

Within this section we will first provide some details about Youth Activism in general and then focus in particular on Youth Activism in the realm of the media. We will discuss issues such as: what youth activism is, why it is important, what forms of youth activism are there and how young people become activists.

Topic: Youth Activism

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➤ Some details about Youth Activism in general

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➤ Youth activism in the realm of the media

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➤ What is youth activism, why is it important, what forms of youth activism are there, how do young people become activists, how to use social media as a tool for youth activism

What is Youth Activism?

Let us start with a clear and simple definition of youth activism. Broadly defined, activism refers to action for social change - activism includes protests, advocacy, information dissemination and raising awareness. Typically, when we think about youth activism, we have in mind the young activists who protest against child labour, for environmental protection, animal rights, recognition of Palestine and so on. Or, historically, we tend to attribute activism to Nazi resistance, fight for civil rights, protests against the Vietnam war during the 1970s in the USA, and 1968 student protests throughout Europe.

As it is probably the case with most definitions, an attempt to define activism seems to be clear, but once we go to the specifics, things tend to get more complex. Activism is used in many different ways by many political actors and those who practise civic engagement. Thus, while we tend to associate it primarily with riots or street protests, scholars emphasize that activism can encompass both actions that are being taken to various forms of knowledge, resources and experiences that enable young people to engage in activism. In that sense, for example, insofar as this course is intended to empower young people and to provide some useful tools for them to act, it is also activism of sorts, if we employ this broader definition. In an influential book called *Youth Activism: an International Encyclopaedia*, Ron Kassimir writes:

"Youth activism can range from voting in elections to participating in revolutions, from exposure to civic education to participation in debate clubs, voluntary work, and service provision, from working on behalf of political parties to gathering signatures to present a petition to political leaders." Scholars, however, have a broader definition, and emphasize that "activism is civic engagement, and the education and experience that prepare a young person for the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship are all part of the process."

But for many young people, and those who consider themselves to be activists, activism here means a more specific and **active participation** in the following: protest events and direct actions, nonviolent but also violent; ongoing advocacy campaigns to change the policies and behaviours of powerful institutions or governments, transnational corporations, international institutions; consumer boycotts and other users of market power to effect change and information gathering and dissemination intended to influence media attention and the consciousness of the public regarding issues of concern.

From the activists' point of view, activism is only one of the forms of civic engagement, and not the most common one. It implies action that expresses some dissatisfaction, action that wants to **change** things. Not many young people engage in this form of activism - actually, not many young people vote at all, and far fewer young people are activists in this sense compared to those who vote. But the importance of such activism cannot be simply measured by numbers of people taking part in it. Recent USA protests like *Occupy Wall Street* or anti-globalist movement are very effective and can have global consequences. Even if activism does not bring immediate change, it raises awareness and affects political views and behaviours of many people.

Another issue that we need to take into account is whether activism is a good thing. Can there be **bad activism**? It depends on our standpoint and this issue cannot be answered universally.

An anti-abortion campaign is surely a good thing for those who are against abortion, whereas for those who emphasize women's rights to choose if they want to have a baby or not such activism can be seen as a bad thing. Also, while we tend to associate the term activism with affirmative, progressive and emancipatory goals, there are also actions such as right-wing activism, anti-refugee campaign that fit the definition of activism as well. Thus, it is hard to say in advance, or once for all what activism is, and especially - that activism is necessarily a good thing.

One author thus illustrates the difficulties of defining activism by taking RAP music as an example. Namely, RAP music often talks about racism and challenges race differences in America. Older rap musicians or bands such as *Ice T* or *Public Enemy* also fiercely attacked the American system and were even seen as a threat by the establishment. RAP can thus be seen as activism, in the sense that it tackles some burning issues. However, others would argue that RAP music is not oriented towards promoting change, that it only raises issues, whereas activism needs to involve a **course of action**. Finally, there are those who also argue that RAP music is destructive, whereas activism needs to be **constructive**. As you can see, once you start thinking more thoroughly about what actually qualifies as activism, this concept becomes more complex and illusive.

We also need to take into account that forms of activism are different in different places - for those who live in democracies, public protests or rallies are typical forms of activism. But for those who live under an authoritarian rule, these forms of expressing dissatisfaction or demanding change are often impossible. Political action in such cases can be hidden out of necessity, and activism can have more secretive forms of raising awareness and opting for action during informal meetings, religious services and so on.

Lonie Sherrod writes in *Youth Activism: an International Encyclopaedia*:

“participating as a citizen in society is as important as working or forming a family, yet there has been much more attention to the development of schooling and work and on the formation of relationships and families than to the development of citizenship. This is a serious mistake. Societies throughout the globe have to understand how their youth develop into productive, capable adult citizens. Societies also need to provide opportunities for the development of citizenship through their social institutions.”

But, are the youth themselves passive and disinterested in their future or politics that surrounds them, as we often hear? Scholar Robert Putnam has argued that around year 2000 civic engagement has been at the all-time low in the United States, especially among young people. And he came to that conclusion by looking at how many people vote, read newspaper, participate in political clubs and the like. And his conclusion was that these indicators are much lower in youth - defined as 18 to 25 years old, than in any other age group. For example, as mentioned, young people typically vote less than any other age group.

But, his argument is controversial. Other scholars argued that civic engagement has not declined but has simply changed in nature. So, for instance, young people may not read newspapers, but they get news from the TV or the Internet. Participation in organisations may be low, but they often act as volunteers, or do community service, and such activities are at their record high.

In the past, transition from childhood to adulthood can be said to have been relatively simple. Before the Industrial revolution, most people were farming, cultivating lands, and there was little difference in workstyle and lifestyle between adults and younger generation. So, no need to have a separate period or life called youth or to give it some exceptional social attention existed.

But in the last 2 centuries, things have changed - first of all, while prior to the Industrial revolution everything remained within a family - a house and a farm, now things have changed - you live at one place, you work at another, and the learning and education part is conducted at yet again a different place, so younger people now started attending schools. On top of that, far more people than ever before started going to universities, or places of higher education, and so on. Work processes and technology are changing rapidly, and it is more and more complicated to catch up. Now we need to acquire new skills constantly in order to be employable - knowledge that was contemporary 20 years ago can be totally useless nowadays. All these things created a gap between generations, and especially between adults and youth.

So, who is nowadays an adult? Usually, it has been considered that once you exit your teens you are an adult. So, maturity line was set between 18 and 21 in Europe or in the UK and US. But this line separating youth and adults has been moved up in the recent decades, simply because it showed that in today's society, it is not easy to get knowledge, gain full independence and have economic means to be fully emancipated by this age. Do, it is commonly taken that youth are between 18 and 25 years nowadays, and some even move this line up to 30 years of age.

Two scholars define the youth in the following manner: *"Youth is an elastic category: where it begins and ends is subject to interpretation and is sensitive to social and historical context. Typically, this stage or time in the life cycle refers to persons in the adolescent and emerging adult years, people who are no longer children but "not quite" adults in the sense of assuming the independence and responsibilities typically associated with adulthood. Depending on the socioeconomic and sociocultural traditions of a society, youth may be persons as young as thirteen and as old as forty."*

In psychological terms, this is the period when a person tries to find him or herself in the world, and his or her position in a society. Lonnie Sherrod puts this simply: *"This is a time when people have to decide how they will earn a living, what they are good at, and what they care about... In other words, youth need to figure out who they are, what other individuals and groups they fit with, what they believe in, how they make sense of the world, and who else believes in the same things that they do."*

This is the time one formulates opinions, beliefs and forms an identity. Studies have shown that people tend to stick to what they defined as their world views and an ideology in their youth throughout their lives. Actually, with age we tend to be more flexible and less prone to straightforward activism that as young people, but basic ideological and political ideas seem to stick with us. While developing their worldview and their ideology, young people encounter the world and society they live in and dominant ideas that these are ruled by. This is also the time they enter the political arena, and in most countries young people at the age of 18 are registered to vote.

This is all very significant as youth sometimes tends to follow the existing political practices, and sometimes to change them. For instance, in the USA and UK, there rather seem to be continuity in beliefs and political practices within the next and past few decades. However, recently we are witnessing the rising interest in politics by young people, especially among the Democratic Party; thus, many young people supported Obama, and most recently Bernie Sanders managed to attract huge masses of young people as his political supporters. In Europe and in particular in the Balkans, there seems to be less continuity in the sense that the younger generation is often more revolutionary and in the forefront of rebellions and protests. Thus, generation from the Vietnam War and the student protest of 1968 tended to be far more liberal than their parents, and in the Balkans and Eastern Europe it was youth in the late 1980s and 1990s that led the protests for the establishment of multiparty system and pushing for democracy.

It is important to stress that all these questions about youth and their political views are not some marginal, irrelevant issues. If you believe in democracy, then you know that in a democratic system of rule it is essential to have active and informed citizens who are able to participate in public and political life of a community and to make sound and reasonable decisions. Thus, making young people into active citizens and having their civic participation is vital in securing that the democratic system is passed on smoothly to new generations. Some even argue that youth are indispensable, as they are seeing political order from a new, fresh perspective, and it is they who have the will and energy, and commitment to change it.

As Ron Kassimir writes in the same book on Youth activism: "the current state and future fate of young people are core to the hopes and fears of all societies." Thus, worrying about youth as political actors, in particular, means to worry about what kind of citizens will young people turn out to be in the future, and what is to be done now to prepare them to become "good" future citizens.