

# What Forces Are Driving Activism Today?

Five trends are reshaping our world in positive ways.

Reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

**Undercurrents: Channeling Outrage to Spark Practical Activism.** By Steve Davis. Hardcover.

196 pages. John Wiley & Sons, [wiley.com](http://wiley.com).

Steve Davis's *Undercurrents* examines five trends that are affecting the direction of social innovation. To Davis, social innovation comes largely from within the dominant socio-economic system through technological advancements.

He notes how technology has improved our lives by offering conveniences our ancestors didn't have. Of course, this technology also has unintentionally given rise to productivity pressures, a widening socio-economic gap, and a hollowing out of the middle class. To call technological inventions by themselves social innovations arguably supports existing inequities.

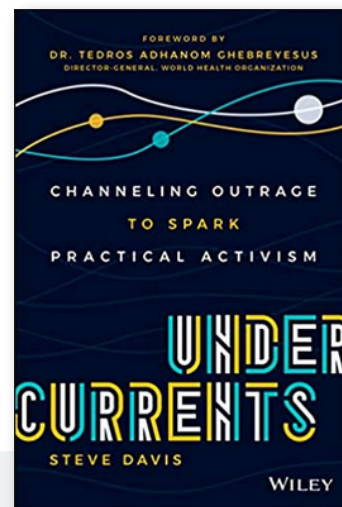
Still, Davis makes many useful observations about current trends. For example, wholesale aid to nations is being replaced by interventions to the communities most in need.

“Social-media communication can be used to divide us.”

Access to technology in these communities is the low-hanging fruit triggering rapid improvement in community well-being. However, targeting aid in such a precise way risks shifting nationalist colonialism toward a neo-colonialism of under-represented populations, such as those in rural areas. This may further widen the gap in well-being between the extractor class and those being exploited.

As long as culturally based adaptations to new technology are disregarded, technological fixes alone won't create sustainable change. Likewise, social media have brought great changes in how we communicate; but, with little social control, the frame of that communication can be set by a minority and used to divide us.

Davis believes tweaking the dominant system with technology is the way to reform it. While this is necessary and is the tale preferred by those with privilege, it's not the only story that needs telling. Meaningful social innovation rejects the either/or debate between providing technological advances and social empowerment.



## Five Undercurrents

Undercurrents are the tides invisible to those navigating the ocean's surface. The undercurrents shaping the work of activists are macro-trends that are creating "positive momentum to push us forward" through this decade and beyond, says Steve Davis. He pinpoints five undercurrents:

1. **Global economies are moving away** from the model of a pyramid, with low-income people at the bottom and a few wealthy ones at the top, toward a diamond, with more people joining the middle class.
2. **Rather than being passive recipients of aid**, communities are playing more of a role in shaping their futures.
3. **The playing field is being leveled**, as greater equity reshapes the field of social activism.
4. **Digital tools are revolutionizing** everything from healthcare to education.
5. **Innovations are being scaled** for widespread impact, giving middleware more importance.

To create meaningful change, we need those inside the system to work for technical reform and those outside the system to critique and disrupt it. This means there's plenty of space for nonprofit organizations – and for people within each nonprofit – to value both perspectives and re-learn the work of cooperation. By developing ways to blend technical improvements with social behavior, we increase opportunities for building community and egalitarianism.



*Terrence Fernsler, MNPL, PhD, has been a nonprofit professional for over 35 years. He is currently an instructor and advisor in the James Madison University Nonprofit Studies minor program, an instructor in the Nonprofit Management and Leadership for the Master of Public Administration in the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University program, and principal of Sustainable Nonprofit Leadership Strategies.*