Sociopolitical development (SPD) refers to the process by which an individual acquires knowledge, skills, emotional faculties, and commitment to analyze and challenge oppressive social forces. Adolescence is an important time for sociopolitical development and, now more than ever, social media plays an important role in this process. Through social media, youth can build community, stay informed about current events, explore ideas, interests, and values, and mobilize others to take action for causes they care about. These activities can help promote positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for youth. They can also facilitate change in the systems that impact teens' lives. At the same time, social media can be damaging to young people's well-being and impede youth organizing efforts. Through social media, youth consume significant amounts of misinformation and complicated social media algorithms filter what ideas, messages and values that get delivered to their feeds. Social media usage has also been linked to issues like anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, all of which can negatively affect factors of sociopolitical learning and development like psychological empowerment, efficacy, motivation and outlook on the future. While there is increasingly more information about how social media engineering affects the socio-political information youth receive, we need to better understand the relationship of social media with socio-political development and how social media affects youth socio-political thinking, behavior, and attitudes.

My dissertation explores the research questions of: (1) How can social media facilitate youth SPD? and (2) How can social media limit, or at times can even be counterproductive to, youth SPD? In learning more about this relationship, we can better utilize social media as a tool for youth empowerment, critical thinking, social awareness, and capacity building for social change. We can also better understand the limits of social media as a tool for socio-political development and mitigate negative impacts on youth socio-emotional well-being. Theoretically this work is informed by a critical youth perspective and activity theory. As such, analysis considers individual and collective-level processes, social structures that shape activity and contradictions and tensions that shape development. I used a multi-site case study approach (n=12) young people (ages 14-19) who are engaged in online and offline social justice work in their communities. Youth are diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and ability. I conducted interviews and direct observation of social media engagement (a social media "ride along"). I also adapted the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) method of photovoice for social media. The youth co-researchers are translating the results into a "for youth, by youth" organizer training and I am highlighting implications for intergenerational organizing and educators who aim to support the development of youth sociopolitical development.