



## How Researchers Changed the World Episode 10

### Joseph Kahne: How social media encourages political participation in young people

**JK:** One of the important things that I think we're seeing in this study is that social media can be a powerful way to mobilize people towards political activity. And that should be understood both as significant and, in some cases, desirable. It's giving young people, who frequently are marginal to mainstream institutions of political power, it's giving them a way to have voice and influence in trying to help frame and shape political dialogues.

**KR:** That was Joseph Kahne. He's currently a Professor in the School of Education at the University of California Riverside. His research has focused on political engagement and participation amongst young people, and he's now particularly interested in how social media is influencing youth political activity.

We all know that today's youth is spending much of their time on social media. Joe is interested in understanding the nuances of this, and what it really means for politics and society. And that's what we'll be exploring today in this episode of How Researchers Changed the World.

*[How Researchers Changed the World introductory music]*

**KR:** Welcome to How Researchers Changed the World: a podcast series, which will demonstrate the real-world relevance, value and impact of academic research; and highlight the people and stories behind the research.

My name is Dr. Kaitlyn Regehr, I'm an academic researcher; an author and scholar of digital and modern culture – and I'm interested in how new technologies can broaden the reach and real-world impact of academic research.

In today's episode, we're speaking to Joe Kahne and exploring his research on how social media is influencing political participation. Specifically, we'll be unpacking his 2018 research paper: 'The Political Significance of Social Media Activity and Social Networks.'

Joe hasn't always been a researcher, but he's always been interested in the education of young people, and their engagement with politics. He began his career as a teacher...

**JK:** So my background is as a High School Social Studies teacher, where I taught in New York City. And I went from there to Graduate School, very interested in ways to support school reform and improvement, with a particular interest in young people's civic and political engagement and education related to that.

**KR:** Joe maintained his interest in education as he moved from teacher to researcher. His early research projects focused on 'civic education', looking at different programs and methods of teaching citizens about their rights and responsibilities within democratic systems and whether this could, or should, be built into the schooling system.

**JK:** So for about 10 or 15 years I was working, mostly studying and doing teaching related to what we might think



of as traditional forms of civic and political development in young people. Things like involvement in community service and related kinds of activities.

But as the digital revolution took hold, I started to become more and more aware of how important it would be to understand and study the way young people engaged with these new media. And that's what led me to studying social media and its relation to young people's civic and political development, as well as studying ways that - whether it's educational efforts inside schools or outside schools, or whether it's platform design or other kinds of interventions - could ultimately support what we might think of as more powerful and effective and equitable engagement with social media in relation to political activity.

**KR:** A 2015 study by technology researcher Amanda Lenhart found that 92% of teenagers go online every single day. Beyond that, 24% of teens describe themselves as online 'almost constantly'.

Social media has become a huge part of day-to-day life, and especially so for young people. It's changed the way we interact with one another, and Joe could see that it was also changing the way we become involved in political activity.

**JK:** The reason for the increased focus on digital media really came out of just watching what young people, and really all people were doing increasingly, which is engaging with those media in relation to political priorities that they had. I'd say it was particularly intriguing for me because in many respects young people are leading the way when it comes to innovation and activity with social media. They have much higher rates of engagement, especially initially, than their parents did.

**KR:** Social media gets its fair share of negative press. It's accused of being an addictive time-waster, of damaging the way that we communicate in real life, of negatively affecting our mental wellbeing, and more.

But when it comes to political activity amongst young people, Joe thought that social media might actually be having a positive impact.

**JK:** If we look at many of the core political practices, whether it is raising money or discussing issues or getting information about issues, whether it's mobilizing people to act, sharing perspectives on policies and political issues or on candidates, in all of those cases, social media is playing an increasing and in many respects leading role.

So for young people it's the most likely place that they're going to get information. It's the place where political campaigns are going to raise most of their money. All of that is flowing through social media. It was increasingly clear that if you wanted to understand young people's civic and political lives and how to support their productive engagement with politics, you had to pay attention to social media.

**KR:** To Joe, what's particularly compelling is the way that young people use social media to mobilize one another politically. Many of the major political movements of today have been born through, or hugely amplified by, social media.

Black Lives Matter, for instance, is a social movement campaigning against violence and systematic racism towards African Americans. It's widely accepted that the Black Lives Matter movement began with a single social



media post by activist and writer Alicia Garza in 2013. Garza wrote the post after the infamous acquittal of George Zimmerman for the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin - a 17-year-old, unarmed, African American high school student. It has since become a global movement, with activism taking place both online and offline. In 2014 Yes! Magazine chose #BlackLivesMatter as one of the twelve hashtags which had changed the world in 2014.

Joe gives a perfect example, that of gun laws in America, and specifically the Parkland Shooting of 2018.

**JK:** One of the places we saw this happen in the US recently, was with the tragic shooting in Parkland, Florida. Within just a couple of weeks, Emma Gonzalez, who was one of the students from the high school that was affected, built a bigger Twitter following than the entire National Rifle Association.

She did that through very shrewd understanding of the ways in which a platform like Twitter works. A lot of her experience with that was...I mean she wasn't a politically significant figure prior to this, but she was someone who was very familiar with social media prior to this, and her knowledge of social media wasn't all that mattered., she also was very thoughtful about the broader political issue of gun control.

But it's crucial to recognize I think, that young people are well aware of how to use these social networks and when the issue matters to them, can mobilize that for political purposes. And it wasn't just about the kids in Parkland, it was about the literally millions of other young people who were aware of how social media works, who chose to follow her or chose to retweet, or chose to create other statements that they put up on social media to amplify those messages.

**KR:** Social media is a means in which young people communicate, and it's also a platform in which they can get their voice heard on important matters.

Joe could see that this was the case, but he wanted to conduct research to truly understand how social media was impacting political activity.

In a moment of serendipity, he was approached by The MacArthur Foundation, who shared this interest. The MacArthur Foundation is a private foundation which gives grants to support organizations and individuals who are working to make the world a more just and peaceful place.

**JK:** The MacArthur Foundation has been very interested in the ways in which social media, digital media more generally, has been transforming society. They approached me, now a little over 10 years ago, about the creation of something that they call a research network. The MacArthur Foundation research networks are networks of leading scholars and often also activists in a given space, who spend about 8 years together studying and working on projects related to an area where they believe multi-disciplinary approaches are necessary. And we were very lucky to get support to form a research network focused on what we came to call participatory politics.

And the focus on participatory politics came in part from a framework that Henry Jenkins at the University of Southern California, had created around a notion of participatory culture.

**KR:** A participatory culture is one in which individual members of the public act as contributors or producers within that culture, rather than simply consuming what is produced by others. Today the idea is most commonly connected with published media and journalism. Audiences are able to play a role in the collecting, reporting



and sharing of content - whether through writing their own blogs, sharing on social media, or participating in online forum discussion.

Henry Jenkins, who Joe mentioned, is a scholar of media and communication, and defines participatory culture as:

*"a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices."*

Joe hypothesized that something similar was happening in the field of politics...

**JK:** We think a similar set of dynamics is going on when it comes to the practice of politics. In other words, that there is a huge participatory element in politics that moves beyond what we might think of as traditional forms of participation, like voting or working on a political campaign, which enables young people, but all people to help shape issues, the way they're discussed, the way they're framed and frequently to mediate access to information.

So while it's true that for the most part, people still often get a lot of their content through newspapers, magazines, TV broadcasts etc, frequently their access to those clips or that information is mediated, often by people in their social networks, who are tweeting about things, or they are posting something on Facebook or Instagram or wherever, that links to some of these stories. So, while it's true that many young people are getting...it's true that many young people are getting their news in that mediated format through their friends and family. And therefore it's very important to be thinking about what are the ways in which these new media, especially social media, is shaping political participation.

**KR:** And this was the spark for the research paper we're discussing today: 'The Political Significance of Social Media Activity and Social Networks.'

**JK:** We were confident, and of course this was hardly news to anyone, that young people spend an enormous amount of time on social media and that much of that time is not focused on politics. In other words, for most young people, politics is not a central focus and their time on social media is largely socializing with friends, pursuing interests and the like.

But if our theory was correct, those modes of participation and the kind of cultural norms that develop around online participation, might well be related to their political participation and indeed, we hypothesized might form a pathway, so that people would move from what we might think of as cultural participation to political participation.

**KR:** And so Joe had his research hypothesis: that everyday interactions by young people on social media do have political significance. But how would he find out if this was the case? We'll find out after this short break...

*[Advertising break: intro music]*



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*[Advertising break: outro music]*

**KR:** Before the break we were about to find out how Joe would go about uncovering the role of social media in the political engagement of young people.

**JK:** So what we did in our paper, was we surveyed a nationally representative group of young people, ages 15 to 25, and asked them about the degree to which they were engaged online but in particular, about the degree to which they were engaged in friendship-driven communities, places where they socialized largely with friends and family and how much online time they spent in what we might think of as interest—driven communities, where young people pursue a given hobby or interest that they have.

**KR:** Joe thought that there was likely to be a difference in how friendship-driven activity (such as Whatsapping friends and family) and interest-driven activity (such as engaging in a Twitter conversation about a football match) impacted the political activity of young people. This is why he used this distinction in his research.

**JK:** We asked about how much of that they were doing in the first wave of the survey that we looked at, which was done in 2013. We also asked about how much time they spent in what we might think of as political activities online, like sharing and circulating political content, as well as political activities offline, like going to face-to-face events, working on political campaigns, things like that. So, the first phase of the study is just looking at, in 2013 how much are these things related to one another.

But where the study I think gets interesting, is that we then were able to survey the same group of people in 2015. And what that allowed us to do was to see how much does one's involvement in friendship-driven communities and interest-driven communities lead to engagement in politically driven online activity or in



politically orientated offline activity in 2015. And we could do that while simultaneously controlling for their prior levels of political engagement. So this gives a relatively robust way of assessing whether or not engagement online, in things like friendship-driven and interest-driven communities that are non-political creates a pathway for political engagement later on.

**KR:** The research showed that the use of social media was definitely having an affect on the political activity of young people, and - as predicted - there was also a distinction between the role of friendship-driven and interest-driven activity.

**JK:** What we found in the study, which was consistent in some respects with our hypothesis, was that it does appear that non-political social media activity is politically significant. In other words, folks who get engaged online with social media, even for reasons like communicating with their friends, often end up becoming more likely than others to become involved in political [missing audio].

That said, there were some important distinctions. One of the first set of findings was, while it's true that friendship-driven activity online lead to politically driven activity online, it was interesting that friendship-driven online, did not lead to offline political activity. And the reverse was true for interest-driven participation online. Kids who went online to pursue their interests were not more likely to do politically oriented work online, but they did become more likely to do politically driven activity offline.

The other big thing that we looked at in the study was whether or not the size of one's social network mattered. We found, perhaps not surprisingly, that it did. But interestingly, having a large social network only matters, and perhaps this won't surprise people, it only matters if you're also involved in these friendship-driven or interest-driven communities. So, folks who had a large social network but weren't doing friendship-driven or interest-driven activity, there was no evidence that promoted greater political participation.

But when you combined it, combined the two, people with large networks, especially those who were engaged in interest-driven communities, were far more likely to become active both in online forms of political participation, which we call participatory politics, and in offline forms of political participation.

**KR:** Joe's findings clearly demonstrate that social media is now a significant factor in the political engagement and activity of young people. Social media is a space where people are building networks, learning about their interests, and engaging with important societal issues. And that means it's also a space which can inspire young people to act.

**JK:** A lot of the priority for doing a study like this is to inform the broader scholarly community. The hope would be that this becomes one, and there are numerous other studies obviously, many other studies, that are exploring the political significance of social media.

So I'm hoping that it will shift, or help shift, understandings in some ways, around both how to study the impact of social media but also around the role that social media plays in our society.

**KR:** This is incredibly valuable knowledge to have, both within the research community and in society as a whole. The value is clear when we look at the paper which Joe, and his colleague Benjamin Bowyer, published about their research findings in 2018. The paper has been downloaded over 32,500 times since publication. It has



been covered extensively by the media, and, aptly, there has also been much discussion of the implications of the research on social media.

**JK:** I think at this point the impact that we're seeing is largely, we've been gratified that a lot of people are downloading and reading the paper, so it's getting quite wide circulation in that respect. And it got a good amount of press attention when it was released, so there have been a variety of newspaper articles that have mentioned it and some news broadcasts that have mentioned it. And we're seeing it cited in journals. So, those would be the kinds of impacts we've seen so far.

Hopefully, it adds to a broader conversation in some of the ways that we've been talking about, that ultimately help people think better about the role of social media because this is a tremendous revolution that we're in the midst of, and it will be always important for us to be thinking about, how do we make these technological changes work for us and not against us, in terms of building the kind of society that we want to live in?

**KR:** We explored this question of how we ensure that technological advance is beneficial, and not harmful, to society, in Episode 4 of this podcast, with AI researcher Steve Omohundro - if you haven't already heard it then it's well worth a listen!

Joe describes his research as 'adding to a broader conversation', and this is the true impact of the work. Those downloads, citations, and mentions on social media translate into increased awareness about the role of social media in politics - both within the subject field and the wider general public.

It's already sparking further research in this area, and Joe hopes that his work, and further work on this topic, will lead to a shift in understanding about the role of social media in society and politics.

**JK:** My hope is that this study that Ben Bowyer and I did, add to that dialogue in ways that are productive and provide some additional understanding or deepen our understanding of key dynamics. For example, that it's very important not to blur all online activity as just one common thing and ask a question like, how does online activity relate to politics, but to be very clear in thinking about different forms of online activity in relation to different forms of political activity.

Another, I hope, big take away from the study, is that it increases people's awareness that many of the kinds of activities that we often think of as trivial, like socializing and engaging with popular culture online, may often have important political consequences and that those spaces may create opportunities for people who are not particularly interested in politics, to still learn about civic and political issues.

This used to be very common, right. When everybody watched the nightly news or read a daily paper, you might read the paper because you wanted to see the sports scores because you weren't all that interested say in politics, but the front page of the paper that you had to buy to find out what happened in a given game, covered national news and so you got exposed to it. Well now you don't need to do that. You can go to a website just for the team you care about and find out what happened without ever being exposed to some of these other issues.

So social media becomes potentially one of the mechanisms that may help foster exposure to a broader array of issues because people may get on social media to socialize or to pursue an interest, but through those mechanisms what we're seeing is they're also getting exposed to political content, and that's building a pathway to political participation.



**KR:** Although social media has a great potential to have a positive impact on how we engage politically in society, there are also worries about the incorrect information proliferating on social media. One area where Joe sees a particular need for further research is the potential risks and challenges involved in the link between social media and politics.

**JK:** Part of the change that's important when it comes to social media, is that gatekeepers play a much lessened role, in terms of their ability to determine what people see and what gets shared, because much of what gets shared is mediated by people in your social network, not by say, elites who run a broadcast network.

Broadcast still matters but it's mediated frequently by the public. Well what does that mean, especially what does it mean in an era where everybody has relatively inexpensive access to the creation of high-quality content? High quality in the sense that it looks like it's high quality. Well it means that misinformation can travel just as fast and, in some cases, faster, than accurate and high-quality information, and it means that it's tougher to tell whether or not the thing you're looking at, is accurate or not. Whether it represents a thoughtful group of people who've long been committed to a cause or whether it is a manipulative piece put out by a group that you may not agree with their purposes.

And we've certainly seen this in political campaigns around the world. Obviously within the US, the degree to which it appears that there were groups funded by the Russians to promote and circulate misinformation, as well as folks who promoted and circulated inflammatory posts just because they knew would get a lot of clicks out of that, and that would make them money. So, there are a bunch of factors that can lead to a great deal of misinformation circulating.

Another big problem that we have to worry about is that again, because these exchanges are frequently not moderated in any meaningful way and because they are often anonymous, the level of civil engagement can drop dramatically. These sorts of things can be deeply problematic for the broader culture, which hopefully relies on conversation and discussion to sort of deepen understandings and sometimes build shared understandings.

And a third dynamic that is very much tied to the digital media revolution, though it's also promoted by cable TV, is the increased ability of people to enter echo chambers, where they're only exposed or primarily exposed to views that align with their own. This can lead to a kind of hyper partisanship and to a view of folks with alternative viewpoints, that is overly critical and not open to real dialogue.

So all of those factors I think can present challenges, when it comes to creating the kind of high quality, interaction, information environment, what we might think of as political culture. All of those things can be challenging to create the kind of political culture that would lead to informed voting as well as broader collective discussions about controversial issues.

**KR:** Joe's current research, therefore, aims to ensure that young people can effectively contribute to our democratic system, without falling prey to misinformation or online bias. For Joe the obvious way to tackle the risk of misinformation is through our education systems.

**JK:** One set of needs, one place to address this that I'm obviously very focused on, is the educational





sphere. So, both in schools and in after-school programmes and youth organisations, there are many, many opportunities, both to help young people become better critical consumers of political content, as well as thoughtful and effective circulators, remixers, creators of political content. We've been doing studies which show that media literacy education that focuses on effective consumption of what one finds online can improve for example, young people's ability to tell what's credible.

**KR:** Education has the power to help young people to understand the world around them. With social media now a huge part of that world, we know that Joe's research will be an important part of the story.

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In the next episode we'll be speaking with researcher Ella Kahu about the importance of student engagement during higher education.

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I'm Dr Kaitlyn Regehr, join us next time for How Researchers Changed the World. Thanks for listening.