

Use it Wisely

Social Media and Youth Activism

Monica Pauls

Mount Royal University, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Series in Critical Media Studies



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Use It Wisely is a thoughtful and timely book that takes young people's perspectives on their digital lives seriously—something that is still far too rare. Monica Pauls offers a nuanced account of youth online activism that moves beyond familiar fear-based narratives, showing how digital spaces can foster agency, solidarity, and meaningful social change, while not shying away from or ignoring the risks. In doing so, the book challenges assumptions about tired “slacktivism” narratives and makes a compelling case for listening more closely to how young people themselves understand and engage the online world.

Prof. Dr. Kaitlynn Mendes
Western University, Canada

Monica Pauls' book Use It Wisely unpacks and critiques stereotypes regarding youth and digital activism (e.g., as 'slacktivism') through a meticulously designed, multi-method research project which centers the voices of youth involved in both gun control and climate change social movements. The book explores core issues such as how authenticity is understood by activists who skillfully navigate the constraints and structure of digital environments to render social change. It provides an invaluable contribution to knowledge in this area.

Prof. Dr. Michael Adorjan
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I am happy to offer my support for Use it Wisely: Social Media and Youth Activism by Dr. Monica Pauls. This book offers a refreshing and nuanced take in a world where we are overwhelmingly presented with evidence of the negative impact of online behaviour. Hearing from the voices of young people is important as we navigate changes in how social media shows up in their lives. Providing a framework to help us understand how young people use social media to express opinions, share ideas, learn and create social change is crucial as young people increasingly orient their lives around social media. This book's insight extends beyond activism and presents a picture of young people that isn't often portrayed, as people who are deeply engaged and committed to their cause. It also provides valuable insight into the work that goes into how new social movements organize and mobilize. Readers will benefit from the discussion of connectivity and collective identity that are fostered online, and how these lead to collective action. A timely and informative addition to the literature and discussion on social movements.

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Introduction

In December 2025, Australia implemented a nationwide ban on social media use for anyone under the age of 16. Since then, several other countries have followed suit - Greece announced a ban for youth under 15; Indonesia is in the process of restricting access to major platforms for those under 16; France and Spain are debating similar policies. Most recently, a proposed ban was voted down in the United Kingdom. Government consultation on this issue continues, which includes a trial involving hundreds of teens who will have their social media accounts disabled, blocked overnight, or capped to one-hour use for several months. Discussions about this topic have also emerged in Canada, where debates about minimum age, age verification, harmful platform features, and the responsibility of platforms may inform new regulations and policies.

I understand and to some extent support such actions, but I also see another side to this issue—a perspective or voice that is missing from the table. One that speaks to the *good* of social media. This is not in reference to the inherent nature of platforms, but rather about the affordances, the spaces, and the opportunities that social media provide for young people. Is cyberbullying real? Undoubtedly, but so are friendships that develop in online communities. Do young people spend (too much) time on their phones? Most probably do, but we cannot assume that time online is always spent on social media, nor that this time would be simply replaced by something *better* should it be taken away. Do young people *not* know how to socialise? I am not convinced. I have teenage children who go to school, who play sports, who spend time with friends and family, all in person. One has a part-time job, and one wants one. They both will soon have drivers' licences. They socialise. I am not sure whether they do it well (or what that actually means) and while I'd like them to spend less time on their phones, I see their social development in other aspects of their lives.

I have long held that absolutes obscure the complexity of social issues. Policies and positions grounded in binary or dichotomous thinking—where experiences, attributes, or outcomes are reduced to mutually exclusive categories—fail to account for nuance and intermediate possibilities. This perspective shaped my approach to this book, which examines the use of social media among youth activists. Drawing on research conducted for my doctoral dissertation, I explored how a small sample of youth activists engaged with Twitter. My analysis focused not only on how activists used the platform in their work, but also on how the platform itself shaped and structured online activity. I did not approach this research with the aim of determining whether social media use among youth activists is inherently beneficial or harmful, nor whether such activism is effective. Instead, I sought to challenge prevailing assumptions about

young people's engagement with social media and to foreground the constructive role that digital media can play in civic and political life. More specifically, this work aims to understand what it means for young people to engage in activism online, how they enact agency through digital practices, and how collective identity may emerge within networked environments in ways that support collective action.

Discussions on activist identity, slacktivism, and what activism looks like on Twitter open the book, followed by an exploration of both the affordances and risks of using social media platforms for activism. Relationships and collective identity are addressed in chapter five, which includes a social network analysis of the data from my study. The book concludes by summarising the previous chapters in a counterargument to the critique of slacktivism.

All of this provides insights into what it means to young people to do activism online. It contributes to a definition of activism that includes youth voice, appreciates the connection between online practices and activist identity and, above all else, furthers a counter-argument to critiques of digital activism. The book also contributes to our understanding of the relationship between human agency and technological control in virtual spaces by demonstrating the agency that youth activists can enact online through their recognition of affordances, their engagement in strategic practices and their navigation of the risks of using social media. Finally, it helps us reconsider our understanding of collective behaviour in light of social media, with a specific focus on relationships and connections among social movement actors online.

I started the research in 2019, with the bulk of the data collection and analysis occurring in 2020 - this was a time when Twitter was Twitter, when the youth climate movement and March For Our Lives (an American gun control movement) were peaking, and the world as we knew it was shutting down because of COVID-19. Much has changed since then—Twitter is now X, social movements have morphed and evolved in membership and focus, and social distancing is a mere memory. However, I still see value in the research I conducted, which is why I wrote this book.

Much of the discourse surrounding social media and young people focuses on the risks of the online environment—from concerns about mental health and excessive use to hate speech and the algorithmic spread of misinformation. This book offers an alternative perspective. Given the central role that social media play in young people's lives, it is essential that we seek to understand their online experiences and recognise how digital spaces can support their participation in social and political life. Rather than drawing conclusions rooted primarily in anxiety or fear, I argue for greater attention to how youth activists themselves understand and engage in their work. This requires that we take seriously the role of digital media in the everyday lives of young people

and acknowledge the value of their contributions to civic and political life, even when their practices differ from those of previous generations. In doing so, we are better positioned to support young people in their efforts to enact meaningful social change.

While we cannot know the future impacts of social media bans, I encourage you to critically examine dominant narratives surrounding young people's use of technology. Consider your own digital practices and uses, the affordances you take advantage of and the risks that you navigate, and the ways in which online spaces, tools, and communities shape your everyday life. Such reflection underscores that digital engagement is neither wholly beneficial nor inherently harmful. Guidance, education, monitoring, and regulation are all strategies that can support the *wise* use of social media by young people. It might be time to try.

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Author's Biography

Monica Pauls is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Child Studies and Social Work at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta. Her research focuses on youth, technology, and digital practice, with particular attention to social media use and youth activism. She teaches in the Bachelor of Child Studies, primarily in the areas of program design and evaluation, research methods, systems and social policy, and child and youth care practice. Her teaching emphasises the integration of theory and practice through participatory learning, partnerships with community organisations, and opportunities for applied learning.

Prior to her academic career, Monica worked as Coordinator for Alberta-based research projects at the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family and as a Policy Analyst with the United Way of Calgary and Area. She also spent several years working directly with at-risk youth in schools, community programs, and residential settings.

Monica holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Calgary. Her doctoral research, which forms the foundation of this book, examined the role of social media in youth activism.

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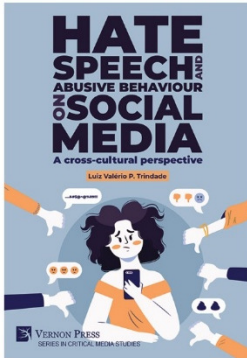
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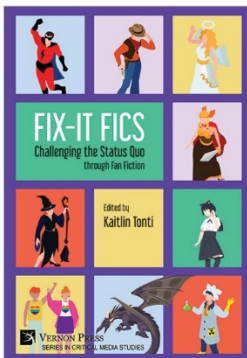
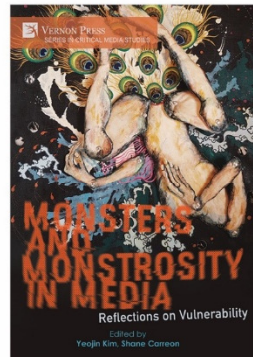
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