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.
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.

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.

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.”

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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 skills.

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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 participatory 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
HENRY JENKINS

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, 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 consensus 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 supporters 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 capacity 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.

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