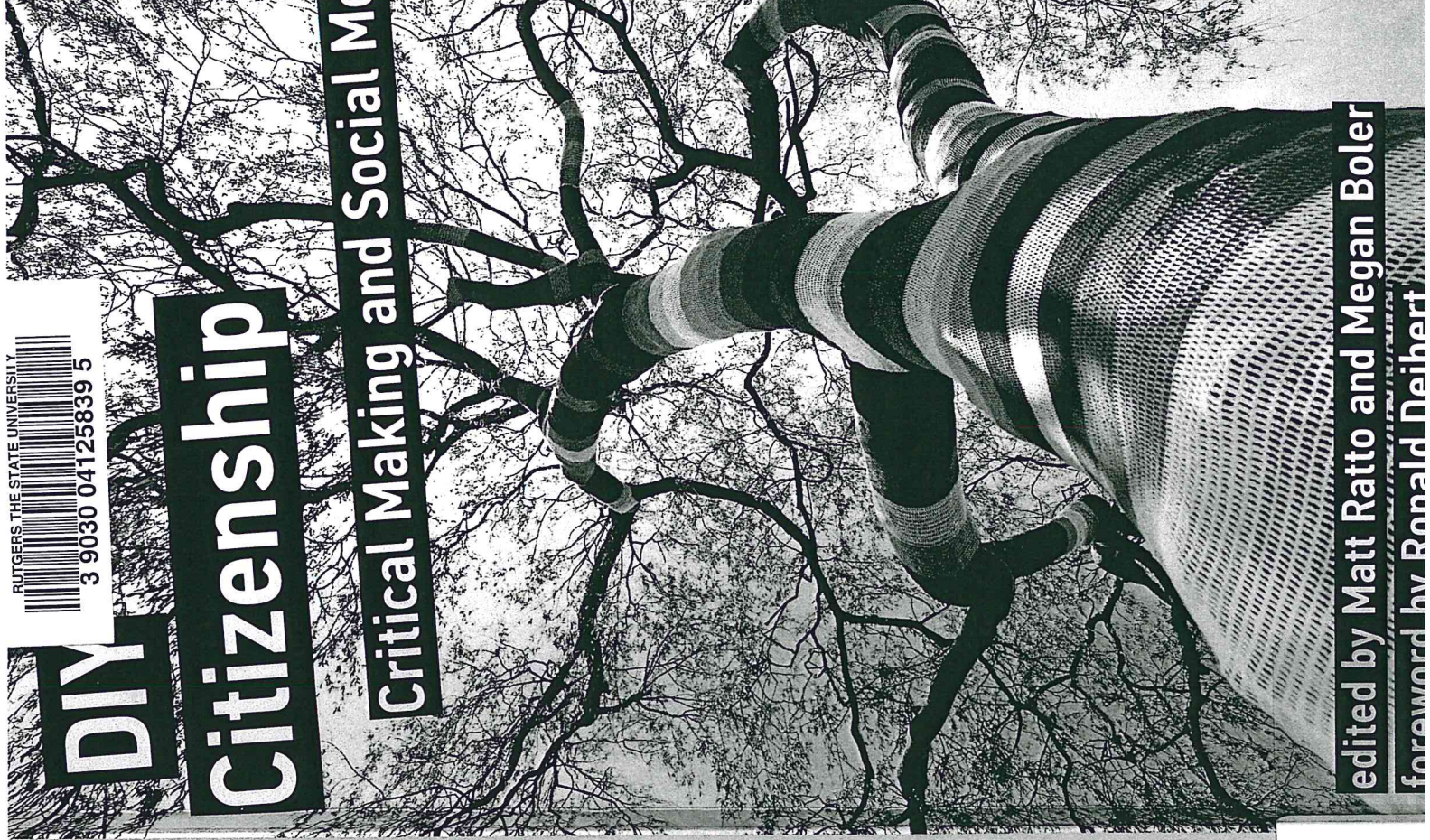




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DIY
Citizenship
Critical Making and Social Media
edited by Matt Ratto and Megan Boler
foreword by Ronald Deibert

communications/media
DIY
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DIY Making and Social Media
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DIY—do-it-yourself—describes more than self-taught carpentry. media enables DIY citizens to organize and protest in new ways (as it's "twitter revolution" of 2011) and to repurpose corporate content into new user-generated content) in order to offer political counter-voices. This book examines the usefulness and limits of DIY citizenship, the diverse forms of political participation and "critical making" that have emerged in recent years. The authors and artists in this collection are DIY citizens whose activities range from activist fan blogging and production to knitting and the creation of community gardens.

Contributors examine DIY activism, describing new modes of civic engagement that include Harry Potter fan activism and the activities of the Yes Men. Inside DIY making in learning, culture, hacking, and the arts, including-it-yourself media production and collaborative documentary making. Discuss DIY and design and how citizens can unlock the black box of logical infrastructures to engage and innovate open and participatory making. And they explore DIY and media, describing activists' efforts to make and reimagine media and the public sphere. As these chapters clear, DIY is characterized by its emphasis on "doing" and making rather than passive consumption. DIY citizens assume active roles as inter-activists, makers, hackers, modders, and tinkers, in pursuit of new forms of engaged and participatory democracy.

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MIT Press
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139
usa
978-0-262-52552-7
ISBN
978-0-262-52552-7
9 00000

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3 Fan Activism as Participatory Politics: The Case of the Harry Potter Alliance

Henry Jenkins

In a white paper released by the MacArthur Youth and Participatory Politics research network, Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne define participatory politics as “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern” (Cohen and Kahne 2012, vi). Participatory politics offers a more welcoming space for diverse kinds of participants than traditional politics, enables greater creativity and voice in expressing one’s views, and provides a gateway to more traditional political activities, such as voting or petitioning. Citing data from a survey of more than 4,000 respondents ages 15–25, they found that those who engaged in participatory politics (roughly 40–45 percent across all racial categories) were almost twice as likely to vote as those who did not. Their research has been especially invested in understanding the role that interest-driven networks (such as those around fandom or gaming) might play in helping to bridge between cultural and political participation.

This chapter represents a study of one increasingly common form of participatory politics—fan activism. For the purposes of this discussion, “fan activism” refers to 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 with metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture. (See also Brough and Shresthova 2012 and Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012.) Fan cultures have long been cited as textbook examples of the larger phenomenon of DIY media production, and fan activism represents an exemplar of the ways that such creative communities might evolve their own models of political and civic participation.¹

This chapter will explore the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), a sustained effort to mobilize a network of fans of J. K. Rowling’s fantasy books around an array of different issues and concerns, ranging from human rights in

producing and editing multimedia creations, educating themselves about every facet of their issue, and relying on their trusted networks to provide a database of information" (Lopez 2011, 2).

Started by Andrew Slack, a twentysomething trained community organizer who has a background in working with troubled youth, the Harry Potter Alliance is fan activism on a previously unimagined scale. The group currently has more than 100,000 members in more than seventy active chapters across the world, organized and mobilized by Slack and his forty-person staff, both volunteer and paid. When the HPA takes action, the results can be staggering: for instance, it raised \$123,000 to fund five cargo planes to transport medical supplies to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. Its Accio Books! Campaign has collected over 55,000 books for communities around the world. HPA members called 3,597 residents of Maine in just one day, encouraging them to vote against Proposition 9, which would deny equal marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples.

Running the HPA from his living room in Somerville, Massachusetts, Slack is a charismatic leader who inspires his volunteer army and part-time paid staff, but also embraces more dispersed and decentralized power structures that allow members a greater voice in the organization's decisions. Local chapters participate in national campaigns but also initiate their own activities, which reflect their own agendas (veterans' rights, say), and solicit participation by other chapters. Unlike most activist groups and charities, the HPA is not defined around a single mission: rather, it embraces a flexible framework inspired by Rowling's content world and by her own previous experience working for Amnesty International, enabling it to respond quickly to any crisis and to mobilize its dispersed members.

From the start, Slack worked within the structures of fandom, using such things as the House Cup competition. Hogwarts is organized around four houses, Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff, each of which embodies different ideals and virtues.³ 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. The HPA recruits high-profile heads for each house who encourage members to take action for the cause. For example, Wrock4Equality was a House Cup competition, where members earned points for each person they contacted in the effort to rally voters against Maine's Proposition 9.

The HPA materials are not always as polished as those of some other activist groups, who work with professional media makers and consultants. Rather, the HPA embraces fandom's own DIY ethos, lowering barriers to participation by respecting the work of novices and amateurs. Many of

Africa to equal marriage rights, from labor rights to media concentration and net neutrality. While the Harry Potter Alliance is open to members of all ages, the group has focused its energies on attracting young people who have grown up reading the books and on helping them find a path toward political engagement. According to HPA chapter coordinator Sara Denver (pers. comm., July 2011), of the organization's 98 chapters, 24 are hosted by high schools and 33 by colleges and universities, suggesting strong student representation in the group.

The HPA embraces a politics of "cultural acupuncture," mapping fictional content worlds onto real-world concerns. A content world is 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. So the content world around Harry Potter includes characters such as Snape and Dumbledore, settings such as Hogwarts, situations such as sorting students into houses using the Sorting Hat, and values such as friendship and maternal love, any or all of which can be used to generate new narratives or to tap into the meanings associated with the original stories. The HPA works by deploying elements of the Harry Potter content world (and their accumulated meanings) as metaphors for making sense of contemporary issues.²

Historically, fans have often entered civic discourse when they assert their collective rights as the most active and engaged segments of the media audience. While many other forms of DIY culture have sought to establish autonomy from mainstream culture, fandom exists at the intersection of grassroots and commercial media. Given this unstable positioning, the fan identity is often an embattled one, and efforts to save shows from cancellation or to rally support for a film project have helped cement social ties between fans, define their shared interests, and shape their public status. By the time these fan groups had defined an issue, identified decision makers, developed tactics, and educated and mobilized supporters, they had completed all of the steps required for activism.

Those who participated in such efforts had built the infrastructure and acquired the personal and organizational skills to take meaningful action. In *Entertaining the Citizen*, Liesbet van Zoonen concludes that fan practices embody, "in abstract terms, the customs that have been laid out as essential for democratic politics: information, discussion, and activism" (van Zoonen 2005, 63). In a study of another fan activist group, Racebending.com, Lori Kido Lopez reaches a similar conclusion: "Some of the organization's strongest and most effective tactics rely on the skills developed as members of the fan community: honing their arguments through community discussions,

For the HPA, overcoming the “Muggle mind-set” (Slack 2007) and releasing the power of fantasy represent vital first steps in becoming an activist. When many Harry Potter fans think of Muggles, they think first of the narrow-minded Dursley family, who keep Harry locked away in the cupboard under the stairs out of fear of and embarrassment about his magical capacities. Building on Rowling’s depiction, the HPA uses the elastic concept of the “Muggle mind-set” as an all-purpose signifier for those forces that resist social justice, including many that are the targets of other kinds of activism, such as conformity, commercialization, authoritarianism, and the politics of terror. The term Muggle mind-set is as loose and as encompassing as, say, “neoliberalism” or “dominant ideology,” and, like them, it links structures of belief, power, and action.

In their final struggles with Voldemort, Harry, Hermione, Ron, and their classmates had to seek out and destroy seven Horcruxes, magic objects of supreme evil containing hidden fragments of the Dark Lord’s soul. In the months leading up to the release of the final movie, the HPA launched an ambitious campaign identifying and directing its collective energy against seven real-world Horcruxes. Some, such as the *Starvation Wages* Horcrux, called attention to global human rights issues; HPA members pursuing this Horcrux sought to get Warner Brothers to commit to license Harry Potter candies only to fair trade companies. Others represented concerns in young people’s lives. For the Dementor Horcrux, the HPA partnered with Reachout.com, an online support group for teens considering suicide. The Body Bind Horcrux helped members push back against distorted body images, while for the Bullying Horcrux the HPA joined forces with the Gay-Straight Alliance to battle homophobia in schools. Its efforts against bullying included both collecting signatures for the Make It Better Oath and making phone calls to voters in Rhode Island to urge them to support an equal marriage initiative there. While critics might see such short, focused efforts as token gestures, the overall Horcrux campaign was designed to help participants understand the links between campaigns for social justice and the internalized fears and anxieties that block many from taking meaningful action. The *Starvation Wages* Horcrux evolved into a more sustained “Not in Harry’s Name” campaign designed to pressure Warner Brothers to shift its chocolate contracts to fair trade companies, a campaign waged in the name of fans but directed against the commercial rights holder of their favorite franchise.

In starting with a fantasy about youth empowerment, the HPA addresses many prevailing concerns about young people and civic engagement. Current scholarship (Gibson 2003; Bennett 2008; Wattenberg 2008; Buckingham

the HPA’s most effective videos simply depict students, in their bedrooms, speaking directly into the camera. The HPA has formed a strong partnership with the video blog community Nerdfighters, whose capacity to mobilize its members was a key factor in the HPA’s success in a 2010 Chase Manhattan Bank online competition.

Stephen Duncombe has described a range of contemporary activist movements that embrace “a politics that understands desire and speaks to the irrational; a politics that employs symbols and associations; a politics that tells good stories” (Duncombe 2007, 9). Whereas Mark Dery (1993) described 1990s cultural and political movements as “jamming” dominant culture, Duncombe alternatively suggests that activists surf the popular imagination, hitching themselves to Hollywood’s publicity to reach a larger public.

Slack describes this new form of activism as “cultural acupuncture.” Recognizing that the news media was more apt to cover the launch of the next Harry Potter film than the genocide in Darfur, Slack saw the HPA as a way to identify key cultural pressure points, thus redirecting energy toward real-world problems.⁴ Pinning political and social causes to Harry Potter works because this content world has a large following, is familiar to an even larger number of people, has its own built-in mechanisms for generating publicity, and is apt to attract many subsequent 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 can channel our emotional investments. Here, again, this form of DIY citizenship speaks both within the subculture of fandom and beyond it, seeking ways to tap the power of mass media to reach a larger public.

Cultural acupuncture inspires civic participation by mapping content worlds onto real-world problems. Against a 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 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 and his minions (Slack 2010). The HPA similarly offers its participants roles within larger-than-life campaigns. The HPA’s playful deployment of terms like “Voldemortmedia” and “WaldeMart” maps the personalized embodiment of evil in the content world to an expanding understanding of real-world harms. Consequently, the HPA allows its young members to know who they are as activists, what they are fighting against, and what they are fighting for, all key steps toward sustaining social change.

2000; Levine 2007) suggests that young people are rarely addressed as political agents, that they are not invited into the political process, and that they are not consulted in the political decision-making process, whether local, state, national, or global. Existing literature suggests that young people are most apt to become politically involved if they come from families with a history of citizen participation and political activism; if they encounter teachers, especially in the civics classroom, who encourage them to reflect on and respond to current events; if they attend schools where they are allowed a voice in core decisions; and if they participate in extracurricular activities and volunteerism that give back to their community. Most forms of activism reach the same core group of participants, who already are politically engaged, and redirect them toward new issues. But, the HPA is targeting young people who are engaged culturally, who may already be producing and sharing fan culture, and it helps them extend their engagement into politics, often deploying existing skills and capacities in new ways.

As researchers such as David Buckingham (2000) have long argued, young people often feel excluded from the language and processes of adult politics. In most cases, they are not invited to participate, their issues are often not addressed, and the debates are framed in a language that assumes familiarity with debates and policies. By contrast, the HPA's cultural acupuncture approach is imaginative and playful, offering an alternative set of metaphors and analogies that are already part of young people's lives. The HPA embraces grassroots appropriation as a way of generating a new vocabulary for talking about political change.

In *The Future of Democracy*, Peter Levine argues, "There are limits to what adults and institutions can accomplish, given the opacity of youth culture and young people's resistance to being manipulated. Therefore, it is important that young people themselves have the skills and values they need to make their own sphere as constructive as possible" (Levine 2007, 76). In some ways, fan activism flies in the face of Levine's claims: fandom has historically been a space where youth and adults work together, outside of the hierarchies that shape relations at school or home, because of their shared interests and mutual passions. In contrast to traditional political organizations which often deploy youth as envelope stuffers for adult-led activities, the HPA places much of the responsibility for core decisions impacting the mission and tactics of the organization into the hands of its young participants, empowering them to make a difference in the world.

Cohen and Kahne (2012) concluded their study of young people and participatory politics with a caution: "The knowledge, skills, resources, and networks that will enable youth to be listened to by those with the power

to advance their priorities may not be adequately or equitably distributed. Promoting broad and equitable access to the support, training, and infrastructure needed to move from voice to influence will be important in order for participatory politics to reach its full potential" (38). One of the hallmarks of the Harry Potter Alliance has been its capacity to broker connections between the fan activists and a range of other more established NGOs, charities, and traditional political organizations (such as Doctors for Health, Mass Equity, Free Press, The Gay-Straight Alliance, Ox-Fam, and Wal-Mart Watch) with which they partner in conducting their campaigns. In July 2007, for example, the HPA and the Leaky Cauldron, one of the most popular fan news sites, organized house parties around the country focused on increasing awareness of the Sudanese genocide. Participants listened to and discussed a podcast that featured real-world political experts such as Joseph C. Wilson, former US ambassador to Gabon, and John Pendergast, senior advisor to the International Crisis Group, alongside performances by Wizard Rock groups.

The Harry Potter Alliance is only one of a range of case studies being developed by the graduate students and researchers affiliated with the University of Southern California's Civic Paths project. Other case studies include considerations of Invisible Children and the *Kony 2012* campaign, undocumented youth and their supporters who mobilized around the DREAM act, the Students for Liberty campaign, Nerdfighters, and American Muslim youth who are struggling with the post-9/11 climate of Islamophobia. Each of these groups deploys some of the techniques of cultural production, circulation, and participation that Cohen and Kahne (2012) have identified here as "participatory politics" or that are discussed in this book as "DIY citizenship." Each deploys a range of new media tools, platforms, and practices, often in association with more traditional kinds of on-the-ground mobilization, in order to recruit and train young activists behind their cause. Most of them appropriate and remix elements borrowed from popular culture in order to frame their issues in a language that makes sense to younger participants. Each creates scaffolding that allows youth to move from forms of cultural participation we associate with the age of YouTube and Facebook into forms of political participation, hoping to translate "voice" into "influence."

Acknowledgments

This chapter was informed by the ongoing conversations of the Civic Paths Research Group in the Annenberg School of Communications and Journalism, University of Southern California, and by the MacArthur Network

on Youth and Participatory Politics. My research on fan activism has been funded by the Spencer and MacArthur Foundations. This chapter is adapted from "Culture Acupuncture: Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance," originally published in *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

Notes

1. For example, fandom has a strong tradition of zine and online publishing that closely parallel those forms of peer-to-peer mentorship and collaborative production described by Red Chidgey (chapter 6, this volume). Harry Potter fans have applied similar logics to the development of distinctive forms of digital production, including vidding, podcasts, blogs, and MP3 musical recordings, and the HPA tapped into this infrastructure as a means of reaching out to a broader base of fans.
2. Given the fantastical setting associated with the Harry Potter books and films, these fans needed to engage in a much more active process of translation to map the content world onto real-world concerns than would be required by the fans of comedy news programs, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, discussed by Catherine Burwell and Megan Boler (chapter 7, this volume).
3. Such structures provide for shared values, common identities, collective goals, and a strong sense of sociability that might allow such groups to work past other kinds of ideological differences, paralleling the functions served by the Pricoscope community as described by Lana Swartz and Kevin Driscoll (chapter 22, this volume). Swartz and Driscoll, along with Joshua McVeigh-Schultz (chapter 23, this volume), are part of my Civic Paths Research Group at the University of Southern California.
4. This acupunctural model represents a formulation of the kinds of "politics of attention" that have motivated other contemporary forms of activism, ranging from Invisible Children's *Kony 2012* efforts to the Yes Men's political pranks (see Reilly, chapter 8, this volume).

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