Chapter 2
Plugged In:
Youth Computer–Mediated Civic Action and Interaction Through the Prism of Modern Protest Movements

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter movements, protest has become the default response to social problems. As students and youth become more involved in political upheaval, they turn to the technology that surrounds them. This chapter focuses on computer-mediated youth civic action and interaction. It examines past trends in youth activism and how social media skills acquired through activism could help these same youth activists transition to the workforce.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter movements, youth public protest seems to have become the default response to a litany of social problems. As students and youth become more involved in political upheaval due to this unrest (Day, 2015; Epstein, 2015; Lotan et al., 2011) as well as precarious economic prospects (Milkman, Luce, & Lewis, 2013), they tend to turn to the technology that constantly surrounds them, namely smartphones and desktop computers. Similarly, communications technology (e.g., email, internet forums), videotelephony technology (e.g., Facetime), communications platforms (e.g., Google Hangouts) and free or inexpensive social media apps (e.g., Facebook, Periscope, Twitter, WeChat, WhatsApp) leverage seemingly perpetual internet connectivity. This allows youth to constantly communicate in real-time, remain mobile, and give them the ability to react to current events. These developments have invariably changed the frequency, tone, and ability of youth to participate in the body politic, including broad social movements like the recently occurring ones mentioned above. Technology gives youth who are interested in these movements the ability to express themselves and their deep personal concerns in ways that were unimaginable even a decade ago.

From these developments, this chapter focuses on computer-mediated youth civic action and inter-action. It examines past trends in youth activism and the current deployment of technology during the present moment. Finally, it discusses how social media skills acquired through activism could help these same young people gain skills to help them successfully transition to the workforce.

BACKGROUND

The 1960s was a defining time for youth protest in the United States. Following the peaceful prosperity following the Second World War as the country recovered from its prolonged participation in warfare, the 1960s became filled with wrenching civil unrest. This is in sharp contrast to the more genteel atmo-sphere characterizing the nation following the previous world war. The Vietnam War's protracted length, the corresponding increasing number of casualties over its duration, and its reliance on the draft drew deep demarcations among the American populace based on race, class, gender, and socioeconomics. As an example, this includes those who chose to enlist as well as draftees were disproportionally poor and people of color who were less able to employ various strategies to avoid service (e.g., successfully apply for deferment). This combination of difficult issues became a major instigator for the student protests and riots that occurred throughout the 1960s (Barton, 1968; Bradley, 2003; Hariman & Lucaites, 2001; Lewis & Hensley, 1998; Moore, 1999), their reverberations still echoing during the present moment as seen in the Charlottesville protests (DeVega, 2017; Owen, 2017; Sinclair, 2017).

One of the most popular and pervasive categories of technology of that time, telecommunications, was one of the key modes of organizing protests during this tumultuous period (Gladwell, 2010). With just a name, a phone number, and loose pocket change, youth activists could communicate to organize and engage in civic action courtesy of widely available pay phones (Gladwell, 2010). In short, the revo-lution will be dialed.

In addition, the growing dissemination of broadcast television brought immediate real-time visuals that could not be easily avoided by the general population. For example, think of the stunning images of soldiers' coffins being flown back from Vietnam. Explosive student revolts at Columbia University (Barton, 1968; Bradley, 2003; Moore, 1999) or at Kent State more tragically also roiled the nation (Hariman & Lucaites, 2001; Lewis & Hensley, 1998; Moore, 1999). If the medium was the message (McLuhan, 1964), the affordances of television and radio as well as their omnipresent nature could no longer simply be ignored. Mass media's immediacy and visually/aurally stunning nature brought the realities of youth dissent, and even death, into the warm and comfortable environs of American living rooms. In the aftermath of the primacy of traditional mass media in rapidly delivering news from around the world, today's youth have arguably accelerated the pace of dissemination. In short, youth bearing smartphones that are constantly connected to the internet deploy social media platforms and associated tools to amplify the reach of news.

With the recent advent of smartphones and social media, youth can easily communicate with these devices to plan, aggregate, and adjust their protest activities in real-time, even as they are on the go as these civic actions are in the midst of erupting. This was probably most clearly seen in the unfolding of the Arab Spring (Abouzeid, 2011; Cottle, 2011; Lotan et al, 2011; Lynch, 2011; McNally, 2010, 2011; Mentor, 2015; Mohyeldin, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Sadiki, 2010), Occupy Wall Street (Besser, 2012; By-rne, 2012; Calhoun, 2013; Conover, Ferrara, Menczer, & Flammini, 2013; Earle, 2012; Epstein, 2015; Gillham, Edwards, & Noakes, 2013; Lazar, 2011; Milkman, Luce, & Lewis, 2013; Occupy Wall Street,

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