you find online is trustworthy."

The Media Literacy movement in the United States has long been divided between those who want to foster such critical thinking skills (including a greater skepticism toward mass media content) and those who want to help young people acquire the capacity to produce their own media. The *Kony 2012* aftermath demonstrates the importance of combining the two. We would not consider someone literate if they could read but could not write; the core goals of the media literacy movement should be helping young people to acquire the skills and competencies they need to meaningfully participate in the culture around them.

Participatory politics represents a powerful model for how civic groups might empower young people to deploy skills they have developed as fans and gamers to make a difference in the world. But, as the *Kony 2012* example shows, to be truly effective, those production capacities need to be coupled with core training in how to assess credibility, how to weigh arguments, and how to rebut criticisms of your position.

This article was originally commissioned by the Shoah Foundation, and this version is reprinted with their permission. Research included here was developed through funding by the Spencer and MacArthur foundations. Key contributions come from Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber Thompson and Arely Zimmerman. ■

WE ARE NOT BOWLING ALONE

NEIL SEEMAN AND ADALSTEINN D. BROWN

Robert Putnam used the metaphor of "bowling alone" to describe diminishing social capital in America. So influential was Putnam's work around the world that observers habitually question whether the notion of a "good neighbour" still exists, and whether the public's faith in institutions is frayed beyond repair. A dozen years after the release of Putnam's groundbreaking book, Seeman and Brown investigated whether Putnam's thesis of dwindling social capital applies to Canada. They found that Canadians, especially younger Canadians, show a strong willingness to reach out to their neighbour in times of need. They find that thanks in part to new technologies, which Putnam saw as threatening to social capital, young Canadians show greater neighbourliness than their elders.

Pour illustrer la dégradation du capital social aux États-Unis, Robert Putnam a évoqué dans son best-seller *Bowling Alone* le déclin des ligues de quilles du pays et l'explosion du nombre de joueurs individuels. L'influence du livre a été telle que maints observateurs doutent aujourd'hui de la notion même de « bon voisinage » et de la possibilité de rétablir la confiance du public à l'égard des institutions. Plus de 10 ans après la parution de l'ouvrage, qu'en est-il de cette thèse de l'érosion du capital social au Canada ? L'enquête des auteurs révèle plutôt une forte volonté des Canadiens, surtout des jeunes, d'aider leurs voisins par temps difficiles. En partie grâce aux nouvelles technologies, que Putnam jugeait menaçantes pour les liens sociaux, la jeunesse canadienne se montrerait plus solidaire que ses aînés.

A dozen years after the publication of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, it is time for a reappraisal of the book's somber vision: an increasingly disengaged, inward-looking society. Putnam saw an erosion of social capital in America, a dissembling sense of neighbourliness and community.

Even though Putnam's book, the culmination of a five-year study, focused on the United States, researchers and opinion leaders around the world latched on to the idea of social capital as a driving force for equity, tolerance and trust in institutions. Today, the seminal 1995 paper on which the book is based has been cited in almost 8,000 separate academic articles. Without neighbourliness and community, researchers argued, we risk losing our social equilibrium. For example, Canadian sociologist Jean Kunz

Neil Seeman, a senior resident at Massey College in the University of Toronto, teaches "Knowledge Transfer in the Age of the Internet" at the university. He is founder and CEO of the RIWI Corporation and of Health Strategy Innovation Cell, and he is the co-author of four books. Adalsteinn D. Brown is chair of the Dalla Lana School of Public Health Policy and director of the Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation at the University of Toronto.

pointed to Putnam's idea of social connectedness as a key predictor of how successfully new immigrants would integrate into Canadian society.

When Putnam published *Bowling Alone* in 2000, events buttressed his hypothesis. The technology investment bubble had burst, yet, paradoxically, we were all suddenly lassoed at the hip to our cellphones and other gadgetry. Putnam blamed Americans' new restiveness on urban sprawl, on the cultural malaise caused by mass media and on the demise of the nuclear family. Trust in institutions was fraying. Would it continue along this path?

To answer this question, we set forth to investigate Canadians' attitudes toward their neighbours. For Canadians, we found, Putnam's warnings missed the mark. We discovered that people under 30 today are more empathic and willing to volunteer and "give back" than baby boomers. The millennial generation, those aged 13 to 29, express a strong desire to help the elderly, the sick and their frail neighbours with simple chores such as laundry and making food. They are willing to give much more of their free time than their parents are to volunteer activity. Our findings contradict a pervasive Putnam-esque media storyline that presents the young as self-absorbed. Younger Canadians are bowling together.

A much-reported 2006 study, lending credence to Putnam's thesis, argued that since 1985 Americans had be-



Occupying Toronto, 2011: the “sit-ins” of the 60s have become online “meet-ups”

PHOTO: ARINDAMBANERJEE / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

come more socially isolated, the size of their discussion networks had declined and the diversity of people with whom they discuss important matters had decreased. In that study, sociologists Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and Matthew Brashears found that Americans had fewer close ties to people in their neighbourhoods. But this study’s sample, from the US General Social Survey, ended in 2004, just as new online networks such as Facebook were thriving. Today, millennials on Facebook routinely discuss important matters with a wide circle

of “friends” or “connections”; the concept of “confidant” seems inapposite. Notably, these researchers gained media attention for speculating, as did Putnam, that new technologies like the Internet and mobile phones would accelerate the drive toward social isolation. Yet by 2009 Keith Hampton and colleagues of the Pew Research Center had shown the positive impact of new technologies. Use of the mobile phone, social networks and the Internet was associated with more robust, more diverse discussion networks.

Two important books published in recent years grapple head on with Putnam’s theory of diminishing social capital. Don Tapscott’s 2008 *Growing up Digital* took umbrage with the idea that young people growing up in the brave new world of ubiquitous technology are selfish and indifferent about civic issues. Tapscott referred to what he called the “net generation,” those under 32 but older than 12, as “the first global generation ever.” He considered them “smarter, quicker, and more tolerant of diversity than their predecessors.” They care

passionately about social justice and typically are engaged in some kind of civic activity at school, at work or in their community. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the net generation emerged as more engaged in civic issues as compared to other age groups. Three years later — in a reversal of previous trends — they voted more than people over 65 in the US presidential election.

Peter Kilborn also surveyed social connectedness in *Next Stop, Reloville: Life Inside America’s New Rootless Professional Class*. The same teenagers

and twenty-somethings stigmatized as self-absorbed in *Bowling Alone* had now grown up, started families and pursued careers — careers that whisked them from “Relo[cation]” town to “Relo” town. Kilborn showed that these “Relos” suffer buyer’s remorse for having chased the post-Reagan American dream. “With the father on the road most weekdays and another move always looming, Relos have neither the time nor the need to sit on town boards or run in local elections, or join

To be sure, anti-neighbour sentiment exists in Canada, with occasional flare-ups. Yet, at interpersonal touch points — on the street, in the workplace — we show good faith toward our neighbours. According to research by Marcus Hollander and colleagues, informal caregiving in Canada — middle-aged and older unpaid caregivers providing care to the elderly — accounts for up to 80 percent of all caregiving. Translating this to market labour rates, these re-

On the street and at work, we show good faith toward our neighbours.

the church vestry or the Rotary Club.” Now trapped in the fog of middle management, Relos seek to repair their broken marriages and to forge better relationships with their children. They are making the choice to give up the nightmare of shepherding their families from Relo town to Relo town.

During the boom prior to the 2008 financial meltdown, Canadians were just as nomadic in their careers as were Americans. Yet for Canadians, change has always been less about relocating from city to city in exchange for a higher pay grade or illustrious job title than it has been about migration to the larger cities — where there is some employment opportunity — and away from rural Canada — where there is increasingly little. Today’s urban centres are bustling and Canada’s small towns are smaller than in the past several generations. But whether in the city or the country, Canadians have always been inclined to social connectedness. Our cultural touch points, such as medicare or Supreme Court of Canada decisions, are often the subject of heated debate and reflect the historic challenges Canadians have willingly faced in building, and rebuilding, a mosaic of trust.

searchers found that in 2007 Canadians spent \$31.3 billion in free labour caring for the elderly.

Inspired by these findings, we were curious to see whether different age groups, and different parts of the country, looked upon their neighbours differently. When we asked Canadians to anonymously answer how much free time they would personally sacrifice to help a neighbour in need, the results show Canadians to be remarkably civic-minded. In the 2009 study of more than 12,000 Canadians conducted for the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, and powered by the RIWI Corporation’s patented data capture technology, almost 28 percent of Canadians said they would spend more than five hours each week doing simple chores for a sick neighbour. Another 42 percent said they would pitch in between one and five hours. There are no significant variations across provinces or territories, or in urban versus rural Canada. We learned that our findings put a much-reported 2005 Statistics Canada study in context: that study found that between 52 and 61 percent of rural residents reported that they knew their neighbours, three times the proportion of urbanites in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa who

reported the same. Yet knowing one's neighbour is less germane to social connectedness than giving up one's time to help a neighbour.

When we dug deeper into the attitudes shown by Canadians of varying ages toward their neighbours, we found differences. Among those who would give one or more hours of

Young people across the industrialized world congregate on Facebook and on other online social platforms to advocate for social causes. The sit-ins of the 1960s have given way to today's online, socially aware meet-ups.

Communities such as Facebook offer young people the opportunity to reach out to others different from

could not revitalize America's waning social capital.

Putnam's argument was compelling for a time, up until the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and professionals' recalibration of their priorities between work and family — a recalibration reflected in Kilborn's interviews. It was compelling up until the rapid ascendance of social platforms online such as Facebook — a phenomenon to which Don Tapscott attributes a new era of social empathy among the young. In a 2002 edited volume written in response to Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, David Schultz noted that Putnam relied too heavily on declining membership in voluntary organizations as a gauge of fractured social capital. Schultz also argued that "Putnam lacks a theory of the state and the role it plays in fostering the conditions that make it possible for voluntary associations to form, exist, and interact." According to scientific research conducted since 2005 by the nonprofit World Values Survey Association, Canadians and Americans consistently fare very well on the "interpersonal trust index," far ahead of Great Britain, in reporting to surveyors that most of their fellow citizens can be trusted.

Voluntary associations can now emerge online at an astonishing rate. Many online participants, to be sure, are solitary observers, yet most interact and connect. Although many interactive sites may be considered the Internet equivalent of singles bars, many more of these sites bring together physically disparate communities that are interested in contributing positively to social or health care causes. For a quick test of this observation, review the content of Web sites that append .org to many health conditions (such as diabetes.org).

Whatever the limitations of its predictions, *Bowling Alone* remains one of the most important works of social science of the last 25 years. It provoked the world to consider the fragility of a neighbour's goodwill. Fortunately, "love-thy-neighbour" remains sacrosanct. ■

Many online participants are solitary observers, yet most interact and connect.

their time to help a neighbour, more than 60 percent were under 44. Gen-Xers (who are now aged 30 to 45) and the millennials (whose eldest members are now approaching 30) are significantly *more willing* to help their neighbours than people between the ages of 46 and 64 (boomers), and still more so than those who are above 65.

There are tens of thousands of children and teenagers in caregiving roles across Canada. According to a 2001 estimate by Saul Becker, cited by Young Carers Canada (youngcarers.ca), there are at least 108,000 young caregivers who "sacrifice part of their childhood in order to lend a helping hand to their families." This number does not include children who serve as translators for their immigrant families. A 2010 study by Grant Charles and colleagues at the University of British Columbia shows that 12 percent of Vancouver high school students are acting in a caregiving capacity. While the boomers may be bowling alone, the gen-Xers and millennials score impressively on the empathy meter.

Putnam himself may have provided the reason for why his hypothesis today seems off course. Putnam explained that "the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value." What Putnam did not, and could not, anticipate is that today's social networks are increasingly online.

themselves. Millennials are more supportive of interracial dating than prior generations, and it has flourished thanks to online dating services. Yes, the young do show habits of self-absorption, yet it has always been thus. Meanwhile, empathy is blossoming. Witness the rise in popularity in online "time-banks," where people register how much, and what kind, of free neighbourly services they are willing to provide to others. See the helpful tone of social communities online, where the most active collaborative forums address chronic illness, notably hidden illnesses, such as HIV/AIDS and depression — not sport or celebrity gossip.

For Putnam, a major indicator of social connectedness was what he saw as a receding bond of trust among neighbours. Putnam offered data showing the steady decline of nonprofit and chapter-based organizations, church and religious attendance, the vitality of labour unions, the penchant for altruism and philanthropy, and even the frequency of family dinners. He served up attention-grabbing statistics on the sharp increase in television consumption, crime and the insatiable demand for professionals in law enforcement. Putnam noted that there had sprung up a "plethora of encounter groups, reading groups, support groups, self-help groups" within prior decades, yet these social groups alone, he said,

LESS DEMOCRATIC, NOT MORE

HENRY MILNER

The logic of social media makes it an antidemocratic force because it filters out opinions that clash with our own, argues Henry Milner, who has studied and written extensively on youth and political participation. The route to a healthier democracy lies in using digital media to improve civic education and by introducing reforms to increase public participation, such as lowering the voting age.

De par leur logique même, les médias sociaux constituent une force antidémocratique puisqu'ils permettent de filtrer les avis opposés aux nôtres, soutient Henry Milner, qui a beaucoup écrit sur la participation politique de la jeunesse. En vue d'assainir la démocratie, il faut utiliser les médias numériques pour améliorer l'éducation civique ainsi qu'adopter des réformes qui favorisent la participation de la population, comme l'abaissement de l'âge requis pour voter.

How are we to understand the generation that has grown up with the Internet? Have digital media made its members engaged citizens, conducting politics online instead of through traditional channels? Or has the revolutionary upheaval in the media environment created a generation of political dropouts?

Opinions differ on the impact of new media on political engagement, and answers are hard to quantify. But it is well established that electoral participation has been declining in the past 20 years or so, as has the degree of political party membership and other indicators of conventional political involvement. Of even greater concern, the retreat has been accompanied by a measurable decline in political knowledge and attentiveness.

I examined this relationship more than a decade ago in developing the concept of civic literacy — the capacity of our societies for informed political participation. In the decade since publication of my book *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*, the widespread use of social media has added a further dimension to the issue, making analysis even more difficult to quantify. Although we have data on the level of voter turnout and can tabulate membership in voluntary organizations or count clicks, we

have yet to find a satisfying way to measure the level of political engagement through social media.

The Internet would appear to make it easy for anyone with an interest and modest search skills to inform themselves at low cost. But the Internet's algorithm-driven culture makes it equally easy to avoid political information altogether, or to limit information to subjects we already care about and opinions that we already hold. Google and other search engines construct their algorithms to push findings that conform to our previously indicated interests.

Advocates for the Internet note that — used properly to serve political curiosity — the Web extends the variety of, and ease of access to, political content. Furthermore, the Web's social networks have the potential to mobilize vastly larger numbers of people behind political causes.

But social media's potential to organize and inspire has worrisome implications, as well. The consequences of such mobilization can be destructive rather than constructive. The lesson from the recent events in Quebec, which mobilized many thousands of young people against a university tuition hike, suggested an incompatibility between social media politics and representative democracy as we have known it. This is an important challenge to those who argue that online activism is replacing traditional politics.

With representative politics, mobilization is linear. It is based on the premise that achieving one's objectives will at one point be resolved through an election in which one or more parties commit themselves on the relevant issue. Social and political change thus results from those political parties and doing well enough to win power in an election. It entails winning over public opinion, a process that takes time and usually requires compromises in which other groups' objectives are also taken into account.

Henry Milner is research fellow at the Chair in Electoral Studies, Université de Montréal. In 2004-05 he held the Chair in Canadian Studies at the Sorbonne and in 2005-06 was Canada-US Fulbright Chair at SUNY (Plattsburgh). He has been a visiting professor or researcher at universities in Finland, Australia, New Zealand and Sweden. Milner is co-publisher of Inroads.

Social media mobilization has a different logic. It filters out information that does not conform to our existing interests and positions, the opposite of the need to engage with and win over a portion of those who disagree with us. The Quebec student strike is an example of this leverage of the minority. Rather than seeking to win over public opinion and being prepared for compromise, the students used social media to escalate school closings and disruptions of normal life in Montreal. The election of the PQ minority government that rescinded the tuition hike was not a case of public opinion having come around: 60 percent of votes went to parties opposing the hike. For the student militants, the message is this: social change is achieved when you force governments to give in to the power of the streets.

The destruction of property that accompanied these social media-driven protests is an expression of the implicit rejection of the linearity of representative democracy. In acute situations, such as the fiscal crisis in Greece or the protests against tuition fee increases in Quebec, a motivated minority, well aware of representative democracy's vulnerability to disruption, can use social media to rapidly mobilize large numbers around particular public policy objectives. The logic,

Hell no, we won't pay: Quebec students march in Montreal. But is it democratic?
PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



I fear, does not lead to greater democracy; rather the contrary.

So how, then, do we use the powerful tools of the Internet to improve democracy rather than challenge it? In *Civic Literacy*, I showed how the Scandinavian countries in particular managed to attain high levels of informed political participation through effective policies in areas such as adult education, support for public television and radio, newspaper subsidies, and publications and services directed at adults with marginal reading skills. In this exponentially faster media age, we are gaining further insights into the kind of interventions with young people that could be effective in stemming the decline in political participation. Data from Denmark show that young people living at home when they are first eligible to vote are more likely to do so, thereby developing a habit of participation. Reducing the voting age to 16, as has been done in Austria, boosts turnout.

But by themselves, these measures can only slow, not reverse the generational decline in political participation. Norwegian evidence suggests that those teens who accompany their parents to the ballot box are no more likely to develop a greater interest in politics than if they had not been allowed to vote. Nor have technological developments, such as e-voting, had more than a marginal effect on engagement levels.

Broader evidence suggests there are very few people who do not vote but engage in other forms of participation or activism: political dropouts are simply off the political map. A recent survey of young people carried out for Elections Canada is revealing. They were asked three political knowledge questions and also whether they had voted. Those who pay attention, and thus acquire political knowledge, participate; those who pay no attention are unlikely to do so.

In my recent book, *The Internet Generation: Engaged Citizens or Political Dropouts*, I argue we must look for ways to use Internet-based communication in well-targeted high school civic education programs. We are starting to get cross-national evidence of how civic education works best in an appropriate institutional framework consisting, in particular, of proportional voting systems and fixed election dates, as well as voting at 16. I have yet to see convincing evidence to support claims that the street, mobilizing through social media, constitutes a classroom in democracy. We should be wary of those who promise a new world of online political engagement. If we hope to bring the Internet generation into effective participation in representative democracy, we will need to know more of what works best in the way of providing civic education, targeted at those who are coming of political age and must carry the fate of democracy. ■

THE SPECTATORS

DAVID HERLE

Not everyone online is seduced by social activism. Toronto consultant David Herle's research has uncovered a significant segment of Canadian society that is young, online, and has no interest or faith in politics. These so-called "Spectators" are alienated from friends and family. They believe they have little control over their lives and are uninterested in causes. Most alarmingly, they don't seem to care.

Tous les internautes ne sont pas férus d'engagement social. Selon l'étude du consultant torontois David Herle, la politique ne suscite ni l'intérêt ni la confiance d'un segment appréciable de Canadiens jeunes et connectés. Appelés « spectateurs », ils sont coupés de leurs proches et amis, jugent avoir peu de maîtrise sur leur vie et se montrent indifférents à toutes les causes. Constat inquiétant !

Nestled within the broad population of Canada is a large segment of people not motivated by what motivates most of us, who are not engaged — at least in traditional ways — with the society around them, and who see little point in trying to influence the course of events around them. Mass communications, built on the assumption of shared values and aspirations, does not reach them. Civic engagement, which assumes that people working together can change society for the better, does not interest them.

When the advertising agency Bensimon Byrne asked the Gandalf Group to create an updated Canadian consumer typology, we did not expect to find a group of people with these characteristics. But 24 percent of those Canadians we surveyed fell into a group we had to label "Spectators," because they do not participate in most of the interactivity that society values. This segment of Canadians is predominantly male, young and living in the suburbs. Over 40 percent are under the age of 35. Few of them are first- or second-generation Canadians.

Two other groups we defined — we called them "Runners" and "Walkers" — differ from each other in many respects, yet share a clear set of life goals and values. Almost all of those in these two segments place a great importance on family, friends, financial security, living a happy life, providing their children with greater oppor-

tunity and leaving the world in some way better than they found it.

Spectators show little desire or need for any of this. They are, for the most part, uninterested in public affairs. Breaking with the perception that young people are strong environmentalists, less than a quarter of Spectators displayed concern about environmental issues. Only about one in ten think it is important to be involved in politics or to support an issue or cause. Fifteen percent say it is important to get involved in the community or offer their time and expertise to a community project. This is not surprising given that few Spectators think that people who get involved make any difference.

Consistent with Robert Putnam's theory of disintegrating social connections, only ten percent of these Canadians feel connected to their community and very few think it is important to know your neighbours. They are unlikely to feel any affinity with their co-workers and few would socialize with colleagues from work.

Most concerning was the fatalistic, demotivated mentality of this segment. We presented survey respondents with 18 life goals or aspirations. Most Canadians subscribe to all of them. Few Spectators subscribe to any. Spectators are ambivalent about objectives such as strong family life, a successful career, material aspirations or close friends. They tend to dislike their work and do it only for the money. Most say that there is nothing that they are passionate about.

It would be one thing if this socially isolated group were happy — but they are not. Less than a third say they are happy, and most do not even know what would make them so.

Contributing Writer David Herle, former pollster and chief campaign strategist for the Liberals under Paul Martin, is a principal of the Gandalf Group in Toronto.



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

At the core of their alienation is a feeling of a lack of control over the direction of their lives. They do not think that life has offered them many opportunities, and they do not feel they can influence their financial or personal direction. They see themselves as corks bobbing in the water, pushed and pulled where the tides take them.

This is not a condition that applies to all Canadians of this demographic group. Many of the young adults aged 18 to 35 that we surveyed do show a desire for rich social connections, falling mostly into the Runners category. They fit the profile of those who may be susceptible to building online communities and even join in fighting for social or political causes.

But for all the excitement around the potential for social media to drive

greater political engagement, there is also awareness that simply being online does not necessarily translate into greater political participation. Many of those online remain stubbornly beyond the lure of politics or social activism. Spectators fit this profile. Our research showed that this segment spends more time online than the average Canadian. What appears clear is that they are not using that time to connect to causes or organize for change.

The size of this group and the depth of its alienation raise troubling questions for marketers, not only of products but of ideas. Much of marketing communications is based on aspirations considered to be universal. If a group doesn't share those aspirations, how can we create advertising that finds affinity with them? The

challenge for political and civil society activists is even more vexing. What does it mean for democracy when so many people believe any attempt at making a difference is pointless and lack faith that that political change can create meaningful outcomes? Where are we headed when a quarter of our population, whose incomes are roughly in line with those of the rest, tell us that the Western ideal of progress is not making them happy or satisfied?

Digital media is not responsible for this alienation of the Spectators. In fact, professional communicators in marketing or politics could easily find a way to reach them, using a variety of social media and online tools.

The problem is we don't know what to say to them. ■

PROTESTING MORE, BUT ALONE

CATHERINE CORRIGALL-BROWN

The 1960s generation is venerated by some and criticized by others for an activism remembered as turbulent and confrontational. But Catherine Corrigan-Brown's study of social movements finds even higher levels of activism today. Those seeking to engage in social and political causes have a greater selection of issues to choose from, and can move easily among them. But she notes that while levels of political participation may be rising, much of that activism occurs outside conventional groups, raising questions about whether it has the power to change the existing order.

Tantôt vénérée, tantôt décriée, la génération des années 1960 a pratiqué un militantisme qui nous semble aujourd'hui particulièrement turbulent et offensif. Mais selon l'analyse des mouvements sociaux de Catherine Corrigan-Brown, ceux-ci se sont plutôt élargis ces derniers temps, notamment parce que les causes sociales et politiques sont plus nombreuses et que ses défenseurs peuvent en embrasser plusieurs à la fois. Mais comme la participation politique a surtout lieu hors des groupes traditionnels, on peut se demander si elle a le pouvoir de transformer l'ordre existant.

A vibrant civil society in which citizens actively engage in social movements is widely seen as vital to a healthy democracy. Not only do social movements advocate for important issues and causes such as women's rights, protecting the environment, and improving education and health care, they are by their nature addressing social problems that governments or markets are unable or unwilling to act upon. And, because of the crucial role these groups play, there was widespread concern after the publication of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam's highly influential 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, in which he lamented the decline of these groups and civil society more generally. Putnam drew a link between our retreat from the social and communal groups of the early to mid-20th century (hence his metaphor of the decline in bowling leagues) and the decline in

Catherine Corrigan-Brown is an assistant professor in sociology at the University of Western Ontario. Her recent book, Patterns of Protest (2012), focuses on participation in social movements. She is currently researching the global environmental movement and the role of government funding in shaping the tactics and strategies of environmental organizations.

civic trust, social capital and connectedness in modern society. He calls attention to the fraying of the bonds and bridges built by social groups, connections he deemed essential to a healthy civil society and a strong democracy.

Putnam's work is very compelling. It does, however, have its critics and has resulted in ongoing attempts to measure the strength of modern social engagement and civil society. My recent book, *Patterns of Protest*, looks at the individuals who participate in social movements and examines why and how they come to engage in these groups over the course of their lives. Contrary to the concerns raised by Putnam, I found that activism has been on the rise since the 1960s. In fact, my research shows that approximately 65 percent of us have engaged in a social movement organization or participated in a "contentious political activity," such as traditional protesting and demonstrating. What we see is not just the visible tip of activism, such as the Occupy Movement's prominence in the media and town squares around the world. Modern activism includes activities and tactics beyond simply taking to the streets. Social movements now rely on Facebook pages, tweeting about events and online petitions to reach a larger swath of people and connect individuals to social causes. In addition to these new techniques of engagement, my research found evidence that we are witnessing a greater range of social movement causes than ever



An anti-pipeline march in Vancouver last month: more causes to choose from

PHOTO: CP PHOTO

before, a finding that should lead us to feel cautiously optimistic about the health of civil society.

Most of what we know about engagement in social movements and about what keeps people active over time is based on earlier cohorts of activists. My book is based on data following individuals who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s and who participated in activism from that period on. It is clear that these individuals engaged in different ways, and to differing degrees, than the youth of today. The rise of the Internet alone means that we live in a very different social and political context than we did in the 1960s, or even in the 1990s when Putnam was building his theory of the decline in social capital. And this raises intriguing questions for those of us who study civic engagement. What is

the effect of the changing character and frequency of protest over time on what we know about individual engagement in activism and civil society? How will those who graduate from high school this year engage in activism compared with previous generations?

I believe we can expect four main trends. There will be more activism. It will be more diverse in nature. It will be characterized by moving in and out of engagement over time. And it will be centred outside traditional social movement organizations.

The cultural stereotype of the 1960s and 1970s as a time of very high levels of protest is misleading. While the protest events during that period might have been more dramatic than in previous times, protest levels in Can-

ada, the United States and other modern industrial democracies are considerably higher today. In addition to the higher levels of protest today than ever before, protest has also changed in nature. The protesters of the 1960s and 1970s were not the mainstream. They were the outsiders. But activism no longer carries the stigma that it did for that generation of protesters branded as radical antiwar activists, feminists

...one-off causes that dazzle us for a while before fading to the next hot thing...

and hippies. Protest is now a common expression of dissent, and other forms of activism such as volunteerism are becoming institutionalized. Many high schools, for example, demand a measured level of community activism and volunteerism from students as part of their graduation credentials (raising the question, of course, of whether that constitutes a truly voluntary act). And the ways in which we can engage in activism today, such as by texting a donation for Haitian earthquake relief, are by nature more casual and require less commitment to a cause.

There are also more causes to choose from. The number of issues and campaigns has boomed, and the Internet makes it easier for all of us to become aware of them or seek them out. We can go online to learn about protests to challenge rising tuition fees, see well-designed videos on YouTube that tell of the victims of Joseph Kony and see images of birds covered in oil from a spill in the Gulf of Mexico. And activism is not limited to the political left. The religious right and other conservative groups now engage in traditional street protests to challenge access to abortion, gay marriage and immigration policy, or are at the vanguard of promoting religious freedom in North Korea.

Third, the activism of today's youth is characterized by moving in and out of engagement and from cause

to cause. The growth and diversification of issues, tactics and groups create new opportunities for a variety of people to engage in contentious politics, but they may also be less likely to make a life of it. The civil rights movement was a multigenerational struggle. Kony 2012 has a more ephemeral feel for the millions who saw the YouTube video, though it also does have a core of activists who have been engaged in

the issue of child soldiers for several years. With the variety of causes and types of groups, many people are attracted to activism and to different issues over time. Consequently, not only should we expect to see more people participating in causes but, once involved, these activists are likely to follow a pathway of transferring from group to group, or in and out of engagement. Permanent disengagement seems less likely for the current generation of activists given that the number of opportunities for involvement is growing, while the costs and risks of engaging are relatively low.

Finally, today's youth are more likely to participate in activism focused outside traditional organizations. Earlier cohorts, such as the sample from the 1960s and 1970s examined in my study, were engaged in a civil society that emphasized the importance of working within formal organizations and participation within its hierarchy. It was *organized* protest that pushed for — and won — civil rights for language minorities, gay and transgendered people, immigrants and women. Paradoxically, engagement in organized political activity may be declining at the same time as participation in protest is rising. Since 1982, the older cohort from my study saw declining involvement in groups, from a high of 28.3 percent in 1982 to only 9.2 percent in 1997. In contrast, engagement in protest activity has increased slowly and steadily throughout the period from 1965 (15.2 percent) to 1997 (21.7 percent)

and has climbed even higher since then (to 23 percent in 2008). These changes are consistent with Putnam's claim that civil society groups might be declining. However, this decline in organizational memberships does not necessarily translate into less political and social engagement for society as a whole.

Engagement in civil society is not declining; it is simply evolving. Young people today are engaging more, but in activities that do not require group membership. Their activism is more likely to be committed through technology, carried out in a campaign on Facebook or re-tweeting a political message (or a link to a political parody video). Yet while it is heartening to be able to refute the notion that we are retreating from civil society, it remains to be seen whether these new forms of activism can foster the social trust seen as a necessary condition for social change. As Malcolm Gladwell pointed out last year in his critique of social media evangelists, signing an online petition is a low-cost commitment. The civil rights movement, on the other hand, was a highly organized, hierarchical group of people with a deeply shared cause and who had more at stake in the fight in part because they knew each other personally and felt a deep sense of responsibility to one another. Organizations, with leaders and structure, may still be essential to building the long-term commitment and strategies required to take on the vested interests opposed to social change.

So while the higher levels of activism are encouraging, it is still too early to set Putnam's fears aside. He worried that these lone bowlers, knocking down pins on their own instead of in leagues, were no longer capable of fostering the communal trust and "social capital" of participatory politics. Just as Putnam lamented that we were bowling alone, today we are protesting alone, at home, through computers, for one-off causes that are often highly salient for a period before fading away. It remains to be seen if those solo acts, even when multiplied by a great number of individuals, can provide the social glue to keep our democracy healthy. ■