

A New Activism: Today's Youth and the Power of Interconnectedness

In 2017, The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center brought together 14 academics, policy makers, practitioners, artists and activists for a thematic residency to explore the potential for “Youth as Agents of Transformative Change.” The residency provided time and space for independent work, as well as an exchange of perspectives in formal and informal discussions.

The following article highlights emerging insights from the residency on the power of youth connections to drive a new, more global activism.

Thanks to the widespread access to communications technology and the ease of social media, today's youth are more globally connected and informed about their world than any previous generation. People under 25 are twice as likely to have internet access when compared to the rest of the global population; among youth in the developing world, the gap is even more pronounced.¹ Thirty percent of the global youth population has actively participated in online social networks for five years or more—indicating that these networks have become a vital part of young people's daily lives and fundamentally reshaped the ways youth learn, engage, and converse.

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*Novuyo Tshuma,
Pd.D. student, University of Houston*

The residents at the Bellagio Center observed that these fundamental shifts in communication have subsequently transformed youth activism. Social movements are no longer constrained by geography as internet access and social media have allowed youth to more easily understand what is happening elsewhere and to share ideas for activism. “We are interconnected now across national boundaries,” says Novuyo Tshuma, a Ph.D. student in the University of Houston's Creative Writing program. “Staying in your own environment does not build the type of the out-of-the box thinking that brings new solutions.” Social media's ability to provide rapid global communication, Tshuma says, means that youth “are able to cut across and talk about world problems, and then import other ideas to our own spaces.” For example, Aya Chebbi built on her experiences and connections as a blogger and online activist during the Tunisian revolution to create the Afrika Youth Movement, a pan-African youth network focused on developing youth leadership for peace and social justice. After Esra'a al Shafei founded Crowdfvoice, a service that collects and amplifies voices of protest across the internet which was originally intended for the

Middle East, she was surprised by just how global the website had become. “People take the tools that you build and repurpose them to their own needs,” she explained. “I didn't think that when I was building Crowdfvoice, the biggest userbase would be in India and Mexico.”

¹International Telecommunications Union

Social media can also push social movements toward a grassroots approach, relying less on a single leader to shape discourse and promoting a more collective agenda. Online forums and communities established on the internet are inherently egalitarian, providing anyone with internet access an equal opportunity to express themselves. For instance, on Ahwaa.org², an open, safe platform for LGBT individuals in the MENA region also founded by Esra'a al Shafei, users post under pseudonyms and can award each other points for making positive and helpful contributions to the community. This means that content is judged on its own merits, rather than by who articulates it. The opportunity to contribute to and shape these communities—to have a voice—mobilizes young people to get involved in social activism. This distribution and decentralization of leadership has significant implications for the paradigm of effective activism. “You can’t do it on your own—no leader can,” explains Mark McCord, former Director of the Young African Leaders Initiative Regional Leadership Center in Nairobi, Kenya. “You have to build networks. You have to bring in others to do the things that you don’t have the ability to. Where those two things come together—this passion and this collaboration—you find the sweet spot where innovation can occur, change can occur, and young people can be transformative in their communities and countries.”

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Mark McCord, former Director of the Young African Leaders Initiative Regional Leadership Center, Nairobi, Kenya

While general social media platforms can be a critical component of an individual youth’s path to activism, more tailored platforms are required in order to develop the skills needed for this activism to successfully create change. Specialized, issue-focused digital networks—which are designed to cater to the ways in which youth want to discuss issues while also giving youth the opportunity to decide what issues will be discussed—can reinforce the connections formed by social media and channel them into activism and action. These types of platforms, which are built by and used by young people, allow them to create their own narratives and build youth-led social movements. As McCord explains, “Youth need a mechanism to be able to get more tools to lead, to know that they are not alone, to build collaborative alliances, and to have a safe space where they can come and talk about really complex issues happening in their countries and know that there is no attribution, no retribution.” In these digital spaces, youth “can really deal with these issues in a way that they can’t in their own societies.”

These new types of networks have already demonstrated their potential to bring youth together. To take the next step to incorporate youth voices, policymakers should tap into these networks and explore ways to link them—and their emerging messages—with formal decision making and leadership platforms.

² A platform under the Majal.org umbrella