Tiny Rebellions: Making Young People's Voices Audible

—Jen Harrison

Over the past two years, no single issue has come up as frequently in my classroom as "free speech." As the political and social climate in Northern America has become more and more polarized, this concept has become one of paramount importance: across campuses, students have battled for the right to voice their political and religious beliefs, but also for the right to go about their business free from speech they consider "harassment." Younger students have participated in everything from petitions to marches and sit-in protests to make their views on gun regulation known, and in ongoing conflicts about race, sexuality, and Indigenous culture, it has increasingly been the voices of the young clamouring for change. In the past, opportunities for young people to be heard were severely restricted: after all, most channels of public communication were mediated by adults, and to speak out one needed a sympathetic grown-up or two to advocate. Then, along came social media.

Social media, with its unparalleled ability to spread any utterance rapidly and widely, has played a key role in the debate about free speech: young people are now better able to make their voices heard publicly, regardless of what they want to say. While sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram are still ostensibly run and moderated by adults, they also offer young people a uniquely effective space for free public speech. On platforms such as these, young people are exercising their right to free speech with abandon, but are also coming under increasing scrutiny for what they say: are they engaging in cyberbullying? What will future employers or funding bodies think of what they say? Will they attract online firestorms or child predators? Young people are also the frequent subject of academic and popular studies decrying the effects of virtual communication and virtual lifestyles, which are held responsible for everything from declining literacy to depression. In thinking through these issues, I

could not help recalling Heather Snell's editorial in *Jeunesse* 10.1, in which free speech was central to many of her arguments about the contentious line between childhood and adulthood: in many countries, that line is determined by the extent to which the free speech of young people can and should be controlled and managed by adults who are assumed to be more experienced, more rational, and more responsible.

Incidents such as the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting or the murder of Jordan Edwards in 2017, however, teach us that this assumption is at best faulty and at worst dangerous: the voices of adults in this society are confused, partisan, ineffective, hysterical. We are also less knowledgeable than we would like to think: while many adults still struggle with how to use a smart phone and may not have heard of Snapchat or Buzzfeed, over 60% of adolescents are regular users of social media, according to the AACAP ("Social Networking"), while a study conducted by the Pew Research Center indicates that 45% of teens report being online "on a near-constant basis" ("Teens"). Young people, it seems, might not only have important things to say, but may well be more skilled at saying them than adults would like to give them credit for.

This editorial examines the potential positives of social media as a platform for what I refer to as "tiny rebellions": the small acts of public self-expression young people make in digital spaces which encourage counter-reading and counter-writing, and which constitute acts of speculative future-building in the face of "adult" impotence. Beginning with a discussion of the traditional constraints on young people's acts of public expression, it moves on to speculate about the empowering and transformative potential of young people writing in digital spaces. It is in these spaces that young people are literally reshaping the world in new and exciting ways.

The limitations of traditional publishing models for children's books (and products) are well-rehearsed. Studies such as Karen Sands-O'Connor's *Children's Publishing and Black Britain, 1965–2015*, for example, point to the way in which institutionalized racism has been built into children's publishing for decades, denying young readers the opportunity to read books written by people of colour and about people of colour. Jack Zipes, in *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, makes a convincing argument for the way in which the entertainment and culture industries have used children's literature as a means of acculturating children so that they become ideal consumers. And Jane Yolen, in her 1997 article for *New Advocate*, argued that the industry trend toward "easy readers" (285) might be limiting in terms of literacy and the development of critical thinking. Regardless of whether you accept such arguments, which run the risk of positioning children as passive victims of what they read, the studies reveal how children's choices have traditionally been limited by the socio-cultural biases of the adults who produce

their literature. While many more studies (most recently Marek Oziewicz's *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction*) have pointed out the ways in which young people routinely engage critically with and speak back to the texts they read, these traditional publishing models nevertheless do not actively provide readers with spaces in which to undertake such acts of free and public speech.

Traditional media may not be any less restrictive. A search of the *New York Times* website for the keyword "child," limited to September 2018, reveals stories about children as victims of child marriage, sexual predators, abuse, neglect and flood waters, with one lone story portraying them as irascible vegetarians. Because these stories focus primarily on young adults and adolescents, the use of the keyword "child" is significant: these media stories highlight the connotations of vulnerability and innocence traditionally associated with childhood and children, as opposed to the connotations of autonomy and agency which are more commonly associated with adolescence and young adulthood. A similar search of the *Guardian*'s UK website reveals stories about child care policies, child protection legislation, the decrease in muscle strength of ten-year-olds, and the advisability of limiting children's exposure to television. A search in Canada's *National Post* revealed recent headlines concerning child murder and manslaughter, child trauma treatments, and changes to child welfare systems. While such stories are both true and relevant, they are also severely restricted and biased: young people are presented largely as the victims of adults, or as the recipients of their protection. Where, in this mass of media coverage, are the stories about young people as empowered leaders,

. . . young people are presented largely as the victims of adults, or as the recipients of their protection.

speakers, and learners? If, as Neal Shusterman's dystopian Unwind Dystology suggests, it is through the media that constructions of childhood in our era are formed, then these constructions do little to provide young people with positive images of themselves as movers and shakers. In the world of traditional media and publishing, young people's voices are largely filtered out, and young people themselves are presented through the filter of adult socio-cultural biases.

Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly clear that young people have a growing desire for free and public speech. In March of 2018, one month after the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, hundreds of students across the country staged an organized walk-out—in many cases, in defiance of school authorities—to protest the lack of gun control and regulation within the United States. The protest was typified by what the *New York Times* described as "eloquent young voices, equipped with symbolism and social media savvy, riding a resolve as yet untouched by cynicism" (Yee and Blinder). This example of young people speaking up and speaking out about the issues that directly affect their lives and their futures is not an isolated incident: in 2013 the Council of Europe's Youth Department launched the No Hate Speech Youth Campaign, uniting young people across forty-five nations to speak out against "hate speech and the risks it poses to democracy and the well-being of young people" ("The No Hate Speech"); a brief exploration of the hashtag #NoHateSpeech reveals a still-thriving social media presence where young people fight for a voice in the politics of hatred ("#NoHateSpeech"). In 2017, the #NoDAPL movement saw Native American teenagers and youth raise their voices against the ongoing issues of colonization and marginalization, symbolized by the Dakota pipeline and "the larger environmental crisis their generation was set to inherit" (Elbein). What has characterized each of these instances—and hundreds more like them in recent years—however, has been the role of social media in giving these young people an easily accessible and wide-reaching platform for expression and debate. The innovation of the hashtag has made these movements successful (in terms of exposure, if not results) and has encouraged more young people to step forward and make their voices heard.

Approximately a decade ago, critics saw in the media a restriction of the ideals of democracy and free speech, lamenting that

> [i]deally, a media system suitable for a democracy ought to provide its readers with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives. It is difficult to find anyone who would claim that media discourse in the United States even remotely approaches this ideal. (Gamson et al. 373)

While this may be true of traditional media outlets, social media and other user-managed platforms have proven

game-changing in terms of the democratization of public discourse. Digital spaces, from social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to fan fiction sites and online forums, provide young people with unparalleled opportunities for publicizing their perspectives and engaging others in dialogue—and there is ample evidence to suggest that they are making good use of these opportunities. On Twitter, as #NoHateSpeech and #NoDAPL suggest, young people are able to enter directly into political conversations, airing their voices and perspectives directly to those who need to hear them, namely, the politicians and policy makers whose decisions will directly affect their futures. On the #NoHateSpeech page, young people across the globe share their own experiences of hate speech and its debilitating effects, as well as their unique suggestions and efforts for combatting it on personal, local, and global levels. The platform is non-judgmental (except insofar as other individuals choose to share their counter-opinions), and as a virtual space it is also comparatively safe: young people can control what they reveal in terms of personal information and identity, giving them better control over the separation of the personal and the private than they might enjoy at, say, a school walk-out. Participation in political discourse via these platforms also exercises valuable literacy skills: in conforming to word limits and other platform limitations (such as the Twitter 280-character limit), as well as managing visuals and intertextuality (via hyperlinks and hashtags), young people making their voices heard in these spaces practise valuable communication skills or risk the frustration of their messages being lost or misinterpreted.

In a similar manner, fan sites and forums offer a space for young people to actively promote inclusivity and representation. Multiple studies of fan fiction have shown how the rewriting and appropriation of much-loved works of fiction offer young people opportunities to negotiate the strictures of normative culture: the writing-in of LGBTQ+ characters, female characters, or characters of colour, for example, allows young writers to correct what they perceive to be imbalances in their literature and their societies. Writing about transmedia experiences in classrooms and libraries, Annette Lamb and Larry Johnson argue that "[t]he cross-genre, multi-platform, transmedia world means many different technologies and channels of communication can provide opportunities and options for differentiation . . ." (76). These digital spaces, therefore, allow young people to collectively imagine the future as different from the present, in a myriad of small, meaningful ways negotiated between engaged individuals in language of their choosing. While such rewriting has formed a part of the literature classroom for a long time, online and digital spaces offer a new level of engagement. As Jen Scott Curwood, Alecia Marie Magnifico, and Jayne C. Lammers argue, "By actively participating in affinity spaces around a shared passion . . . , young people can easily access an authentic audience who reads, responds to, and even critiques

their written work" (677). Spaces such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram operate according to a similar logic, providing users with multimodal opportunities to disseminate their own narratives, whether those narratives express their own identities or engage with wider social issues. In these spaces, young people engage wide audiences of their peers in order to begin the work of imagining and building a future which is better suited to their needs than the one they currently occupy. In so doing, they effectively bypass the stagnant thinking of mediating adults. Online and virtually, young people are not only disseminating and encountering new ideas and perspectives, but they are also building the critical communication skills needed to realize their goals for the future.

Online and virtually, young people are not only disseminating and encountering new ideas and perspectives, but they are also building the critical communication skills needed to realize their goals for the future.

This issue of *Jeunesse* engages with these ideas both within and in conjunction with the special section on transnationalism. Digital communication offers obvious implications for the development and exploration of transnational identities, providing a dialogic space which transcends borders and geographical boundaries. Sarah Glassford ("'International Friendliness' and Canadian Identities: Transnational Tensions in Canadian Junior Red Cross Texts, 1919–1939"); Geneviève Brisson ("Plurilingualism and Transnational Identities in a Francophone Minority Classroom"); and Marcia Ostashewski, Heather Fitzsimmons Frey, and Shaylene Johnson ("Youth-Engaged Art-Based Research in Cape Breton: Transcending Nations, Boundaries, and Identities") offer readings which explore the role of traditional publishing and media platforms for children's voices, setting the stage for Jayne Malenfant ("Anarchist Youth in Rural Canada: Technology, Resistance, and the Navigation of Space") to explore the role of social media and digital spaces in helping young people expand transnational boundaries.

In the article that precedes the special section, Janette Hughes and Laura Morrison's "Teaching Critical Visual Literacies through #Selfies" engages with the complexity of the literacy and communication skills involved in online and digital communication between young people, and particularly ephemeral communications such as selfies, which are often denigrated as shallow and superficial. With suggestions for translating the selfie phenomenon into effective classroom practice, Hughes and Morrison illustrate how young people's own self-mediated communications are providing the blueprint for potential futures—and not the other way around. The four book reviews in this collection engage further with the concepts of childhood innocence and young people's voices raised by these articles. Mavis Reimer's "Suspicion and Collaboration: Modes of Scholarly Reading" interrogates scholarly engagement with representations of childhood agency within cultural systems. Mark Golden's "Children's Literature and the Classics," which reviews Owen Hodkinson and Helen Lovatt's *Classical Reception and Children's Literature*, gestures at the consideration of young reader's voices so often missing from considerations of children's literature, and which is an important aspect of this volume's critical framework. Both Anuja Madan's "Representing Childhoods through Comics" and Larissa Wodtke's "The Child's Place in Pop Music" engage with representations of childhood in popular culture, discussing the ways in which comic-book culture and popular music have challenged traditional conceptualizations of childhood innocence and vulnerability.

It is easy to dismiss young people as self-centred and short-sighted, more interested in the latest online trend than in the long-term issues they will face in the future. Such a viewpoint, however, ignores the multitude of young voices taking over the virtual airwaves. Free from the constraints of adult mediation, young people on social media are able to explore, engage with, and ultimately shift the discursive playing field for the critical social issues of our time. We may not be in dialogue with them, but they are in dialogue with each other, and it remains to be seen what the results of such dialogue will be.

Works Cited

"#NoHateSpeech." *Twitter*, 2018, twitter.com/nohate_speech?lang=en. Accessed 8 Nov. 2018.

Curwood, Jen Scott, et al. "Writing in the Wild: Writers' Motivation in Fan-Based Affinity Spaces." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, vol. 56, no. 8, 2013, pp. 677-85.

Elbein, Saul. "The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at

Standing Rock." *New York Times*, 31 Jan. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/magazine/the-youth-group-that-launched-a-movement-at-standing-rock.html. Accessed 8 Nov. 2018.

Gamson, William A., et al. "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 18, 1992, pp. 373-93.

Lamb, Annette, and Larry Johnson. "Divergent Convergence Part 1: Cross-Genre, Multi-platform, Transmedia Experiences in School Libraries." *Teacher Librarian*, vol. 75, no. 5, 2010, pp. 76-88.

"The No Hate Speech Movement Youth Campaign 2012–2017." *Council of Europe*, 2018, www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign/library. Accessed 8 Nov. 2018.

Oziewicz, Marek. *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction*. Routledge, 2015.

Sands-O'Connor, Karen. *Children's Publishing and Black Britain, 1965–2015*. Palgrave, 2017.

Shusterman, Neal. Unwind Dystology. Simon and Schuster, 2007-2014.

Snell, Heather. "To Be or Not to Be an Adult, That Is the Question." *Jeunesse*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-21.

"Social Networking and Children." AACAP, 2018, www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-and-Social-Networking-100.aspx. Accessed 8 Nov. 2018.

"Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018." Pew Research Center, 31 May 2018, www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/. Accessed 8 Nov. 2018.

Yee, Vivian, and Alan Blinder. "National School Walkout: Thousands Protest against Gun Violence across the U.S." *New York Times*, 14 Mar. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/us/school-walkout.html. Accessed 8 Nov. 2018.

Yolen, Jane. "Taking Time: Or How Things Have Changed in the Last Thirty-Five Years of Children's Publishing." *New Advocate*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1997, pp. 285-91.

Zipes, Jack. *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. Routledge, 2002.

Jen Harrison is an instructor of English at East Stroudsburg University, where she teaches composition, professional writing, creative writing, and literature courses. She earned her Ph.D. in children's literature in 2009 from Aberystwyth University in the UK. Her current research focuses on post-humanism, speculative fiction, and non-fiction for young people. She is also an editor with *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*.