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Generation ideal: Millennials and social media activism

By [Joseph Oteng](#) 2:28 pm EDT August 18, 2014

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Carrie Miller, a University of Vermont student poses offering free hugs as a street preacher condemned same-sex relationships in the background.

(Photo courtesy of the Vermont Cynic)

What if with one video you could cure a disease and save the lives of millions worldwide? What if all it took to cause equitable fund redistribution for educational reform was a simple like, share,

tap, swipe or voice command.

Young Americans are not quite there but are well on their way to making their ideals reality. The Millennial generation is known for being highly-connected through social media and technology. Now, more than ever, it seems that in addition to updating relationship statuses, tagging photos and passive-aggressive subtweeting, college-matriculated students are using their profiles to advocate for social issues.

From the voluntourism phenomenon to the current the ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis] [ice bucket challenge](#) that has netted millions for neurodegenerative diagnoses research, college students are taking to the Internet to talk about what matters to them. Some argue, however, that conversations with selective captive audiences and hashtags are not enough to be bonafide activists.

Social media users often see their views reflected by those they are connected to and may miss opportunities for serious dialogue.

"Our generation needs to be careful [with social media advocacy] of the effects of an echo chamber. It is so easy to support the people you agree with and tune out the ones you don't, so that you never have a real discussion about it. It does not benefit your causes, and is instead contributing to some of the extremely polarized divisions we see today," Miami University (OH) student Taylor Maple says.

"Our society seems to always be looking for the next big thing. [Remember Kony 2012?](#) There were

Mike Jennings and Nash Moss, sophomore with Lemos from the University of Vermont says.

The events of the community unrest after [the death of African-American teen Mike Brown](#) in Ferguson, MO exemplified this trend of highly engaged citizen reporting with Twitter serving as the main hub for information dissemination under the local police force's paramilitary state on the night of August 13th contrasted with others who participated being more concerned with the first amendment rights violations as opposed to alleged racial profiling and the murder of an unarmed citizen. Others still were completely oblivious to the events of the night tear gas bombs, rubber bullets and all with top trends on Twitter including a rerun of popular Disney Channel show *That's So Raven* and 6-second video app celebrities, Vine, fandomenium with #Ferguson or Howard University's demonstration of unity #HandsUpDontShoot eerily being absent.

Social justice educator, Jessica Pettit defines activism as, "Listening and hearing other people's stories — being open to learning new information and challenging one's assumptions and judgments. Sharing information with others and hearing other perspectives."

Her definition reconciles the disconnect between traditional concepts of activism such as the Boston Tea Party, the civil rights March on Washington and the Occupy Movement where people physically banded together to send a message and demand change. In her eyes modern activism has found social media to be a crucial spark to start important conversations

demonstrations, and sit ins. She also stresses the impact of learning from others as well as, “giving other’s the tools to have conversations across difference so that their own self-awareness builds and gains momentum.”

Benjamin Kennedy, a University of Vermont student concurs saying, “Repeated exposure to a cause on social media may not change someone’s actions, but I think it has the power to spark a change in their thoughts. Social media has a way of “humanizing” causes and helping people to realize that everyone has been impacted/knows someone who has been impacted by the issues of, for example, racism, queer rights, mental illness or chronic physical illness in some way.”

The final verdict — University of Vermont sophomore Carrie Miller says, “Social media advocacy is great to get the word out, but sharing a post is not going to change the world. In order for change to happen, people need to know about the problem and then *do* something about it.”

Here are a few ways you can put the ‘action’ back in ‘activism.’

- Know your motivations (be authentic with your concerns; know the source of your passion; focus your energy and follow through)
- Don’t title yourself (allies and advocates are honors bestowed by others upon you; support marginalized identities with active listening, challenging stereotypes and educating yourself/others)
- Get outside your social circle (challenging your views reminds you that there isn’t a singular solution to any issue)

etc.)

- Be visibly active (attend discussions; protests, rallies; donate money, or time of your own volition)
- Self-work is key (check your biases; analyze your prejudices, do some research; understand we were learn our beliefs)

What's your opinion on the role of social media in advocacy and allyship? Are they effective mediums and is the Millennial generation more talk than show?

Joseph Oteng is senior at the University of Vermont studying religion on the pre-medical track. He serves as an on-air personality at his campus's TV station, UVMtv, for their pop culture show in addition to documenting his college experience on his blog (youthful-life.blogspot.com). You can follow him on Twitter @drjotengii.

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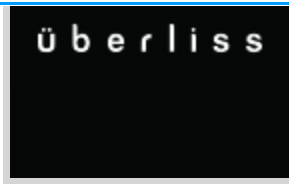
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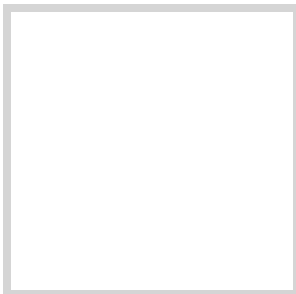
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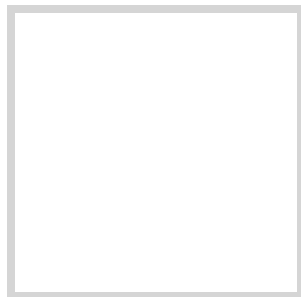
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