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## When the “Children” Speak for Themselves: The Tactical Use of Social Media by the Survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting

Jesse S. Cohn  
jcohn@pnw.edu

Rhon Teruelle  
rteruell@pnw.edu

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D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

# **When the “Children” Speak for Themselves: The Tactical Use of Social Media by the Survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting**

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“Maybe — just maybe — we are changing the political calculus,” Paul Begala speculated in the months following the massacre of twenty children and six adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012. That calculus had been largely fixed in place since the midterm elections of 1994: gun control, it was reckoned, was a losing proposition, and legislators who wanted to keep their seats had better stay out of the sights of the National Rifle Association (Begala 2013). While reform measures passed in Connecticut with relative speed (Foderaro & Hussey 2018), Begala’s was largely a losing wager. As it turned out, even this moment of perhaps maximal horror — few subjects, as Lee Edelman has pointed out, elicit as much “social consensus” as the importance of protecting “the Child, whose innocence solicits our defense” (2004) — failed to produce any substantive change in the direction of increased regulation of firearms. Indeed, in the wake of Newtown, the gun lobby succeeded in *rolling back* existing law across much of the country: not only were an assault weapons ban and a universal background check provision defeated in the Senate (Keneally 2017), but as PBS’ *Frontline* noted, by the end of 2013, “27 states [had] passed 93 laws expanding gun rights” (Childress 2013). In short, few were expecting that the Valentine’s Day 2018 school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida would provide any new occasion for “changing the political calculus.” Yet in the weeks after the shooting occurred, a group of students who survived the attack launched an ambitious social media campaign that has arguably already succeeded where so many others have failed: they have brought the issue of gun control back on the national political agenda, and have challenged politicians, policy makers, and even the NRA in their battle to address gun violence in America. Even more unexpectedly, they accomplished this by defining themselves as, and speaking from the position of, “children.”

A cursory look at the support and momentum that the students have gained since the incident on Valentine’s Day 2018 reveals that there is a potential for civic, societal, and political changes in America. For example, in direct response to the students’ demands, on Wednesday, March 7, 2018, the Florida legislature passed a bill that raised the minimum age of gun purchasers to 21 from 18, required a background check for gun buyers, and outlawed bump stocks (devices that when attached to rifles enabled them to fire faster) (Astor 2018). A week prior to that, retailers Dick’s Sporting Goods and Walmart both ended sales of assault-style rifles and announced that they would no longer sell guns to individuals under the age of 21 (Nassauer 2018). The students’ initiatives did not end there: #NationalWalkoutDay (March 14, 2018), #MarchForOurLives (March 24, 2018), and #NationalSchoolWalkout (April 20, 2018) drew mass participation. In conjunction with their demands on social media, these spectacular events were designed to create support for and even more awareness about the movement to end gun violence in America.

Our study is intended to address some of the urgent questions raised by the Marjory Stoneman Douglas students’ social media activism. We note three major research deficiencies: 1) insufficient focus on and attention to American youth civic participation, particularly as actualized in and aided by social media; 2) a focus on identity and relationships in much of the research on social media, as opposed to the political motivations of young people; 3) a focus on European youth in most of the recent studies on youth civic participation, with less attention given to youth activism elsewhere. In addition, we are interested in the political implications of the students’ choice to position themselves as “children,” as when, in a CNN interview, one of the surviving students, David Hogg, emphatically stated: “We’re children. You guys, like, are the

adults” (CNN, 2018b).

This exploratory study paves the way for a qualitative investigation into the civic engagement and participatory democracy that these students have enacted through their social media practices. We focus on the students’ use of social media to challenge current gun laws and their decision to represent themselves as “children.” Although it is impossible to illustrate a direct correlation between the students’ actions and recent changes to gun laws, we certainly cannot and should not discount their effectiveness either. This paper will further elaborate on the two main tactics utilized by the student survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting: their tactical use of social media; and their tactical self-representation as “children.”

### **Defining children, childhood, and youth**

What exactly are the implications when young people who self-identify as “children” become actively involved in public political life at a national level? This question is complicated by the fluidity of the identities it concerns: “youth” and “childhood” are malleable terms that continue to be contested, as is the boundary between the two categories (Doak 2011). Flanagan and Syvertsen (2006), define youth as “an elastic category: where it begins and ends is subject to interpretation and is sensitive to social and historical context” (p. 11). Talburt & Lesko (2012) likewise view youth as a complex and “malleable category” wherein young people are “‘transitional subjects,’ neither child nor adult, but ‘in the making.’” (p. 2). The geography of childhood and youth adds another layer of ambiguity: for example, a working-class child growing up on the global periphery – say, in the rural regions of the northern Philippines – will have a much different life than a middle-class child born and raised in the global center of New York City (Wallerstein & Wallerstein, 2004; Taft 2019). Even within that metropolitan context, only some children will be represented or treated as – in effect, *allowed* to be – “children” (Goff et al. 2014; Chaney & Robertson 2013). Nonetheless, by and large, children are more frequently viewed as the subject of adult politics rather than as political agents in their own right (Edelman 2004; Taft 2019), and after the waning of the generational struggle of the 1960s and 1970s, youth in the US have been widely viewed as apathetic or self-concerned, disengaged from contemporary politics (Banaji & Buckingham 2010, p. 17). In fact, Morozov’s (2009) critique of “slacktivism,” in which he refers to the practice as an ideal type of activism for a generation of “lazy” individuals, typifies the rhetoric often used to describe the youth of today. While preconceptions like these may owe more to social fantasy than to any reality — the indolent, insufficient Bad Child is certainly the “fantasmatic” flip side of Edelman’s innocent, angelic Good Child — they contributed to public perceptions of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School students’ activism as surprising, even unprecedented.

Our very understanding of the political is often structured around the exclusion of children, defined uncritically as lacking adult power and capacity, although some have set out to redefine these paradigms (Holloway and Valentine 2000; James et al. 1998; Qvortrup et al. 1994). As Archard (2004) claims, childhood is defined as “that which lacks the capacities, skills and powers of adulthood. To be a child is to be not yet an adult” (p. 39). Thus, even when children and young people are commended by adults for acts of civic engagement, these are almost always framed as pedagogical, as *preparatory* for adult political life; they are praised as “leaders of tomorrow” rather than acknowledged as leaders in the present (Taft 2010). To act like a child or to be treated as one, for Cornelius Castoriadis, is the very hallmark of heteronomy, so that infantilization and subordination are practically synonyms: “the person who remains constantly

in the infantile situation is the conformist and the apolitical person, for they accept the Law without any discussion and do not want to participate in shaping it” (1997, p. 93). All of this makes it that much more important to ask why the Parkland students consciously identified themselves as “children” precisely in order to indicate their reliance on “the adults” to make proper decisions.

### **Tactical self-representation: “We’re children”**

To address “lawmakers and Congress,” interpellating them as “the adults” (CNN 2018b), posed a paradox. On the morning after the shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, a student survivor, David Hogg, stood in front of CNN’s cameras to demand that adults act in place of “the children” – “the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention,” as Edelman put it (2004, p. 3). The demand presupposes that the one voicing it is incompetent to act, standing in a place marked by dependency and subordination. This risked every one of the predictable responses heard two weeks later, at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Maryland. For instance, far-right pundit Katie Hopkins professed to “feel sorry for them,” but characterized them as “children who are upset,” ostensibly not “in a good pragmatic place to make political decisions,” and suggested that they were being “manipulated by the media” (NowThis News 2018). The place of “children,” for the NRA and its surrogates, was not to speak but – as emotional, immature, vulnerable, and incapable of engaging in a politics of their own – to be *spoken for*. In short, this was representational politics *par excellence*: those who “could not represent themselves . . . had to be represented,” reinscribing “a separation between those who are holders of power and those who are subject to it” (Tormey 2006, pp. 93, 100).

At the same time, self-identifying as children turned out to be a tactic that distinguished Parkland from Newtown: the child victims of 2012, who “could not represent themselves . . . had to be represented” by parent-led gun-control advocacy groups and media coverage. Media framing of the shooting unhelpfully focused on the perpetrator (reinforcing conservative narratives about mass shootings as fundamentally unpredictable events, attributable perhaps to an ill-defined “mental illness,” or simply to an incomprehensible evil, “the devil”) and on the victims (memorialized as “angels,” eliciting sentimental and religious responses – “thoughts and prayers” – but not organizing or action) (Chaney & Robertson 2013). By contrast, the phrase “we’re children” announced something quite different. *In the act of speaking*, by speaking *as* one of the “children,” Hogg and his fellow student activists called into existence a new collective agent, claiming the right to speak *for themselves*, preempting representation, even taking a step beyond representation into autonomous action.

As some commentators have observed, this tactic of preemptive self-representation successfully shifted media attention away from the act of the individual perpetrator and toward the collective inaction of lawmakers (Bump 2018), giving rise, in the process, to a powerful narrative about the students’ own agency. We can perhaps see this emerge most vividly in the speech delivered by Emma González on February 17, 2018 (subsequently drawing 3.4 million views on YouTube). Responding directly to President Trump’s tweet framing the shooting as the work of a “mentally disturbed,” “bad” individual, the young survivor foregrounded the responsibility of adults – “the people who let him buy the guns in the first place, those at the gun shows, the people who encouraged him to buy accessories for his guns to make them fully automatic, the people who didn’t take them away from him when they knew he expressed homicidal tendencies.” Building

on the refrain, “we call BS,” González indicted adult politicians for the very apathy and irresponsibility (Castoriadis’ “conformis[m]” and “apolitic[ism]”) that are perennially attributed to young people:

[M]aybe the adults have gotten used to saying “it is what it is,” but if us students have learned anything, it’s that if you don’t study, you will fail. And in this case if you actively do nothing, people continually end up dead, so it’s time to start doing something . . .

The people in the government who were voted into power are lying to us. And us kids seem to be the only ones who notice and our parents to call BS. Companies trying to make caricatures of the teenagers these days, saying that all we are self-involved and trend-obsessed and they hush us into submission when our message doesn’t reach the ears of the nation, we are prepared to call BS. Politicians who sit in their gilded House and Senate seats funded by the NRA telling us nothing could have been done to prevent this, we call BS. They say tougher guns laws do not decrease gun violence. We call BS . . . They say no laws could have prevented the hundreds of senseless tragedies that have occurred. We call BS. That us kids don’t know what we’re talking about, that we’re too young to understand how the government works. We call BS. (CNN 2018a)

With each new invocation of this theme, González contributed to the emerging narrative of the “we” (“us students,” “us kids”) as a powerful new force – active, iconoclastic, self-aware, and critical.

To an extent, this was itself the construction of another illusion, that of a movement suddenly erupting from nowhere; when in fact, considerable organizational and institutional groundwork had been laid in previous years, both by largely white and suburban parents’ organizations such as Moms Demand Action, constructed in response to Newtown (Stuart, 2018), and by largely non-white urban youth movements like the Million Hoodies Movement for Justice, constructed in response to the vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012 (Zornick, 2018). If Polletta (1998) and Wood (2017) are correct in arguing that it is precisely the “gaps” and “ambiguities” in social movement narratives, their *failure* to provide a clear cut framing for collective action, that draw those not yet involved into “emotional and psychic connection” with activists, then perhaps the mystique of a seemingly spontaneous and entirely self-organizing youth movement is partly to be credited for the rapid spread of #NeverAgain across the country – indeed, this may speak to the paradoxical power of “we’re children.” The two hundred miles’ distance between Sanford, Florida, the site of Trayvon Martin’s murder (43.1% white alone, median household income \$42,025), and Parkland, Florida (65.9% white alone, median household income \$131,525) is indeed great, even if Parkland is considerably more racially diverse than Newtown was in 2013 (88.2% white alone, median household income \$116,024) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), posing another problem of representation: how to avoid falling into the trap of “worthy victim” discourse (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013), constructing an exclusively white and wealthy “we”? Given the much higher death toll of everyday gun violence in comparison to all school shootings, it is hard to avoid concluding, in the words of Marjory Stoneman Douglas student activist Jaelyn Corin, that “Parkland received more attention because of its affluence” (Hamedy 2018). In acknowledgement of their

obligations to “those communities who have always stared down the barrel of a gun,” in Corin’s words, she and other white student activists shared space with youth speakers of color from Los Angeles, Chicago, and the Washington, D.C. area at the March For Our Lives rally on March 24, 2018. By participating in the performative force of “we’re children,” Black elementary school student Naomi Wadler expanded the range of the “children’s” collective agency:

I am here today to acknowledge and represent the African American girls whose stories don’t make the front page of every national newspaper, whose stories don’t lead on the evening news... My friends and I might still be 11 and we might still be in elementary school, but we know. We know life isn’t equal for everyone and we know what is right and wrong. (Staff, 2018)

### **The students’ tactical use of Twitter**

Undoubtedly, Twitter is one of the most popular social media platforms in the world and a popular medium for the dissemination of breaking news. In July of 2019, it was reported that Twitter had 330 million monthly active users, and of these, “134 million use the service on a daily basis” (Twitter 2019). It was also reported that over 60 percent of Twitter users worldwide are between the ages of 35 and 65 years old (theVAB, 2018). Twitter users spend an average of 3.39 minutes per session (Statista 2019), and almost 500 million or half a billion tweets are sent out on a daily basis. This works out to a total of 5,787 tweets per second (Mention 2018). Perhaps, it was a combination of these factors that led to the surviving students’ use of Twitter over Facebook and Instagram. Whatever their reasons, Twitter became the Parkland students’ social media of choice. And the way they utilized Twitter was both purposeful and clever; a constant challenge to America’s existing gun laws, more specifically, and gun culture, more generally. This section will focus on three particular individuals’ tactical use of Twitter. Coincidentally, the three activists of our study’s focus, David Hogg, Emma González, and Delaney Tarr, became the voices and the faces that represented the movement.

The first of our student leaders is David Hogg. He joined Twitter on September 2013, and currently has 9,053 tweets, 999.8k followers, and follows 1,787 individuals. Hogg came into prominence on the day after the shooting as he, along with a few other classmates, utilized Twitter to demand gun control and legislative changes on existing gun laws, as well as criticizing the NRA and its supporters. An example of these types of tweets occurred at 8:30pm on May 13, 2018, when Hogg tweeted the following: “For NRA members that have bought more guns out of the irrational fear of us the NRA does provide some safety tips for guns please be sure to be a safe and responsible gun owner. Around 900 children commit suicide with parents[’] gun every year” (Hogg 2018). Here, as if to systematically invert the caricature of the Parkland activists as “children who are upset,” Hogg adopts the rhetoric of adulthood, criticizing NRA members for succumbing to “irrational fear” and calling them back to their “responsib[ility]” both as “gun owner[s]” and as “parents” The tweet received 9.2k likes and was retweeted 3.6k times.

The majority of Hogg’s tweets since the shooting have been related to gun control and advocacy. On October 27, 2018, in response to another mass shooting, this one at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh’s Squirrel Hill neighborhood, Hogg tweeted the following at 9:36AM: “Fuck the NRA, vote.” Once again, the NRA is clearly the target of Hogg’s anger. The tweet was liked 64.8k times and was talked about by 12.7k people. At 9:55AM, Hogg followed up with this

tweet: “It hurts every time I see these headlines and then the political inaction . . . but we have the power to change it. Squirrel Hill my heart is with you. We will fight for you every single day.” 5,100 people liked the tweet and 1,105 commented about it.

Hogg was not alone in his criticism of the NRA. On the same day, three other individuals had similar sentiments as their messages to the NRA which echoed Hogg’s were likewise found on Twitter. Christopher Leone tweeted: “Fuck the @NRA. Vote out these corrupt, do-nothing @GOP motherfuckers. Marti Gould Cummings tweeted: “BAN GUNS NOW!!! Fuck the @NRA the @GOP.” And Fred Guttenberg, the father of Jaime Guttenberg who died at the Marjory Stoneman High School shooting tweeted: “‘Thoughts and Prayers.’ To be honest, my faith was rocked on Feb 14th. The only way that expression works now is that I pray we vote every NRA politician from office and elect those committed to our safety, to decency, and civility. I love this country. Time to vote!!!” In addition to expressing his sorrow, Guttenberg echoes one of the students’ rallying cry to vote those who support the NRA out of office and change America’s existing gun laws.

In their attempt to fight back, supporters of the NRA, such as Fox News host Laura Ingraham have launched a variety of attacks on Hogg and his peers. On March 28, 2018, she chastised Hogg as a “gun rights provocateur” and mocked his inability to gain acceptance to four University of California schools, tweeting: “David Hogg Rejected By Four Colleges To Which He Applied and whines about it. (Dinged by UCLA with a 4.1 GPA... totally predictable given acceptance rates.)” In so doing, Ingraham framed Hogg as the Bad Child, “whin[y]” and self-centered. In so doing, however, she inadvertently presented the spectacle of an adult attacking a “child,” inviting public outrage. Hogg identified companies that regularly bought advertising on Ingraham’s show and urged them to terminate their contract with Fox. By the time Ingraham apologized to Hogg, the damage had been done: several of her sponsors terminated their advertising contract with Fox. “We are in the process of removing our ads from Laura Ingraham’s program,” Nutrish tweeted (Wang & Chiu 2018). Wang & Chiu (2018) also noted that “TripAdvisor pointed to one of its company values — ‘We are better together’ — in its decision to stop advertising with Ingraham’s show.” In ending their advertising support for Ingraham’s show, Wayfair told the Hill that “Ingraham’s personal criticism of Hogg was ‘not consistent with our values’” (Wang & Chiu 2018). As evidenced by these three examples, Ingraham’s attack on Hogg had very real consequences.

Emma González is another of the student survivors who was catapulted to fame largely because of her involvement on Twitter. Using the handle @Emma4Change, González created her Twitter account shortly after the shooting at her school and now has 1.6 million followers. Her powerful speech during the March For Our Lives event included the now historic four and a half-minute silent pause and cries of “We call BS!” Even before the event, however, González utilized Twitter to advocate for changes in America. On February 18, 2018, González tweeted the following: “My friends and i have been hard at work at North Community Park calling attention to @NeverAgainMSD and @AMarch4OurLives It's time for change. Lets make it happen. #neveragain #march4ourlives.” This tweet received 29.3k likes and 9.1k retweets. And a pinned tweet on her Twitter page that was created on March 23, 2018 includes an accompanying video of veterans speaking out about gun violence in America and the need for gun reform: “I have absolutely no words... Thank you not only for your service but for standing with us as we



#MarchForOurLives tomorrow all over the world #VeteransForGunReform #GunControlNow #NeverAgain <https://wepresent.wetransfer.com/story/veterans>.” A sampling of González’s tweets provides clear evidence of the students’ tactical use of social media in their struggle against the NRA. In the first tweet, González illustrates how Twitter is being used to help organize the @March4OurLives even in DC, and in the second, she helps to promote a video made by veterans calling for gun reform in America.

Just like Hogg, González received backlash for her involvement in the movement. Congressman Steve King, a far-right Republican from Iowa, criticized González for wearing a small Cuban flag on her jacket with an accompanying meme: “This is how you look when you claim Cuban heritage yet don’t speak Spanish and ignore the fact that your ancestors fled the island when the dictatorship turned Cuba into a prison camp, after removing all weapons from its citizens; hence their right to self defense.” Attacks on González and her fellow students often focused on identity, as when she and others were “smeared falsely as ‘crisis actors’ by conspiracy theorists and hoaxers on the Internet” (see Paquette 2018; and Rosenberg 2018). Indeed, Alex Jones, who had successfully spread the “crisis actor” narrative after Newtown, and Republican politician Mary Franson, amplifying the representation of the student survivors as inappropriate political agents, each compared the students to the Hitler Youth: “Authoritarianism,” Jones declared, “is always about youth marches” (Rosenberg 2018). After some public pushback, both Jones and Franson released statements apologizing for their actions. The very tactics that Jones had notably deployed with such success before — sowing “information disorder” as a means of disrupting ethical public discourse in the wake of a crisis — had for once proven ineffectual (Sellnow, Parrish & Semenas 2019).

Like Hogg and González, Delaney Tarr, who was instrumental on Twitter after the shooting, continues to advocate for gun safety and an end to gun violence. A prime example of her online advocacy appears in a response to Elizabeth Warren. On August 3, 2019, Warren tweeted about the mass shooting in El Paso, Texas: “The news out of El Paso is devastating. I’m heartbroken for the victims and their families. Far too many communities have suffered through tragedies like this already. We must act now to end our country’s gun violence epidemic.” Tarr responds to Warren’s tweet with an article about an upcoming forum for Democratic candidates sponsored by two prominent gun control organizations and the following offer: “Then you should come to our gun safety forum. Let’s end gun violence, together.” Tarr’s tweet garnered 754 likes and 60 retweets, and the forum was attended by Warren and the rest of the leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination. When, shortly after the El Paso shooting, another mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio occurred, Tarr responded: “9 killed and 26 injured. In less than a minute. These are human lives being ripped away. Enough fucking thoughts and prayers. Give me action. Give me anger. Give me some REASONABLE FUCKING GUN LAWS.” Tarr’s rhetoric, by puncturing the imagery of childhood “innocence” and cliché-ridden decorum (“thoughts and prayers”), aims at puncturing the public affect of numbness surrounding mass shootings, turning sorrow into “anger” and “action.”

The Parkland students have not let up on their demands for gun control, and have been anointed the new “Twitter influencers” (Wootson, Jr. 2018). This very notoriety has become a focus for attacks: if Alex Jones was largely unsuccessful in branding them as “crisis actors,” others, drawing on the rhetorical repertoire used to delegitimize youth activism in general, have

attempted to paint them as self-interested attention-seekers. Days before #MarchForOurLives, another school shooting provided an opening for just this kind of attack: moments after a student at a suburban Maryland high school opened fire, Blaine Gaskill, the school’s resource officer, fired back at him (Hassan & Ahmed 2018). Investigation would later determine that the shooter had in fact died by suicide (Wood, Richman & Rector 2018), but Gaskill drew instant comparisons to the ineffectual deputy assigned to Marjory Stoneman Douglas (Hassan & Ahmed 2018). Thus, “on the eve of the Parkland teens-led March on Washington,” according to the *Washington Post* (Wootson, Jr. 2018), the Parkland student activists were attacked by Colion Noir, a.k.a. Collins Iyare Idehen Jr., a lawyer and gun rights activist from Houston with nearly 650,000 subscribers on YouTube. Using his NRATV show as a platform, Noir “took to the airwaves... telling them: ‘No one would know your names’ if a student gunman hadn’t stormed into their school and killed three staff members and 14 students.” Noir drew a contrast between illegitimate political protagonists — the allegedly self-centered and clueless “kids” — and the kind of agent favored by the NRA, the fantasy figure of the “hero,” the “good guy with a gun.” Referring to the much-touted heroics of the school’s resource officer, Noir continued: “To all the kids from Parkland getting ready to use your First Amendment to attack everyone else’s Second Amendment at your march on Saturday, I wish a hero like Blaine Gaskill had been at Marjory Douglas High School last month because your classmates would still be alive and no one would know your names, because the media would have completely and utterly ignored your story, the way they ignored his” (Wootson, Jr. 2018). The appropriate response to “kids” who act out, Noir implied, was for adults to shame and ignore them. Emma Gonzalez’s response was to attend instead to the new survivors: “We are Here for you, students of Great Mills . . . together we can stop this from ever happening again.” Adults incapable of shame are perhaps to be ignored.

## Discussion

The Parkland students have been credited with affecting the American political landscape. They have also been lauded for their tactical use of social media. We should not be surprised by this. According to Tarr, “[s]ocial media is something our generation is fluent in in a way that the older generation finds it difficult to grasp. We know how to communicate with our peers, and Twitter is the place to do it. I was angry and I was voicing my anger on the only platform I knew I could, and those tweets started going viral” (Holmes, 2019). Moreover, the students’ demands for gun control included the following: a complete ban on “semi-automatic weapons that fire high-velocity rounds”; universal background checks and “a database recording which guns are sold in the United States, to whom, and of what caliber and capacity they are”; raising the gun purchasing age to 21; and closing the gun show and secondhand purchase loopholes. Support for their demands was made visible at the March for Our Lives, which drew more than 800,000 people to Washington, D.C. (Holmes 2019).

The Parkland students’ social media advocacy has begun to result in some significant changes. The most patent results came in the immediate aftermath of the attack, when they were able to pressure Florida lawmakers to pass gun safety legislation and big companies to “cut ties” with the NRA (Guarino 2018). The ripple effects of their activism may even have reached the midterm elections of November 2018 (Lopez, 2018). In addition to the changes in existing gun laws, according to Yablon and Nass (2018), “Democrats earning F ratings from the NRA for their views on gun laws prevailed not only in increasingly bluish swing states such as Virginia, Nevada, Wisconsin, and Colorado, but also in conservative strongholds like South Carolina and

Kansas.” Notably, Wisconsin’s Scott Walker — once a rising star of the GOP, who had survived a serious challenge from the left in 2011-2012 — lost the gubernatorial race despite over a million-dollar support from the NRA. Moreover, even some NRA-backed politicians that retained their seats saw a significant decline in their margins of victory. For one, Florida Republican Rick Scott narrowly defeated Democrat Bill Nelson in an extremely close race. Undoubtedly, these results speak positively for the shift towards gun control, as many of the upstart winners were Democrats who are in strong support of legislative gun control, to the chagrin of the NRA. Some 14 months after the shooting, long after the initial crisis cycle had ended, the first Democratic presidential debate attested to the lasting presence of the students’ social media activism: one after the next, the candidates paid tribute to the “Parkland kids” while competing to stake out persuasive policy positions on gun control (Man 2019).

While definitive, strategic victories remain elusive, the Parkland students have used tactical social media to help fundamentally shift the parameters of the national conversation on gun control. In the words of Emma González’s Twitter bio: “Change ? in my country ? it’s likelier than you think.”

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*Jesse Cohn* is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Purdue University Northwest. He is the author of *Underground Passages: Anarchist Resistance Culture, 1848-2011* (AK Press, 2015), and is currently working on a book about the strange elevation of science fiction and fantasy to a central position in contemporary culture. Reality outstrips his imagination on a regular basis.

*Rhon Teruelle* is an Assistant Professor of Mass Communication and Social Media at Purdue University Northwest. Prior to moving to the US, he worked as a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Calgary in the Department of Communication, Media & Film. His research focuses on social media and civic mobilization in relation to social movements and collective action, the social implications of social media, and politics. His work has appeared in *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *Social Alternatives*, and *Teaching and Learning*.