

# S is for Storytelling

There are a lot of things you miss out on when you have a sixth month old baby: sleep, personal hygiene, eating meals with two hands. But for all the bleary-eyed diaper changes and spit up-stained shirts, there are a million moments that fill your heart to the brim, countless simple pleasures that make the daily challenges dissolve quickly into the depths of your memory. One of those simple pleasures is reading to your child.

Part of our bedtime ritual includes rifling through the box of board books and choosing just the right story to tell. I often land on a small, colorfully illustrated book called *A is for Activist* by Innosanto Nagara (it should probably come as no surprise that the son of a postdoc with a sociology degree and a high school English teacher would be gifted such a thing upon his arrival). Nagara mixes a recitation of the alphabet with explanations of different types of activism, taking his reader on a journey from A to Z with stops like “F for a feminist who fights for fundamental rights,” “G for grassroots sprouting from below,” and “Z for Zapatista (of course).”

The entry for D reads:

*Little d democracy.*

*More than voting, you'll agree.*

*Dictators detest it. Donkeys don't get it.*

*But you and me? We demand equality!*

The last time I leafed through the story from the comfort of the nursery rocking chair, baby boy propped on my knee, I lingered on this page. “I guess even children’s books are kind of over institutional politics these days,” I thought to myself. I thought also about the stuff that occupies the corner of my brain that’s not devoted to keeping a tiny human alive: my academic work on youth and politics.

True democracy isn’t really about voting or parties or any of the other trappings of “Big P” politics at all. That sentiment has been echoed time and again by the young people I interact with as part of my research for the Media, Activism and Participatory Politics, an effort made possible by the MacArthur Foundation’s research network on Youth and Participatory Politics.

In 2012, I interviewed young libertarians from across the country about their views on partisan politics and how their political identities connected to their digital lives and experiences online. What I found was a passionate group of young people who were interested in political issues but who

were not so interested in getting involved *in* politics.

Part of their disillusionment stems from the perception that politicians on both sides of the aisle lack the ability to communicate effectively, compromise, or engage in civil discourse. Zachary Slayback, a student at the University of Pennsylvania and self-identified libertarian, explains:

I think people from both sides, both within and outside politics, can look at the youth libertarian movement, see its breadth of views and intellectual perspectives, and see how we all are still able to get along and have rational, civil discourse, and take that as a general lesson.

If anarchists are able to sit in the same room as classical liberal bleeding heart welfarists and have a reasonable discussion on the proper role of government, then surely two people who disagree over 2% in budget cuts should be able to do the same.

Kaja Tretjak, a postdoctoral research fellow at SUNY Buffalo Law School who has done extensive research on the student liberty movement, says that young libertarians are interested in creating a “dynamic grassroots presence to transform society... rather than using a political system that is seen, by many people in the movement, as inherently corrupt and ineffective for their purposes.”

And it's not just libertarians who are feeling disenchanting with

politics as usual; we've heard young people from across the political spectrum express their frustration with the seemingly limited options for effecting change through traditional mechanisms, and recent studies bear this out as well. A March 2014 Pew report on Millennials entering adulthood suggests that half of all Millennials choose not to identify with either political party and only 31% say there is a "great deal of difference" between Democratic and Republican parties.

Still, the story is not all one of doom and gloom (and besides, I'm not really in the business of inciting moral panics about the kids these days). But if young people are bypassing traditional politics more and more, how *do* they engage in meaningful change in 2014?

Media scholar Ethan Zuckerman has used the term "participatory civics," the use of digital media to engage in political discussion or share civic media, to talk about the kind of contemporary engagement that continues to grow and flourish in the absence of faith in the political system. He argues, "It's not that people aren't interested in civics. They're simply not interested in feeling ineffectual or helpless." In light of that sentiment, young people in particular are turning to more "participatory" modes of engagement, relying on their familiarity with participatory media platforms to effect change.

As part of their engagement in participatory civics, young people are increasingly tapping into the power of storytelling to

assert voice and influence in an age when trust in partisan politics is at an all-time low. Storytelling has become an *essential* tool in the era of digital-age civics.

In a recent webinar series on the topic, sponsored by our research team in partnership with Youth Radio, Connected Learning, the Black Youth Project, and the Media Arts + Practice division at USC's School of Cinematic Arts, more than twenty young activists came together to think about the affordances and challenges of digital media for civic action and discuss how political narratives are created, produced, spread and recontextualized through their "digital afterlife."

The participants in this convening showed how, even in the face of swirling public debate on young people and "slacktivism," the simple act of storytelling can create big change. Take, for instance, the case of Tani Ikeda, founder of ImMEDIATE Justice, an organization that provides girls with the resources and training to tell their own stories about gender and sexuality through film; or Jonathan McIntosh, a pop culture hacker who has reached a wide audience with his video remixes (like "Buffy vs Edward" and "Donald Duck meets Glenn Beck") to spark critical conversation about topics ranging from gender representations in popular culture to politics and news media.

For many of the webinar participants, telling their stories was a way of asserting (and sometimes finding) their voice. As Zuckerman argues, "voice begets voice," meaning that it's easier

for people to talk about tough issues or share their personal experiences when others are doing it, too. Erik Huerta, who blogs by the name, El Random Hero, describes how, after he “came out” as undocumented online, he started sharing personal stories via his blog and other social media platforms about how his undocumented identity shaped his everyday experiences. He characterized the process as akin to putting out a “message in a bottle” to reach others, and as something that, in time, gave him the confidence to get involved more actively in organizing around immigrant rights.

The reach of the storytelling practices like those employed by Huerta can also extend beyond voice; sometimes those practices lend themselves to political influence in the traditional sense as well. Jason Russell, co-founder of Invisible Children, participated in the first webinar in our series on “finding your story” and described how storytellers often start small by taking inspiration from “inciting incidents,” or small kernels of revelatory knowledge. Russell explained how his inciting incident was finding out about child soldiers in Uganda ten years ago; he went on to produce a series of films about the conflict in Uganda, including Kony 2012, one of the most “viral” videos of all time.

*Kony 2012* garnered a great deal of controversy, with critics questioning the organization itself, the potential impact of the film, and the seemingly weak level of engagement it invited.

Still, despite the criticism, the film spurred the proposal of a bipartisan resolution in Congress condemning the acts of Joseph Kony. Invisible Children's other films also sparked more instrumental change, with President Obama signing the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act in 2010.

University of Arizona Professor of Sociology, Jennifer Earl, has suggested that it's time scholars begin to think about what a digital "repertoire of contention," looks like, a term Charles Tilly used to describe the set of movement tactics available to social actors in any given historical period. Based on the evidence we've uncovered, it seems storytelling should be included as a key component in such a digital repertoire because all signs point to the fact that young people today are particularly adept at using storytelling for change—and that's something we can *all* be hopeful about.

Young people's creative use of storytelling to enact civics—to get us one step closer to that "little d" democracy Nagara describes in his children's book—is not only an inspiration, but a testament to the power and enduring nature of stories more broadly; it seems almost too obvious to say that stories are, at their core, elemental to the human condition.

But these stories mean nothing if they fall on deaf ears. Joan Donovan, co-creator of InterOccupy.net, observed, "Most [people] focus on social media as a way to broadcast our own

lives, but these platforms are also a place to receive stories.”

One day, sooner than I can likely imagine, my baby will outgrow my lap and our rocking chair, and he’ll probably grow tired of all my stories. But I hope by the time my sixth month-old is grown up enough to be telling his *own* stories, I’ll be wise enough to “receive” them with an open mind. Because the most important thing we can do (as adults, as educators, as activists ourselves) when a young person says, “Let me tell you a story,” is listen. And I’m all ears.

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