# WOKE

## The Rise of Connected Activism

On April 23, 2016, President Barack Obama conducted a town hall meeting with a group of young London leaders as part of a three-day trip to the UK. The president abandoned his customary suit and tie for a more relaxed ensemble that underscored his warm and friendly relationship with young people. In his opening remarks, Obama expressed his appreciation for "the chance to meet with young people and hear from them directly." He said that hearing from this demographic "gives me new ideas and . . . underscores the degree to which young people are rising up in every continent to seize the possibilities of tomorrow."

As the town hall proceeded, young attendees asked the president about a variety of topics, including Northern Ireland, the T-TIP agreement, East Africa, and leadership in a world marked by political polarization. One young woman named Maria struck a more personal note when she described her gender identity as "non-binary." She talked about how terrifying it is to live in a country in which "non-binary people . . . literally have no rights." Maria asked the president to address civil rights and LGBTQ issues for people "who fit outside the social norms." Then Louisa, a self-described "climate change campaigner," asked the president which social movements "have made you change your mind while you've been in office and inspired you to do things?"

In response to these questions, President Obama acknowledged how LGBTQ activists and his own two daughters had enlightened him toward a favorable position on same-sex marriage. He noted his role in the historic

Paris climate agreement. He pointed to the rising unrest in the US around race and the use of police force, and he named Black Lives Matter as a great example of how young activists can bring attention to the issues that they care about. The president also issued a warning about youth-driven activism: "Once you've highlighted an issue and brought it to people's attention and shined a spotlight, and elected officials or people who are in a position to start bringing about change are ready to sit down with you, then you can't just keep on yelling at them."

The President asserted that it's okay to make noise and occasionally act a little crazy to get attention and shine a spotlight on an issue. "But," he said, "once people who are in power and in a position to actually do something about it are prepared to meet and listen with you, do your homework; be prepared; present a plausible set of actions; and negotiate and be prepared to move the ball down the field even if it doesn't get all the way there."

Back in the US, reports of this meeting framed the president's comments as criticism of Black Lives Matter. A *New York Times* headline read "Obama Says Movements Like Black Lives Matter 'Can't Just Keep on Yelling.'" The *Washington Post* ran a similar headline: "Obama Counsels Black Lives Matter Activists: 'You Can't Just Keep on Yelling.'" In fact, the president's comments struck a familiar note about the Black Lives Matter movement specifically and youth activism more generally. Youth activism these days is critiqued as more style than substance, more tech savvy than political savvy, more vanity-driven than policy-driven—all obvious references to young activists' use of social media as a means to participate in civic life.

Obama was not the only high-profile critic of youth-driven social movements. Media mogul Oprah Winfrey suggested that unlike the participants in the 1960s civil rights movement, the young activists driving Black Lives Matter have no specific goals or clear asks. However, Obama and Winfrey, in their comments, underestimated a movement that was more robust than they and most others realized. Critics of Black Lives Matter have been largely unaware of the movement's evolution and the substantive impact young activists desire to make. Moreover, critiques like these fail to adequately appreciate the complex features of contemporary youth activism and the evolving models of political engagement they inspire. In fact, young activists have adopted many of the features of the new innovation economy—collaboration, inventive uses of technology, crowd power, and the mantra of failing fast and trying again—to pursue their vision of a more equitable and just society.

## THE CIVIC DECLINE NARRATIVE

One of the most persistent criticisms of millennials is the claim that they are so reliant on social and mobile media that they are less involved than previous generations in the world around them. Young people's preoccupation with technology, it is strenuously argued, has undermined our sense of community and the future of democracy. According to this view, the integration of social media into daily life has made millennials less civic-oriented than their parents and grandparents. Scholars who study the quality of civic life call this the "civic decline narrative."

Critics claim that by just about every measure, young people, to paraphrase the political scientist Robert Putnam, are playing the civic game less than their older counterparts. Younger Americans, we know, vote less than older Americans. Younger Americans, critics assert, also consume less news than older Americans.

Another supposed indication of the erosion of civic engagement is the steep drop-off in affiliations with political parties. And it is true: millennials are much less likely than their older counterparts to report belonging to one of the two major political parties. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam points to a decline in what he calls "grassroots activism"— political protest or mobilization that is inspired by a set of local or national conditions. Political scientists also believe that political expression—writing to an elected official, signing a petition, writing an article or letter to the editor, or making a speech—is on a downward trend.

Researchers have identified several reasons to explain young people's retreat from civic life. Some studies, for example, suggest that younger people are much less likely than their older counterparts to trust traditional sources of political influence and power. Others argue that apathy or lack of interest in public affairs is a significant factor. Additionally, millennials are frequently accused of narcissism. Historically, younger citizens tend to feel less politically efficacious than older citizens. But no factor is more resonant in the critique of young people than the claim that media and technology have contributed mightily to declining participation in civic life.

Millennials came of age in the most media-rich households in history. Over the years multiple entertainment technologies—DVDs, video games, desktop and laptop computers, smartphones, and tablets—have entered our homes. Consequently, one scholar claims, our homes have become "wired castles," a description that highlights the extent to which entertainment

platforms wall us off from the outside world and diminish our interest in community involvement. Critics and social scientists alike maintain that increased attachment to screens, especially mobile devices, makes all of us—but especially children, teens, and young adults—less social, connected, and communicative. Social media, in this context, is an oxymoron precisely because it presumably encourages less "authentic" social contact.

Millennials—the most connected generation in American history—feature prominently in this version of the civic decline narrative. These circumstances have led cultural critics and researchers to conclude that millennials are too busy "tweeting," "snapping," or posting to Instagram to care about anybody or anything beyond themselves. The greatest social cost of social isolation, according to Putnam, is the loss of social capital. Nan Lin, a long-time scholar in the area of social networks, defines social capital as those resources available to individuals through social connections. When members of society invest less in one another, they not only become social-capital poor, society suffers too. We spend less time staying informed about our communities and world affairs. We spend less time participating in civic organizations and are less likely to support charitable causes and organizations. Simply put, we are less likely to care about creating a better world, less likely even to think that we have the capacity to do so.

The narrative that millennials are disengaged with civic life focuses primarily on legacy civic institutions, including political parties, community-oriented organizations like bowling leagues, and traditional forms of civic expression like writing to the local newspaper editor. Still, there is mounting evidence—anecdotal and empirical—that millennials are involved in the civic sphere but in ways that researchers have not adequately measured or understood. Thus, an interesting question emerges: What if the claim that young people are disconnected from and disinterested in the world around them is an overstatement or just plain wrong?

## THE CIVIC INNOVATION NARRATIVE

In contrast to the civic decline narrative let me propose an alternative—what I call the "civic innovation narrative." Whereas the civic decline narrative asserts that there is a steep decline in political engagement, the civic innovation narrative contends that what is really happening is a remaking of political engagement. The civic innovation narrative offers a portrait of a civic culture that is creative, iterative, and fit for the networked age.

What about the claim that millennials consume less news, a key component of political knowledge and participation? In a national survey of young adults that Vicky Rideout and I conducted with the nonpartisan research organization NORC at the University of Chicago, millennials' use of smartphones to go online was decisive compared to other means. Sixty-eight percent reported going online with a smartphone, compared to 8 percent who reported going online via a desktop computer. According to the Pew Research Center, people who get their news on their mobile devices throughout the day tend to turn to more resources, get news from new sources, watch news videos, read in-depth news articles, and send and receive news through their social networks. The fact that millennials are more likely than their older counterparts to engage news this way suggests that they may actually be exposed to more news sources rather than fewer.

In the age of social media and "fake news," the concern may not be lack of access to news but rather the quality of the news we consume. Millennials are living testimony to the often uttered view that in the connected world we no longer find the news; rather, the news finds us. What we still do not know, however, is whether or not the ambient qualities of news—the constant news alerts and mobile updates—are leading to more in-depth engagement, political knowledge, and participation in civic life.

Nowhere is the formation of civic innovation more apparent than in the rise of what I call "connected activism." Broadly speaking, young people practice connected activism through informal modes of political activity, inventive uses of technology, creative political expression, and direct action against powerful institutions. Rather than submit to formal politics, read print news, associate with legacy civic organizations, or view voting as the only expression of civic engagement, millennials are devising new pathways to pursue civic investments that are responsive to our times and their vision of political engagement.

I have identified five basic components of effective connected activism: it is mobile, visual, spreadable, scalable, and impactful. First, the benefits of mobile devices in the civic sphere are notable and substantial. For example, smartphones have become a tool for real-time communication, civic media making, and political organizing. As the capabilities of smartphones expand, activists use them to capture and share photos and videos that reinvigorate the tradition of citizen journalism. A second component of connected activism is the visual nature of social media communication and the

creation of media content—photos, videos, memes, graphics—that can expand and enrich storytelling and political expression. The visual aspect of connected activism speaks to the broadcasting capabilities of social media channels like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram and the affective power of visual content to stand as witness to social injustice and to catalyze community dissent.

A third component of connected activism is the spreadable nature of social media content, that is, the ease and speed with which media and messages can be circulated and consumed. The shifting media landscape in which we now exist makes it easy for connected activists to produce and circulate content beyond the corridors of corporate media. Social media, by design, is spreadable media—media that is created to move fluidly across computer-mediated social networks. A fourth feature of connected activism is the scale at which communication and organization can take place. Social media improves the opportunities to engage crowd power—through crowdsourcing and crowdfunding—to bolster political causes. When Black Lives Matter activists traveled to participate in local demonstrations against law enforcement's use of deadly force, they often turned to crowdsourcing to connect to local activists, coordinate local protest activities, and even find accommodations.

A final component of connected activism is the degree to which mobile, visual, spreadable, and scalable features of connected activism enhance the prospects for greater social impact. Due to the internet's ability to quickly multiply the number of participants who can connect to a movement or circulate a political viewpoint, the potential for activists to assert power and influence—social impact—is greatly enhanced.

Digital activism is frequently dismissed as passive, ephemeral, and superficial. Critics charge, for example, that social media may be good for exchanging information but not for strategic organizing. Further, critics note that social media may be good for generating awareness for social issues but not for deep and sustained political engagement. These same critics often overlook the substantive ways in which digital activism enables whole new repertoires of community building and political agency, not because of technology but rather because of the inventive ways activists use technology.

This new repertoire was never more evident than when young creatives came together online and offline to create what the *New York Times* called the first civil rights movement of the twenty-first century.

## #FERGUSON

On August 9, 2014, a white police officer named Darren Wilson shot and killed an unarmed Black teen, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri. It was not the first time an unarmed African American was killed by the police that year. In fact, at least three hundred African Americans would be killed by police in 2014, the majority of them unarmed. But Brown's death triggered a local and national movement that signaled a turning point in American civic life.

Within a few days of Brown's death, Ferguson was dominating the news headlines, but the events there did not become a national story until they became #Ferguson, a social media–enhanced narrative and form of connected activism that was driven largely by young creatives. The protest in Ferguson placed a bright spotlight on the nascent Black Lives Matter movement and the vitality of connected activism.

#Ferguson was both a revelation and a revolution. What made #Ferguson a revelation was the rapid pace and intensity with which everyday citizens began reporting about the tragedy. From the beginning, the young creatives in Ferguson were not simply chronicling what had happened and what was happening between police and the largely Black working-class community, they were also developing a distinct point-of-view that was sensitive to the plight of Ferguson residents. In the words of African American millennials, #Ferguson was "unapologetically black." The reporting from the streets was designed to build support for local Black residents while also framing the militarized tactics of Ferguson police as excessive and oppressive.

What made #Ferguson a revolution was the degree to which young creatives became the primary source of news and information for the world. Social media–powered citizen journalism enabled activists to shape the larger political discourse around race, policing, and social justice in the US. More precisely, #Ferguson influenced how local, state, and federal law enforcement, media organizations, and elected officials, including the president of the United States, responded to the crisis. #Ferguson represented a power shift in our political and media culture and the political awakening of a generation.

The constant live updates via Twitter, Facebook posts, and video streams on Vine provided an intimate window into the epic struggle citizen-activists waged against law enforcement and elected officials for dignity and accountability. The most compelling photos and videos—almost all of them captured with smartphones—were shot from the point of view of Ferguson

residents and activists. This was a radical departure from more traditional modes of news and information production, which are typically filtered through the lens of institutional elites such as law enforcement, elected officials, and professional journalists.

The first few days of social media documentation in Ferguson turned out to be critical. Ferguson residents built an early and compelling narrative that would spread and grow in terms of influence. By the end of the day of Brown's death, August 9, nearly 200,000 #Ferguson tweets circulated. By contrast, none of the major cable news channels—CNN, FOX, MSNBC— reported on the events in Ferguson that day. Local residents and activists broke the Ferguson story through their use of social media.

Two researchers from Northeastern University, Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles, studied the first week of social media that flowed from West Florissant, the street where Brown was shot dead and which later became one of the flashpoints in the conflict between police and local residents. They examined over 500,000 tweets that were generated during the first week of the crisis that contained the keyword "Ferguson." Their findings are revealing.

The most influential Twitter users during that time were not journalists, elected officials, or leaders of civil rights organizations. Rather, they were Ferguson residents who took on the dual roles of citizen journalists and activists. Jackson and Welles call these citizen-activists "early initiators." They were among the first on the scene and the first to start posting information about the events that ensued after Brown's death. These early initiators were the most retweeted and mentioned among those who adopted Twitter to comment and report on what was happening in Ferguson.

This group of early initiators emerged as a grassroots elite, leaders and influencers in a network of activists and content creators that formed soon after Brown's death. The grassroots elite gained prominence as a result of how their storytelling resonated within a growing social network. Due to the mobile, visual, spreadable, scalable, and impactful nature of connected activism, the status of the members of this grassroots elite was elevated to a level that was comparable to more traditional elites, such as professional journalists and civil rights leaders. The young creatives in Ferguson provided a steady stream of information, on-the-ground reporting, and live updates that established an information infrastructure that grew in scope and influence.

Anyone paying attention to the #Ferguson political movement could see that the civic decline narrative did not apply to the young creatives mobilizing around Michael Brown's death. These were not millennials who were less engaged with news and political knowledge than previous generations of Americans. Rather, these connected activists embodied the civic innovation narrative, developing inventive, responsive relationships to news and political knowledge. #Ferguson established a new framework for how we think about the creation, circulation, and consumption of news and political knowledge in the age of social media.

One of the first tweets related to Brown's death was from ThreePharoah, a St. Louis–based rapper. At 12:03 p.m., roughly two minutes after Brown was gunned down, he tweeted, "I JUST SAW SOMEONE DIE OMFG."

One minute later ThreePharoah posted a photo of Brown lying facedown in the street with two white police officers standing over him. The tweet simply read: "Fuckfuck fuck."

ThreePharoah sent a few more tweets describing the scene as the crowd along West Florissant began to swell. Some of his followers tweeted back questions asking what had happened. Other followers used Twitter to ask him how he was holding up in the face of trauma. These exchanges typified the dynamic role that social media would play in Ferguson. From the very beginning, social media was, among other things, a real-time channel for reporting from Ferguson, spreading the perspectives of residents and activists, and building a community of material and emotional support.

In an interesting twist, the national news media followed the on-the-ground reporting from the army of young creatives in Ferguson who turned their mobile phones and social media into a source of citizen journalism, documentary television, and political activism. MSNBC's Chris Hayes told the *New York Times*, "This story was put on the map, driven, and followed on social media more so than any story I can remember since the Arab spring." This trend—citizens producing and circulating news via social media—was under way before Ferguson and reflects, more broadly, a collective turning away from the long-standing hegemony of legacy news media and their agenda-setting role.

This shift in reporting and civic storytelling had a profound effect on Ferguson, the nation, and, most significantly, the young creatives who were largely responsible for it all. Young activists would emerge from #Ferguson buoyed by the sense that they could influence the media and political elite.

After Ferguson, they recognized that connected activism could be a powerful lever for civic innovation, direct action, and social change.

## #WOKE

To understand the vitality of connected activism, consider the political journey of DeRay Mckesson, the former Minneapolis school administrator who emerged as one of the celebrity activists from the tragedy in Ferguson. Mckesson followed the citizen protests in Ferguson through social media rather than the traditional news media. He was not alone. In our *Millennials, Social Media, and Politics* survey, 70 percent say that they get "a lot" or "some" of their news and information from social media. By contrast, 22 percent say that they get "a lot" or "some" of their news and information from print newspapers. The tweets, Facebook posts, and Vine videos that exploded from the streets of Ferguson resulted in an awakening of a sort for Mckesson. Black millennials frequently use the term "woke" to refer to a person who has developed a new awareness about something, usually a social issue, they were once oblivious to.

Mckesson would later assert, "We aren't born woke, something wakes us up, and for so many people, what woke them up was a tweet or a Facebook post, an Instagram post, a picture." The social media content generated by young creatives in Ferguson did more than wake Mckesson. The more personal accounts of what was happening in Ferguson gave him a connection to the movement that was extraordinarily personal and powerful.

Recalling the moment he decided to "go stand in solidarity with the people in Ferguson," Mckesson said, "It was 1 a.m. on August 16, 2014, and I'd seen the events unfolding in Ferguson via Twitter. And I waited until the morning and then called my best friend and asked him for his advice with regard to going down to St. Louis." Mckesson added, "I packed a small bag, put a status on Facebook saying that I was going and asking for somewhere to stay in St. Louis. Then I got in the car, drove nine hours, and ended up on West Florissant."

In Ferguson, Mckesson instinctively did what millennials do. He pulled out his smartphone and began capturing photos and videos of the protesters and their encounters with Ferguson police. He tweeted around the clock and posted hundreds of videos to Vine, giving followers a more intimate connection to what was happening during those grim days and nights in the streets. Within a few weeks Mckesson's social media activities—the nonstop

tweeting and Vine videos—positioned him as a central node in the ecosystem of a growing political movement.

Mckesson and other activists transformed common social media practices—clever tweets, Facebook posts, memes, video clips, status updates—into dynamic forms of connected activism. In the midst of advocating for social justice, they pioneered new methods of political communication and expression. Much of it was improvisational, as Mckesson explained. "There is no one way to do this work. There's no one way to be someone who cares about justice or equity," he said. "There's no one way to use tech platforms. If we had used Twitter the way that all the articles say that you use Twitter, we wouldn't be here. We use it in a different way. . . . You think about the beginning of the protests. It was before . . . you could upload videos on Twitter. We were really patchworking platforms to make them work for us."

As the movement in Ferguson evolved, social media became a resource for connecting to other activists, coordinating demonstrations, and sharing information. "Twitter," Mckesson would later say, "was how I processed [my experience in Ferguson]. I quickly understood Twitter to be a really powerful organizing tool, and we used it to bring people together, to challenge narratives that were untrue, to push people to think differently. It became a real force."

For many young creatives, social media was an opportunity to keep people connected not only to one another but also to the events that were unfolding in the streets of Ferguson. Twitter was a resource for reporting and witnessing. "I remember when Trayvon Martin died, there was no news, and I just didn't know what was true or not. I didn't want that to be the story of Mike Brown," Mckesson told the *Advocate*. In direct contrast to the civic decline narrative, social media was smartly leveraged by young creatives in Ferguson to amplify voices of political dissent. Many of the social media posts captured images of military-style policing—the use of tear gas, police dogs, and armored tanks—that were shared with people all across the world.

The use of social media in Ferguson had a strong social component too. For Mckesson, Twitter was a tool for community building as well as political activity. In interviews, he liked to say that "Twitter was the friend that was always awake." No matter the time of day he posted to Twitter, someone was always online and likely to respond. In direct contrast to the civic decline narrative, young creatives used social media during the events in Ferguson to invest in social capital. Each time Mckesson reached out on Twitter and

found someone awake, he strengthened his ties to the woke community he was a part of. Mckesson realized the vast potential of social media to build his social capital. He used social media to reach out to people, cultivate social connections, and find the material and emotional resources he needed during challenging situations. The community and connections he built online also offered support in the face of internet trolls, bullies, and hate speech.

Mckesson's political journey compelled him to think about the perils and possibilities of digital activism. He was annoyed by the charges that "internet activism" was passive, ephemeral, and shallow. Critics often dismiss internet activism as clicktivism, a term typically used to deride digital activism in general and millennial activism specifically. As he reflected on his own personal experience, Mckesson noted, "I never criticize people who [others] deem to be Twitter activists, or hashtag activists, because I know that telling the truth is often a tough act, no matter where you tell that truth. I think that's important." Mckesson added, "I think that we'll continue to see the platforms push and redefine the way we organize."

Mckesson is among a growing network of young creatives who are shattering derogatory notions of digital activism by pioneering new models of political engagement. Digital activism is not a monolithic enterprise or a substitute for deep engagement in civic life. Rather than retreat from civic life, young activists like Mckesson are expanding the terrain of engaged citizenship and the repertoire of practices we associate with civic life. In our survey with NORC at the University of Chicago we noticed an interesting relationship between social media use and civic engagement. Millennials who were most likely to post political or social issues content via social media were also more likely to be engaged in civic-related activities offline such as voting or attending a political rally. For them, social media was not a passive form of political participation but was instead associated with more active forms online and offline. These activists are not substituting connected activism for real-world engagement; they are using the power of connected activism to complement real-world engagement. Young activists like Mckesson certainly embody this finding in our data.

While it was Mckesson's inventive use of social media that catapulted him into political celebrity, he did more than tweet about injustice. Mckesson essentially lived in Ferguson for several months, joining protesters to confront law enforcement and city officials. He then joined activists in cities like Baltimore and Baton Rouge to protest the killing of unarmed Black citizens by police. David Axelrod, longtime political insider and adviser to

President Obama, invited Mckesson to lead a seminar on social media and activism at the University of Chicago's Institute of Politics. Mckesson, a Baltimore native, even ran for mayor in his hometown. Beginning in Ferguson, Mckesson collaborated with a diverse team of activists, artists, designers, and data scientists to build a new kind of political movement that reflects many of the signature features of the new innovation economy. Young creatives like Mckesson wield a form of political activism that is networked, tech savvy, and deeply committed to social justice.

## SOMETHING BIGGER

#Ferguson marked the beginning of an explosion of street protest and savvy social media engagement that emerged in the days and months following the death of Mike Brown. In retrospect, #Ferguson was a precursor to something bigger. Some of the young creatives involved in #Ferguson began to think about their social justice work the way aspiring entrepreneurs think about a start-up, and that meant mobilizing their resources to build an enterprise that they could grow, iterate, and deploy to disrupt, in their case, the political status quo. As their model of political activism evolved, it began to embody some of the core features of the new innovation economy. This was certainly true with Samuel Sinyangwe, a Stanford University graduate and policy analyst.

Like so many other millennials, Sinyangwe was struck by the rise of the Ferguson protest and how it "woke" a generation. When he saw Mckesson's reply to Oprah Winfrey's criticism that Black Lives Matter activists did not have specific asks or goals, Sinyangwe reached out to Mckesson via Twitter. "I replied to the tweet saying that I could help develop a policy agenda that implements these demands in practice. I didn't know who De-Ray or anyone was," Sinyangwe recalled. "As a policy analyst, I wanted to contribute policy."

Sinyangwe believed that if the advocacy work of Black Lives Matter was going to spark real changes in the way law enforcement polices Black communities, the activists needed to persuade lawmakers to act. The best way to do that, he thought, was to tell a data-driven story. Sinyangwe identifies as a data scientist, but he is also a data activist. He represents an emerging group of talented professionals who are beginning to think inventively about the ways data can be mobilized to inform and support movements that challenge systems of social and economic inequality. In the era of "big data," we are learning that the collection of massive amounts of information can and has

been deployed in ways that reproduce disparities in health, education, up-ward mobility, and criminal justice. The way algorithms are developed, the analysis of large data sets, and the application of artificial intelligence reflect the degree to which the management of data serves as a source of power, new capitalism, and social control.

Data activists believe in the power of data to tell stories that have the capacity to induce political action and policy change. Sinyangwe believed the next evolution in the movement to secure Black lives was the use of data as a tool for mobilizing more strategic and persuasive forms of political en-gagement. "People in positions of power and influence are more receptive to data than stories. In their positions they hear all kinds of stories from all kinds of people, and they have to sift through what the trends are in order to set policy," Sinyangwe said.

After a series of conversations with Mckesson and St. Louis–based activ-ist Brittany Packnett, Sinyangwe decided to conduct an analysis of police killings in the US. If he and his fellow activists were going to advocate for policy shifts and greater accountability among police, it was important to have a precise understanding of the scope of the problem. For example, how many people do the police kill a year, and what percentage of those people is African American?

When Sinyangwe went to collect the data, he was surprised by what he found—nothing. More precisely, he discovered that none of the federal agencies that we might expect, including the Department of Justice, the FBI, and the Centers for Disease Control, maintain records of police use of force. This was true even though one of the requirements laid out by the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 was that the attorney general's office is supposed to publish an annual summary of police activities, including the excessive use of force. But as he searched, Sinyangwe realized that there were no standardized protocols for collecting and systematically organizing data about the activities of the police.

Eventually, Sinyangwe turned to three citizen-driven crowdsourced da-tabases to get the most comprehensive information on the scope of police use of force. KilledbyPolice.net, the US Police Shootings Database, and FatalEncounters.org highlight the persistent efforts of everyday citizens to keep the public informed about the use of deadly force by police. These civic-oriented enterprises were doing what the federal government was not doing—maintaining an annual accounting of police killings across the coun-try. It did not take Sinyangwe and his collaborators long to realize that the

databases were useful. Combined, they represented roughly 90–95 percent of the total police killings in the US. Few people knew that these sources of data existed. Sinyangwe told a group gathered for a 2015 conference on Data & Civil Rights that the databases "have been here all along. It's just no one had taken the data bases, merged [them], filled in the gaps, and made sense of it to the world." That is precisely what he and his collaborators decided to do. Sinyangwe explained, "We could tell the story in another unique way, a way that can be especially appealing to policy makers."

After collecting and analyzing the data, Sinyangwe and his colleagues had to decide on the best way to share their findings. What story would they tell, and, equally important, how would they tell it? After careful deliberations, they decided to build a web-based project called Mapping Police Violence. Working with a team of artists, designers, and web developers, the team fed the information from their unique data set into Carto, a location data intelligence software solution that, among other things, visualizes geo-tagged data. They designed graphics and charts to illuminate some of the more striking findings from their analysis. The site that they built went live in March 2015—seven months after Brown was killed—and was immediately recognized as a technical and civic achievement. News organizations like the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as tech news organizations like *Fast Company*, the *Huffington Post*, and *TechCrunch* featured the project in their reporting.

Mapping Police Violence was also eye-opening for the team that created it. "One look at that map, in two seconds, you knew this was happening everywhere. It wasn't just a Baltimore problem or a Ferguson problem," Sinyangwe told *Fast Company*. The visualization data compiled by the team supported a rallying cry that was echoed by many activists regarding the use of deadly police force in the US: "Ferguson is everywhere."

The empirical data was equally compelling. Take, for example, their analysis of 2015 data on police killing from the sixty largest police departments in the US. In 2015 fifty-nine of the sixty police departments killed civilians. The rate of police killings exceeded the national homicide rate in several cities, including Bakersfield, Oklahoma City, Oakland, New Orleans, Indianapolis, and St. Louis. Of the sixty departments reviewed, only one, the Riverside (California) Police Department, did not kill anyone in 2015. The data revealed that Blacks were disproportionately more likely to be killed by police than any other racial or ethnic group. Among the people killed in the top sixty police departments in the nation, Blacks made up 41 percent

of the victims, even though they were only 20 percent of the total population in these specific jurisdictions. Forty-one of the sixty police departments disproportionately killed Black people relative to the population of Black people in their jurisdiction. Alarmingly, fourteen departments killed Black people exclusively, including St. Louis, Atlanta, Kansas City, Cleveland, Baltimore, Boston, and Washington, DC.

For Sinyangwe, Mapping Police Violence was precisely the kind of data-driven story that he envisioned telling to support the movement to secure Black lives. The findings revealed in Mapping Police Violence led Sinyangwe, Mckesson, and Packnett to launch Campaign Zero, a civic initiative that included ten specific policies to reduce police killings in the US, such as the use of body cameras for police and a more robust training regimen for police officers. Campaign Zero was the team's first explicit move into policy-oriented activism. A mix of stakeholders, including police departments, elected officials, and high-profile political candidates consulted the policy ideas crafted by Campaign Zero, marking key shifts in the identity and influence of a movement that began in Ferguson.

A civic enterprise like Mapping Police Violence required an approach to political activism that was collaborative, tech savvy, and empowered by a diverse network of talent. It also required activists to become more innovative and even entrepreneurial in their desire to be agents of social change.

## BUILDING A CIVIC START-UP

Shortly after releasing Mapping Police Violence, Sinyangwe, Mckesson, and Packnett formed a new political organization, WeTheProtesters. Their post-Ferguson efforts had increasingly focused on translating their experiences, knowledge, and political capital as activists into a more sustainable civic enterprise. Efforts like these were designed to catalyze the momentum generated by Black Lives Matter.

The young activists like Sinyangwe, Mckesson, and Packnett that emerged from Black Lives Matter had ambition, but that was not enough to create a political movement built for the twenty-first century. The evolution of their ideas about political engagement prompted them to begin thinking as much like a tech start-up as a civil rights organization. Naturally, this meant thinking about how their technology and social ingenuity could empower their civic aspirations. In an effort to launch a higher-capacity organization, they took a path that a growing number of aspiring start-ups take—they applied for admission to an accelerator.

Since 2008, the accelerator model has been growing at a steady clip in the US. Accelerators are designed to ramp up a start-up's learning, networking, execution, and go-to-market preparation in a fixed amount of time, usually about six weeks. I visited a number of accelerators during my fieldwork and was struck by several features. In many ways, accelerators are like boot camp for entrepreneurs. Their primary aim is to help start-ups scale their idea for a product or service. Some of the most recognized companies in the digital economy—Airbnb and Dropbox—benefited from the accelerator model.

The typical accelerator provides a physical space for start-ups to build an idea into something tangible. Accelerators are also a source of social and financial capital. For example, accelerators often connect aspiring start-ups to a vibrant network of entrepreneurs who can offer, among other things, business, strategic, and technical expertise. Additionally, accelerators introduce promising entrepreneurs to a network of angel investors and venture capitalists, the financial backbone of the innovation economy.

WeTheProtesters was accepted to a San Francisco–based accelerator called Fast Forward. Whereas most accelerators are designed to help launch for-profit companies, Fast Forward was one of the first to specialize in cultivating nonprofit enterprises. For traditional accelerators, a key measure of a company's success is the value of financing rounds or lucrative exits. Accelerators that build nonprofit organizations establish different metrics for success. For example, Fast Forward measures success in terms of the number of lives their companies have impacted, the lines of code written, and the percentage of founders who are women and from diverse racial and ethnic groups. During their time at Fast Forward, the founders of WeTheProtesters had the opportunity to sharpen their strategic vision, grow their social network, meet and learn from other social impact enterprises, and prototype their idea for a digital civil rights movement.

Unlike in the for-profit sector, in the nonprofit sector there is no venture capital infrastructure. The leaders of WeTheProtesters knew that the timing for their idea—a millennial-driven political movement—was right, but they would need to find more creative ways to prepare to go to market and to scale their enterprise for the immense audience of activists they wanted to reach. How could they build an operation that effectively mobilized the widespread desire among many millennials to get involved? As they thought about their political future, they discerned that the scope of the work was far greater than any one organization could manage. The number of people

either directly involved with or at least sensitive to the claims and concerns of Black Lives Matter was substantial. The challenge that WeTheProtesters faced was designing a mechanism and a call to action that could effectively mobilize this untapped resource into a base of direct action, influence, and political power. "There are not enough full-time activists and advocacy organizations to handle the immense demand of the moment," Sinyangwe said, "so we have to figure out how to build the capacity to the millions of people who want to get involved to be as good as the professionals."

## A TIME TO ACT

WeTheProtesters' desire to build what some called the first civil rights movement of the twenty-first century required ingenuity, verve, and the ability to tap talent that existed beyond their small circle of leaders. The contributions of Aditi Juneja, a former New York University law school student, are a brilliant example of the possibilities of connected activism in a networked society.

By her own admission, Juneja was late to the Black Lives Matter movement. She knew the group existed, but she struggled to articulate anything specific about its practical goals. In her third year of law school, Juneja reached out to WeTheProtesters via social media, indicating that she had a background in government and an interest in policy. She was struck by the fact that a group of young activists were not only making noise; they were also making a difference. In 2016, soon after corresponding with Sinyangwe, Juneja began serving as an informal adviser to WeTheProtesters in between her studies at NYU Law. Americans would elect a new president that year.

Juneja paid close attention to the presidential campaign. She followed the vastly different policy positions of the two major candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Like many Americans, she was surprised by the election of Trump, calling it a wake-up call for her and her colleagues at WeTheProtesters. "After the election, we knew we needed to shift focus," Juneja told me. Trump's policy pronouncements, on everything from immigration to health care, were a frontal assault on WeTheProtesters' values of equity and social justice.

A few days after the presidential election, Juneja took action. "I started making a Google Doc and tables to keep track of different policies. It started out as an attempt to educate myself." She was interested in how the looming shifts in the policy landscape would impact those who were most vulnerable, socially and economically. "There is a lot of chatter about politics in the

news media," she explained to me, "but not much attention to how politics and policy actually impact people's lives."

As she began studying the nuances of the political and legislative process, Juneja became extraordinarily knowledgeable about policy. During our conversation, she spoke about things as varied as budget reconciliation, cloture, and the Affordable Care Act. Juneja believed strongly that it was important to build a platform that could help educate aspiring activists. "I was a law student and someone who paid at least a little attention to the connection between politics and policy," Juneja noted, adding, "and if I did not understand what was happening in the policy space, I was convinced that many others did not either."

After populating the Google spreadsheet with policy-related content, Juneja shared it with Sinyangwe. "Sam liked it, and we both thought, 'This should be made public.'" Juneja and some of the WeTheProtesters team began brainstorming the best way to leverage her policy document into a form of political action. She explained to me that while the project was motivated by the 2016 presidential election, it was not anti-Trump. Rather, she wanted to build a platform that was pro-equity and pro-social justice. Juneja's policy document became the material for a new open-source, wiki-style platform that embodied WeTheProtesters' vision to build capacity for a twenty-first-century political movement that was digital, networked, creative, and, most importantly, capable of inspiring direct political action. They called the platform the Resistance Manual.

## PROTOTYPING THE CIVIC FUTURE

If there was one social platform that was synonymous with Black Lives Matter, it was Twitter. Despite the 140-character constraints at the time, Twitter was a multipurpose channel. Activists used it as a platform for organizing, broadcasting, and collective mobilizing. Twitter inadvertently became the infrastructure for the movement. But as WeTheProtesters began to think about building a more sustainable movement and an organizational structure, Twitter had some notable limitations. "What it [Twitter] hasn't done effectively is preserve the knowledge base outside of the immediacy of the moment," Sinyangwe explained in an interview with the *International Business Times*.

The Resistance Manual would be a different kind of social platform, he said: "[It] promotes crowd sourcing mentality and collaboration at scale, but does it in a way that saves the content and allows you to dive deeper and really

become informed." If Twitter was about staying informed in real time, the Resistance Manual was about staying informed over time. The inspiration for the design of the Resistance Manual came from the most collaborative information resource in human history: Wikipedia. The Resistance Manual runs on the same free software as Wikipedia, MediaWiki. From a design perspective, the Resistance Manual looks and feels like Wikipedia. The layout and organization of content follows the wiki model, making it both familiar and user-friendly. Equally important was the concerted effort to capture the collaborative spirit of Wikipedia. "When you think about Wikipedia, they're designed to crowdsource contributions from people effectively and to build a knowledge base that's greater than any one group or organization," Sinyangwe said. "It's reflective of the body of knowledge that's out there."

The wiki model was responsive to the organizational and financial constraints that WeTheProtesters faced. The fledgling civil rights organization was ambitious, but it lacked the two things that are critical to mobilizing a political organization: money and staff. The wiki model, like so many of WeTheProtesters' other endeavors, became a clever workaround in the face of limited resources. What it may have lacked in financial or human capital, WeTheProtesters made up with the accumulation of social and reputational capital. Whereas social connections lead to social capital, the respect and admiration inspired by activism result in reputational capital.

When it came time to execute the wiki, WeTheProtesters mobilized their deep social connections to recruit talent. Social media helped to widen their social network. Research has shown that it is not necessarily the size of a social network that matters, but rather the diversity of the people in that network. Social network scholars refer to this as "network extensity." Launching a digital platform required a deep reservoir of talent—designers, coders, artists, researchers, writers, and policy analysts. By growing their social capital, largely through social media, WeTheProtesters was able to access the human capital it otherwise lacked.

WeTheProtesters had swag too. The organization's brand was recognizable and reputable among young, established, and aspiring activists. In the wake of Ferguson and other high-profile police killings, Mckesson had become a political celebrity. He made appearances on *The Late Show with Steven Colbert* and *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. Johnetta Elzie and Packnett had been featured in a number of news media outlets. Elzie, a St. Louis native, used her razor-sharp intellect to bring attention to the racial injustice she had witnessed in Ferguson. She was known as a "Day 1," a reference to

those who began protesting in Ferguson the day Brown was killed. Their smart use of social media—everything from Black Twitter to meme culture—reflected a generational ethos that was transforming the cultural and communication landscape. The social media presence of the WeTheProtesters planning team, simply put, enhanced their reputational capital and appeal to young people.

Juneja's vision for the Resistance Manual was straightforward: policy explanation and connections to activism for as many people as possible. Her "napkin pitch" went something like this: "Get educated. Get organized. Take Action." The pitch summarized the three things the Resistance Manual was designed to do: First, educate about specific policy areas. If activists were going to spark change, it was critical that they be knowledgeable about the political process and specific policy areas. Second, the Manual was designed to function as a hub that curated the knowledge, insights, and tactics activists could use. Finally, the Manual was designed to offer local activists concrete pathways into direct political action.

For its launch, the Resistance Manual offered a mix of materials, including crisis resources, tools of resistance, and essential readings. For example, the executive orders on immigration issued by Trump shortly after he took office thrust many immigration activists into crisis mode. Undocumented adults needed to know where they could go to get legal assistance and support for their children if they were deported. The Resistance Manual offered a number of specific tactics activists could include in their civic toolkit. Some of the tactics included strategies for working with the media, including how to write op-eds or give an interview. The essential readings list compiled books, articles, and syllabi that allowed people to access a wide range of ideas and philosophies related to the history of protest, social movements, and inequality.

## MAKING SHIT UP OR FIGURING THINGS OUT?

At its core, the Resistance Manual resembles some of the creative and entrepreneurial endeavors that I observed throughout my research. There is no dedicated office space. The bulk of the work—research, data collection, strategizing, policy discussions—happen primarily through online channels. Juneja was based in New York, but the community of volunteers that she worked most closely with lived across the US. "We had people from Oregon, New York, Missouri, North Carolina, Texas, really all over the world," Juneja recalled.

Like many other bootstrapping innovators, WeTheProtesters turned to online tools to help make their work more efficient, productive, and manageable. Juneja told me that they relied heavily on Slack, the cloud-based business application software, in those first few months of the Manual. The team of volunteers for the Resistance Manual used Slack to coordinate, communicate, collaborate, and ideate. "It was great for getting things done," Juneja told me. She was overwhelmed by the enormous amount of work the Manual required. "I was working nonstop, trying to manage the site, overseeing new content creation, and responding to more and more inquiries." Once she set up a leadership team and developed Slack subgroups, the actual job of organizing the influx of correspondence, questions, and volunteers became more doable.

With Slack they could create subchannels and subconversations that allowed for a more efficient exchange of information, collaboration, and problem-solving. For example, the members of the leadership team who focused on immigration organized through a specific channel that allowed them to share relevant information and devise a strategy for curating that information. In the early days of the Manual, immigration was a hot topic, largely because of the swift action Trump took shortly after becoming president. People needed information right away that addressed questions such as "What are my rights?" and "Who can I consult for legal advice?" Immigration activists from communities across the US needed help identifying specific tactics they could use to support immigrant families and communities in crisis.

Within just a few days of the launch, the Manual generated a few hundred thousand unique users and several thousand edits. According to Juneja, the users included individual citizens, nonprofit organizations, ex-patriots, and activists from other countries. There was, for example, the mom in Chicago who used the Manual to inform her kids and spark conversations with them about racial, political, and policy matters. The conversations initiated by this mother inspired one of her kids to start a WeTheProtesters club at her high school, a likely pathway into civic engagement for this group of young citizens.

The Manual also became a widely respected tool in the larger "resistance community" that grew rapidly after the election of Trump. As more social impact organizations form, competition between them is inevitable. Among other things, groups vie for funding, visibility, talent, and, of course,

influence. Juneja believes that rather than competing in the "political resistance nonprofit space," the Resistance Manual emerged as a neutral tool. She noted that when she attended conferences and convenings with members from the resistance community, they consistently commented on the value of the Resistance Manual. "They view it as a resource for strengthening their knowledge in key policy areas," she explained. Soon after its launch, Juneja realized that the Resistance Manual had the potential to be a pivotal node in a political ecosystem where youth activism and the policy landscape might be transformed.

The Manual's audience was global too. "People and organizations from India, South Africa, and the UK reached out to us," Juneja said. As a result of #Ferguson, the activists at WeTheProtesters became global icons of digital age political activism. Aspiring activists from other countries wanted to learn more about the strategy, organization, and ideas that invigorated the Resistance Manual. Juneja's conversations with global activists were substantive. When she spoke with activists from India, Juneja pointed out that the lower levels of internet penetration in the country might limit the value of a digital toolkit like the Resistance Manual. She noted that pamphlets and radio addresses might be more useful in communities facing digital access and literacy issues.

Juneja's side hustle—building the Resistance Manual—eventually became a full-time gig. Roughly two hundred people—lawyers, teachers, designers, activists, and students—signed up as volunteers soon after the Manual's launch. Somebody needed to quickly devise and manage a system that could utilize this volunteer talent effectively. Additionally, someone needed to create and supervise a process that could manage the crowdsourced content that populated the platform. The Resistance Manual was Juneja's idea, but it was never her plan to be the lead organizer of the platform. "I never expected to be that person," Juneja told me.

While attending NYU law school—from which she later graduated—Juneja worked as many as seventy hours a week on the Resistance Manual. "I did not go to many classes. Really, I did not do much else." As Juneja thought about the massive effort that was required to build early momentum for the Manual, she reflected, "This movement called for something different." Before long she was managing the flock of volunteers, writing and curating content for the site, conducting research, and networking with other resistance organizations. In her words, "I was just making shit up as

I went along." There was no manual for how to organize a digital political movement. She read a few books and studied a handful of organizations, but this was new terrain for her and for WeTheProtesters.

What Juneja described as "making shit up" could also be characterized as "figuring things out." It turns out that the ability to adjust on the fly, grapple with complexity, manage uncertainty, and figure things out are among the most crucial skills in an economy powered by innovation. The ability to see the need for a product, a service, or an idea and figure out how to deliver it is a skill. The team at WeTheProtesters saw a need—catalyzing a burgeoning social movement—and proposed a solution for tapping and unleashing its political potential: a crowdsourcing platform that built community, knowledge, and tools for direct action. One of their innovations was the scale at which they attracted a diverse collection of talent to build a political organization that was much larger and potentially far more impactful than any traditional organization they could have created.

## THE CHALLENGES OF CONNECTED ACTIVISM

If there was one thing that Juneja wanted me to understand about the Resistance Manual, it was how hard it was to bring the idea to fruition. "All of the work that we did sounds romantic, but it was not. It was really, really hard," she said. There were times when she questioned if they could realize the vision. "It's not pretty; you make mistakes. I yelled at people, neglected family and friends," she acknowledged during our conversation.

I was struck by how much Juneja learned about civic innovation largely through the hands-on experience of making the site and then going public with it. She led the effort even though she had no experience building a civic media platform. Like many of the enterprises discussed in this book, the Resistance Manual was a product of tech ingenuity, social capital, responsiveness to change, and entrepreneurial hustle.

Juneja and the leaders from WeTheProtesters realized that activists around the country needed a network and tools that could empower their desires for activism, sometimes on a local scale, sometimes on a national scale. As a result of the spreadable and scalable features of connected activism, the Resistance Manual influenced activists from other countries too. "People around the world reached out to us," Juneja proudly recalled. "They wanted to learn from us in order to do something similar in their country." When Juneja met with some of these activists and shared her insights about using digital technology to organize political movements, her actions illus-

trated the sharing economy that is such an integral part of the innovation economy young creatives are building. Rather than charge global activists a fee to acquire insights from WeTheProtesters or to access the Manual, Juneja wanted the resource she helped to create to be accessible, spreadable, educational, and impactful. While it may have cost WeTheProtesters financially, the decision to make access to their wiki-based platform free invited the expertise, ideas, and community-building that brought their vision of a more dynamic, effective, and inclusive civic future to life.