

Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, and Arely M. Zimmerman, **By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016, 347 pp., \$19.00 (paperback).

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Are American youth apathetic about civic life? There has been a prevalent perception that the vibrancy of American civil society is declining, and public mistrust in institutional politics is on the rise (Putnam, 2000). Within this context, youth are frequently seen as disinterested in political affairs. The authors of **By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism** contest the conception by providing a profoundly different image of contemporary American youth whose civic activities assume a different form. Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Vilenchik, and Zimmerman offer a wide range of examples of young people who work together, harnessing potentials of new media and technologies, in seeking to effectuate political change, not through established political institutions but through cultural mechanisms. The key theoretical and empirical contribution lies in giving voice to a new form of political participation—that is “participatory politics”—and the role of youth agency, pop culture, and digital media. “Participatory politics” is defined here as the point where participatory culture meets political ends and “where citizens see themselves as capable of expressing their political concerns—often through the production and circulation of media” (p. 2). It emphasizes democratically oriented digital practices in informal settings within which young people create and remix digital culture as a way to engage with sociopolitical issues. *By Any Media Necessary* is thus a much-needed voice in the emerging fields of civic media and participatory culture.



Following a detailed introduction (chapter 1) discussing core concepts broadly are five chapters (plus an afterword) that present a series of case studies covering various organizations, networks, and movements that have deployed mechanisms of participatory practice to involve young people in the political process. For instance, chapter 2 considers Invisible Children as a human rights organization of young Americans that released a 30-minute video titled *Kony 2012* to resist the practice of child soldiering in Uganda while chapter 3 concerns fan activism through a series of examples of fandom networks as the Harry Potter Alliance, Imagine Better, and the Nerdfighters that harnessed pop culture materials to emblematically talk about politics. Also, chapter 4 and chapter 5 present different perspectives of political storytelling by groups of minority youth, particularly American Muslim youth and undocumented people, who appropriated digital media for identity expression and assertion of their voices. The authors wrap up the book in a conclusion (chapter 7) that puts together major insights from the preceding chapters, and an Afterword, contributed by Lissa Soep from Youth Radio—a national youth-driven production company, discussing connected learning in relation to youth participatory politics.

Taken together, these chapters highlight critical aspects and mechanisms of participatory politics. One is the notion of *circulation*, whereby grassroots spreadable media are produced and circulated widely and quickly to audiences. Also, pop culture and media contents are harnessed creatively to connect youth members to one another, empowering them to imagine what it means to fight for social justice. Shared tastes provide the basics for the creation of “public spheres of the imagination” or places where people share values, hopes, and dreams. Participatory practice therefore allows for youth mobilization of various forms of social media and networked communication, along with on-the-ground activities, for civic ends.

However, there is also the flip side of participatory politics. A major issue highlighted by the authors is “the paradoxes of participatory politics” or the tensions between competing values (e.g., activism vs. entertainment, top-down vs. bottom-up approaches) facing the grassroots civic organizations and their young members. One example is the case of Student for Liberty, or second-wave libertarians discussed in chapter 6, whereby youth had to work “within the system”: While tapping into social media affordances to get their voices heard, they received financial support from conservative think tanks and individual donors. Also, the authors suggest that one downside of taste-based politics deriving from youth appropriation of pop culture materials is that it could potentially give rise to forms of social exclusion, insofar as taste is associated with race and class. Further, state control and social surveillance from conservative parents, religious leaders, and online haters are imminent threats to the stability of the young’s participatory politics and associated outcomes.

Overall, *By Any Media Necessary* is an important contribution to the current debates around civic participation and role of youth. Participatory politics in the digital era is a connection to “a new public space,” where political change is being forged through social and political networks that come together online and in physical spaces to explore new possibilities (Castells, 2012). However, what makes *By Any Media Necessary* different is its central argument for the cultural as the gateway of the political. What these young people do with pop culture, fanish materials, and online media provide preconditions for civic culture.

Throughout the book there is also strong support for the idea that fostering a culture of participation—both culturally and politically—that allows youth to assert their voices can be valuable in and of itself, regardless of the specific outcomes of their efforts. Participation in this sense relates to Bennett’s (2008) articulation of political engagement as the empowerment of youth as expressive individuals. Nonetheless, *By Any Media Necessary* emphasizes the collective—rather than individual—dimensions as a crucial condition of participatory practice. Arguably, culture has long been a critical force for social change, but a more participatory media landscape can open up more fruitful venues for cultural production than before. *By Any Media Necessary* thus reveals much potential of civic media in the digital age, encouraging the rethinking of how citizens organize and act for common good and the political participation of young people as “citizens in the present” (Gordon & Mihailidis, 2016).

In line with civic media scholarship that focuses on the opportunities for emerging technologies and digital cultures to buttress collective action, *By Any Media Necessary* suggests the important role of new media and technologies in facilitating political engagement and participatory practice. The notions of *transmedia activism and mobilization* are effectively analyzed to discuss how youth tap into the potentials

of media platforms and networked communications—from social media, spreadable videos, and Internet memes—and use their digital skills in a collaborative and participatory manner in seeking to bring about political change. However, access to the digital per se does not warrant change, but the structure that supports political participation by youth does, according to the authors. Participatory politics in the digital era is thus not that dissimilar from the traditional civic engagement; it is as natural for contemporary youth to act politically online as it was for older generations “to forge ties at the local bowling alley, coffee shop, church, or barbershop” (p. 273). What’s different is digital media do allow young men and women to reach out to a broader base of audience and facilitate meaningful enactment of agency through innovative expressions.

A critique of *By Any Media Necessary*—that is also of participatory politics—is its overemphasis on youth agency such that it is unlikely to be generalizable to the broader population of American youth. Social inequalities and digital divides are arguably inevitable deterrents of the participatory condition, as they might exclude certain individuals and groups from worthwhile political engagement. Carpentier (2016) suggests that participation is a utopic ideal, and participation is inseparable from power such that it should be viewed in relation to uneven distributions of power rather than the dichotomy of “authentic” or “fake.” Nevertheless, the authors of *By Any Media Necessary* carefully argue that they see participation here as an aspiration as much as it is a reality. The notion of “a more participatory culture” is thus brought up in their reflections on the framework of participatory politics to call attention to those who have not yet acquired the skills, access, and status needed to meaningfully participate.

Although participatory politics may not speak for the experiences of all, it is an important form of political participation that emerges outside of American institutional politics and deserves attention. Young people in the current digital era might not actively join formal civil associations nor go to vote, but they, or at least some segments among them, do work together diligently through alternative mechanisms to try to change the world—by any media necessary.

### References

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