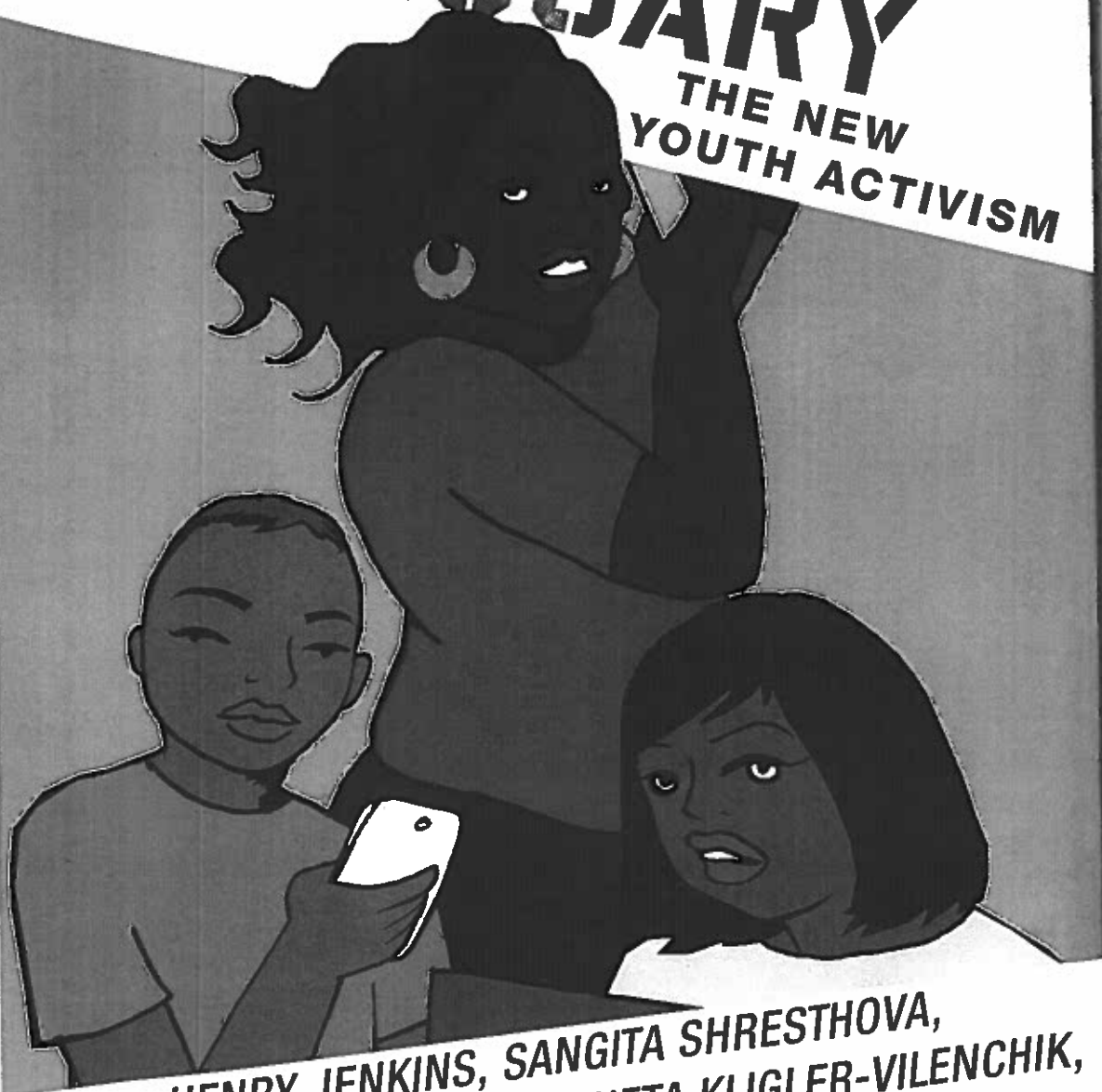


C. 2016

BY ANY MEDIA NECESSARY

THE NEW
YOUTH ACTIVISM



HENRY JENKINS, SANGITA SHRESTHOVA,
LIANA GAMBER-THOMPSON, NETA KLIGLER-VILENCHIK,
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CONNECTED YOUTH AND DIGITAL FUTURES

Series Editor: Julian Sefton-Green

This series explores young people's day-to-day lives and futures. The volumes consider changes at the intersection of civil and political reform, transformations in employment and education, and the growing presence of digital technologies in all aspects of social, cultural and political life. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning (DML) Initiative has supported two research networks that have helped launch this series: the Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network and the Connected Learning Research Network. The DML Initiative and the DML Hub at the University of California, Irvine, also support production and open access for this series.

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By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism

Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson,
Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, and Arely M. Zimmerman

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The New Youth Activism

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With an Afterword by Elisabeth Soep



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“Decreasing World Suck”

Harnessing Popular Culture for Fan Activism

Neta Kligler-Vilenchik

A young fan masquerades as Harry Potter in a YouTube video blog encouraging young people to donate books to libraries and communities in need. In a downtown bar, fans gathered for a “Wizard Rock concert,” dancing to songs based on the world of Harry Potter, are approached by volunteers encouraging them to register to vote. In a local library, a group of fans meets every week to discuss how the Harry Potter stories can be linked to real-world issues. All of these unlikely examples mirror ways that a popular cultural phenomenon can be employed toward participatory politics.

Established in 2005 by community organizer and stand-up comedian Andrew Slack, together with co-founder Seth Soulstein, the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA)—whose members are responsible for all the activities mentioned above—is a nonprofit organization promoting literacy, equality, and human rights. The HPA leadership includes a handful of paid staff members and a network of young volunteers, dispersed around the nation, conducting most of their communication online via laptops. The local face-to-face component of the HPA involves a network of over 300 chapters in high schools, colleges, and communities nationwide, and on six continents. The mostly youth-led chapters engage in national campaigns but also promote local projects based on their members’ interests. Unlike Invisible Children, described in Chapter 2, the HPA is not defined around a single mission; rather, it addresses a diverse set of causes loosely inspired by J. K. Rowling’s content world. For the HPA, the Harry Potter universe is so rich and diverse that almost any real-world cause could be linked to it, allowing the organization to respond quickly to current events as well as to pressing issues raised by its members.

The HPA operates within the structures of the Harry Potter fan community, using its creative tools to encourage civic action. One example is the House Cup competition. Hogwarts, the school of magic in the Harry Potter universe, is organized around four houses, Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff, each of which embodies different ideals and virtues. Harry Potter fans deploy many different sorting mechanisms to place members into appropriate houses, and many feel a strong sense of identification and affiliation with their house. This identification is then employed to rally fans, as in the Wrock4Equality campaign, in which members earned points for their respective houses for each person they contacted in the effort to rally Maine voters against an anti-gay marriage proposition. Such structures respect things fans value, and employ them to encourage budding activists to go further than they might have otherwise. In 2011, the HPA established the Imagine Better Network to extend its approach of “harnessing the power of popular stories” to other fan communities, as well as to nonprofits, schools, activist organizations, philanthropists, and Hollywood.

This chapter revolves around the HPA, Imagine Better, and the online Nerdfighter community. While the most unconventional of our case study organizations in terms of their language and civic style, the groups described in this chapter have also been some of the most successful in harnessing the enthusiasm many people have for popular culture and directing it toward engagement with real-world issues. At a time when young people increasingly pull away from membership in traditional civic associations (Putnam 2000; Wuthnow 2002), and are often depicted by the media as uninterested in their communities and disconnected from the political world, we will see here examples of groups that have translated young people’s passion for popular culture into participatory politics.

What do we mean when we describe the groups depicted here as “successful”? As we’ve discussed in Chapter 2 regarding Invisible Children, for nonprofit organizations that mobilize young people, success can be judged on several levels. On the one hand, there is their ability to achieve their civic goals. On the other hand, these groups—some more explicitly than others—seek to encourage their young members to see themselves as civic agents and to feel empowered to make positive change in the world. In Peter Dahlgren’s (2009) model of the civic culture

circuit, “civic agency is premised on people being able to see themselves as participants, that they find engagement meaningful, and that they experience motivation via the interplay of reason and passion” (102). Such agency is one of the conditions necessary for civic engagement. In the conclusion of this chapter, we will return to Dahlgren to show how these groups link different components of the civic culture circuit model.

In the case of the HPA, since 2005 this group has shown time and again its capacity to empower its young members to engage in actions with real-world impact. Some of the group’s most visible campaigns have been charity based. For example, after the 2010 earthquake, the HPA’s Helping Haiti Heal campaign raised \$123,000 in two weeks from small donations, enabling it to send five cargo planes full of supplies. Every year, the organization runs book drives for communities in need and has donated over 200,000 books to libraries and communities from Brooklyn to Rwanda. Campaigns such as these, which have drawn mainstream media attention, have been instrumental in encouraging the participation of many in the Harry Potter fan community and beyond it as well.

The HPA also works to further its members’ understanding of global issues, including ones that get little attention from mainstream media. In July 2007, the group worked with The Leaky Cauldron, one of the most popular fan news sites, to organize house parties around the country focused on increasing awareness of the Sudanese genocide. Participants listened to and discussed a podcast that featured political experts such as Joseph C. Wilson, former U.S. ambassador to Gabon, and John Prendergast, senior advisor to the International Crisis Group, alongside performances by Wizard Rock bands.

The HPA leadership is adamant about going beyond consensual civic engagement and charity to seek more systemic and structural changes, even as it pushes members beyond their comfort zones. As Slack explains, “We do want people to both volunteer with people at a local AIDS clinic as well as advocate for better treatment of AIDS victims in Africa. We want our young people tutoring underprivileged kids and helping them read, getting them engaged in the Internet and learning those things, but then also challenging the rules of the game that are making it possible for kids to go without food” (Jenkins 2009). HPA has also worked toward change through institutional politics—its members have registered over 5,000 young people as voters, and during the

marriage-equality campaign in Maine, they called more than 3,500 state residents in a single day.

The HPA and Imagine Better often collaborate with the Nerdfighters, which represent a different model for mobilizing popular culture fans. The Nerdfighters are an informal online community of young people that took shape around the YouTube channel of the VlogBrothers, John and Hank Green. John Green is a best-selling young adult author and Hank Green is a musician and entrepreneur; both now engage in a wide variety of educational projects that they produce for YouTube, such as SciShow and Crash Course, channels dedicated to teaching science, history, and a range of other topics including U.S. government and politics. On their VlogBrothers channel, the Greens upload two videos a week, about “nothing in particular,” in their signature style, which involves high-speed talking, multiple jump cuts, and various inside jokes and jargon. Nerdfighters connect not around a fictional content world, but rather around their affiliation with the VlogBrothers and a broader “nerd” identity. As part of this shared identity, the group pursues a shared social agenda, which they call “decreasing world suck.”

As the VlogBrothers enigmatically define it in their YouTube video “How to Be a Nerdfighter: A VlogBrothers FAQ,” “World suck is kind of exactly what world suck sounds like. It’s hard to quantify exactly, but, you know, it’s like, the amount of suck in the world.” This broad definition leaves much space for individual Nerdfighters to interpret what “world suck” and decreasing it means to them. Examples range from personal acts, such as being a good person or cheering up a friend, to collective acts that fit within our definition of participatory politics. Nerdfighters are one of the largest communities of lenders on Kiva.org, a nonprofit organization that grants loans to people without access to traditional banking systems. Every year, they promote charities and other nonprofit organizations through YouTube videos and encourage small donations from individual Nerdfighters. In 2013, such endeavors raised more than \$850,000 for the Foundation to Decrease World Suck, a nonprofit created by the VlogBrothers, benefiting a variety of causes and organizations selected by Nerdfighters.

The HPA and the Nerdfighters have many similarities. Membership between the two groups overlaps often. The groups also have comparable civic goals (though they are articulated differently) and have

collaborated on multiple campaigns and projects, often involving the VlogBrothers promoting HPA campaigns in their videos, thus significantly increasing their reach. The size of the Nerdfighters community has been key to the success of its outreach and fundraising efforts; the HPA, while much smaller in membership, has been successful at sustaining members' civic participation over time and supporting their development as civic actors (Kligler-Vilenchik 2013a). Unlike the HPA, Nerdfighters have generally focused their attention on charity and civic engagement, refraining from initiating campaigns with a clear political stance. Yet to the Green brothers, as John Green told us in 2013, a central objective is to encourage young people "to see themselves as people who matter and as people who can shape policy."

Building on case studies of the HPA, Imagine Better, and the Nerdfighters, this chapter explores how these groups deploy popular culture engagement toward political ends and how they both cultivate and activate their members' civic imagination. In Chapter 1, we introduced the concept of the civic imagination, the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political, or economic institutions or problems. The groups in this chapter are the ones that focus most on "imagination" and use fictional narratives and imaginary worlds in order to make sense of, relate to, and act upon issues in our real world. We identify different mechanisms through which this deployment works, describing the intersections between fan communities, content worlds, and participatory politics, and the paradoxes that sometimes result. At the same time, we also consider ways in which these practices are applied and adopted beyond the context of fan communities. Using the concepts *fan activism* and *content worlds*, we explore how these groups engage young people through popular culture, and what the strengths and limitations are of such a model.

This chapter is based on three years of research conducted by Neta Kligler-Vilenchik. Building off of previous work conducted by the author and members of the Civic Paths group at USC (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova 2014), the research included in-depth interviews with 15 members of HPA and/or Imagine Better and 15 Nerdfighters, mostly between the ages of 15 and 25, as well as seven expert interviews and ongoing conversations with people in leadership positions in the groups. The research also draws on an analysis of a range of texts and artifacts produced by the groups and their

members. An ethnographic component included participant observation at events both large scale (e.g., national fan conferences) and intimate (e.g., meet-ups for local groups).

Fan Activism: Fan Enthusiasm Gone Civic

Participation in informal and formal civic organizations has been regarded as a cornerstone of American democracy at least as far back as Alexis de Tocqueville's visit to the United States in the 1830s. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) argues that such affiliations have been in decline, citing the disappearance of community bowling leagues as emblematic. While *Bowling Alone* paints a complex picture, pointing to economic distress, long daily commutes, and generational change as possible culprits for this decline, Putnam places much of the blame (about 25 percent of it, to be precise) on media consumption, and specifically on television. As he asked in an earlier work, "How might television destroy social capital?" (Putnam 1995, 678). The claims made in *Bowling Alone* spurred more than a decade's worth of scholarly and public conversations around the forms of social bonds that might restore civic engagement.

The examples discussed in this chapter—and much of this book—make an opposite claim: that popular culture, rather than leading to a disengagement from public life, is being used as a resource around which young people are making connections to civic and political worlds. Putnam understands television viewing as an individual experience, seeing time spent with entertainment content as time away from social experiences. Yet fan communities, this chapter's focus, are by their nature collectives, much like the bowling leagues Putnam longingly describes. Bowling leagues were above all a way to bring people together, to use common activities to create a context where a range of other conversations and actions could take place. We see fan communities as performing similar functions today, with the added value that they provide shared mythologies that can inspire acts of civic imagination and thus represent potential bridges between participatory culture and participatory politics.

Fan communities have long been early adopters of various tools and platforms, which they use for purposes of creative production and

circulation (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Similarly, they have been at the forefront of experimenting with the connections between popular culture and civic engagement—laying the early seeds for many of the ideas in this book. We have come to term this engagement “fan activism”:

Forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture. (Jenkins 2012a)

As the definition points out, we use “fan activism” to refer both to political participation and to forms of more consensual civic engagement, including charity—though at times we also make distinctions between these forms of participation. At a time when many young people are renegotiating their relationship with the traditional political process, often seen as ineffective, out of touch, or—ironically—uncivil (see, e.g., Zuckerman 2013a), fan activism offers a powerfully resonant means to connect and mobilize young people toward collective concerns. Fandom provides them with a space to gather, talk, imagine, debate, and engage with each other, and much like bowling leagues, it is a space where other kinds of conversations emerge.

We see fan experiences as valuable on their own terms. As a source of pleasure and social outreach, fan creativity matters in a world where many people lack means of creative expression in their schools or in their work lives. Some fan communities are increasingly seeking ways to help their young members become more active citizens. In Chapter 1, we encountered the example of Lauren Bird, who later became the communications director for the HPA. As Bird explained, civic education in school did not leave much room for discussion or expression, while online fandom provided an outlet for creativity and connectivity. Bird’s encounter with the HPA during its Helping Haiti Heal campaign served as what is known in the connected learning framework as a “consequential connection,” helping to redirect what Bird did for fun toward other goals. The groups discussed in this chapter succeed in making such connections for many who, like Bird, have not previously thought of themselves as civic actors.

The three case studies described here are distinctive in that the groups explicitly promote fan activism through “mechanisms of translation” between participatory culture and participatory politics. Mechanisms of translation (Kligler-Vilenchik 2013b) are practices through which the same activities and social ties that bring fan participants together are deployed to support participatory politics. These groups foster and activate members’ and supporters’ civic imaginations in different ways: they deploy elements of their content worlds as analogies for thinking about political issues; they encourage supporters to actively produce and circulate media content that often borrows from pop culture imagery; and they provide a social environment that encourages people to reflect on politics and discuss different perspectives.

This chapter’s three case studies document fan activism as a practice, but also raise questions about its boundaries, its strengths and limitations. How is fan activism grounded in fan practice, and how does it extend it? When and how are practices of fan activism adopted beyond the realm of fans? Does fan activism have the capacity to shift how a broader public imagines the process of political change? To answer these questions, we elaborate on the concept of fan activism, chart its roots and progression, and describe it as a continuum between two modes: fannish civics, which allows devoted fans to connect their deep knowledge of a beloved text to social concerns, and cultural acupuncture, which builds on sometimes more superficial references to resonant popular culture texts to gain widespread public attention for issues.

Prefiguring Fan Activism

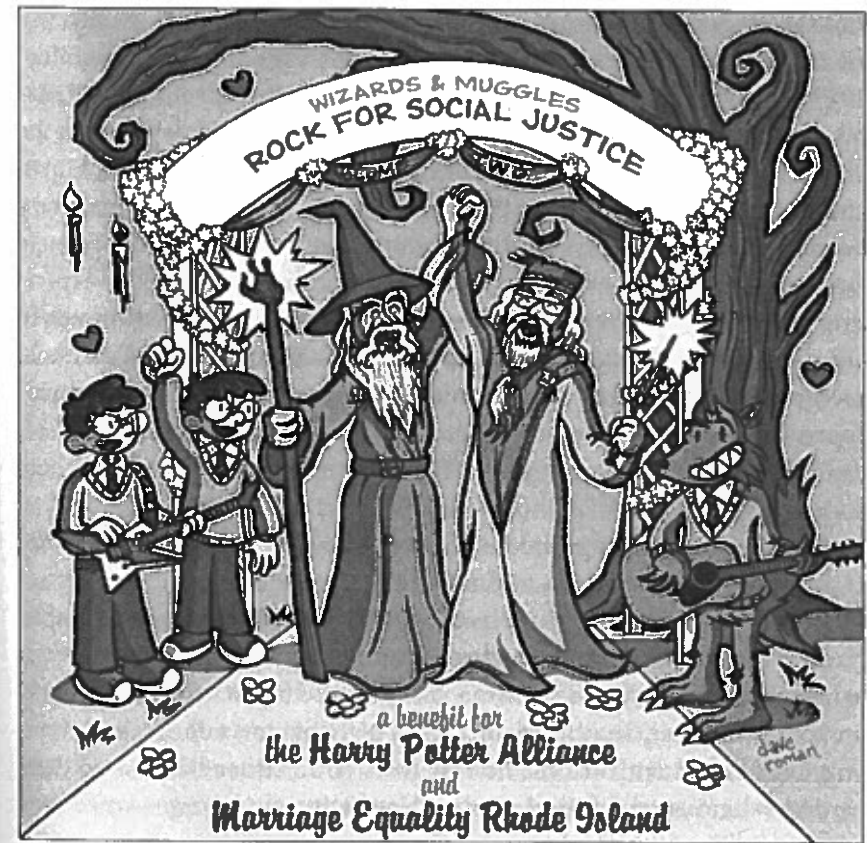
The teenage girl fan of Madonna who fantasizes her own empowerment can translate this fantasy into behavior, and can act in a more empowered way socially, thus winning more social territory for herself. When she meets others who share her fantasies and freedom there is the beginning of a sense of solidarity, of a shared resistance, that can support and encourage progressive action on the microsocial level. (Fiske 1989a, 136)

In his description of the Madonna fan, John Fiske describes a trajectory from pop culture consumption to potential political action. The young fan’s engagement with the text starts individually, when her

recognition of Madonna as an empowered woman inspires her own sense of empowerment. The next step is subcultural participation: the fan meets others who share her fantasies and freedom, developing a sense of shared solidarity and shared resistance. This collective identity, in turn, is hypothesized to “support and encourage progressive action on the micro-social level” (Fiske 1989b, 104), the level of politics of everyday life.

Today, one might say that Fiske was hinting at an early iteration of “third-wave feminism,” especially as embodied by the Riot Grrrls, but he would have lacked access to that vocabulary in 1989. At the time, his claims were met with overwhelming resistance, as he was criticized for celebrating meaning making over the sphere of material politics (McGuigan 1992) and for having an inflated sense of the power of what he called “semiotic democracy.” Self-empowered social behavior, critics argued, does not equal political action. Moreover, he was rebuked for not being able to provide empirical grounding for the behavioral trajectory he was theorizing. Indeed, he struggled to find evidence for the connections he claimed between fandom and social awareness, arguing that “the products of this tactical consumption are difficult to study—they have no place, only the space of their moments of being” (Fiske 1989a, 35). While Fiske’s argument was very controversial when he first made it, given current examples of fan activism we may ask if he didn’t take his notion far enough—he never envisioned that fan identities would give birth to collective action on the macropolitical level, the politics of societies. When HPA members, for example, connect J. K. Rowling’s “outing” of Dumbledore as gay (Smith 2007) to participation in phone banking to promote marriage equality laws, they are clearly engaging in macropolitical fan action.

Fiske believed that popular culture was inspiring political thought and action constantly—but in the confines of people’s private conversations, their interactions in front of the home television set, and in their own consciousness, none of which were subject to outside observation. Today’s new media environment, on the other hand, brings many of these once-hidden meaning-making processes into much greater visibility. In the context of an increasingly participatory culture, fans and other audience members publicly express their interpretations of cultural texts online, circulating their subcultural creations to friends and family through social networking sites. As online culture has brought



“Harry Potter for Marriage Equality.” Fan art by David Roman.

fan communities further into the mainstream, making them more accessible to wider audiences, it also provides tools and platforms through which fans can forge connections between their cultural passions and engagement in social issues. The groups described in this chapter represent some of the most visible and clear manifestations of these connections—and they may be only the tip of the iceberg.

As Michael Saler (2012) notes, fans have drawn connections between fictional worlds and real-world issues since the beginning of fan discussions. Saler examines early-20th-century genre authors, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, J.R.R. Tolkien, and H. P. Lovecraft, whose followings paved the way for the emergence of modern fan culture. He describes

how these early fans conversed through letter pages of pulp magazines, or in direct correspondence with each other, allowing them to collectively but playfully inhabit the imaginary worlds that inspired their passions and curiosity. Saler terms these conversations “public spheres of the imagination,” spaces where people came together to discuss ideas, hopes, dreams, and fears by mapping them onto shared fictions. These imaginary worlds proved to be powerful touchstones for the real world, precisely because they were so evocative. Imaginary worlds enabled fans to experience strong sensations and identifications that could open their minds to new experiences beyond their everyday lives. Yet these works’ fictional status generally allowed participants to avoid the exclusiveness and violence that often mark, for example, nationally based affiliations. Instead, fans of different faiths conversed with each other, creating a public sphere more heterogeneous than those found in many other social contexts.

The function of fan affinities in bridging differences surfaced often in our research, and represents one of the strengths of fan communities as a productive space for participatory politics. Nerdfighters, for example, described how their shared identity as fans creates an environment where heterogeneous discussion and disagreement can be achieved in a civil manner. Jacob, a 20-year-old Nerdfighter, talked about having discussions with people he disagrees with, either because of their strong religious or political views: “Nerdfighters are very—we’re very passionate about things but we’re also very respecting of other people’s opinions. . . . I think most of the Nerdfighters if they’re approached by somebody who disagrees with them, they would be able to respond in a more rational way. . . . Most of the Nerdfighters seem to react in an intelligent discussion as opposed to insults.”

As Saler’s historical examples suggest, establishing a civic imagination by connecting fictional worlds with real-world issues is not a new phenomenon. Andrew Ross (1991) describes science fiction fan organizations of the 1930s and 1940s that served as spaces in which to debate radical political ideas. Helen Merrick (2009) explores a feminist science fiction culture that goes back to the 1960s. Contemporary fan studies have likewise paid quite a bit of attention to ways that fans discuss gender (e.g., Wills 2013), race (e.g., Gatson and Reid 2012), sexuality (e.g., Hunting 2012), and other politically relevant issues through their favorite texts. However, the forging of such political connections was usually aimed at expres-

sion, education, and conscience raising—it generally did not lead fans to “march out in the streets” in pursuit of activist goals. Groups like the HPA, Imagine Better, and Nerdfighters differ from these earlier examples in that their civic goals are explicit and they use connections between fictional and real-world issues to motivate real-world action.

Politicizing Fan Activism

Fans have historically organized to protect their collective interests as fans, defending their cultural productions from claims of copyright infringement or other forms of censorship, for instance, or rallying to keep favorite programs on the air, and these actions have provided templates for other activist efforts, helping them to learn how to identify targets, develop tactics, and educate and mobilize supporters in ways that could be directed toward real-world causes. Such efforts may already be civic insofar as we think of efforts to shape the cultural environment—such as promoting funding for the arts or protecting a local landmark from demolition—as civic activities, but the kinds of fan activism we are discussing here uses these skills and infrastructures toward more explicitly political goals. In *Entertaining the Citizen*, Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) concludes that fan practices help hone, “in abstract terms, the customs that have been laid out as essential for democratic politics: information, discussion, and activism” (63). In this sense, fandom may represent a particularly powerful training ground for future activists and community organizers.

In 2012, members of the Civic Paths group at USC edited a special issue of the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* dedicated to fan activism, which elicited dozens of examples from around the world. The special issue features a diverse set of case studies, ranging from fans of *The Colbert Report* engaging in collective action initiated by the political satirist (Schulzke 2012) to the engagement of Korean popular music (K-pop) fans in charitable fundraising and volunteering (Jung 2012). The range of submissions we received underscored the resonance of this new and emerging concept as a powerful mobilizer for young people today, and motivated us to continue elaborating and refining it.

Most of the examples of fan activism discussed so far focus on members of fandoms. Yet, as Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007) claim,

our current media moment, characterized by increasing technological possibilities to engage in fan activities, has contributed to “the increasing entrenchment of fan consumption in the structure of our everyday life” (8). Consequently, it may be helpful to consider the wider spectrum, from those engaging in “emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (Sandvoss 2005, 8) to the participants in complex, organized social communities of fans. Some of the challenges faced by our case study groups involve whether or not to broaden their target audience beyond the fan community to a wider public—a question we will address through the distinction between two modes of fan activism: fannish civics and cultural acupuncture.

Fannish Civics: Translating Fannish Practice to Civic Talk and Action

Within the HPA, members engage not only in national campaigns, but also in local, member-initiated actions. One such local initiative, which took place within a new, small Southern California chapter of the HPA during 2012, was a workshop dubbed Harry Potter as a Tool for Social Change (Kligler-Vilenchik 2015). The workshop was described by its founder as “an informal study group on how Harry Potter relates to current sociopolitical and personal identity issues.” Ranging from six to eight members, the group held six weekly meetings, with each week’s discussion devoted to a certain book from the Harry Potter series. While the books served as the discussion’s starting points—and as the main hook for most of the younger participants—the group held in-depth discussions around subjects as diverse as Walmart’s labor practices, racism, slavery, and the presidential election.

The idea for the group, which can be seen as an almost literal application of our concept of the civic imagination, came from the chapter organizer, 20-year-old Erin. An activist from an early age, Erin works with multiple civic organizations, including the local city hall and a liberal local church. Erin saw the HPA as having unique capacities:

The Harry Potter Alliance I think can be used to build those strong connections between people and to build those personal commitments to different issues, because they can connect to that story.

Erin is a “die-hard” activist, one who was civically active before the HPA and would almost certainly continue to be so even in its absence. This isn’t true for all the group’s members. Maura, a dreamy-eyed 21-year-old, is quite far from your average political junkie. In her interview, she explained that she’s much more connected to the worlds of fantasy and magic: “With magic, anything is possible . . . our world is kind of boring. You get a job, you grow up and you start a family, that’s all there really is to life.”

What made Harry Potter as a Tool for Social Change work as a political discussion group? What made it different from other politically minded groups that enabled dreamy Maura to feel just as comfortable in it as activist-minded Erin? We would argue that the group’s activities constituted fan activism in the form of *fannish civics*: participatory political practices that directly build on existing fannish practices.

Fannish practices are activities conducted by members of fan communities in relation to their object of affection, either collectively or on their own. Fans use the term “fannish” to refer to practices of their community. Some well-researched fannish practices include writing fan fiction (e.g., Hellekson and Busse 2006), creating fan art, vidding (e.g., Coppa 2008), and engaging in fan discussions. Benjamin Woo (2012) characterizes fannish practices as ones that involve forms of criticism and connoisseurship, and that are charged with affection, pleasure, and commitment or loyalty (183).

The experience of reading, debating, performing, and rewriting Harry Potter has been shared by many in the millennial generation (Anelli 2008). Rowling’s stories of the boy wizard, the remarkable school Hogwarts, and the battle against the Dark Lord became global best sellers. Emerging alongside the popular embrace of the web, Harry Potter fandom has developed new media platforms and practices (Scott 2010). The community was among the first to use podcasting and blogs, to develop beta reading practices to improve fan fiction, to distribute MP3 files (such as those of Wizard Rock) through social networking sites, and to use machinima production practices to construct fan vids. Today’s Harry Potter fans engage in activities ranging from real-life quidditch (an adaptation of the sport from the books—with brooms but without flying) to operas based on the young wizard’s tales. As some of our earlier work (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012) has described, the HPA has

thrived by tapping the preexisting infrastructures of the prolific Harry Potter fan community, including fan sites, podcasts, and conventions. Through these practices, fans experience their fictional worlds in new ways, while sharing them with like-minded others.

Engaging in fannish civics is for some another manifestation of their fan enthusiasm. For example, some members' entry into the HPA was directly connected to the void that was left when Rowling stopped writing new books and Warner Brothers completed its series of screen adaptations. HPA member Kathy explained:

I was so invested in these characters . . . when the books were finally over, there was nothing to do, I couldn't give that up yet. I wasn't ready. So I joined this community [the HPA] that was also just as invested and wanted to really use that investment towards good things. I was like, good, I can be part of this at least. It was still Harry Potter.

Fannish civics is strongly rooted within the practices of a preexisting fan community, which includes not only a connection to a primary text, but a strong social bond between community members. Stephen Duncombe (2012a) stresses community building as one of the practices of fandom that most facilitates its connection to political activism. Indeed, one of the most common themes in the interviews we conducted was the centrality of the "sense of community"—the connections and friendships forged between participants (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012)—precisely what Putnam said was cemented for previous generations through their involvement in various civic organizations.

The content world serves as a first step to forging such social connections, as Becca described: "If I know someone is a Harry Potter fan, I can talk to them all day. We can talk about Harry Potter, no problem. It brings us together." Yet many members are quick to exclaim that it's "about so much more than Harry Potter." Lisa explains that for her, the fan practices and the friendships are the key element of her enjoyment:

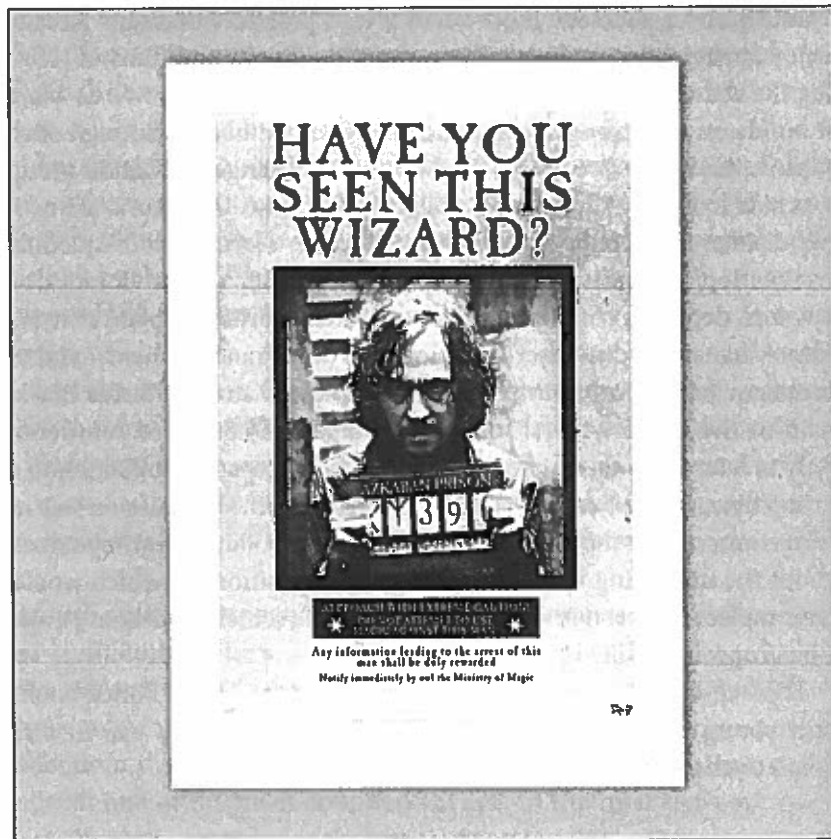
A lot of the people I know in this fandom have only read *Deathly Hallows* one time and they don't particularly like the movies. But the Wizard Rock, the conferences, the podcasts, all of that, that's what they're into and it's the community, like the friends that they've made and stuff like that.

Fannish civics succeeds most when it taps practices that fans already enjoy engaging in, such as talking about the books and films, dissecting the characters, and imagining alternative scenarios, as well as when it builds on the strong social bonds between members. Through such means, the Harry Potter as a Tool for Social Change discussion group was able to harness the interest of even those who, like Maura, are usually disinterested politically, and thus represents a form of "consequential connection" for individual participants. The group's most vibrant discussions deployed fans' mastery of the content world to explain abstract ideas—like inequality, discrimination, and disenfranchisement—and to create an activist commitment. For example, the story of Sirius Black, who in the series we first meet as a dangerous convicted murderer, only to later find out that he was framed, served as an introduction to a group discussion of capital punishment. The political discussion was in turn connected to the opportunity to influence policy: the group talked about the upcoming vote on California's Proposition 34, which would have replaced the state's death penalty with life sentence without parole (the proposition failed).

HPA co-founder Andrew Slack argues that the Harry Potter books take young people seriously as political agents and thus can inspire youth to change the world:

Young people are depicted in the books as often smarter, more aware of what's happening in the world, than their elders, though there are also some great examples where very wise adults have mentored and supported young people as they have taken action in the world. . . . We are essentially asking young people the same question that Harry poses to his fellow members of Dumbledore's Army in the fifth movie, "Every great Wizard in history has started off as nothing more than we are now. If they can do it, why not us?" This is a question that we not only pose to our members, we show them how right now they can start working to be those "great Wizards" that can make a real difference in this world. (quoted in Jenkins 2009)

Against this backdrop of Death Eater terrorists, bungling or manipulative government officials, a deceptive press, and repressive school authorities, Rowling tells how one young man organized his classmates into



Sirius Black as a prisoner, posted on therpf.com.

Dumbledore's Army, a loosely organized activist group, to go out and fight evil—sometimes working alone, sometimes collaborating with adult groups such as the Order of the Phoenix, but always carrying much of the burden of confronting Voldemort. In our world, young people are likewise confronted not only with social and political problems that often seem simply unsolvable, but also with the consistent message that, as young people, they are too naive, uninformed, and powerless to do anything about those problems. The HPA, by contrast, invites them to use their civic imaginations, to ask what it might mean for Dumbledore's Army to tackle the problems of the real world, and to collectively identify the core sites where such struggles would take place: "What if we gave our teenagers the opportunity to imagine themselves as the heroes that

they have grown up watching, rather than treating their precious minds as nothing more than a way to line the pockets of some CEO?" (Slack 2010).

Fan Activism as a Continuum: From Fannish Civics to Cultural Acupuncture

Fannish civics is at its best when it builds on practices that fans engage in anyway, when it rewards fans' mastery and deep engagement, and when it connects fan enthusiasm not only to real-world issues but also to action. At the same time, this means that the main pool of potential participants in fannish civics consists of fans with deep levels of engagement and those who are already embedded within a fan community. If the goal is to encourage participatory politics among broader populations of young people, fannish civics can only go so far.

We can distinguish fannish civics from another mode of fan activism—that of "cultural acupuncture." The term was introduced by Andrew Slack (2010) to describe his broader model of change:

Finding where the psychological energy is in the culture, and moving that energy towards creating a healthier world. . . . We activists may not have the same money as Nike and McDonald's but we have a message that actually means something. . . . What we do not have is the luxury of keeping the issues we cover seemingly boring, technocratic, and inaccessible. With cultural acupuncture, we will usher in an era of activism that is fun, imaginative, and sexy, yet truly effective.

Recognizing that the news media was more apt to cover the launch of the next Harry Potter film than the genocide in Darfur, the HPA took the approach of identifying key cultural "pressure points," and redirecting the attention they received toward real-world problems. In this way, the group sought to inspire the civic imagination on a more expansive scale, among the broad audiences familiar with Rowling's extraordinarily popular stories. Pinning political and social causes to Harry Potter works not just with fans but more broadly because this content world has a large following, has its own built-in mechanisms for generating publicity, and has demonstrated its capacity to attract repeated waves of media interest. Harry Potter constitutes a

form of cultural currency that can carry the group's messages to many who would not otherwise hear them and that channels emotional investments. Often, cultural acupuncture works through grassroots production of new paratexts—such as fan videos—which attach themselves to the larger transmedia campaigns that emerge around major entertainment franchises, potentially redirecting—through what we might call a form of conceptual judo—the strength of the Hollywood publicity machine toward a range of other causes.

Slack came up with his model of “cultural acupuncture” back when the HPA was working with the Harry Potter books and films as its sole reference text. However, over time the real testing ground for cultural acupuncture became the Imagine Better Network.

Originally, Imagine Better was conceived as a way to preempt the predicted disappearance of the Harry Potter fan community. In July 2011, the last movie in the Harry Potter series was released. At LeakyCon 2011, a grassroots fan convention, young fans were talking about “the end of an era,” linking the series’ conclusion to the end of their own childhoods. As one HPA member, Daniela, expressed it, “so obviously Harry Potter is over, sadly.” Fans feared that their beloved community would turn into an example of “zombie fandom,” a fan community that has “entered into a state of atrophy, decline or impending demise” (Whiteman and Metivier 2013, 270). Imagine Better was launched at that LeakyCon with the idea of applying the approach that had proven successful for the HPA to other fictional texts and collaborations with other fandoms.

The concern that sparked Imagine Better can be easily understood. The HPA was very successful with Harry Potter fans, but the closure of the primary text with the final film’s release left the fan community in a state of uncertainty. When a civic organization—one that plans to be around for a while—is tied to the constantly evolving flow of popular culture texts, this may present a challenge. But while some fan communities die out with the closure of their primary text, this is not always the case. Rebecca Williams (2011) discusses ways that fans of the TV series *The West Wing* reacted to that program’s cancellation. Using the concept of “post-object fandom,” she shows how they were able to sustain their fannish involvement even after the series’ “death.” Harry Potter now constitutes a “post-object fandom”—while Rowling releases new content, even in relation to the same universe, the scale is much more minimal.

Still, the fan community lives on—while some fan conventions like HPEF (Harry Potter Education Fanon), which had been held since 2003, have shut down, others such as LeakyCon were still taking place as of 2014. So the HPA still has more life than its organizers might have projected.

While much of the HPA’s work falls under the rubric of fannish civics, Imagine Better has been experimenting more with cultural acupuncture, marking a shift in focus from preexisting fan communities to reaching a broader public. To further understand fannish civics and cultural acupuncture as different modes, we examine two large-scale national campaigns that Imagine Better conducted around the release of the first two movies in the Hunger Games series. Whereas the first campaign uses fannish civics, the second moves further on the continuum toward cultural acupuncture.

Hunger Is Not a Game: A Lesson in Extending Fannish Civics

The Hunger Is Not a Game campaign, launched around the release of the movie *The Hunger Games* (2012), based on the bestselling series of novels by Suzanne Collins, was Imagine Better’s first effort to reach beyond the Harry Potter content world. The Hunger Games series is set in the fictional country of Panem, which consists of a wealthy Capitol that thrives through its control of 12 districts in varying states of poverty. Every year, two children from each district are chosen to participate in a compulsory televised event called “The Hunger Games,” where they battle each other to death until only one winner emerges—the series focuses on the tales of one such participant, Katniss Everdeen.

The Hunger Is Not a Game campaign sought to connect the release of the movie to the cause of world hunger. In this campaign, Imagine Better partnered with an established nonprofit organization—Oxfam—which brought to the table its on-the-ground experience. The campaign planned through this partnership included food donations, fundraising, and awareness raising around the systemic causes of world hunger.

Based on the HPA’s previous experiences with Harry Potter fans, the campaign was designed as what we have termed fannish civics, meaning its imagined audience consisted of dedicated Hunger Games fans. While many Imagine Better members identified as Hunger Games fans, they were not necessarily actively involved in the Hunger Games



Hunger Is Not a Game campaign logo, from hungergameslessons.com.

fan community. Thus an early step in the campaign's planning was reaching out to committed Hunger Games fans, including members of several key fan websites, and eliciting their cooperation. Slack appeared as a guest on a popular Hunger Games podcast and even the name for the campaign was taken from a suggestion by a Hunger Games fan. Following the model of fannish civics, the campaign attempted to reach these fans through spaces where they were already engaged.

However, if we've seen that fannish civics works best when it rewards fan mastery, it is not clear that Hunger Is Not a Game met this standard. The campaign's broad references to the movie and its themes did not build on fans' deep engagement with the text. Despite the attempts to involve those within Hunger Games fandom, Madison, a Hunger

Games fan who collaborated with Imagine Better, felt that the campaign resonated only with some segments:

There is a group who thinks about these things and who understands sort of the deeper underlying message of the book and who want to take that and use it to do some good. But then, you have the fans who like the love triangle. They like the fact that she [Katniss, the protagonist] uses a bow and arrow and they don't really think any deeper than that. And I would love to be able to do more to sort of make these people think more about the subtext and stuff, but I know that it's difficult. I think a lot of that has to come with age and maturity. So I'm hoping in the future, we can do more to reach that segment of the fandom.

Madison's description of some Hunger Games fans' reservations about fannish civics should not be too surprising. In fact, when the HPA was launched within Harry Potter fandom in 2005 it was met with much skepticism from those who believed that real-world politics detract from the magic of the Wizarding World. Slack was seen by some as an outside agitator, trying to manipulate the fan community to benefit his own agenda.

Over time, however, Slack demonstrated his own mastery of the text, and thus his status as a fan, an insider. As he explained: "one of the reasons why I was successful in beginning the Harry Potter Alliance is because I'm such a hardcore Harry Potter fan. Had I not been such a passionate Harry Potter fan, had I not been caring about this myth so much myself, I wouldn't have been able to translate the message as well" (quoted in Jenkins 2009). Jenni, an HPA chapter organizer, shares her memory of seeing Slack's well-worn copies of the books—evidence of his fan mastery:

Andrew is definitely much better at making links and metaphors between real world issues and the events of the novels, he is great with coming up with very specific links. He has very banged up and marked-up copies of the books. Most of it is in his head, he recalls a lot of stuff on the spot which is unbelievable and for which I applaud him. I have good recall but not as good as him, or maybe I don't reread the books as often as he does.

On the other hand, when Imagine Better started the Hunger Is Not a Game campaign, it was clear that the organizers were not "insider"

fans—at least not to the same extent. Underscoring that in the campaign's aftermath, Slack shared the following with his more than 3,000 Facebook followers:

Just talked with a reporter who asked me what I thought of Katniss being cast as someone who is white—when in fact, Katniss is mixed race. So maybe I was projecting my white privilege or something on to this, but I had always thought that Jennifer Lawrence's complexion matched Katniss pretty well to what I had imagined. Is Katniss, in fact, mixed race? *This is what I get for only reading the books a handful of times instead of being able to recite them from memory like I can with Harry Potter* [our emphasis]. (Facebook post, December 7, 2013)

When mastery of the content world is valued as social currency, such an admission may position Slack as an outsider in the eyes of more hard-core fans.

Moreover, a surprising turn of events raised added tension around who the “real” Hunger Games fans were. When the Hunger Is Not a Game campaign received media attention, notably coverage in the *New York Times* (Martin 2012a), lawyers for Lionsgate, the distributor of the movie, contacted Oxfam and requested that they remove mentions of the campaign as it was “causing damage to Lionsgate and our marketing efforts” (Martin 2012b). Appalled, a member of Imagine Better created a petition calling on Lionsgate to “stop bullying its fans into complacency.” After the fans’ protest drew attention on both social and mainstream news media, Lionsgate quickly retracted its demands. In the wake of this victory, Imagine Better’s organizers celebrated the power of fan activists over corporations. In an interview with the *New York Times* (Martin 2012b), Slack proclaimed:

Hollywood was not sending an olive branch to the youth demographic that they depend on; they were attempting to whack us over the head with a large branch, rendering us unconscious consumers. It's simply not going to work this way anymore.

The HPA had some history of taking a confrontational approach toward the movie studio responsible for the cinematic texts central to its own

fan universe—for several years, the group petitioned Warner Brothers to transition their Harry Potter–themed chocolate frogs into fair-trade chocolate (finally achieving success in early 2015, as we describe in the chapter's conclusion). At the time, the HPA's struggle with Warner Brothers was at an impasse and so the “win” over Lionsgate was especially meaningful to its fan activists. But the confrontational approach toward Lionsgate discomfited some within the Hunger Games fan community. Some fans extended to the studio the same adoration and respect they felt for the Hunger Games narrative and its author. Lionsgate had courted and collaborated with Hunger Games fan community leaders, and those fans felt it ungrateful to confront the corporation. Thus, while Imagine Better worked closely with Hunger Games fans in the planning stages of the campaign, this incident exposed frictions between the groups.

The Hunger Is Not a Game campaign points to some challenges in using fannish civics to engage multiple fan communities. Due to its embeddedness in fannish practices, fannish civics requires deep knowledge of the specifics of each involved fan community and mastery of its content world. These aspects are not easily learned—they are the product of years of being an “insider.” Moreover, the fans need to be prepared to take action, often by learning to read their touchstone text through a political lens—as this observation suggests, employing the civic imagination may be a learned skill. So, while *The Hunger Games* is on the surface a more overt political allegory than the Harry Potter saga, using it as a blueprint for taking real-world political action was not necessarily consistent with what dedicated fans were taking from the series. The Hunger Is Not a Game campaign taught Imagine Better's organizers about the difficulty in mobilizing others into fannish civics without being embedded community members.

The Odds in Our Favor: Engaging through Cultural Acupuncture

In 2013, with the release of *Catching Fire*, the second installment in the Hunger Games film franchise, Imagine Better took a different approach that leaned more toward cultural acupuncture. It attempted to engage supporters not by connecting to an existing fan community, but rather by tapping the general public's attention. The Odds in Our Favor campaign, whose goal was raising awareness around economic inequality,

began by encouraging participants to upload photos where they show the “three-finger salute,” a gesture symbolizing the resistance of the impoverished districts against the prosperous Capitol and its tyrannical leader, President Snow. Here Imagine Better built on popular social media practices: it was 2013 when “selfie”—“a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website”—was chosen as the Oxford Dictionaries’ word of the year.

The next stage of the campaign was triggered by some of Lionsgate’s marketing decisions, most significantly a tie-in with CoverGirl, which launched a makeup line called the Capitol Collection. Imagine Better criticized Lionsgate for celebrating the oppressive Capitol instead of highlighting solidarity with the oppressed districts, and “turning an anti-classist epic into a platform for the novels’ villains” (Slack 2013). Imagine Better then launched a campaign linking the Hunger Games to what they saw as its real message—social inequality—through the release of a YouTube video called “The Hunger Games Are Real.”

The video starts with a quote from Haymitch, who advises Katniss and Peeta, contestants in the fictional Hunger Games: “From now on, your job is to be a distraction, so people forget what the real problems are.” The video then shows some of the marketing efforts for *Catching Fire*, highlighting the “hot guys” in the cast, only to interrupt the scene with static and a disruptive black-and-white “rebel message.” Lauren Bird, the spokesperson for the HPA, dressed in an austere black outfit like that of a rebel leader in the film, proclaims:

Enough with the distraction, the Hunger Games are real.

Check it out: In The Hunger Games a small portion of the population controls a majority of the wealth. People have full time jobs and still go hungry.

Think it’s fiction? Think again.

While the audio details the economic disparities in Hunger Games’ dystopian country of Panem, the visual shows statistics of real-world economic inequality. For example, the death of Katniss’ father in a mining accident is linked to the decline of unionization in the United States; the corrupt justice system in Panem is connected to the fact that African

Americans are incarcerated at six times the rate of whites in the U.S. Bird concludes:

Does the Hunger Games have hot guys in it? Big fucking deal. It also has something else. Us. People who want justice. President Snows of the world, your reign is coming to the end. You can try and distract us but it’s too late—the fire has started and we will not stop. Not until the odds are in everyone’s favor.

The video ends with a call to “join the resistance” and links to odds-inourfavor.org, where viewers can participate in a range of real-world actions. The video powerfully succeeds in linking the fictional world to the real one, not only through words but through sound and imagery as well. The dramatic “rebel message” interrupting the Capitol signal gives it a particular resonance and, indeed, it came to be the group’s most widely shared video.

In contrast with Invisible Children (Chapter 2), producing videos of professional or near-professional quality had not previously been one of the HPA’s strengths. In fact, “The Hunger Games Are Real” is the first video the group made with grant money that enabled the organization to employ a professional video production crew. Early Harry Potter fandom was more focused on text-based modes of expression, such as the writing of fan fiction and the creation of fan websites like The Leaky Cauldron. Accordingly, the HPA at first communicated mostly via text, such as through the group’s blog and email list, as well as audio podcasts, which were very popular with the Harry Potter fan community. The videos the group sporadically created to launch campaigns or publicize success stories were generally of modest production quality, intentionally designed with a DIY aesthetic similar to that of other fan-made videos. Yet increasingly, younger Harry Potter fans were embedded in the YouTube community, for whom video production is a key form of expression and communication (Lange 2014). In 2011, the HPA created a regular vlog channel, marking a shift in the amount of video the group produced, as well as the greater attention it began to pay to quality and style. The vloggers were sometimes disappointed by their view count (averaging a few hundred per video) and the fact that they were mostly reaching already-dedicated HPA members. At the same

time, relative to the number of views, the videos had a high number of “likes” and, in the comments sections, viewers often engaged in conversation and discussion around the issues raised. As Burgess and Green (2009) discuss, YouTube’s different “popularity measures” assess different logics of audience engagement; whereas the view count is a way of “counting eyeballs,” high numbers of comments point at a very engaged viewership—which relates to the difference between audiences and publics we discuss in Chapter 2.

In comparison to the modest views of the HPA vlogs, “The Hunger Games Are Real” reached the largest-ever viewership for an HPA video—over 450,000 views. Most of these viewers, it seemed, hadn’t heard of the group before. Accordingly, however, the video’s associated comments section was characterized less by discussion and conversation as in the intimate HPA vlogs, and more by one-sided and often extreme views, as is often the case with YouTube videos with a large viewership (e.g., the comment by YouTube user richardparadox163: “Does anyone else think this video is trying to incite a Communist Revolution?”).

In terms of its strategy and outcomes, the campaign is closer on the continuum to cultural acupuncture than fannish civics, successfully riding on the wave of Hunger Games–related attention through its resonant audiovisual style. Some of the detailed references to specific characters and events from the stories did allow hardcore fans to go deeper than they could with the first campaign, but the video is also accessible to anyone who had watched the movies and is familiar with the storyline, enabling the campaign to broaden its reach beyond the fan community.

One could question to what extent cultural acupuncture is still a mode of “fan activism” if the audiences it seeks to mobilize aren’t just fans. We would argue that cultural acupuncture should be understood as a mode of fan activism when it is created *by* fans and develops out of fannish ways of engaging with a text. True, cultural acupuncture constitutes a strategic form of connecting popular culture to social issues—but to be considered as fan activism, as opposed to the kind of culture jamming practices discussed in Chapter 1, it needs to come from a passionate engagement with the original text. And fan activism needs to be bottom-up, emerging from a grassroots movement, unlike the forms of celebrity-based activism that we saw Invisible Children sometimes deploy in Chapter 2; the difference between *Veronica Mars* star Kristen

Bell soliciting support from her followers, and *Veronica Mars* fans taking action on their own in opposition to child soldiering or domestic violence is crucial. Some uses of cultural acupuncture may not constitute fan activism, if they are initiated purely as a way to garner attention. For example, Melissa Brough and Sangita Shresthova (2012) describe how protesters in the West Bank village Bil’in engaged in *Avatar* activism: they covered their bodies with blue paint to resemble the colonized Na’vi race in James Cameron’s blockbuster movie and approached an Israeli military barricade, chanting “Sky people, you can’t take our land.” Photographs and videos of the protest were circulated online, garnering news media attention. We see this video as a case of activists reconfiguring pop culture content and using fanlike tactics to provoke attention, dialogue, and mobilization. In our terminology, this use of pop culture content for specific political goals is a form of cultural acupuncture, but not fan activism. At times, however, activists—through their more strategic use of popular culture—may find themselves becoming fans, as we will discuss briefly in the conclusion to this chapter.

The relationship between fan activism and cultural acupuncture can be linked to the distinction described in Chapter 2 between drillable and spreadable media (Mittell 2013); to recast that distinction, drillable media is characterized by narrative complexity, encouraging die-hard fans to dig deep into the story world to mine new insights, while spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) is characterized by “horizontal ripples,” often aiming more at the accumulation of views than at long-term engagement. Accordingly, we can think of fannish civics as a “drillable” mode that addresses the most highly engaged fans as its imagined audience. The connections between the story world and real-world issues are often based on an in-depth knowledge of the fictional narrative, rewarding fan mastery and dedication. Based on these characteristics, fannish civics will mostly activate those already engaged in fannish practices. Cultural acupuncture, on the other hand, builds on the “attraction model” of spreadable media. While still connected to the story world, it requires minimal depth of story-world knowledge. With cultural acupuncture, the aim is to reach wide audiences, and the campaign may occupy participants’ attention for a shorter span.

While making the spreadable/drillable distinction, Jason Mittell wishes to discourage the normative stance that prefers drillability over

spreadability as a mode of audience engagement. Similarly, both cultural acupuncture and fannish civics should be seen as viable models of fan activism, though they may be best suited to different civic goals. We may consider these goals through the lens of what Zuckerman (2013a) terms thick versus thin engagement. Zuckerman defines thin engagement as “actions that require little thought on your part: sign a petition, give a contribution.” Thick engagement, on the other hand, asks “for your creativity, your strategic sensibilities, your ability to make media, research, deliberate or find solutions.”

Fannish civics worked well for the Harry Potter Alliance in engaging motivated members who were integrated into the fan community and had been taught to read the touchstone texts through a particular lens. Many of these fan activists were inspired to take actions requiring “thick engagement,” such as opening local chapters, volunteering as HPA staff members, organizing local book drives, or taking part in creative projects to spread the word. Their participation in the HPA built on their pre-existing embeddedness in the Harry Potter fan community. Arguably, cultural acupuncture may be a more productive avenue for Imagine Better as it seeks to reach out to other audiences and other texts, as this mode of activism requires less familiarity with the practices and structures of each different fan community and may resonate with a wider public. Cultural acupuncture may also be particularly appropriate for efforts that require “thinner” engagement, such as awareness raising, where reach itself is a measure of success (see Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova 2012). The spreadability of cultural acupuncture may create entry points, inviting some participants into “thicker” modes of fan activism; it may also inspire young fans, who see the texts they are passionate about and the activist work they’re doing spreading to wider, and different, communities.

The Glue That Holds a Community Together: Content Worlds and Taste Communities

As we’ve seen, while fannish civics and cultural acupuncture differ in the depth in which they drill into a text, both employ civic imagination by connecting fictional worlds to real-world concerns. We now consider how the three groups discussed in this chapter use content worlds and shared tastes as the glue that holds a community together, and we will

address the challenges these groups face when attempting to broaden their base of support.

The chapter’s three case studies represent different uses of content worlds: while the HPA focuses on one content world, Imagine Better attempts to resonate with fans of different content worlds and to engage broader audiences. Nerdfighters, as we will see, unite fans toward civic goals around broader cultural affiliations. What roles do content worlds serve for fan activists? Do some content worlds better lend themselves to the pursuit of political goals than others? How may content worlds limit the range of issues and audiences these groups can address? We’ll begin by examining the HPA’s use of the Harry Potter world, before examining ways to broaden out beyond a single content world.

Public Spheres of the Imagination in Action

“Literature creates a whole new world in our minds. It allows us to experience things we’ve never experienced before.” As Becca, a member of the HPA, explained, fan activist organizations tap the rich imaginary worlds created by fictional texts. These texts serve the organization as *content worlds*: “the network of characters, settings, situations, and values that forms the basis for the generation of a range of stories, in the hands of either a commercial producer or a grassroots community” (Jenkins 2012a). In the hands of fan activists, content worlds serve as a form of cultural currency (Fiske 1992). Much as these rich worlds inspire a range of fan expressions such as writing fan fiction, recording a Wizard Rock song, or engaging in fan discussion, they serve as fertile ground for connections to various social issues. These worlds are based in texts that fans not only love, but which they get to know intimately through rereading, rewatching, and discussing with others. Fans’ sense of ownership—and mastery—of these texts is what helps them use them as resources in their civic imagination.

In fact, young fans’ deep engagement with fictional content worlds most likely surpasses their familiarity with the kinds of civic and political knowledge traditionally valued by scholars of youth engagement (such as familiarity with the workings of government). Within the ideals of the “informed citizen” model, a particular model of citizenship that grew in the progressive era (Schudson 1999), young people are “required”—by

others, as well as in their own perception—to have in-depth knowledge of all facets of an issue before they're "allowed" to form and express an opinion. Yet, particularly in an information-rich environment, this ideal may create a standard that is impossible to meet (Thorson 2010), causing some young people to avoid all news content. Instead of admonishing young people for being more interested in entertainment than in the news, fan activism uses the one sphere to deepen engagement with the other—for example, using the hardships faced by werewolves in the magical world to inspire consideration of the discriminatory treatment of minority groups. Satya explains:

I learned more about myself and more about the world around me, because I think it's a lot easier to understand Harry's world than it is to understand our own.

The HPA's use of fictional worlds to help young people make sense of real-world issues constitutes what Ashley Hinck (2012) calls a "public engagement keystone": "a touch point, worldview, or philosophy that makes other people, actions, and institutions intelligible." Connecting the work of several scholars of democracy, Hinck explains that a public engagement keystone serves multiple goals for the activist group: it creates an anchoring at the level of citizens' lived experiences, it helps identify and bring together people with shared beliefs and interests, and it forges strong ties between activists.

The HPA's use of the fictional Harry Potter world as a "public engagement keystone" extends from the macro-level of the organization to the micro-level of individual participants' interactions and conversations. The richness of this content world, along with fans' deep relationship with it, allows individual HPA members to hone their own civic imaginations, to build their own connections to real-world issues that are most pertinent to them, while enjoying the institutional support of a larger organization that holds out the opportunity for them to initiate collective actions. This is evidenced in the example of the discussion group mentioned before, or in the work of individual chapter organizers like Davia:

We like to link everything back to Harry Potter. We have to get a little creative sometimes, but we can still link. We were trying to get involved

in some environmental issues so we called it herbology, and with animal things we call it "care of magical creatures."

On the micro-level of individuals, connecting the fictional text to real-world issues may be a learned skill. We encountered before the example of Hunger Games fans who had a hard time seeing the fictional world's relevance to social and political issues in our world. Astera, a 17-year-old HPA member, explained how her experience with the HPA has sensitized her to making such connections:

A lot of it, I only started to think about once I found the Harry Potter Alliance and all of that. The first time [I read Harry Potter] it was just a really good and surprisingly intricate story. But now that I've thought about it that way for the first time, I realize that there actually are a lot of parallels that aren't even that far of a stretch, and I'm trying to think about all books I read more like that. I'm making them more real and applicable.

For Astera and other HPA members, linking the Harry Potter narratives to real-world issues has served as a consequential connection that encouraged them to read other fictional texts as political allegories as well. But can this work with any text?

If we consider the texts that Imagine Better has worked with, such as Harry Potter, the Hunger Games, and Superman, they have a factor in common, besides having new content released when the group was first organizing campaigns. These are all texts that take place in an immersive "world" of their own, one that is both related to and yet different from the real world. Mark J. P. Wolf (2012) characterizes such fictional worlds as "secondary worlds," which use materials from our "primary world" yet reshape and recombine its elements, creating a world that's at the same time recognizable and different. Such worlds encourage fan creativity by allowing fans to imagine alternative characters, subplots, and scenarios beyond the canonic text, but still within its logic. When fans use these worlds to discuss, reimagine, and seek to change the primary world, they are participating in what Saler (2012) calls "public spheres of the imagination."

Matt Hills (2002) uses the term "hyperdiegesis" to describe "the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is

ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nonetheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension" (104). This characteristic of fictional worlds enables fan activism to work not only with the existing characters and story plots, but to create countless connections, even ones that don't exist within the text, as long as they fit in the world's internal logic. We may see a distinction here between the different modes of fan activism: while fannish civics may venture into such creative additions, cultural acupuncture typically sticks to the canonic plot, and even more specifically to ideas familiar to a wide audience.

There are many potential strengths to using fantasy worlds to make sense of the real world. Saler (2012) claims that due to their fantastical elements—what he calls their “as if” status—fictional worlds may help challenge one-sided convictions people hold about the real world. Van Zoonen (2005) discusses how interpreting fictional political narratives can facilitate people's performance of citizenship, for example by helping them imagine a perfect society and an ideal political process that surpasses partisan differences. As Diana Mutz (2006) explains, in many of our life contexts people are surrounded by those similar to themselves, and only rarely do they engage in discussions with people whose political views differ from theirs. The characteristics of fan communities may create a different climate: when discussions begin around fictional content worlds, slowly forming into friendships, people may find ways beyond the “echo chambers” that inhibit more conventional kinds of political communication. This was the experience of HPA member Kevin and one of his closest friends:

Ron, he is probably the farthest person in comparison of who I am as a person. The only thing that really connects us is Harry Potter, and our political views are completely different, our social views are completely different. You know there are some overlaps—the fight for the equality of people and some of the general things there, but who we are as people is completely different. But we're best friends, because we don't look down on each other because that was a kind of different view.

When done right, fictional content worlds can bridge ideological differences, helping people to see a social issue in a different light and to

reach some shared understanding around it. But employing content worlds for activist goals can also be fraught with challenges.

One such challenge is finding the right balance between the content world and the civic goal. While the HPA has been very successful at creating real-world links to the world of Harry Potter, its attempts to base political campaigns around other fictional universes have varied in terms of their depth of engagement with those different content worlds. In Chapter 1, we discussed the rich symbolism of Superman, who was born on the planet Krypton but raised by American parents, having to hide his true identity. Imagine Better attempted to tap this connection in its Superman Is an Immigrant campaign, launched around the release of the 2013 movie *Man of Steel*. Through a video blog for the HPA a year earlier, Julian Gomez, a member of the HPA and one of the campaign's organizers, had publicly come out as undocumented (videos of young people “coming out” as undocumented are dealt with in more detail in Chapter 5). In an op-ed for the *Huffington Post*, Julian (Gomez 2013) described his personal connection to the campaign and to the story of Superman :

In the summer blockbuster *Man of Steel*, Superman struggles with his identity as an immigrant, terrified that if he tells the American people that he's from another place, they will reject him. I felt that same fear when I was old enough to understand what it meant to be undocumented. Last year, I finally found the courage to publicly speak about my undocumented status in a video blog that has now been watched over 16,000 times.

For this campaign, Imagine Better partnered with Define American, a project led by immigrant rights activist Jose Antonio Vargas, with the aim of “using the power of story to transcend politics and shift conversation around immigration, identity, and citizenship in America.” Imagine Better and Define American encouraged people to share their stories of heritage and identity, sparking a conversation around immigration reform. On the Tumblr page wearetheamericanway.tumblr.com, young people uploaded pictures with descriptions of their family heritage, signing with “I am the American way” and Superman's signature S, branded with the colors of the American flag. While the Tumblr page elicited participation, some fans felt that the campaign did not tap the

potentially rich symbolism of the Superman content world. This also relates to our fannish civics/cultural acupuncture distinction—the campaign could speak to and be comprehended by a wider audience, but did not engage the in-depth passion of fans. At the same time, the introduction of the “Superman is an immigrant” metaphor brought a fresh perspective into the conversation around immigrant reform.

Beyond a too-shallow depth of engagement, there are other potential pitfalls in connecting secondary worlds to participatory politics. The “internal logics” that make these worlds function, after all, don’t necessarily apply to our world, and making direct comparisons may be problematic. A careful balance must be struck between which elements of the story world are taken up and which are left behind, and in some ways, this task may be easier with a world involving fantastical elements such as magic than with a more realistic one. For example, when the HPA calls its members “a Dumbledore’s Army for the real world,” this metaphor works to convey the idea that these are young people coming together to fight for what they believe in. Naturally enough, it leaves out the parts about practicing magic in order to do so. But when Imagine Better uses the rebellion of the districts in the dystopian world of the *Hunger Games* as a template for action, one wonders if a revolution seeking to overthrow an oppressive government is really the form of action the group is advocating. While the rebellion metaphor is resonant, it may carry meanings the activist organization does not wish to embrace.

This potential problem manifested around Imagine Better’s use of the three-finger salute from the *Hunger Games*. In Suzanne Collins’s dystopian world, the three-finger salute is originally a symbol of solidarity with and respect for others, but over time it acquires a more militaristic meaning of defiance against an oppressive government. In *The Odds in Our Favor* campaign, Imagine Better asked participants to submit selfies with the three-finger salute to symbolize their resistance against economic inequality. Yet the organization was taken aback when global news media reported that the three-finger salute was being used by protesters in Thailand, opposing the country’s 2014 military coup. On the one hand, this was a powerful example of cultural acupuncture happening spontaneously; on the other, the group was worried by the fact that the symbol it had adopted and promoted was being used in a situation involving violent confrontations. Meta-

phoric resistance—in the context of U.S. democracy—is playful, but resistance to an oppressive dictatorship carries a very different weight of risk and responsibility.

Beyond the challenges of connecting to specific content worlds one at a time, Imagine Better faces the challenge of finding a common ground among fans of different texts. In this model, fans are drawn toward civic action not so much through a single content world, but rather through their shared identity as “fans” (see Jenkins 2011). When fans move from one text to another, that is not a sign of their disloyalty or fickleness, rather, it is a characteristic of fans as nomadic (Jenkins 1992). They are not just “fans of” a certain text—instead, “fan” should be understood as a subcultural identity, which shares certain traditions and practices of the wider fan culture. When it seeks to move beyond a single content world, Imagine Better attempts to build on the practices shared by fans regardless of their primary texts.

In a talk entitled “Orphans vs. Empires,” delivered at the TEDx-Youth conference in San Diego in 2013, Slack sought to construct a composite mythology that stitched together images from a diverse set of popular narratives, including *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Hunger Games*, *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, *Superman*, *Batman*, *Once Upon a Time*, and *The Lion King*, each of which, he suggested, depicts how people who feel powerless can nevertheless overcome powerful foes and change the world. Stitching together these mythic struggles with real-world conflicts around the globe, Slack asked his enthralled audience (which by this point was engaging him in a call-and-response) to join him in creating “a Dumbledore’s army for our world, a Fellowship of the Ring, a Rebel Alliance” that might fight for social justice and human rights, wherever and whenever these core values were thrown into crisis. Here, Slack was not simply speaking to multiple fan audiences, but also looking for the shared values and experiences that linked them together into a larger subculture.

Beyond Content Worlds: Fan Activism Emerging from a Taste Community

Nerdfighters represent another model for broadening fan engagement with civic issues, one that does not center around a specific content

world. The informal online community of Nerdfighters consists of mostly young people, who can be primarily characterized as fans of vloggers John and Hank Green. The VlogBrothers' YouTube channel is the centerpiece of the Nerdfighter community's shared universe. This is exemplified in the shared ritual for novice Nerdfighters—watching all the vlogs dating from 2007, comprising over 72 hours of video. As Nerdfighter Adrian explained:

In order to be a really serious Nerdfighter, what do you do? You watch every single video in a chronological order. At this point, it's been so long that I think it's basically impossible.

Yet while the vlogs are the centerpiece, there is a much wider universe of content that Nerdfighters share, extending far beyond the Green brothers. Nerdfighters see themselves as having “shared interests,” liking the same content, and being “nerds.” In Nerdfighter Julie's words,

That's the reason why we're there. We're all Nerdfighters who have some shared interests, with Doctor Who and Harry Potter, Star Wars and whatever other things. But also like we're all nerds, we've always been nerds who just like to think a lot. I mean, I don't know, it's like you can have honestly intellectual conversations.

Nerdfighters generally say that they share an interest in “everything nerdy”—a term that is very broadly defined. Nerdfighters referenced a range of examples of “nerdy stuff,” including YouTube celebrities, the musical *Cats*, stop motion Lego animation, and the American Museum of Natural History. This may allow for more inclusivity than the example of the HPA, which generally attracts fans of a particular franchise. Moreover, beyond their identification around “nerdy” content, Nerdfighters also self-identify as a community of DIY media producers, specifically part of the YouTube community of video producers (or “YouTubers”; see Lange 2009). As Nerdfighter Theo claimed, “these communities are really based on creating content.”

In terms of their participatory politics, Nerdfighters are united by a common—though amorphous—goal: “decreasing world suck.” As mentioned before, this broadly defined agenda inspires acts ranging from

REAL QUESTIONS FOR REAL NERDFIGHTERS

1. HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN A NERDFIGHTER?
2. FAVORITE HANK VIDEO & JOHN VIDEO?
3. WHICH CHARITY (OR CHARITIES) DO YOU SUPPORT?
4. WHAT DO YOU THINK YOUR 'FAMOUS LAST WORDS' WILL BE?
5. BEST THING ABOUT BEING A NERD/NERDFIGHTER?
6. FAVORITE VLOGBROTHERS PUNISHMENT(S)?
7. TOP THREE FAVORITE HANK GREEN SONGS?
8. TELL A 'NERD' JOKE.
9. FAVORITE JOHN GREEN DOOH & WHY?
10. GIVE YOUR MOST CREATIVE DEFINITION OF DFTBA.



Nerdfighter-designed content signaling the community's shared affiliations.

the interpersonal level, such as helping out a friend in need, to collective acts that fit within existing definitions of civic engagement. For example, we mentioned Nerdfighters' activity on Kiva.org, a nonprofit organization that enables individuals to make small loans to people without access to traditional banking systems. Nerdfighters constitute one of the largest communities of lenders on the site, topping groups such as Kiva Christians as well as “atheists, agnostics and skeptics.” In

comparison to some of the more controversial issues the HPA has taken on (e.g., same-sex marriage), the Nerdfighters generally limit their engagement to charities and nonprofits, pursuing goals that virtually “everyone can agree on.” (Of course, this is not always the case. Invisible Children members, too, generally saw themselves as pursuing a goal everyone could agree on, until the backlash against the organization proved otherwise.) This is in a deliberate attempt to create a “big tent,” in which all members (ideally) feel welcome—we will later discuss the limits to that notion.

Without relying on a single content world, Nerdfighters still manage to create a vibrant community of fan activists who translate their shared interests, their shared practices, and their sense of community toward real-world action. For example, the Project for Awesome (P4A) is an annual event in which Nerdfighters (and other video creators) are encouraged to create videos about their favorite charities or other nonprofit organizations and simultaneously post them on YouTube. Project for Awesome was one of the first things most Nerdfighters mentioned when asked how Nerdfighteria (the community of Nerdfighters) helps decrease world suck. Jacob explained:

I think most Nerdfighters realize at least after they’ve been a Nerdfighter for a while that they’re part of a group that is actually actively decreasing world suck in the literal senses. I mean, whenever someone asks me about Nerdfighteria, I instantly list the Project for Awesome . . . because it’s just something that you want to say, “Oh, I’m part of this group that every year raises thousands of dollars for charity in an awesome way.”

When P4A was launched in 2007, its goal was to somewhat rebelliously “take over” YouTube’s front page for one day with videos of charities and nonprofits. Since then, the project has been conducted in explicit partnership with YouTube. In the 2013 P4A, Nerdfighters uploaded hundreds of videos and over 24,000 people donated money to the Foundation to Decrease World Suck, a 501(c)3 charity created by the VlogBrothers, through Indiegogo, a crowdfunding website geared toward nonprofits. The mostly small donations added up to over \$850,000, split between the 20 charities whose videos received the most votes by the community.

P4A encourages the mode of expression preferred by many Nerdfighters—video production. The videos uploaded for the project range from ones by semiprofessional “YouTube celebrities” (video artists well known within the YouTube community, though not commonly outside of it), such as “WheezyWaiter,” to ones uploaded by young Nerdfighters, who differ widely in terms of their video-production experience. One video, created by two boys in their early teens, was uploaded at a 90-degree angle, with a caption explaining, “I know its sideways but there’s no way I’m shooting this again.” Exemplifying the inclusive ideals of a participatory culture, Nerdfighters promote creative production by lowering the barriers to expression and encouraging all members to see themselves as potential contributors.

P4A not only encourages Nerdfighters to upload videos, it also supports their creativity through structural features: on projectforawesome.com, one of the ways to pull up videos is by pressing “random video,” ensuring that each contribution has an equal chance of being viewed. The website encourages viewers to comment as much as possible on the videos they view, and over 460,000 comments were submitted in response to the 2013 videos. This practice stems from the early days of P4A, when “most-commented” videos would rise to the top of YouTube’s browse page, but has been kept “partly out of tradition and partly to help videos by lesser-known YouTubers become more popular in search results.” “Comment bombs” are also encouraged through the 48-hour livestream, where the Green brothers and other guests feature P4A videos and, with increasingly silly behavior, comment on them. In 2013, John Green donated one penny for every comment on P4A videos, further encouraging this participatory behavior. Finally, the “perks” offered to those who donate through the Indiegogo website reflect the wide range of content Nerdfighters are fans of, with merchandise related not only to the Green brothers, but also to different YouTube celebrities, as well as art created by the wider Nerdfighter community.

Through P4A and other campaigns, Nerdfighters represent a mode of fan activism that builds on fan practices and a broad shared identity, as well as a wide but shared “universe of taste,” while each individual chooses his or her own flavor or point of entry. While the diversity of shared content limits the extent to which the group can count on specific shared references to create a sense of community or an activist commitment,

Nerdfighters may also suggest an additional route to broadening fan activism over time.

The fact that Nerdfighters do not rely on one content world but instead on a wide universe of taste has helped to broaden their base of support. But, while we stress the bottom-up nature of the Nerdfighter community, over time the increasing celebrity status of one of the VlogBrothers—John Green—has significantly contributed to the growth of Nerdfighteria, in sometimes uneven bursts. When John Green started the VlogBrothers project with his brother, Hank, in 2007, he was already an award-winning author of two young adult books. His subsequent books quickly rose to best-selling status, arguably spurred by the growth of the Nerdfighter community. Green's biggest success was *The Fault in Our Stars*, a young adult romance novel about two cancer survivors, that was number one on Amazon six months ahead of its release date and debuted at number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list. The book was inspired by the real story of Esther Earl, a 16-year-old Nerdfighter who found friendship and support in the Nerdfighter community as she was struggling with thyroid cancer. Esther befriended John before succumbing to cancer in 2010, and, in the Nerdfighter community, she became a symbol for warmth, friendship, and courage. When asked by John Green what message she would like to convey to the world, it was "tell the people you love that you love them."

If the existence of the Nerdfighter community was mostly limited to "insiders," this changed in 2014 with the release of the film adaptation of *The Fault in Our Stars*. The modestly budgeted movie broke a record in pre-release ticket sales for a romance, and, in its opening weekend, earned \$48 million, topping supposed blockbusters featuring Tom Cruise and Angelina Jolie. The movie's surprising success drew significant media attention not only to John Green, but also to the Nerdfighter community—although it was often discussed as a traditional fan network rather than as a civic movement. Nerdfighters, many of whom relished the sense that their community was a well-kept secret, reacted to this publicity with mixed feelings. At a VlogBrothers meet-up session three weeks after the release of the movie, a young teenager in a Nerdfighter T-shirt asked to read a question she prepared for John and Hank Green: "What do you think is the relationship between the size of the community and the participation of its members?" This question, re-

flecting the concern of many Nerdfighters over the community's sudden growth, summarizes many of the challenges that Nerdfighters, the HPA, and Imagine Better negotiate, in seeking what makes a community—one that coalesces around popular culture—cohere, and what keeps its members engaged in the pursuit of civic goals.

Before closing, we want to acknowledge some of the limits to the inclusivity of these communities. Nerdfighters strive to be a very open community, with explicitly low "barriers to entry." According to their mantra, "If you want to be a Nerdfighter, you *are* a Nerdfighter." Yet while Nerdfighteria is very large, this group offers the rare opportunity to examine granular data about the demographic makeup of its participants: the VlogBrothers conduct a yearly "Nerdfighteria census." In the 2014 census, over 100,000 Nerdfighters participated—a remarkable response. As this census shows, Nerdfighters are mostly high-school and college age (60 percent of Nerdfighters are between the ages of 16 and 22) and mostly American. Nerdfighters are predominantly female—in the census, 72 percent were female and 26 percent male—while a significant number of community members identify as genderqueer, genderfluid, or questioning. In terms of race and ethnicity, the group is highly skewed in relation to the racial and ethnic makeup of young Americans in general: 85 percent identify as white, 6.5 percent as Latino, 3.5 percent as East Asian, and only 1.6 percent as black.

The findings of the Nerdfighter census prompt a confrontation with the question of the gender and racial/ethnic makeup of fan communities. Within fan studies, there has long been a discussion around the paucity of people of color participating in the structures of fandom. Jenkins (2014) describes the awkward situation of panels at fan conventions where white fans encircle a handful of minority participants, demanding to know why there aren't more fans of color. As Jenkins points out, the answer goes beyond decisions on the individual level, and may operate "on a systemic or structural level to make it harder for some to speak out as fans" (97). This question is troubling in relation to fandom as an opportunity for pleasure and learning, but it becomes even more pertinent when we think of fan activism as a form of political participation, and of those who may be excluded from it.

One informal, and inadvertent, boundary to participation that may be functioning in the context of the Nerdfighters—as well as the HPA, which

acknowledges a similar demographic skew in its membership—may involve cultural distinctions of taste and preference. Based on their shared “nerdy” interests, Nerdfighters can be characterized as a “taste community,” referring to a group with a communal preference for certain music, movies, or books (van Dijck 2009). Yet as Antoine Hennion (2007) explains, the allegedly natural affinity of fans toward their objects of passion “is actually socially constructed through the categories employed, the authority of leaders, the imitation of intimates, institutions and frames of appreciation, as well as through the social game of identity making and differentiation” (97). Thus when Nerdfighters say they simply “like the same stuff,” this claim may belie the structural determinants of their affinities.

As Jenkins (2014) asserts, fandom mirrors larger forms of segregation in culture at large. Bourdieu’s (1984) work on taste politics reminds us that taste is shaped by access to certain experiences, by who is encouraged or discouraged from displaying certain kinds of cultural preferences. And while Bourdieu focuses on class distinctions, we can point to the ways that taste is racialized as well. Using Daniel Dayan’s (2005) concept, we may think of Nerdfighters as “taste publics,” which are “generally focused on works, texts, or programmes; the performance of these publics is generally ‘verdictive’ (evaluative)” (54). Dayan also describes such groups as “identity publics” because of the ways they forge common identities around shared interests. While these shared interests constitute a powerful cultural resource for the group to build on as they move into fan activism, those same interests may also serve as an informal means of cultural exclusion—a point that is particularly relevant when we see these groups as the basis for political participation. One way this issue may be addressed is by leaders of these groups overtly taking up racial issues, as when both John and Hank Green repeatedly spoke of racial injustice in the context of the police killings of unarmed black men in 2014. While cultural tastes may limit inclusion, taking an explicit stance in support of racial justice may help young black youth feel more welcome in these communities.

Conclusion

The three case studies described in this chapter all offer successful models of fan activism—mobilizing fan enthusiasm toward participatory

politics. Through their different characteristics (focusing on one content world versus moving through multiple content worlds, mobilizing organized fan communities versus attempting to reach individual fans), they help us refine our understanding of fan activism and the ways content worlds may inspire the civic imagination, sketching the boundaries for these terms and testing their limits. This chapter suggests that fan activism can be understood as a continuum between two different modes—fannish civics and cultural acupuncture—that, while closely related, differ in their imagined audience, in the depth of their use of the content world, and in their participatory political outcomes. While the HPA succeeded in mobilizing a highly active fan community into fannish civics, the mode of cultural acupuncture may better serve the group as it seeks to engage other popular texts and reach other potential supporters through Imagine Better.

This chapter also dissects how fan activist groups utilize content worlds. Relying on scholarly examinations of world building as a literary practice, we see that fan activist organizations may benefit from tying into rich, immersive, and expansive worlds, extending their logics to locate almost endless opportunities for real-world connections. Such connections play to the fan community’s strength, enabling conversations across ideological and cultural differences. At the same time, content worlds may limit fan activism by the nature of their internal logics, as well as by declines in their popularity over time. Imagine Better presents one possible model to overcome this limitation, shifting to new texts in order to tap cultural pressure points. A different route is suggested by the Nerdfighters, who engage in fan activism based on a wider shared identity as “nerds” with similar cultural tastes. Yet both groups also find that connecting around popular culture content may limit their reach, in often unintended ways.

In the introduction to this chapter, we mentioned Dahlgren’s (2003) concept of the civic culture. He explains, “for a functioning democracy, there are certain conditions that reside at the level of lived experiences, resources and subjective dispositions which need to be met” (139). As such, Dahlgren is interested in the sets of cultural norms and practices that enable people to begin to engage as civic agents. He offers a circuit model comprising six dimensions—shared *values*, a sense of *affinity*, *knowledge* and competencies, *practices*, *identities*, and *discussion*—that

helps us understand how citizens can use the media in a way that encourages (or hinders) their civic engagement. The groups described here not only provide conditions necessary for their members to participate in the public sphere, they use media engagement as an active way to mobilize their members towards real-world action.

To exemplify how these groups employ the “full circuit” of engagement, we’ll examine the most recent campaign that Imagine Better conducted around the release of the third installment in the Hunger Games movie series, *Mockingjay—Part 1* (2014). Again focused on the theme of economic inequality, this campaign includes aspects of awareness raising, expression, and action. To exemplify the links between the Hunger Games narratives and the real world, the campaign calls participants to share how economic inequality has affected their lives. Under the hashtag #MyHungerGames, these stories are shared as a form of broader awareness raising. Yet in this campaign, members are called not only to share their own stories, but to collaborate with a somewhat surprising ally—“Fight for \$15,” a nationwide protest by fast food workers striking for higher wages and the right to unionize. The oddsinourfavor.org website explains: “These workers struggle with the same issues that workers in the districts face: low pay, bad hours and working conditions, hunger, lack of affordable healthcare, and more.” As a specific call for action, members are asked to visit a local McDonald’s and hand the manager an information sheet about fair wages and unionization rights. The campaign invites participants to take a selfie of themselves doing the three-finger salute and share it, along with their experiences of the direct action, through #MyHungerGames. It’s important to note—a campaign like this definitely demands more than many young participants feel comfortable with. As Andrew Slack admitted in a write-up about the campaign in the *New Yorker*, “some members have expressed social anxiety about doing this” (Wiedeman 2014). The HPA thus attempts to build up its members’ confidence, encouraging them to partake in actions they would otherwise be wary of through the inspiration of fictional worlds.

In this campaign, the focus is on equality, a *shared value* that HPA/Imagine Better identified as one of their key areas of action. The campaign begins by targeting the HPA/Imagine Better membership, tied by an *affinity* building both on the shared content world and shared

community structures. In a form of cultural acupuncture, however, the campaign reaches beyond this community, trying to mobilize larger audiences familiar, though not highly engaged with, the Hunger Games narratives. The campaign helps participants to acquire greater *knowledge* regarding economic inequality and fair wages, educating them through the allusions to the fictional narrative coupled with real world labor and income data. Their *identities* as fans, as well as their identification with the protagonists of the Hunger Games, are mobilized toward their engagement. Their action is supported through concrete *practices*—building on the fannish practices they already love engaging in, as well as encouraging them to participate in new activist practices. The #MyHungerGames hashtag and the connection to the Hunger Games content world through both language and visual symbols open opportunities for *discussion* of these issues, with fellow fans and wider audiences familiar with the franchise. The HPA thus not only completes the circuit of the conditions necessary for political engagement, but goes beyond it to harnessing these elements toward real-world change. Moreover, this campaign—through cultural acupuncture—goes far beyond the fan base, to activate and capture the imagination of those with only a superficial familiarity with the Hunger Games. In fact, some union activists report becoming enthusiastic Hunger Games fans through their engagement with the Odds in Our Favor campaign.

Earlier in the chapter we discussed two possible forms of success—success in achieving civic goals, and success in terms of empowering young members to see themselves as civic agents. Based on our conversations with young people, these groups were influential in their development as civic agents, and becoming involved with them was often the precursor to additional civic and political involvement. In terms of their civic goals, these groups have had visible successes in raising funds for charity, in registering and rallying voters, and in increasing public awareness of social issues. The HPA and Imagine Better, in particular, have worked consistently to achieve a range of political goals, while not shying away from more contentious ones, as well.

Fan communities have often been key innovators of new expressive and social practices, often early adopters of new media platforms and practices. This chapter describes ways that fan communities are also pioneering new forms of activism, ones that bridge popular cultural interests

and political causes. The achievements of the groups described in this chapter—both in terms of civic goals, and in their civic empowerment of young citizens—did much to inspire us to embark on our broader examination of innovative forms of participatory politics. The examples of fan activism described in this chapter are the most clear manifestations of the ways that the civic imagination may inspire real-world political actions, but we are finding similar logics emerging across all of the case studies we discuss in this book, as more and more youth are using storytelling and media making as tools for promoting political change, for example by employing powerful popular culture symbols like the trope of the superhero (Jenkins et al. forthcoming). In Chapter 4, we will see how American Muslim youth in the post-9/11 era make use of such creative tools, as they negotiate the tension between publicity and privacy.

4

Between Storytelling and Surveillance

The Precarious Public of American Muslim Youth

Sangita Shresthova

The NSA apparently is spying on people by monitoring what apps they're using. Damn son, for all the buildings I've blown up in Angry Birds, I wonder if I'll get interrogated for being a ringleader of Al-Qaeda.

—Aman Ali, January 27, 2014

In a Facebook status update, Aman Ali, an American Muslim comedian and storyteller, connected the popular mobile game Angry Birds to thoughts about surveillance and terrorism. At first glance humorous, Ali's post also succinctly captures a key paradox that surfaced throughout our research on American Muslim youth and participatory politics: young American Muslims' desire to express and connect through creating and sharing stories coexists with a climate increasingly defined by privacy and surveillance concerns. In his post, Ali reveals that like many of his 5,000 largely American Muslim Facebook friends, he is caught in a bind: he constantly juggles his desire to connect with others through social media with the awareness that his posts may be viewed (and possibly misunderstood) by audiences far beyond his intended networks. Acknowledging this reality may, in fact, be a key step toward overcoming its potential to silence voice and expression. Within three days, Ali's Angry Birds Facebook post received 557 likes, while many people left comments on it that poked fun at the underlying situation. One commenter suggested that Ali use a BlackBerry as there are no apps available for the phone, hence (supposedly) safeguarding it from NSA snooping. Another commenter warned that Ali's Facebook post now had so many keywords that it would certainly get flagged for official scrutiny. We might think of this Facebook exchange as a form