"Decreasing World Suck":

Fan Communities, Mechanisms of Translation, and Participatory Politics

Neta Kligler-Vilenchik

Executive Summary

This report describes the *mechanisms of translation* through which participatory culture communities extend members' cultural connections toward civic and political outcomes. The report asks: What mechanisms do groups use to translate cultural interests into political outcomes? What are challenges and obstacles to this translation? May some mechanisms be more conducive towards some participatory political outcomes than others?

The report addresses these questions through a comparison between two groups: the Harry Potter Alliance and the Nerdfighters. The Harry Potter Alliance is a civic organization with a strong online component which runs campaigns around human rights issues, often in partnership with other advocacy and nonprofit groups; its membership skews college age and above. Nerdfighters are an informal community formed around a YouTube vlog channel; many of the participants are high school age, united by a common goal of "decreasing world suck." These two groups have substantial overlapping membership, yet they differ in their strengths and challenges in terms of forging participatory politics around shared cultural interests.

The report discusses three mechanisms that enable such translation:

1. Tapping content worlds and communities – Scaffolding the connections that group members have through their shared passions for popular culture texts and their relationships with each other toward the development of civic identities and political agendas.

2. Creative production – Encouraging production and circulation of content, especially for political expression.

3. Informal discussion – Creating and supporting spaces and opportunities for conversations about current events and political issues.

Through these mechanisms, these two groups build on young people's passions around popular culture and their sense of shared cultural identity in order to help them cultivate their civic identities, express themselves politically, and take action.

Cover photo: HPA

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Introduction

On February 14, 2013, President Barack Obama participated in a virtual "Fireside Hangout." A "21st century take on Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats," the Google+ Hangout was designed to enable an informal, participatory discussion between the President and various internet personas, all representing thriving online communities[1]. Amongst the participants was John Green of the YouTube "VlogBrothers," representing the Nerdfighters, an online community of culturally and civically active youth who fight to "decrease world suck." When Green was invited to participate, he asked the Nerdfighters what questions he should ask. The issue that received the highest number of votes was one much discussed in the Nerdfighter community: Why doesn't the U.S. eliminate the penny, which research shows is wasteful to the economy? Stumped by this question, a surprised President Obama admitted: "I've got to tell you, John, I don't know," before quickly shifting the discussion to more familiar ground.[2] As the event

Fig 1. President Obama replying to John Green's question about the penny

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[1] The White House Blog. "President Obama Participates in Fireside Hangouts". Accessed March 2013. http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/02/13/president-obama-participates-fireside-hangouts-google
[2] The White House (February 21, 2013). "President Obama on the Penny in a Google+ Hangout" [Video file]. Retrieved from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx-KdaJBSEA

drew to a close, Obama urged the Nerdfighters "not to forget to be awesome," referencing the group's motto.

The virtual encounter between John Green and the President of the United States highlights some ways that civic and political engagement may be changing—especially for young people. Green spoke with the President not as a representative of a political party or formal organization, but rather of a *participatory culture*—"a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship."[3] His participation in the Fireside Hangout, as well as the knowledge Obama displayed about the Nerdfighters, suggest the extended opportunities for such cultural groups to exert their voice and influence in contemporary politics. The Nerdfighter community voting to ask the President about the elimination of the penny is an example of *participatory politics*—"interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern."[4] The Nerdfighters and the Harry Potter Alliance, the second group examined in this report, both exemplify how participatory culture groups can scaffold their members' participation into participatory politics.

The MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) has engaged in a multi-year investigation of changes in the ways politics are perceived and practiced by young people and facilitated by new media contexts. In particular, they have been documenting how new media and participatory cultures offer socializing contexts for youth civic

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[3] Henry Jenkins et al., *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (White Paper), 2006, p. 3. See:
http://digitallearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF

[4] Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne, "Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action," Youth and Participatory Politics Network, MacArthur Foundation (2012), vi. See:
http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/content/participatory-politics-new-media-and-youth-political-action-ypp-survey-report

engagement.[5] Included in the network of projects associated with YPP, the Media, Activism & Participatory Politics (MAPP) project at the University of Southern California developed a series of case studies focused on innovative networks and organizations, which bridge between informal participation in online communities and cultures and more active engagement with institutional politics.[6] While the groups described here do not necessarily represent what *the majority* of young people are doing, they surface important connections between the political world and the cultural and social realms.

Using the concept of *mechanisms of translation*, this report identifies practices through which two participatory culture groups—the Harry Potter Alliance and the Nerdfighters—build on young people's passions around popular culture and their sense of shared cultural identity as an entry point into cultivating civic identities, encouraging political expression and supporting political action. The report identifies three such mechanisms: 1) tapping content worlds and communities, 2) creative production, and 3) forming opinions and discussion. This report focuses on successful examples of such translation, but also on the barriers and obstacles to this process.

The Harry Potter Alliance and the Nerdfighters share 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. Yet, despite the similar membership and goals, the Harry Potter Alliance has been more successful at sustaining members' civic participation. Nerdfighters, on the other hand, have been more successful at short-term mobilization and are perceived by members as providing a more open space with lower barriers to entry.

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[5] Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh and Danielle Allen, "Youth, New Media, and the Rise of Participatory Politics," in Danielle Allen and Jennifer Light (Eds.), *Youth, New Media and Citizenship.* (MIT Press, forthcoming).
[6] For more on the MAPP project and the different case studies, see http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/content/mapp-media-activism-participatory-politics

Introducing the groups

Nerdfighters

The Nerdfighters are an informal group, revolving around the YouTube channel of the "VlogBrothers," two brothers in their thirties. John Green is a best-selling young adult author and Hank Green is a musician and entrepreneur, though both now engage in a wide variety of online projects.[7] Inspired by video artist Ze Frank,[8] the Green brothers launched the "Brotherhood 2.0" project in 2007, in which they pledged to cease all text-based communication for a year and keep in touch through publicly accessible vlogs (video blogs). In their vlogs, the brothers adopt the "talking head" format, facing the camera and chatting with the audience (and each other). Over time, they developed an elaborate repertoire of made-up jargon and inside jokes, which encouraged others to join their exchange.[9] In 2007, YouTube featured Hank's song "Accio Deathly Hallows" (calling for the release of the seventh Harry Potter book) on its front page, greatly increasing their visibility. The main focus for this case study is the community of Nerdfighters—the predominantly young followers of the VlogBrothers.[10]

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[7] Some of their intriguing online projects include *SciShow* and *Crash Course*, YouTube channels dedicated to teaching science and history, respectively.

[8] In 2006, Frank launched a daily video program called *the show*, combining commentary on current events with artistic activities engaging his viewership. His fans contributed thousands of photos, videos and music files for his various projects. See www.zefrank.com

[9] Some examples include: DFTBA – an initialism for Don't Forget to be Awesome; The Yeti – a way to refer to John's wife (who is never present on video); Tiny chicken disease – a common cold, and many more.

[10] Throughout the report, when I talk about VlogBrothers, I'm referring to the Green brothers. When I talk about Nerdfighters or Nerdfighteria I'm referring to the wide community.

Fig 2. A local Nerdfighter group

The name "Nerdfighter" emerged from one of the Greens' vlogs; John encountered an arcade game called "Aero Fighters" and mistook its name for "Nerdfighters.". The brothers' followers adopted the term to describe themselves, and the VlogBrothers address many of their vlogs to Nerdfighters or "Nerdfighteria." The Greens define a Nerdfighter as "a person who, instead of being made of bones, skin and tissue, is made entirely of awesome."[11] Over time, the Nerdfighter community reached significant proportions—the average Vlogbrother video has over 250,000 views.[12] The "barriers of entry" to Nerdfighteria are kept low. As the VlogBrothers quip: "Am I too young / old / fat / skinny / weird / cool / nerdy / handsome / tall / dead to be a Nerdfighter? No!! If you want to be a Nerdfighter, you *are* a Nerdfighter."[13]

Based on their sense of agency and their real-world engagement, Nerdfighters go beyond being a mere "audience" to the VlogBrothers, and can instead be conceptualized as a "public."[14]

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[11] VlogBrothers (2009, December 27). How to be a Nerdfighter: A VlogBrothers FAQ [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyQi79aYfxU

[12] John Green has become quite prominent due to his best-selling books, the last of which is currently being adapted into a film, creating another factor for the group's increasing size.

[13] VlogBrothers, How to be a Nerdfighter.

[14] Sonia Livingstone, "On the Relationship between Audiences and Publics," in Sonia Livingstone (ed.) *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere* (Intellect, 2005), 43-76.

The pronounced goal of Nerdfighters is to "decrease world suck." When interviewed, John Green explained that, to him, this goal is:

> Very much at the center of Nerdfighteria and I don't think that there really is a community without that commitment to decreasing world suck or, as Hank likes to say, "increasing world awesome". I don't think there's a community without its values.

As the VlogBrothers enigmatically define it, "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."[15] This broad definition leaves much space for individual Nerdfighters to interpret what "World Suck" (and decreasing it) means to them. Examples cited in interviews have ranged from personal acts, such as being a good person or cheering up a friend, to collective acts that fit within existing definitions of civic engagement. For example, Nerdfighters are very active on Kiva.org, a non-profit organization enabling individuals to make small loans to people without access to traditional banking systems.[16] Kiva.org features communities of lenders, and Nerdfighters are the largest community on the website with 34,773 members, topping "atheists, agnostics and skeptics" (23,795 members) as well as Kiva Christians (10,652 members). For several months, Nerdfighters ranked highly in the amount loaned, with a total of $1,771,025 disbursed.[17] The Nerdfighters also support Project for Awesome (P4A), an annual event in which members are encouraged to create videos about their favorite charity and non-profit organization and simultaneously post those on YouTube. The first year the project was launched, its goal was to take over YouTube's front page with videos of charities and non-profits for one day. In the 2012 P4A, Nerdfighters uploaded hundreds of videos and donated impressive amounts of money to the "Foundation to Decrease World Suck" (a non-profit created by the VlogBrothers).

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[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Kiva. "About us," accessed March 2013, http://www.kiva.org/about

[17] Kiva. "Kiva Lending Team: Nerdfighters," accessed March 2013, http://www.kiva.org/team/nerdfighters

Nerdfighters could then vote on which charities should receive the donation. Finally, Nerdfighters decrease World Suck by collaborating with the Harry Potter Alliance.

The Harry Potter Alliance

The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) is a non-profit organization established in 2005 by activist and stand-up comedian Andrew Slack. For Slack, creating an activist group around Harry Potter—a "Dumbledore's Army for the real world"—seemed a natural step, and he was surprised at the time that no one had done that before.[18] The HPA promotes literacy, equality and human rights.[19] To do so, the organization taps the existing infrastructures of the thriving Harry Potter fan community, including blogs, podcasts, conventions, fan fiction sites, and wizard rock (Harry Potter themed music) concerts.[20] The HPA leadership includes a handful of paid staff members and a network of volunteer staff, dispersed around the nation, conducting most of their communication online. The local, more face-to-face-oriented component of the HPA includes a network of around 130 chapters in high schools, colleges and communities nationwide and abroad. The mostly youth-led chapters engage in national campaigns but also promote local projects based on their members' interests.

In its seven years of existence, the HPA has engaged in multiple campaigns, some independent, and some in conjunction with established non-profit organizations. Every year, the organization runs book drives for communities in need. Perhaps their most visible campaign has been Helping Haiti Heal in 2010, in which they raised $123,000 in two weeks from small donations to send 5 cargo planes full of supplies to Haiti—an achievement reached in part due to

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[18] Andrew Slack, "All about the HPA", session at LeakyCon Fan Convention, Orlando, Florida, July 16, 2011.
[19] The HPA. "What we do", accessed March 2013, http://thehpalliance.org/what-we-do/
[20] Neta Kligler-Vilenchik et al., "Experiencing Fan Activism: Understanding the Power of Fan Activist Organizations through Members' Narratives", *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

their collaboration with the Nerdfighters. HPA's more recent campaigns include Equality FTW (for the win), raising $95,000 for action around immigration, education and LGBTQ equality.[21] The HPA has also mobilized around marriage equality, with members phone-banking to persuade residents of Maine and Rhode Island to legalize same-sex marriage.

Fig 3. HPA Chapter Organizer Meeting at LeakyCon 2011

In 2011, HPA launched Imagine Better, a project that aims to bring the model behind the HPA—mobilizing fan communities to civic action—to other fan groups and content worlds. So far, two large Imagine Better campaigns have been launched: one around the Hunger Games series[22] and another around the Superman movie *Man of Steel*.[23] Currently, collaborations with other fan communities are planned.

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[21] Indiegogo: Equality For The Win, accessed March 2013, http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/equality-ftw

[22] *The Hunger Games* tells the story of the dystopic nation of Panem, where the Capitol exercises political control over the rest of the nation. The "Hunger Games" are an annual event in which one boy and one girl from each of the twelve districts surrounding the Capitol are selected by lottery to compete in a televised battle to the death. The series was connected to a campaign around world hunger.

[23] In a campaign around immigration policy, Superman is presented as an immigrant who, despite not being born in the United States, loves his new country and dedicates his life to protect it.

The HPA has been examined as a form of fan activism,[24] as a manifestation of Connected Learning principles,[25] as a contrast to Culture Jamming,[26] and for its use of rhetoric form.[27] This report builds on these ideas to investigate how both the HPA and Nerdfighters as participatory culture groups are able to scaffold participatory politics.

Since the 1990s,[28] the burgeoning field of fan studies has recognized fan communities as sites for meaning making, shared identity formation, and creative production. Fan studies maintains a distinction between individual fans and organized fan communities or fandoms, emphasizing "the collective nature of fandom."[29] HPA and Nerdfighters can both be characterized as organized fan communities (rather than aggregations of individual fans) with shared content, structures, norms, and modes of engagement. HPA members see themselves as primarily Harry Potter fans, though they identify themselves as "fans" more broadly. Nerdfighters see themselves as fans of John and Hank Green, but also as fans of "nerdy content," though this is usually defined less by content type (mostly science fiction and fantasy) and more by members' active curiosity and unrestrained enthusiasm.

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[24] Henry Jenkins, "'Cultural Acupuncture': Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance", *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012); Kligler-Vilenchik et al., Experiencing Fan Activism.
[25] Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Sangita Shresthova, "The Harry Potter Alliance: Connecting Fan Interests and Civic Action". Connected learning case study, see http://connectedlearning.tv/case-studies/harry-potter-alliance-connecting-fan-interests-and-civic-action
[26] Henry Jenkins, "From Culture Jamming to Cultural Acupuncture" (forthcoming).
[27] Ashley Hinck, "Theorizing a Public Engagement Keystone: Seeing Fandom's Integral Connection to Civic Engagement through the Case of the Harry Potter Alliance", *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).
[28] Henry Jenkins, *Textual poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge, 1992) ; Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).
[29] Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse*, Fan fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet. (McFarland, 2001), 23.*

The chart below captures some key similarities and differences between HPA and Nerdfighters:

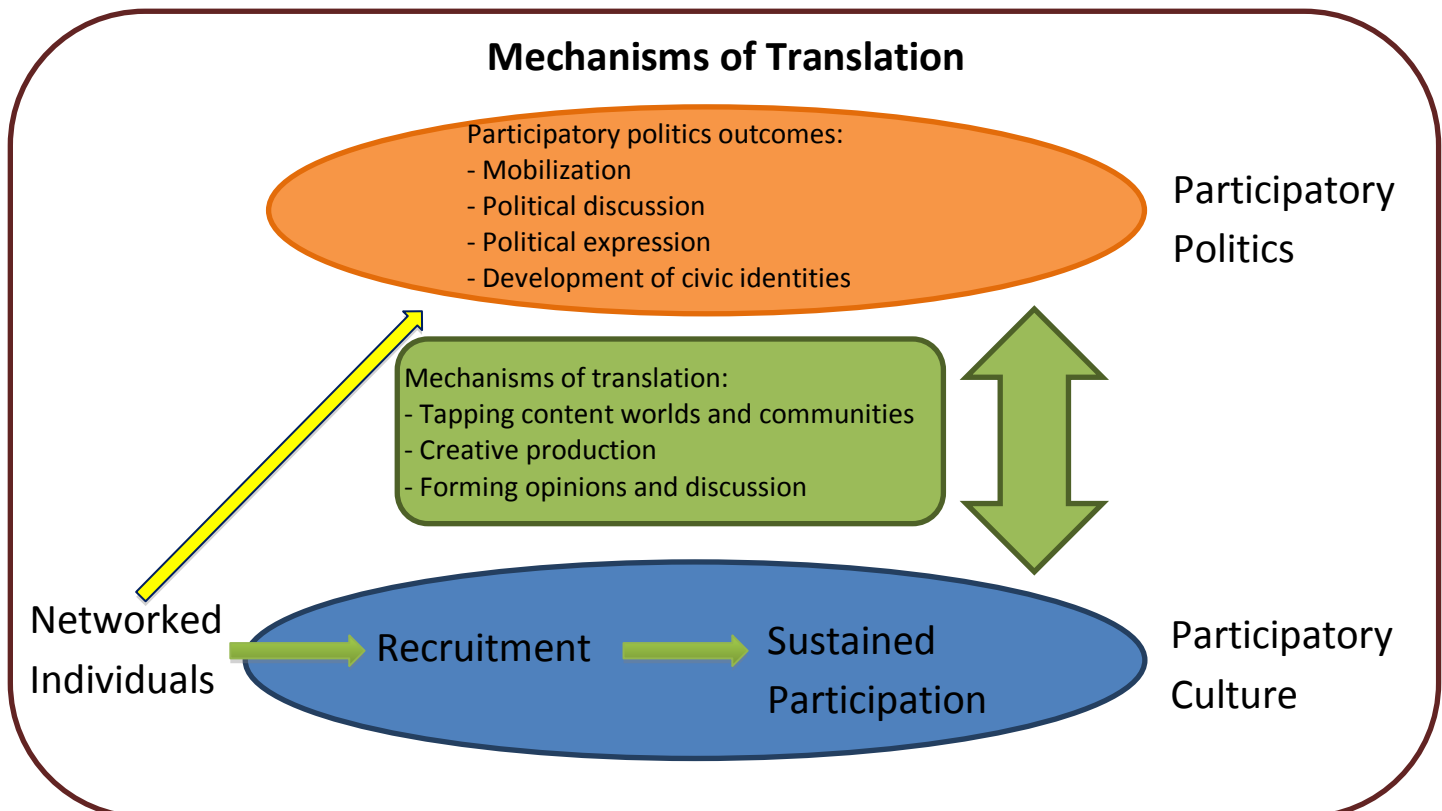|	Harry Potter Alliance	Nerdfighters
Nature of group	501(c)3 non-profit	Informal online community
Structure	Online organization, with local chapters in schools, colleges and communities	Mostly online (particularly via YouTube), with some informal local groups
Characteristics of Participants[30]	Mostly college, some high-school age and some older participants	Mostly high-school age, some college-age, few older participants
Leadership	Andrew Slack – founder and executive director, Paul DeGeorge – co-founder. Senior staff. Chapter organizers for local groups.	John and Hank Green (the VlogBrothers). Informal organizers for local groups.
Guiding motto	Dumbledore's Army for the real world	Don't forget to be awesome (DFTBA)
Size	Claims to mobilize "hundreds of thousands". Around 130 local chapters.	Each video garners around 250,000 views; Over 1.1m subscribers to the VlogBrothers channel

The Research

I have been following the HPA for over 2.5 years and the Nerdfighters for over 1.5 years. This report mainly relies on in-depth interviews with 30 members of HPA and Nerdfighters (fifteen HPA/Imagine Better and fifteen Nerdfighters), mostly between the ages of 15-25. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over Skype or face-to-face and lasted between 1.5-2 hours. The research also draws on an analysis of a range of texts and artifacts produced by these groups. An ethnographic component also included participant-observation at national and local events for the two groups. All research practices were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern California. See the methodological appendix for further details.

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[30] It is hard to characterize group members due to fluid membership, but this general characterization is supported by the break-up of the interview sample (see the methodological appendix).

Mechanisms of translation

Mechanisms of translation describe the ways that the group members' cultural investments and social connections get deployed to support participatory politics outcomes. The diagram below will guide our discussion. The area in blue represents the domain of participatory culture. The orange area is the realm of participatory politics. Here, we look at participatory politics outcomes, encompassing action, expression and identity. The green area in the middle maps various mechanisms of translation through which cultural participation is channeled into participatory politics. Importantly, the same mechanisms of translation that function vertically, from participatory culture to participatory politics, also function horizontally, leading individuals to become more culturally involved with the group. Horizontal translation scaffolds vertical translation: more cultural involvement leads to more opportunities to engage politically.

Diagram - Mechanisms of Translation

Mechanisms of Translation

Participatory politics outcomes:
- Mobilization
- Political discussion
- Political expression
- Development of civic identities

Participatory Politics

Mechanisms of translation:
- Tapping content worlds and communities
- Creative production
- Forming opinions and discussion

Networked Individuals

Recruitment → Sustained Participation

Participatory Culture

The diagram begins with "networked individuals." Barry Wellman uses the term networked individualism to describe the ways "many people and organizations communicate with others in ways that ramify across group boundaries. Rather than relating to one group, they cycle through interactions with a variety of others, at work or in the community."[31] For this diagram, "networked individuals" are young people who interact with other individuals and groups in multiple ways but are *not* (or, perhaps, not yet) members of the groups we are describing. Including networked individuals in the chart reminds us that the majority of youth are not involved in participatory cultures. The yellow arrow shows that, while participation through cultural groups is one viable way to become involved, many networked individuals engage in participatory politics without belonging to such groups. However, the ideal is to see more, and a wider variety of, youth engaging than currently do.

The groups this report studies are rooted in participatory culture, the blue area. Henry Jenkins' work has identified some advantages of participatory cultures as spaces for collaborative learning, creative expression and identity formation.[32] Some of the previous MAPP team research has shown how participatory cultures recruit members and sustain their involvement.[33] Moreover, this work suggests that those who are more involved with the group culturally may often be more likely to transition into participatory politics, as they are exposed to

[31] Barry Wellman et al., "The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism", *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication 8*(3) (2003), see
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2003.tb00216.x/full
[32] Jenkins et al., *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture;* Delwiche and Henderson, *Participatory Culture Handbook.*
[33] Kligler-Vilenchik et al., Experiencing Fan Activism; Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Sangita Shresthova, "Learning through Practice: Participatory Culture Civics," Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network, MacArthur Foundation (2012). See
http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/Learning%20Through%20Practice_Kligler-Shresthova_Oct-2-2012.pdf

more opportunities.[34] Such a connection has also been confirmed by some of the quantitative work conducted within the YPP network, showing that participation in nonpolitical online participatory cultures can serve as a gateway to civic and political participation.

The orange realm visualizes participatory politics outcomes. These include:

- Being mobilized (or mobilizing others) to take civic or political action, e.g. signing a petition, voting, or creating a video promoting a non-profit organization.

- Exerting voice through political discussion and expression. This can happen off-line (in social meet-ups or discussion groups) or online (through comments, blog posts, videos, discussion forums).

- Developing civic identities, defined as the ways in which young people come to see themselves as civic actors with an independent opinion and agency.

These outcomes are often mutually re-enforcing, though different group members may engage differently. Importantly, these outcomes are not hierarchically or temporally ordered.

The green area, focused on mechanisms of translation, is the focus of this report. The three mechanisms discussed here are:

1. Tapping content worlds and communities – Scaffolding the connections that group members have through their shared passions for popular culture texts and their relationships with each other toward the development of civic identities and political agendas.

2. Creative production – Encouraging production and circulation of content, especially for political expression.

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[34] Joseph Kahne, Nam-Jin Lee and Jessica T. Feezell, "The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures among Youth Transitioning to Adulthood." *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 10(1) (2013): 1-20.

3. Informal discussion – Creating and supporting spaces and opportunities for conversations about current events and political issues.

Clearly, this list represents the mechanisms most prominent in *these* case studies. These mechanisms of translation straddle—and connect —the worlds of participatory culture and participatory politics. We are not witnessing a one-directional translation from participatory culture to participatory politics. Rather, group members actively participate in the cultural realm even as they also seek participatory politics outcomes. Throughout, I will consider how each mechanism works in the Nerdfighters and the HPA.

Tapping content worlds and communities

Those coming from a civic engagement perspective often valorize the moments when the cultural "turns into" the civic. Yet, these groups' strength in encouraging civic outcomes stems from their grounding in content worlds to which young people already feel a strong connection. These fan investments are almost always why young people are part of these groups in the first place. The process is not one of "transition," where young people who come into these spaces for their fan interests become aware of themselves as political agents and then abandon the popular culture that brought them there. Instead, we see an ongoing interplay between the cultural and the civic/political. Specifically, this section will focus on two ways cultural connections foster participatory politics—through tapping the mythologies associated with content worlds and through soliciting participation from the communities that revolve around these content worlds.

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."[35] Content worlds may consist of fantastical stories or realist fiction.

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[35] Jenkins, Cultural Acupuncture.

They may originate from the activist group or from existing popular culture content. At different times, the group may valorize the content world, critique it, or adopt a more ambivalent posture, yet the content world remains a point of shared experience and understanding.

> The HPA's close connection to the content world is explained in their mission statement.

> The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) is a 501c3 nonprofit that takes an outside-of-the-box approach to civic engagement by using parallels from the Harry Potter books to educate and mobilize young people across the world toward issues of literacy, equality, and human rights. Our mission is to empower our members to act like the heroes that they love by acting for a better world.[36]

HPA founder Andrew Slack has identified the HPA's larger approach as "cultural acupuncture," a conscious rhetorical strategy of connecting fictional content to real-world concerns. For Slack, "cultural acupuncture is finding where the psychological energy is in the culture and moving that energy towards creating a healthier world."[37] Yet, these connections go beyond an organizational or rhetorical strategy. Most, though not all, HPA members see themselves as fans of the series. Many describe having "grown up with Harry Potter," reading the books as they came out, and experiencing the gradually maturing story-line as they themselves were entering adulthood. For some, these books were a safe haven from challenging childhood experiences such as difficult family situations, particularly divorce, or bullying. Other researchers have documented how fans of various texts find their fictional worlds an attractive alternative to their real world experiences—for example, gay fans of Star Trek encouraged by the series' utopian vision.[38] HPA members strongly identified with the protagonists:

> At that time in my life, in high school, I was a loner, a recluse. I didn't have any friends, stayed to myself. I had this rare case of ADHD, just didn't know how to socially interact

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[36] The HPA. "What we do", accessed March 2013, http://thehpalliance.org/what-we-do/
[37] Andrew Slack, "Cultural Acupuncture and a Future for Social Change", *The Huffington Post* (July 2, 2010), see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andrew-slack/cultural-acupuncture-and_b_633824.html
[38] Henry Jenkins, "Out of the Closet and into the Universe", in *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York University Press, 2006).

with people on a level like my sister did for some reason. And was just teased, harassed and bullied in school and I think I identified more with Hermione because I was also really smart… even though she had Harry and Ron, she was harassed and bullied all through the books pretty much. So I really identified with her because she was such a strong female character (Calvin, 25).

These stories have played a key role for many in the "Harry Potter generation," who have channeled their passion toward participation in the multiple structures of Harry Potter fandom. Members of the HPA, who are only a small subset of Harry Potter fandom, adopt an explicit reading of the narratives through the lens of real-world issues and concerns. They use critical discussions around Harry Potter to make sense of the sometimes confusing array of issues one "should" know and care about. Satya, a 17 year old of Nepalese origin, is a volunteer staff member with the HPA and also active in a range of school clubs (an involvement that started after engaging with the HPA). She claimed: "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." This constitutes what Ashley Hinck calls a "public engagement keystone," "a touch point, worldview, or philosophy that makes other people, actions, and institutions intelligible."[39]

Most HPA participants see the stories as promoting engagement and tolerance. Faced with both mortal danger and government corruption, Harry and his friends embrace activism rather than apathy—an activism informed by principles of tolerance toward oppressed others and strengthened through friendship and mutual caring. HPA summarizes these principles in mottos such as "what would Dumbledore do?" or "the weapon we have is love."

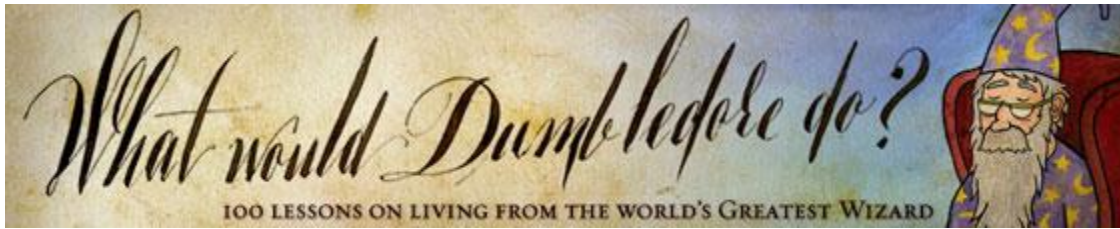[39] Hinck, Public Engagement, Para 1.5.

Fig 4. "What would Dumbledore do?" - one of the HPA's mottos

Twenty year-old Erin, who recently came out as agendered,[40] used the example of Lupin, a werewolf, as a metaphor for the demonization and discrimination of the LGBT community:

> If they already know the story, you can retell like, "Oh, you know how Lupin was fired from his job because people thought werewolves were monsters." Well, that's like such and such group of people—we've used this for the HPA for LGBT people. We have this conception in our popular culture of LGBT people like, "Oh, they're pedophiles. They're going to attack your children" and that's what people think of. The wizards, they think, "Oh! The werewolf, he's going to infect my children." It's the same concept of some sort of infectious disease. It's going to harm their children, that's what they're afraid of. But Harry Potter fans know that's not true about werewolves. They know the wizarding world was wrong, so you tell them that story and they can make that connection and go, "Oh! Maybe we're wrong about LGBT people and all being like, they're going to attack my child and going to infect them with the gay."

At the same time, HPA members often exclaim that it's about "more than Harry Potter." Rather, their engagement emerges from the community that has formed around this content world:

> A lot of 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 (Lisa, 20).

Wizard Rock, podcasts and conferences are key components of Harry Potter fandom. From the start, HPA has used Wizard Rock concerts held around the country as key venues for raising awareness. Paul DeGeorge, a prominent Wizard Rock artist, is a co-founder of the HPA, and many other Wizard Rock artists support the organization. For example, as part of the 2012 Wrock (Wizard Rock) the Vote campaign, members of local HPA chapters registered voters at

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[40] Agendered people do not identify with or conform to any gender.

Wizard Rock concerts. In the summer of 2012, those entering a popular L.A. bar to attend a wizard rock concert were greeted by HPA members handing out voter registration forms, engaging concert-goers in discussions about the importance of voting. Other examples of tapping the structures of the Harry Potter (HP) fan community include training sessions about the HPA in fan conferences, working together with fan websites (such as the Leaky Cauldron) to insure coverage for campaigns, and setting up HPA information booths at quidditch tournaments. Working through existing community infrastructures has enabled the HPA to succeed despite limited resources.

The HPA is currently in the process of reaching beyond this audience base. With the release of the last series movie in the summer of 2011, many feared that HP fandom would come to an end. At Leakycon 2011, a grassroots fan convention organized by the Leaky Cauldron (a key fan website), attendees described "an end of an era" and likened the conclusion of the Harry Potter series to their own ending childhoods. Yet the reports of the death of the fandom were, if not greatly, at least somewhat, exaggerated. HP fandom continued in 2012, somewhat re-fueled by the launch of Pottermore, an interactive website developed with the collaboration of J.K. Rowling.[41] Fan conventions still took place in 2012, though it was the last one for HPEF (Harry Potter Educational Fan-on), which had organized conventions since 2003. Leakycon, which is geared towards younger HP fans, is still taking place in 2013, and tickets have sold out six months in advance. Still, at least some fans believe that HP fandom is dwindling, or, as Daniela (23) puts it, "so obviously Harry Potter is over, sadly."

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[41] While initial enthusiasm in the fandom about Pottermore was very high, this sentiment did not persist. Fans quickly felt that the Pottermore interface was very limiting: due to safety concerns it enabled almost no social interaction with other users. Once they "got through" a book (often quite quickly), fans often felt that there was nothing left to do on the website.

What happens to an organization that explicitly roots itself in a certain content world when that content world loses its traction? The HPA pre-empted this question with the launch of the "Imagine Better" project in July 2011. Imagine Better takes the approach that has proven successful for the HPA—connecting fans around beloved story worlds to create real world change—as a basis for collaborations with other fandoms. The initiative launched the same week as the release of the last Harry Potter film, but founder Andrew Slack explained that the idea behind Imagine Better has been in his head for several years.[42] For almost two years, a volunteer team researched and catalogued other fandoms online, identifying collaborators within over 20 fan communities, including ones established around popular books, television shows and movies, as well as YouTube celebrities and young adult authors.

Imagine Better is still an open experiment. So far, the "Hunger is not a Game" campaign was deemed a success, collecting 6300 signatures for Oxfam's pledge for systemic food justice and donating over 2000 food items to local food pantries.[43] However, it was only partially successful in creating collaboration with the Hunger Games fandom. While HPA members embraced the campaign despite the new story-world connection, Madison (29), a Hunger Games fan collaborator, regretted that the campaign only resonated with some in that fandom:

> 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 like 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.

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[42] Andrew Slack, "Imagine Better", session at LeakyCon Fan Convention, Orlando, Florida, July 16, 2011.
[43] HPA. "It's a Wrap", accessed March 2013, http://thehpalliance.org/2012/04/its-a-wrap/

These are important questions when considering links between story worlds and engagement. In contrast to the strong links that the HPA has made to a specific canon and its roots within a specific fan community, Imagine Better seeks to tap into the shared ground of all kinds of fans, aggregating their respective energies towards shared social action. Yet, such connections take time and effort. The HPA initially met skepticism and only gained acceptance within the core fandom over time. Can such acceptance be achieved working with multiple other fan communities? How dependent is this process on the nature of the content world and of the fan community? While this report will not go more in depth into the Imagine Better project, we can examine this question through the second case study - the Nerdfighters.

The Nerdfighters can also be seen as forming around a content world—in this case, the video blog of John and Hank Green—though their identification extends beyond that space. The VlogBrother channel currently features two new vlogs a week (down from three a week in 2011 and daily vlogs during 2007). Their topics range widely from "how to make friends"[44] to "Revolution in Egypt: a 4-minute introduction."[45] Nerdfighters recalled being introduced to the VlogBrothers through different avenues, most commonly through other YouTubers, or through John Green's books. However, once they discovered these vlogs, many Nerdfighters made a strong connection:

> Once I found the VlogBrothers, I immediately latched on to the content they're making because it was really fun, but strangely educational at the same time, which I really enjoyed (Meghan, 23).

Nerdfighters appreciate the VlogBrothers' intellect, their smart ways of engaging with topics and encouraging viewers to ponder issues. Nerdfighters feel like the Greens speak to them

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[44] VlogBrothers (2013, January 25). How to Make Friends [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHVL_CgETss&list=UUGaVdbSav8xWuFWTadK6loA&index=3
[45] VlogBrothers (2011, January 31). Revolution in Egypt: A 4-Minute Introduction [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pn9x4LCQ5I0

as equals, respecting their intellectual abilities and maturity. At the same time, the VlogBrothers'

content is humorous and relatable:

> First they're just funny, a lot of their stuff, but a lot of times it's kind of that smart funny other than just like slapstick comedy. It's like this is intellectual jokes, or not trying to sound superior (Julie, 17)

A shared ritual among "novice" Nerdfighters is to watch all the vlogs dating from 2007,

comprising over 72 hours of video. What Adrian describes as "basically impossible" has, in fact,

been performed by many Nerdfighters:

> 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 (Adrian, 17).

While the vlogs are the centerpiece, there is a much wider universe of content that Nerdfighters

share. They see themselves as having "shared interests," liking the same content, and being

"nerds":

> I think Nerdfighters have a lot of the same likes, I mean, the same TV shows, not the same books but Harry Potter obviously, and John's books. And a lot of the music as well (Inez, 16).

> 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 (Julie, 17).

Nerdfighters are thus connected not only through a specific content world, but as part of

a wider "taste community."[46] Daniel Dayan discusses "taste publics," which are "generally

focused on works, texts, or programmes; the performance of these publics is generally

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[46] See, for example, Antoine Hennion, "Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology", *Cultural Sociology 1* (2007), 97-114.

'verdictive' (evaluative)."[47] Dayan also describes such groups as "identity publics" because of the ways they forge common identities around shared interests.

Fig 5. Nerdfighter-designed content signaling the community's shared affiliations[48]

Nerdfighters generally say that they share an interest in "everything nerdy"—though this term is very broadly defined. When Nerdfighters say something is nerdy, they may mean it prompts you to think. But they may also mean a certain mode of engagement, which could apply to any text. John Green has described this mode of engagement as "unironic enthusiasm":

> Nerds like us are allowed to be unironically enthusiastic about stuff… Nerds are allowed to love stuff, like jump-up-and-down-in-the-chair-can't-control-yourself love it.[49]

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[47] Daniel Dayan, "Mothers, Midwives and Abortionists: Genealogy, Obstetrics, Audiences and Publics," in Sonia Livingstone (ed.) *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere* (Intellect, 2005), 54–55.
[48] "Real Questions for Real Nerdfighters". Created by Nerdfighter Cynthia Crowsen, accessed May 2013. http://itallchanges.com/2012/03/31/real-questions-for-real-nerdfighters/
[49] VlogBrothers (2009, July 19). Harry Potter Nerds Win at Life [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMweXVWB918

Nerdfighters reference a range of examples under "nerdy stuff," including the musical *Cats*, stop motion lego animation, and the American Museum of Natural History. This taste public allows for more inclusivity than the example of the HPA, which generally attracts fans of a particular franchise. At the same time, Nerdfighters' more open-ended approach can lead to discontinuities when they try to build on shared knowledge to create a sense of community. Consider, for example, what happened during a local Nerdfighter meet-up in November 2011. The group was playing a charade-like game where the goal was to identify YouTube celebrities. At some point, following a series of failed attempts where participants did not recognize the performed identities, Joanna, the group's informal organizer, exclaimed, "That's the problem with YouTube stuff, not everyone knows the same things." Such lapses matter because Nerdfighters rely on shared affiliations with content as the basis for their community. As Adrian explained,

> [Nerdfighteria is] a group of people who share a common interest generally in online activities, people who enjoy doing games, engaging in online discussions and making friends who might not necessarily be with you but you could still be with them all the time because you can be online with them… There's not like a manifesto or like creed that we adhere to. It's just like we happen to have found each other on the internet and so because we have mutual interests, we engage with each other and tend to make friends with each other (Adrian, 17).

Nerdfighters are mostly in their formative teenage years, when peer relationships are a central preoccupation.[50] Nerdfighteria combines an interest-driven group with a friendship-driven one in which the main goal is engaging with peers.[51] Nerdfighters often admit to being somewhat introverted, shy, or, in their words, "socially awkward." Discovering the Nerdfighter community online, and for some also in-person, often feels like a safe haven. Joanna, who at 25 is an older-than-average Nerdfighter, explained what she has observed among her younger peers:

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[50] William M. Bukowski, Andrew F. Newcomb, and Willard W. Hartup (eds.), *The Company They Keep: Friendship in Childhood and Adolescence* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[51] Ito et al., *Hanging Out*, 16.

There are a lot of younger Nerdfighters. And I think like being young and being a Nerdfighter is common because a lot of young kids don't have a lot of friends who like what they like. That age is so awful with popularity and being weird at things. So, when they find a community like this, they attach themselves to it and they just love it.

Unlike HPA, Nerdfighters do not identify "cultural acupuncture" as a conscious rhetorical strategy. Nerdfighters talk about popular culture, and at times they talk about politics, but they do not often combine the two. For one thing, Nerdfighters cannot count on a shared content world, and for another, they do not necessarily have models for making these kinds of connections.

However, this is not to say that Nerdfighters could not potentially leverage their shared pop culture interests to make such connections or that Harry Potter is a unique text for political allegories. In fact, the HPA volunteer staff tapped some of the content Nerdfighters are passionate about—for example, the *Doctor Who* series—as part of the Imagine Better initiative. In a document detailing how different content worlds can be connected to political issues, the team suggested some of the following connections and activities for *Doctor Who* fans:

> Ood were trafficked from Ood-Sphere, their home world in 4126. The Ood were stolen in the night from their friends and family by Ood Operations, a company that sells Ood as a servant race. This is comparable to the stories of trafficking children for child labor in the international chocolate industry.
> - Host a screening of "Planet of the Ood" (Season 4, Episode 3).
> - Have an awareness event about human trafficking and the status of slavery in modern society; possibly bring in a speaker from Not for Sale or another organization that deals with trying to end modern day slavery.[52]

The difference between the two groups thus lies not in the nature of the text, but rather in the conscious effort—and established structures—to devote time and energy to forging such connections.

That said, Nerdfighters do build on the infrastructures of their community to mobilize toward civic goals—often on a much larger scale than the HPA. The community has an

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[52] Campaign suggestions (by fandom), accessed May 2013,
https://sites.google.com/a/thehpalliance.org/chaptersresources/imagine-better-resources/campaign-suggestions

impressively large reach. At the time this report was written, the VlogBrothers' YouTube channel had over 1.1 million subscribers and 318 million video views. Hank Green's Twitter account had around 215,000 followers; John Green's had almost 1.5 million. When the Greens attempt to inform or rally this community, their message has a wide reach, and usually a large impact. Examples include the VlogBrothers' many videos which explicitly educate about political issues (e.g. *North Korea: Explained*[53] with over 800,000 views or *Understand the Sequester (Spoiler: It's Bananas)*[54] with over 350,000 views). On the mobilization side, Nerdfighters raised over $483,296 in 2 days of the Project for Awesome campaign in 2012 and loaned almost $2,000,000 to small business owners in developing countries through the non-profit Kiva.[55] Such success does not simply reflect the size of the VlogBrothers' following—if that were the case, we may expect to see much larger mobilization successes by fans of, say, Justin Bieber, who currently holds the record for the most Twitter followers. The Nerdfighter model differs from examples of celebrity activism, where the celebrity's influence is derived mostly from the attention they command.[56] Here, the key factor is the Nerdfighters' collective feelings of belonging and the work the Green brothers have done to increase participants' sense of civic agency. Mobilization is also achieved through members' own initiative, as when Nerdfighters invite their peers to participate in a blood drive through Facebook.

Nerdfighters and the HPA thus present different models of tapping content worlds and communities, each with its strengths and weaknesses. Rooted in the Harry Potter story-world, the HPA can build on more shared cultural capital. HPA members' deep fan knowledge enables the

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[53] VlogBrothers (2013, April 5). North Korea: Explained [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRTjHJ93UYg
[54] VlogBrothers (2013, March 12). Understand the Sequester (Spoiler: It's Bananas) [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D319DsrxfUA
[55] Kiva. "Kiva Lending Team: Nerdfighters," accessed March 2013, http://www.kiva.org/team/nerdfighters
[56] David Meyer, "The Challenge of Cultural Elites: Celebrities and Social Movements", *Sociological Inquiry, 65*(2).

organization to tap specific characters, storylines and themes. Yet, latching onto one content world has its limits. The challenge for Imagine Better is broadening their base of support by tapping multiple content worlds and forging common ties across diverse interests.

Nerdfighters are linked first and foremost as fans of the VlogBrothers. At the same time, they all have something wider in common as people who like "nerdy" things. The term's wide, and somewhat idiosyncratic, definition allows Nerdfighters to perceive a shared connection, while embracing a wide range of content worlds. This is an advantage for diversity—the group reaches a much wider audience than the HPA—yet this broader connection also makes it more difficult to "count on" shared knowledge. So, while the HPA can safely use metaphors from the narratives that are somewhat obscure to non-fans (e.g. werewolves as discriminated minorities), Nerdfighters cannot tap content with the same certainty.

One of the defining characteristics of participatory cultures is their "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement."[57] But the shared cultural knowledge required for membership with participatory cultures can serve as a barrier to entry, either when it requires a very deep engagement with one certain text, or when it "demands" familiarity with a multitude of texts. Vera (16) took a critical stance towards pressure by some Nerdfighters to like the same things in order to belong:

> People now are starting to be like, "You can't be a Nerdfighter if you don't watch this, listen to this, read this book" and those people are starting to dominate it... A lot of us joined because it was for people who are different, and now everybody's becoming the same because they think, "Okay, this is the one place that I can fit in."… That's really upsetting at least to me because I know that I don't -- there are some things that I just don't want to belong to within it and it makes you feel kind of ostracized from the community sometimes, that I don't want to be a part of that where everybody is the same person.

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[57] Jenkins et al., Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture, 7.

The Politics & Entertainment surveys conducted by the Norman Lear Center at USC Annenberg have found that entertainment preferences are linked to political differences. For example, "Reds" favor TV shows such as House and CSI, while "Blues" prefer 60 Minutes and The Daily Show.[58] Thus, tapping certain content worlds may inadvertently create exclusivity on the basis of partisanship as well as gender or race. This is only one possible explanation to the paucity of minority groups in fandom.[59] At the same time, members argue that shared cultural interests sometimes help overcome political differences, a notion that will be further elaborated later in this report.

Creative production

Participatory cultures encourage creative production. As Patricia Lange and Mimi Ito note, we are currently witnessing "young people… engaging in the production of digital music, images, and videos," to create meaning "contextualized in their everyday life-worlds."[60] In this section, the focus is primarily on video production, though some production of text and audio will also be discussed. Creative production, as Lange and Ito discuss, is often considered more imaginative than consumption of mass-produced media. At the same time, as we have seen, the "consumption" of content worlds can also function as a mechanism of translation for cultural groups. These two should be seen as intertwined rather than opposed: both HPA and Nerdfighters build on the content worlds and community ties to inspire creative practices.

Beyond the technical affordances of new media, these groups promote creative production by lowering the barriers to expression; most if not all community members are seen

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[58] Norman Lear Center, "Zogby/Lear Center Poll: Meet the Purples!", accessed May 2013, http://www.learcenter.org/pdf/PoliticsSurveyRelease2.pdf. The survey also included "Purples" – some independent, some moderate, as a distinct group.

[59] Special issue: Race and Ethnicity in Fandom. *Transformative Works and Cultures 8* (2011). See: http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/issue/view/9

[60] Patricia G. Lange and Mizuko Ito, "Creative Production", in Mizuko Ito et al., *Hanging out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media.* (MIT Press, 2009), 250.

as potential content contributors (as opposed to a centralized and hierarchical model in which content is only produced by elites). There is strong support for creating and sharing creations, realized through structures such as tutorials or forums to ask questions, troubleshoot problems, and receive feedback from others. A thriving participatory culture also requires appropriate norms that support creative practices. Such support may come from anyone in the group, though there are also forms of informal mentorship from experienced users. Such norms and practices provide members with the strong sense that their contributions will be heard and appreciated. Moreover, these groups function within relatively safe and supportive spaces, in contrast to the more hostile climate surrounding some online platforms, such as YouTube.

Of course, most of these groups' creative production is not only, or even primarily, done around political topics. However, once scaffolding enables creative production around diverse topics, provides an appreciative audience, and encourages appropriate ethical norms, these structures can (and sometimes do) serve political purposes as well. At the same time, producing political content introduces its own challenges. When spaces are usually designed for cultural participation, personal expression, and social interaction, when does it feel appropriate to use them for political expression? And how may the language that resonates with cultural affiliations support, or hinder, political messages from reaching a larger public or informing institutionalized politics?

Creative production occupies a central space both for the VlogBrothers and for the wider Nerdfighter community. Sonia Livingstone notes that while new media provides resources for some children to be creative, their uses usually reveal creativity they would have engaged in anyway, with or without the internet.[61] In interviews, Nerdfighters described an impressive range of offline creative activities, ranging from writing stories and songs, to costume making, to video

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[61] Sonia Livingstone, *Children and the Internet* (Polity, 2009), 60.

editing, to luthiery (making of musical instruments). Moving this creativity to the digital realm expands these young artists' potential audience, offering a stronger support network.[62]

The creative drive can be seen as a shared trait of Nerdfighters, or, as Theo (15) claimed, "these communities are really based on creating content". Joanna (25) described Nerdfighters as "certain kind of kids":

> They're not the kind of kids that just sit on the rug playing video games and doing nothing else, these kids are like "I'm going to film something." or "I'm going to write a song" or "I'm going to do this thing" and they're all just really proactive, and that's kind of how I was at that age (Joanna, 25).

Lange and Ito talk about "trajectories of participation" for creative production, including stages that move from tinkering and playing to acquiring more advanced skills. Nerdfighters highlight the importance of the group context in helping participants move along these "trajectories."

As Inez, a Nerdfighter vlogger, explained, key steps in such a trajectory include creating a YouTube channel and uploading their own content:

> I have my own channel, which I started before I got into VlogBrothers, and I never, I just got it for favoriting videos and liking stuff, commenting and stuff like that. I subscribed to a couple of people, but after I got into VlogBrothers, it's when I started making content. What I do is just vlog about things I guess (Inez, 16).

Inez's impulse to "just vlog about things" is rooted in Nerdfighters' connections to the wider video creator community of YouTubers.[63] Nerdfighters occupy a niche genre within this community; specifically, their videos are closely inspired by the VlogBrothers' own mode of creative production. Examples include keeping their vlogs to no longer than four minutes or using some of the VlogBrothers' recurring genres (e.g. "thoughts from places"). Nerdfighter

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[62] Henry Jenkins and Vanessa Bertozzi, "Artistic Expression in the Age of Participatory Culture: How and Why Young People Create," in Billy Ivey and Steven Tepper, *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life* (Routledge, 2008).

[63] Patricia Lange, "Living in 'YouTubia': Bordering on Civility", *Proceedings of the Southwestern Anthropological Association 2,* 2008. See http://www.patriciaglange.org/assets/Lange%20SWAA08.pdf

YouTube channels can often be identified by their reference of common terms in their titles, such as "nerd", "awesome" and "cool."

Another notable influence is the use of "collab channels," YouTube channels that are shared by several people. While the VlogBrothers' channel was a collab channel for two people, other prominent YouTubers (such as FiveAwesomeGirls, launched November 2007) popularized versions including five participants who are typically assigned a set day of the week (e.g. one member always vlogs on Mondays, one on Tuesdays etc.). Collab channels help young people overcome some of the challenges of online production. For starters, creative production is a high-effort endeavor. Creating a video involves multiple stages of planning, scripting, filming, editing, posting and tagging. Being in charge of creating one video a week is a much lower bar than trying to maintain daily content as the VlogBrothers originally did (and as many Nerdfighters and other YouTubers still attempt in the VEDA—Vlog Everyday in April—event). Members of collab channels often set a theme for the week (e.g. 'the Oscars' or 'your first kiss') that solves the problem of deciding what to talk about. Being assigned a regular day means you have a responsibility to the other group members and don't want to disappoint them. Some collab channels even impose playful "punishments" for not creating a video on your day, often consisting of dare-like tasks such as smearing peanut butter on the face while talking—an example I will return to later.
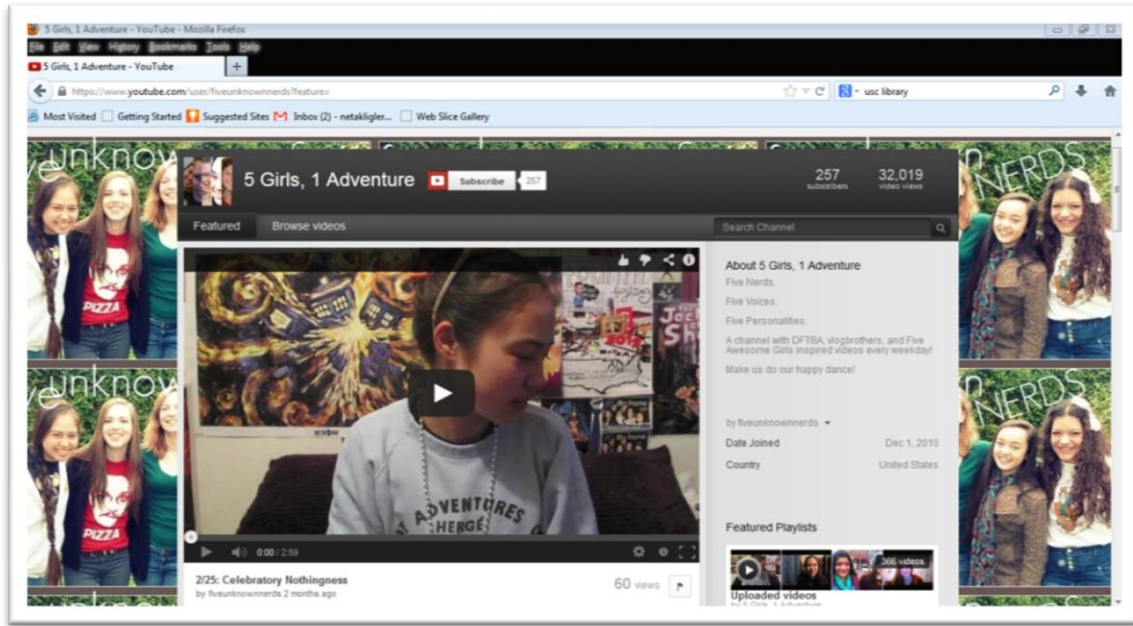
Fig 6. "Five Unknown Nerds" – an example of a Nerdfighter collab channel

In his discussion of digital media creation in schools, Peter Levine notes "the audience problem"—many civic education projects online reach a frustratingly limited viewership. "We communicate in a public voice in order to address someone, and it matters who listens. It is discouraging to build something if no one comes." [64] Nerdfighters overcome the audience problem in several ways. First, Nerdfighters serve as each other's audiences. The common etiquette of Nerdfighter reciprocity states that if someone subscribes to your channel, you should subscribe to theirs. Beyond subscribing, a level of active engagement is the cultural norm:

> I think within the Nerdfighter community, you know when you have this video and you post it (…) they're going to watch it and they're going to like talk to you about it. If you're talking about something that they can relate to they are going to comment back and you're going to create that sort of friendship and that connection (Joanna, 25).

This engagement, moreover, is sustained by norms of encouragement and friendliness, where, as Joanna further described, "everyone's really accepting and welcoming." Receiving

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[64] Peter Levine, "A Public Voice for Youth: The Audience Problem in Digital Media and Civic Education," in W. Lance Bennet (ed.), *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, 129.

positive, encouraging reactions to videos is an incentive for further production, whereas criticism, cynicism or meanness (the behavior of "haters" in the YouTube jargon) inhibits expression. Sarah Banet-Weiser, for example, discusses how girls' YouTube videos of themselves singing and performing are often judged in a pejorative, hurtful and sexually objectifying way.[65] Nerdfighters shelter most community members from some of the harsh reactions confronting other amateur creative production.

Finally, much of the Nerdfighters' creative production is focused on internal communication amongst friends and explicitly *not* aimed at reaching wider audiences. Mona, for example, described how her friends use their joint YouTube channel for shared communication:

> It's just kind of whenever we do something or see something that makes us think of one another or show that to each other. If we have a story and we want to tell each other […] whenever I would vlog, it was because I was too busy to chat with them on Skype so what I would do is I would just periodically make videos so that they would still be a part of my life and they would know what was going on with me and things like that and then they would comment. I would feel that we're still friends (Mona, 17).

The VlogBrothers videos offer a good template for linking informal vlogging to wider civic and political issues. Many VlogBrother videos discuss public concerns, ranging from social issues pertinent to young people (e.g. environmentalism or LGBT rights),[66] to American electoral politics (importance of voting, "why rich people pay more taxes"), to global issues (the revolutions in Arab countries, water.org's actions in Haiti).[67] These videos, in turn, are interspersed with other, clearly non-political topics such as "the world's smallest animals" and "how to make friends." The VlogBrothers' more politically oriented videos usually start with placing a current event in a broader historical or political context and are often grounded in

[65] Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Branding the Postfeminist Self: The Labor of Femininity," in *Authentic TM* (New York University Press, 2012).

[66] VlogBrothers (2012, October 12). Human Sexuality is Complicated… [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXAoG8vAyzI

[67] VlogBrothers (2011, December 17). We Built a Well in Haiti [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgD1tVd9ubA

substantial research. At the same time, these videos have the signature Vlogbrother "look and feel," including rapid-fire speech, jump cuts, and inside jokes.

For example, the 1/1/2013 Vlogbrother video called "why does congress suck?" [68] begins with John describing the Senate's compromise to postpone action on the impending fiscal cliff. The video jump cuts to "John from the future" (wearing a different T-shirt) frustratedly yelling, "Congress!!" while throwing around a bunch of documents to imply that the House of Representatives will not necessarily make the same compromise. John argues that the current Congress is even less effective than "the famous do-nothing congress of the Truman era" given the low number of bills passed. He offers a "quick history lesson," explaining the differences between the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. He describes the process of choosing congresspersons according to districts, noting that districts can be redrawn by state legislatures to ensure whether they will be Democratic or Republican. John's conclusion addresses the risks of decreasing trust in government but also the importance of government to our everyday lives and the importance of voting in local elections. If they follow the 3:55 minute video's quick flow (which, admittedly, is a challenge—pausing, returning and rerunning pieces of the video is definitely needed to get the full picture), Nerdfighters gain an understanding of legislation that goes far beyond that usually offered by the most in-depth news commentary or provided in most civics classes. Not among the channel's most popular, this video has still been viewed over 400,000 times and elicited over 3500 comments. [69]

To what extent do the Nerdfighters offer this kind of political discussion in their own video production? Political expression in Nerdfighter community videos (with politics widely defined) is the exception rather than the norm, much less common than in the VlogBrothers'

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[68] VlogBrothers (2013, January 1). Why does Congress Suck? [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0CvmK0dVcI
[69] At the time of writing in March 2013.

videos. When prodded, interviewees provided several explanations. First, talking about political

issues in the videos feels like a high bar. Clearly, to create something like John's "why does

Congress suck" video entails much research as well as the self-confidence necessary to delve

into issues that are beyond everyday conversation. Ruth (17) explained:

> I want to make sure that I have the facts, that I was educated on what I was talking about
> and that I had really flushed out what my opinion was before I went to make a video
> about it.

The perceived need for elaborate research stems from fears of being criticized in the comments if

you are not completely knowledgeable. This concern also reflects a wider endorsement of the

ideals of the "informed citizen," who is required to have an in-depth knowledge of all sides of

the argument before forming an opinion.[70] While generally perceived as positive, this ideal may

also inhibit young people's political expression.[71]

Part of the challenge may also be one of translation across genres or styles. An

emblematic example is a YouTube video created by Inez, a 16-year old Mexican-American

Nerdfighter, as part of the collab channel she shares with four other girls.[72] Inez, who lives in a

small town on the border with Mexico, begins the video in a fancy dress, as her collaborators

decided to all dress up for the Oscars week. Inez talks about the dress and having worked on her

hair for the video and asks people to like the video for a competition the girls of the collab

channel are doing on who's the fanciest. About 28 seconds into the movie, she says, "Nobody

actually decided to punish me,[73] so I took the liberty of punishing myself, so I'm going to do

peanut butter face." After showing the peanut butter she chose, she says, "While I put peanut

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[70] Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life,* (The Free Press, 1998).
[71] Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Kjerstin Thorson, "Navigating Good Citizenship in a Networked World: The Case of Kony2012" (paper accepted for presentation at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington DC, August 2013).
[72] The video itself is not linked here so as not to identify the interviewee.
[73] As mentioned previously, "punishments" are used in collab channels when one of the members is "delinquent", e.g. misses a video, like Inez did.

butter on my face I'm gonna talk about some of the things you can't say when you're in a Catholic school." She starts with "Sister, I don't agree with what you're saying" and "I actually really like the Da Vinci code" and moves on to "I don't believe in God." She then transitions to "Actually, talking about Catholic schools, oh my god, the elections. Everybody at my school practically hates Obama because they're all Catholic what-evs, and they're all like voting for Republican candidates, and I'm just sitting there saying, are you crazy? Have you actually heard what they're saying?" She discusses conversations with a classmate about gays serving in the military, trying to convince her dad to vote for Obama, and saying they should move to Canada if Santorum is elected for president (the video is from March 2012 while Santorum was still in the race). While making this impassioned speech, Inez smears peanut butter all over her face.

Inez's video does display the kind of political voice that scholars studying informal political conversation desire in young people's expression. Inez is knowledgeable and passionate about politics. At the same time, smearing peanut butter on her face makes it harder to take her opinions seriously. Her imagined audience is comprised mostly of Nerdfighters, who would know that this gesture is an homage to the VlogBrothers, but it would be undecipherable to any outside observer.

The first instance of "peanut butter face" in a VlogBrothers video is from 2008. In the video, John gives a detailed account of the war between Russia and Georgia, proclaiming, "Everyone knows, Hank, the only way to get the internet to pay attention to news is via peanut butter face."[74] He finishes the video with letting his dog lick off the peanut butter. This was later repeated in a 2009 video about the civil war in Sri Lanka where John says, "Now, Hank, I'm not here to yell at people for not paying attention to the extremely serious situation in Sri Lanka

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[74] VlogBrothers (2008, August 12). PEANUT BUTTER FACE (while discussing the Georgia-Russia War) [Video file]. Retrieved from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_p3hLtr5Ok

because it's not your fault for not paying attention to it because it's extremely complicated and no one has ever explained it to you while rubbing creamy peanut butter on their face. Yes, Hank, I know how to get people's attention to serious international news stories – peanut butter face."[75]
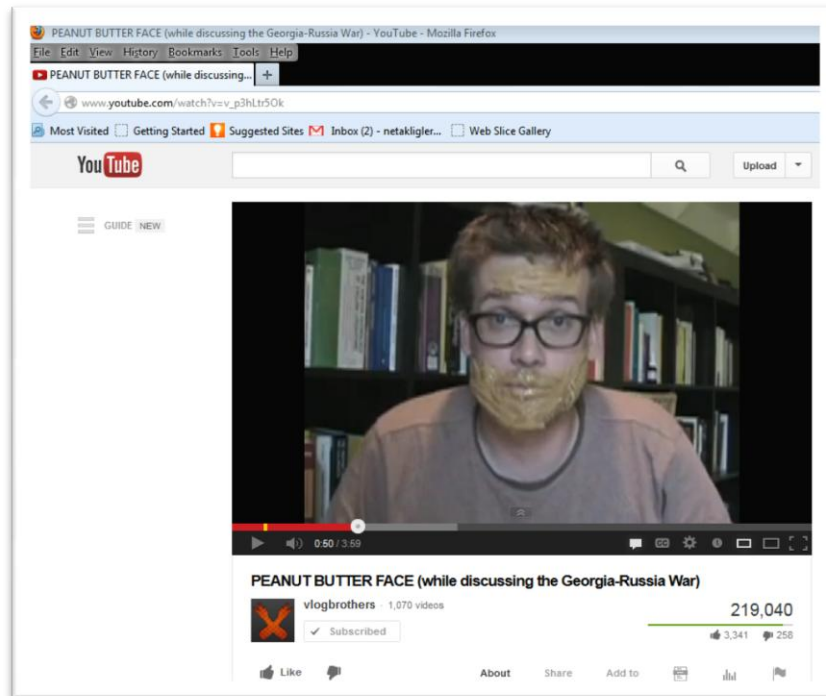
Fig 7. Use of "peanut butter face" in Vlogbrother video

Knowing this context may help make Inez's video somewhat more legible, though her reasoning for using the peanut butter was different from John's. In the interview, Inez recalled that a week before, she had watched a Nerdfighter video on another, more well-known channel, where one of the girls talked about her dislike of Santorum and received very harsh comments: "She was just talking about it and she was saying a lot of his quotes. It started a lot of controversy in the comments and if I'm not mistaken, they lost a bit of subscribers because of that video." She felt that using the peanut butter could protect her from such backlash:

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[75] VlogBrothers (2009, April 26). Peanut Butter Face Discusses Sri Lanka [Video file]. Retrieved from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQiLngzLiGI&feature=relmfu

I know that if I talk about it without doing something like putting peanut butter on my face, obviously the same reaction will happen to me because there are a lot of people that are against and for Rick Santorum….Well, like what Jade did [the girl who did the Santorum video], she tried to do it in her video and tried to get people to see what things he said. Well, I try to do it in my American political situation video with peanut butter. I try to do it in a very funny way though I was very distressed about how I didn't want him to win and I wanted to move out of the country. Those are means right now that I have found to express things I want other people to see what I think about (Inez, 16).

Historically, activists have often worn masks of various kinds, not only to disguise their identities, but to allow them to step outside their normal social roles and to feel empowered to speak in new ways. Here, when introducing serious and difficult perspectives into a space that's usually devoted for entertainment and sociality, there may also be a perceived need to adopt a more playful tone, to suggest that you do not take yourself too seriously.

Other Nerdfighters felt that their videos were just not "the right place" for a political discussion. Ruth, a 17-year old Nerdfighter, spent a large chunk of her interview explaining why creating a political video would be difficult and why her collab channel hasn't attempted it, though she also thinks doing so would have value:

I don't think I've said anything that's too controversial or provokes too much discussion in my videos, but I don't think it's the right venue to do that. I mean, maybe it's not the right venue. Usually with the collab channel, every week we have a theme. So we've decided that we're going to talk about movies or we're going to talk about TV shows (Ruth, 17).

Ruth's comment raises the question of where and when political expression is deemed appropriate. In her ethnographic examination of civic groups, Nina Eliasoph considers the concept of "political etiquette," specifically whether the discussion of political issues is deemed appropriate or desirable within various group contexts. Eliasoph concludes, "People implicitly know that some face-to-face contexts invite public-spirited debate and conversation, and others

do not; in contemporary US society, most do not."[76] If Nerdfighters see decreasing world suck as a main goal, why are Nerdfighter videos not the right venue to discuss, as Ruth said, "anything that's too controversial or provokes too much discussion?" It may be telling that Ruth, who is also an HPA member, thought the HPA might be a more appropriate venue to have political discussions.

In the HPA, creative production tends to be more centralized than in Nerdfighteria and emerges mostly from the organization and its volunteer staff—particularly in the case of video production. While many HPA members have other modes of expression, such as blogs or Tumblr pages, fewer have their own YouTube channels—unless they also consider themselves Nerdfighters. The infrequent vlogging may stem from the fact that early Harry Potter fandom was more focused on text-based modes of expression, such as writing of fan fiction[77] or creating fan sites like The Leaky Cauldron.[78] The book series has famously been attributed with bringing kids back to reading and writing.[79] However, the younger Harry Potter fans and HPA members interviewed for this project have largely shifted towards video production or more visual platforms such as Tumblr. Some see a generational divide within the fandom, where "older" fans (those who are now in their mid twenties and above) are more likely to express their ideas through text and are sometimes skeptical of the younger fans' audio-visual tendencies.[80]

Audio podcasts constitute one intermediate phase between textual and video production. Harry Potter fandom was among the first fan communities to embrace podcasting when this

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[76] Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

[77] Catherine Tosenberger, "Oh my God, the Fanfiction!": Dumbledore's Outing and the Online Harry Potter Fandom", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly 33*(2) (2008).

[78] The Leaky Cauldron, accessed May 2013, http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/

[79] Catherine L. Belcher and Becky Herr Stephenson, *Teaching Harry Potter: The Power of Imagination in Multicultural Classrooms,* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

[80] Catherine Tosenberger, "Generation Potter: Fifteen Years Later", session at Ascendio Fan Convention, Orlando, Florida, July 14, 2012.

affordance became available. One popular podcast, Pottercast, was connected to the fan site The

Leaky Cauldron. Pottercast aired 250 episodes (the last one was planned for mid 2013), won

several podcast awards, and featured interviews with J.K. Rowling.[81] Pottercast also featured

HPA's campaign to raise awareness around Darfur. More recently, Portkey, a podcast that aired

during the fan conference LeakyCon, helped those not able to attend stay connected to the event.

While Portkey is affiliated with the HPA, it is independently produced by several fans. Bethany,

one of the Portkey's organizers, stated that their autonomy enables them to maintain a close

connection to HP fandom while also supporting the HPA's civic goals:

> The great thing about Portkey is that while it's affiliated with the HPA, and we love
> doing things revolving like LGBTQ issues and the equality for the win and everything
> like that, Portkey likes to tap the fact that we have a love for Harry Potter, we have the
> fandom and we need to bring that back sometimes… We're realizing why we love Harry
> Potter, which is why we have more just like fun panels, like the Pottermore panel or the
> Unpopular Fandom Opinion Panel. This means to connect what we so love to the
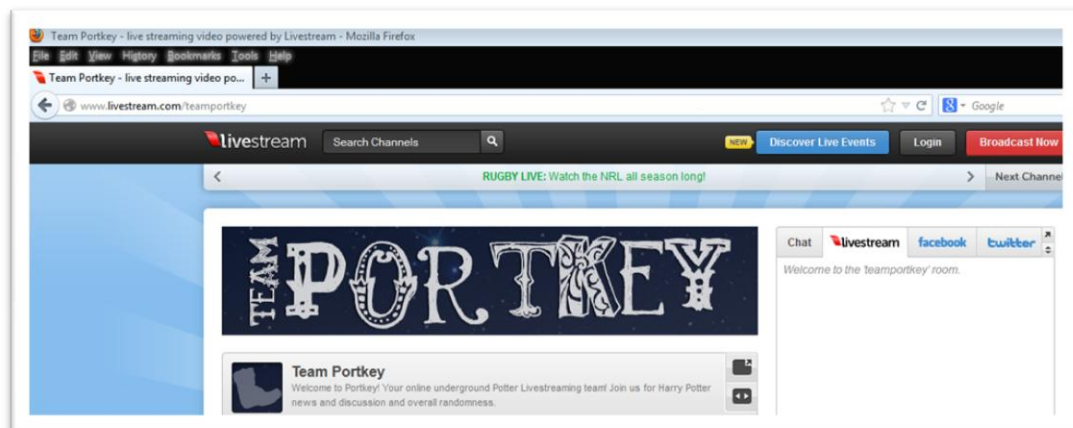> discussion (Bethany, 20).

Fig 8. The PortKey channel on Livestream

HPA members who are not Nerdfighters are less likely to belong to collab channels or to have

YouTube channels on which they vlog regularly. Their creative production online—at least as

representatives of the group—is more often explicitly elicited by the organization. Signaling

their ties to the Nerdfighters and the YouTube community, HPA launched its vlog on the

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[81] Pottercast, accessed May 2013, http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/pottercast/

YouTube channel hpalliance in 2011.[82] Though the HPA had produced several sporadic videos before to launch campaigns or publicize success stories, the vlog marked a shift in their use of YouTube as several vloggers shared the responsibility of posting new material 2-3 times a week. Lisa, one of the HPA vloggers, explained some of the goals for creating the regular vlog channel:

> We did realize that we definitely needed to have vloggers. We needed to be more part of the YouTube community because we consider YouTube to be one of the fandoms that we associate with (…) We also wanted some more faces of the HPA because the HPA, we're like 50 to 70 staff and we do all these things, but people only know Andrew [Slack]… (Lisa, 20).

The HPA did not have many models for how a non-profit might deploy a YouTube vlog. Lisa described a long learning process as they experimented with translating their activist messages into the language of vlogging:

> YouTube has obviously been something that just about everyone on the HPA is interested in, because it's a weird thing, there is the YouTube community and for people like wizard rockers or people who just started out as vloggers, it's very easy to translate that into video. But for the HPA, you know, we're a non-profit organization and most non-profits don't have vloggers for sure and their videos are usually something that they'll commission, they're not really like engaging or interactive. And so we've always had to try and reconcile that (Lisa, 20).

One of the challenges for the HPA vloggers was how to create videos that are not only informational, but are engaging and fun to watch. Over time, their most successful videos felt informal and conversational in tone rather than tightly focused around a core message (e.g., summarizing a campaign). Unfortunately, the average HPA vlog has a view-count of around 500, which the vloggers see as disappointingly low. At the same time, relative to the number of views, videos have a high number of "likes" and many comments. As Burgess and Green 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

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[82] The Harry Potter Alliance YouTube Channel, accessed May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/user/thehpalliance?feature=watch

very engaged viewership.[83] The vloggers support their viewers' engagement by ending their

vlogs with a question for the audience to answer in the comments and by going back and

responding to many of the comments they receive.

    While the HPA vloggers have produced several videos a week for almost two years now,

one particular video embodies the strengths, but also possible limitations, of translating

participatory political goals into engaging videos. Julian Gomez, a 19-year old college student

from Miami, Florida, has been an HPA vlogger since the channel's inception. In the July 31,

2012 video entitled "Why I can't go to LeakyCon," Julian makes a surprising revelation: he is

undocumented.[84]

Fig 9. Julian's video, "Why I can't go to LeakyCon"

    The video begins with Julian, dressed in a button-up shirt and tie, recounting the amazing

experience he had at LeakyCon the previous year in Orlando, Florida, not far from his home. He

describes meeting online friends in person and celebrating the power of stories to bring people

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[83] Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Digital Media and Society Series* (Polity Press, 2009).
[84] The HPA YouTube Channel (2012, July 31). Why I Can't Go to LeakyCon [Video file]. Retrieved from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nKuPo_V1Rc

together to do great things. He then sadly observes that this year the conference will be held in Chicago, and he can't attend: "There is a longer story behind this, but the simple truth is – I'm an undocumented American." Against the backdrop of old family pictures, he narrates the story of his parents, who had a successful store in Argentina but encountered financial problems after it was robbed. They decided to make a fresh start in America, where their kids would have "a better chance at a good education and a safer life." Julian describes his life in Miami, where he graduated summa cum laude from his high school and was accepted to a college honors program. Yet, while other honors program participants are exempted from tuition, he has to pay for school. He explains that, as an undocumented student, he has out-of-state status "even though I do live in-state, in the house that my parents own and pay taxes for." Julian continues, "I can't take a student loan, can't get a job, can't get a license, so I don't have an ID that will let me fly or take a train, and I don't know anyone with a flying car." Connecting his situation to broader immigration issues, Julian explains that there is currently no common-sense immigration process available for millions of aspiring citizens. He then connects all this back to Harry Potter by observing that "If Voldemort had his way, those born to Muggle parents would be stripped of the right to work, an education, and the practice of magic of course. Harry Potter would support immigration reform."

Julian's video was a striking success for the HPA vlog. Developed in coordination with the senior HPA staff, the video was released two weeks before the launch of HPA's Equality for the Win campaign, which raised funds for immigration reform and other issues. Moreover, the video was produced in conversation with prominent immigration activist Jose Antonio Vargas[85]

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[85] The video even ends with the logo for "Define American?", a non-profit started by Vargas, though that connection is not explicitly stated in the video.

and was modeled on the "coming out as undocumented" media created by DREAM activists,[86] thus enabling networking with that movement. Dedicated HPA members, who felt a strong identification—and often personal friendship—with Julian were responsible for its circulation. Meghan shared:

> I reblogged it on Tumblr. I retweeted it from the HPA and a couple of different people on my Twitter as well. Have I showed it on my Facebook? If I haven't, I should. So I've definitely tried to get it out there because Julian asked us in our Catitude group if we'd be willing to share it and we were all very supportive of him making this video and putting it out there (Meghan, 23).

For many HPA members, the video's key success was putting a face to immigration reform, the face of someone they considered "one of them" (Julian had been vlogging for the HPA for over a year by the time the video had launched). Many supporters admitted to not having personally (at least knowingly) known anyone who is undocumented before. Meghan explained how Julian's story informed her stance on immigration reform:

> Immigration was one of those things that I never really thought too much about before. I never really truly took a stance on it, because I just didn't know anything about it. I've never known anybody who was a legal or an illegal immigrant, one way or another, or that came to this country, at least to my knowledge I didn't know. To have somebody who had come to this country, they're an undocumented citizen, and being able to tell their story gave me a lot of perspective very quickly about that subject (Meghan, 23).

The HPA community's discussion was vibrant, but what's especially notable is this video's success in what few HPA vlogs had achieved—reaching beyond the HP fandom. The video has been picked up by several mainstream media channels, including Univision[87] and ABC news.[88] It garnered a relatively impressive reach—over 16,000 views at the time of writing.

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[86] Arely Zimmerman, "Documenting DREAMs: New Media, Undocumented Youth and the Immigrant Rights Movement," 2012, see http://dmlcentral.net/resources/5061

[87] Univision News Tumblr Page. "The Harry Potter Alliance and Julian Gomez You're your Help with Immigratoin Reform", accessed May 2013, http://univisionnews.tumblr.com/post/28652587868/harry-potter-alliance-julian-gomez-immigration-reform

[88] ABC News. "Harry Potter Alliance Member and Undocumented Student Julian Gomez on How You Can Help this Nation's Immigration Problem", accessed May 2013,

Reaching beyond the HP community also meant that the nature of the discussion could be much more heated than is customary within the HPA,[89] particularly given the controversial nature of immigration reform. Some adamant opponents of immigration, such as the YouTube user Rstegs, posted multiple comments:

> There are legal ways of obtaining citizenship without living here illegally. Go about it legally and respect the laws that have been put into place and I'll respect you. I'm legally a citizen of the US and I don't feel some huge injustice in the world for not being able to fly or drive to Florida for a CONVENTION. I live within my means and I am grateful for the things I have.

Others were less subtle in their commentary, such as the YouTube user ntskl who posted: "Cry me a fucking river, Julian". Such comments violate the friendly and supportive conversational norms typical for the HPA. However, since the stated goal was to reach beyond the imagined audience of the HPA, Julian may have been better prepared than other fan vloggers for some of the difficult comments the video received. Julian responded to numerous YouTube critics, explaining the nuances of his situation and wider issues confronting undocumented immigrants.

"Why I can't go to LeakyCon" is a vivid example of the HPA's "cultural acupuncture" approach; references to the Harry Potter content world and to everyday fan experiences helped to engage and mobilize fans, who were often thinking about these matters for the first time. Yet, these choices may have limited the conversation that followed the video's release. Julian did ultimately attend LeakyCon. Touched by his video, the HPA community worked together to ensure he was able to get to Chicago without boarding a single plane. Julian recounted his experiences in the follow-up video, "Why I went to LeakyCon."[90] As excited and thankful as he was, Julian says there, he was also somewhat frustrated by the attention focused around his

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http://abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/Entertainment/undocumented-student-julian-gomez-fix-immigration-problem/story?id=17231788

[89] Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova, "Learning through Practice".

[90] The HPA YouTube Channel (2012, August 20). Why I Went to LeakyCon [Video file]. Retrieved from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdSQlfC3bXA

arrival to the conference. "I was just amazed at how great people are, but I also thought that they were missing the point. I wanted people to be that passionate about discussing immigration policy flaws, not getting me to Leakycon." Julian concluded, however, that "it's kind of the same thing": when people go out of their way to help him attend the conference, they see him as a fellow Harry Potter fan, not just as an undocumented immigrant.

In her discussion of the centrality of storytelling for social movements, Francesca Polletta considers the ways that narratives may limit how social issues get discussed. "Without denying narrative's political potency," she argues, "for disadvantaged groups, narrative comes with risks as well as benefits. The story lines available to modern American activists make it more difficult to tell a story of long-term endurance than one of short-term triumph and more difficult to argue that to 'keep on keeping on' is success."[91] "Why I can't go to LeakyCon" may exemplify this claim. Julian's ability to attend the conference became the story's "happy ending," potentially closing off further discussion.[92]

On the one hand, the video sparked a lot of conversations, within and outside the Harry Potter community. It built towards the HPA Equality FTW fundraising campaign.[93] The goal of the campaign was to raise $50,000 in 3 weeks—instead, they reached $94,803, and the wide circulation and enthusiastic reception of Julian's video very likely helped them surpass their goal. LeakyCon also featured a panel on immigration reform, which included not only HPA staff and Julian, but also Jose Antonio Vargas who introduced his perspective on immigration to a fan audience that might not have heard him speak in other contexts. On the other hand, a change.org petition to recognize "our friend, our fellow fan, and our fellow American Julian Gomez as

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[91] Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics*, (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3.

[92] I would like to acknowledge the participants in the Civic Media class at USC Annenberg, whose discussion of the video raised some of these ideas.

[93] Indiegogo: Equality For The Win, accessed March 2013, http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/equality-ftw

someone who should be given the same right to dream, and the same opportunity as all of us who received citizenship by being born here" received only 578 signatures.[94]

Creative production is a central aspect of expressing participatory politics, for both the Nerdfighters and the HPA. For Nerdfighters, establishing mechanisms for expression, even when these are non-political, enables young people a structure and opportunity to have their voices heard. Thanks to these structures, Nerdfighteria is characterized by wide participation in creative production. Using these venues for political expression, however, presents challenges. As Inez's peanut butter video shows, the language of YouTube or Nerdfighteria may sometimes be unintelligible to outside participants, cutting participants off from larger public discussions. Moreover, some members feel YouTube videos just aren't the right venue for political expression.

As a non-profit, the HPA, by contrast, has clear civic and political goals: they want to foster public awareness. HPA's success lies in creating a space in which political expression is legitimate and accepted and in tapping the HP community and its structures to engage others around these messages. To do that, the organization needs to translate their concerns into a language that resonates with the fan community. Yet, as the example of Julian's video shows, this narrative frame may sometimes prove too narrow.

Forming opinions and discussion

Informal political conversation has long been recognized as a way for citizens to form opinions and deepen their understanding of why the political world matters.[95] Many environments, however, are not conducive to political conversation due to their "political

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[94] Change.Org. "All Houses of Hogwarts: Stand by Julian for Immigration Reform", accessed March 2013, http://www.change.org/petitions/all-houses-of-hogwarts-stand-by-julian-for-immigration-reform?c=upworthy

[95] Kathy Cramer Walsh, *Talking about Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics.*

etiquette"—the extent to which public discussion is deemed appropriate and desirable,[96] or to institutional restrictions, such as those governing schools.[97] Young people in particular may find political discussion intimidating. Not only is such talk perceived as controversial and divisive, but the ideal of the "informed citizen" may leave young people feeling ill-equipped in terms of their political knowledge and overwhelmed by the standard of research expected of them.[98]

The young people interviewed for this project echo many of these concerns. Yet, the two case study groups also model ways to overcome these obstacles. Both the Nerdfighters and HPA encourage participants to become aware of issues that the community feels are important. They also function as "safe spaces" where participants can legitimately express their views and disagreements are settled civilly. Yet, the groups differ in the extent to which political conversation is deemed appropriate. Moreover, their friendly conversational norms sometimes leave participants feeling ill-equipped to defend their views against others with a more critical stance.

For most participants, these communities are first and foremost social spaces where they're comfortable expressing their "true selves" amongst friends. Small sub-groups within Nerdfighteria offer niches where participants can talk without feeling judged:

> For the most part we're a very, very safe space. When someone is not sure what to do with their life and like sometimes something very, very close to home has happened and it just kind of hit them really hard and they don't know what to do, often they go to the other Nerdfighters and try to talk about it with them, and that helps most people a lot (Lucy, 20, Nerdfighters).

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[96] Eliasoph, *Ibid.*

[97] Joel Westheimer & Joseph Kahne, "Educating the 'Good' Citizen: Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals", *PS Online* (2004).

[98] Kjerstin Thorson, "Finding Gaps and Building Bridges: Mapping Youth Citizenship" (PhD diss, University of Wisconsin, 2010).

Nerdfighters mentioned talking to others in the group about their most intimate problems, such as their parents' divorce, battling depression, or uncertainties around their sexual identities. Kevin similarly turned to his HPA affiliated quiddich team in tough times:

> We've probably become each other's best friends. Like one of our girls she just lost her grandma and another is going through a lot with her dad and I was going through some stuff with my step dad in his health. And you know, the first person you turn to, the first people you turn to are the [quidditch team] (Kevin, 27, HPA).

Such norms of openness and intimacy could also be conducive for vibrant political discussion, but ethnographic research shows that this is not always the case. Nina Eliasoph describes groups where the attempt to create a sense of community made publicly spirited conversation seem out of place, as something that might disrupt the harmony.[99]

When young participants were asked about their willingness to engage in political discussions, they mentioned many potential barriers. For example, young people are often turned off by political discussion when they feel there is a one-sided attempt at persuasion:

> I feel that's kind of why people engage in those discussions in the first place, is to persuade somebody that they're right. I mean, I try to maintain that everybody has an opinion and just because I don't agree with your opinion it doesn't mean it's wrong. (…) But for political discussions, I don't actively seek them because I always feel like I'm being pitched something, like I'm being pitched a different viewpoint, and that's not something that I look for or enjoy (Kim, 23, HPA).

Young people may also feel overwhelmed by the range of issues they are "supposed to know about" and the many viewpoints there are to comprehend. Echoing well-documented trends among youth, Tara expressed her distrust of the news media:[100]

> There's just too much and it's overwhelming and you don't know who to listen to or what to pay attention to. The news nowadays is just garbage half the time anyway (Tara, 27, HPA).

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[99] Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics.*
[100] David Buckingham (2002), *The Making of Citizens: Young People, News, and Politics* (Routledge, 2000).

Such concerns explain why a large percentage of young people are disengaged from politics.[101] However, the two case study groups show how being embedded in a context in which political issues are regularly discussed helps overcome such resistances. Collectively, these groups identify specific issues deemed important, and members work together to become more informed about those topics—a more manageable task than knowing "all there is to know":

> I think HPA has helped me a little bit with being aware of what's going on. It's actually like, "Oh, well this is important," and then I read it and I'm like, "Okay. Yeah, this is important to me." (…) So that helps me realize, "Okay, this is not important to me but this is" (Tara, 27, HPA).

While traditional youth groups also identify, research and discuss issues, fan activists have the added advantage of a shared content world that helps identify their personal relevance:

> I'm not saying that everyone my age is unaware of what happens in the world, but most of them are not. So, when you already have something that's there and you're not saying, "Here, you must be informed about everything there is to know about the world, of all the evils and stuff. And now, you have to do something about it." It's different than saying, "At Harry Potter, this happened and this is happening now, too. You should probably do something" (Satya, 17, HPA).

Issues that are raised in Vlogbrother videos, such as the elimination of the penny mentioned in the introduction, often come to be issues of personal importance to Nerdfighters, as Mona described:

> I am 100% for getting rid of the penny and I believe very strongly in it. The people always think that, they don't understand how much money we waste on pennies and like how stupid it is to have a penny… It's just stupid. So that—yeah, that was brought to my attention by Nerdfighteria (Mona, 17, Nerdfighters).

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[101] Cohen and Kahne, *Participatory Politics.*

Reflecting the notion of participatory politics as "not guided by deference to elites,"[102]

Nerdfighters express a strong appreciation of the value of discussion. Jo noted that simply

adopting the issues John and Hank see as important would be antithetical to the group's values:

> I think debating social issues is a good thing because if everyone just kind of blindly
> followed everything Hank and John said, that would kind of—I don't think Hank and
> John would want that, first of all. I think it would just lead to people liking or being in
> support of things they didn't really know about or didn't really care about, or maybe even
> disagree with, but they would just do it because the people that they follow are in support
> of it… But I feel like they [Hank and John] encourage to make your own decisions,
> nothing's forced. They always encourage to research more on your own, like don't just
> take their word for it. Go look at like YouTube where they got information from and
> things like that (Jo, 20, Nerdfighters).

For instance, the video "I HATE PENNIES!!!!" includes an on-screen message that links

to further information on the topic,[103] including the CPI inflation calculator and articles from the

Washington Post and *Consumer Affairs*.

The VlogBrothers even use these features to correct themselves. For example, as John

details the cost of producing a penny, a message indicates that these figures are from 2008 and

that producing coins became cheaper in 2009, pointing viewers to more information in the

"doobylydoo" (the text box under the video's "about" tab). There, the YouTuber Sivartis is

thanked for the correction. Nerdfighteria embraces the values of "collective intelligence." In this

model, offered by Pierre Levy, voluntary knowledge communities can achieve the best outcomes

when group members pool knowledge and share expertise.[104]

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[102] Cohen and Kahne, *Participatory Politics.*
[103] VlogBrothers (2010, September 6). "I HATE PENNIES!!!! (Also Nickels.)" [Video file]. Retrieved from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77C47XYm_3c
[104] Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Perseus Books, 1999); Jenkins, *Convergence Culture.*

Fig 10. "I HATE PENNIES!!!!" video – example of digging in the data

The HPA also encourages members to investigate and form their own opinions:

I think that they're very good at like saying, "Make sure you look more into this. Make sure you go to the CNN Freedom Project for more information about starvation and wages and things like that." (…) The HPA is supportive of making sure that you are doing more research than what we're telling you (Heather, 26, HPA).

Bethany, a volunteer staff member, described a conscious mode of engagement:

We [at the HPA] inform the people that we're trying to help and that we're trying to get involved or engage, and inform them on a much more independent level. Meaning, they have to seek out the information for themselves on some level, versus slacktivism where the information, they pretty much hand it to you, and you just hand the same information off (Bethany, 20, HPA).

Bethany's reference to "slacktivism" is telling. At the time the interviews were conducted in 2012, many participants had just witnessed the controversy around the online film *Kony2012,* produced by the non-profit organization Invisible Children as part of their campaign to capture African warlord Joseph Kony. The 30-minute film was widely shared via social media,

particularly by young people,[105] becoming the fastest-spreading online video at the time with 112

million views in one week.[106] While IC has been engaging young Americans for over nine years

by the time Kony2012 was released,[107] the group had reached global exposure—seemingly

overnight. IC was widely criticized for their depiction of a white savior narrative, the omission of

important facts (e.g., that Joseph Kony is no longer in Uganda and that his child army is

currently much smaller), and allegations of financial misconduct. Given these harsh critiques,

many saw the whole campaign as a "scam." Moreover, those who had spread the film—

particularly young people—were blamed as dupes, who had not done sufficient research before

pressing "share."[108]

Without being prompted, Kony2012 was mentioned by ten participants, out of 27

interviews conducted after its release. It was mentioned even in the last interviews, more than

five months later, suggesting the controversy's long-lasting impact.[109] Participants almost always

presented Kony2012 as a cautionary example of young people taking action without being

sufficiently informed. Theo, a 15 year-old Nerdfighter and HPA member, was interviewed one

week after the release of Kony2012. He had shared the movie to his social networks and even

signed up to a Facebook group page planning to help "cover the night" (hang Kony posters all

over cities to spread awareness). But Theo felt the immediate pushback online. Only one week

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[105] "Kony 2012: Stats Breakdown of the Viral Video," *The Telegraph*, March 9 2012, accessed March 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/9134431/Kony-2012-Stats-breakdown-of-the-viral-video.html

[106] "Update: Kony Social Video Campaign Tops 100 Million Views," *Visible Measures Blog,* March 12 2012, accessed March 2013, http://corp.visiblemeasures.com/news-and-events/blog/bid/79626/Update-Kony-Social-Video-Campaign-Tops-100-Million-Views

[107] Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, "Why Youth are Drawn to Invisible Children: Prefiguring Kony2012", March 12 2012, *Confessions of an Aca-Fan, http://henryjenkins.org/2012/03/why_youth_are_drawn_to_invisib.html*; Melissa Brough, "Fair Vanity: The Visual Culture of Humanitarianism in the Age of Commodity Activism", in Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser (eds.), *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (New York University, 2012).

[108] Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson, "Navigating Good Citizenship".

[109] The leadership of both groups also referred to Kony2012, adding to its visibility within these communities. Whereas Andrew Slack of the HPA generally supported Invisible Children, and particularly Jason Russell after his breakdown, the VlogBrothers took a much more critical stance. See their Tumblr post: http://fishingboatproceeds.tumblr.com/post/18888907871/kony-2012

later, Theo said he felt like Kony2012 had become the "elephant in the room" that had to be

addressed at their next HPA chapter meeting:

> I'm just going to say like yeah, we can support the cause because this guy [Kony] is a really bad guy, just don't start throwing your money at them yet, because you need to know much more. And, a lot of people have addressed this, that the problem may be over-exaggerated and all that, so we're just going to tell people like, don't get too invested in it yet (Theo, 15, Nerdfighters/HPA).

This critique further solidified as time passed. Interviewed a few weeks after Kony2012's

release, Kevin referred to a popular meme critiquing IC's supporters:

> There's this meme that had a college kid sitting there and he's smiling and then on top it said, "Watch the YouTube video," underneath it said, "Become a social activist." And that's really what happened, these people they don't understand what they're talking about. They didn't investigate the issue at all (Kevin, 27, HPA).

Often, interview participants discussed Kony2012 to differentiate their own communities

from Invisible Children. They explained that their own communities encouraged young people to

research issues and form their own opinions before acting:

> The Invisible Children movement, it offers a paternalistic movement in some ways that asks kids to follow this and do this and follow this. Whereas the HPA and a lot of other fandom activism organizations, the way they engage you is more of an empowerment to all. You're asking people to think, you're also asking people to act and you're asking people to become involved. (Bethany, 20, HPA).

Nerdfighters felt that being connected to a community where people pool their information helps

protect them from "jumping on the bandwagon":

> Like Kony 2012 for example, I think that a lot of Nerdfighters did a really good job of looking into that issue a lot deeper than the general population did and instead of (…) instead of jumping on the bandwagon, we did a little more research, and they are like, this is not working the way it should (Mona, 17, Nerdfighters).

Contrary to the informed citizen model, which requires each individual to know all the necessary information themselves, Nerdfighters trust the processes by which they work together to identify, research, and debate pressing issues.

To facilitate these processes, Nerdfighters have embraced certain norms of civil discourse. Julie contrasted the polite discussions amongst Nerdfighters to the mean-spirited comments often made in the broader YouTube environment:

> I mean, there's obviously still a lot of arguing and things like that. People's viewpoints are so different, but there's definitely a lot more discussion that's civil (Julie, 17, Nerdfighters).

When discussions are held on commercial online platforms that are open to all, the actual audience may diverge from that imagined by participants. John Green explained how the VlogBrothers take active steps to maintain a safe space for Nerdfighter conversations:

> John Green: The other thing is to make the comment section of the website, of wherever you are, to make it safe, as safe as you can. Obviously, you can't make anything completely safe but you know, we just don't allow racism and we just don't allow homophobia or attacks on trans-people or any of that stuff.
>
> Interviewer: Is that by actively deleting comments?
>
> John Green: Yeah, and banning people who make them over and over again. The truth is it's very few people, but it's very loud because you can't tell but you want to rise to answer it. And that gives these people attention, which in turn makes them feel like it was useful to have said these terrible things because they got what they wanted out of it I guess. So yeah, I mean that's something that we try to do. Again though, I mean when you're talking about—I don't know, 30,000 comments a week, obviously you can't do it on everything. That's tough then.

Feeling safe is important as these youth express themselves politically, especially around sensitive issues such as sexual identity. Yet, our team's previous research on Invisible Children argued that the ability to anticipate and rebut counter arguments is a crucial civic practice.[110] As

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[110] Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova, "Learning through Practice".

they encourage civil exchanges, groups characterized by participatory culture practices may also avoid more contentious moments that would prepare members for broader political discussions.

Demonstrated through their collective responses on issues like marriage equality and immigration rights, both the HPA and Nerdfighters tend towards socially liberal stances. Still, neither group is exclusively liberal, and many members mentioned having conservative friends.[111] Out of the interviewees from both groups, two or three identified as conservative, though this identity was not clear-cut. Kevin, a 27-year old HPA member, explained:

> I'm one of the few conservative people on the team if you want to label me. But I don't label myself a conservative. I have lost touch on both sides of that political line. But the majority of [his HPA chapter and related quidditch team], whether it's because they are gay or because that they are social activists or whatever it is, they seem to fall very far onto the liberal side.

Fig 11. "Not in Harry's Name"—HPA's campaign around Fair Trade chocolate[112]

At times, Kevin's political views clashed with others in his local HPA chapter. For example, he was not a supporter of the HPA campaign to pressure Warner Brothers to make their chocolate Fair Trade. He advocated for a free market approach instead:

> There is this old joke that goes, if Republicans don't like guns, they don't buy them. If Democrats don't like guns they try and ban it, and that goes for -- you could insert

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[111] I use liberal vs. conservative (rather than Democrat vs. Republican) as these are the terms participants usually used to describe themselves and others in the group.

[112] Design by Alec Longstreth, http://www.aleclongstreth.com/2011/11/not-in-harrys-name-chocolate-frog-cards.html. On his blog, Longstreth, a cartoonist and illustrator, mentions this design was a web banner he suggested for the campaign and was never used officially; he thinks that's a good idea as the design may be "too cute for such a serious campaign".

anything in there. […] If Warner Brothers doesn't want to use Fair Trade chocolate and you don't agree with that, don't buy their stuff (Kevin, 27, HPA).

Taking a minority stance can be difficult, and Kevin decided to just "stay out" of the Fair Trade campaign. He has, however, been vocal on other issues. Kim, a liberal member of Kevin's HPA chapter, characterized this diversity of perspectives as a strength:

> I was talking with Kevin and somehow jobs and the economy came up. […] He is socially liberal and economically conservative, and he believes that Reagonomics, the trickle-down effect, is a valid possibility for the American workforce, and I don't. That's fine, we're allowed to disagree. He mentioned it and I was like, "Well, why do you believe that works better than making more government jobs for people who are out of work, which is what Obama has been doing?" He explained. He understands that yes, it's putting people into jobs that wouldn't previously have had jobs, and he was able to explain the spending differences and stuff like that, and even though I still disagree with the principle of what he was saying, I was able to better understand the fundamentals of the idea behind it… . It doesn't necessarily mean that I agree with it entirely, which is fine, because that's what a conversation is about, but I was able to learn from it and that was more important than whether or not I agreed with him (Kim, 23, HPA).

Kim and Kevin's willingness to listen to each other despite their differing political views constitutes the kind of "public spirited talk" many scholars would be happy to see: open to debate, devoted to the common public good, and receptive to differences of opinion.[113] For Kevin, HPA'a ability to combine shared activist goals with friendship helps bridge difference:

> You have to define friendship, like, why are you friends with this person? Are you friends because they do the same activism as you and it stops there? Because if it stops there, that's not really friendship. Friendship [means] somebody who cares about the other person, or is interested in the other person. And so with my more conservative views and their more liberal views, our views actually aren't that far off from each other. And I think that our friendship lies in it, we are friends, and we're not going to let our political views or our particular views or whatever get in the way of enjoying that person.

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[113] Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics.*

Negotiating political statements has been a challenge for HPA's leadership. As a 501(c)3

nonprofit, the HPA cannot engage in political campaigning.[114] Yet, Andrew Slack, the founder of

the HPA, openly endorses Democratic candidates on his own Facebook page with this

disclaimer:

> NOTHING that I express on my Facebook page reflects the opinions of the Harry Potter
> Alliance. These opinions and views - all of them - are mine and not that of the HPA. If
> you want to know what the HPA thinks, please go to the HPA Facebook page! It's
> awesome!

While Slack is very clear about the separation between his views and those of the organization,

some HPA members have expressed discomfort with his explicitly partisan political statements.

The VlogBrothers contrast themselves with the HPA's approach in terms of their partisan

identification. For them, the main goal is being inclusive:

> We try harder—and this is a very difficult thing to navigate—we try harder to not be
> partisan, which is not something that the HPA really cares about. They only care about
> what's right. We want to include people in the conversation. We don't want to remove
> people. We don't want to push people out of the conversation even if we really disagree
> with them. We want to find ways to listen and the HPA just wants to get it done, like they
> want to do what's right, and I have a lot of admiration for that model. But we want to try
> to be as big a tent as we can while still standing for the stuff that, not just that we believe
> in, but the stuff that sort of, in my opinion at least, is like inarguably correct (John
> Green).

A critical reading could point to the VlogBrothers' potential economic incentive in

widening their audience; as YouTube partners, they benefit from higher numbers of views. An

alternative argument, however, is that the VlogBrothers' motivation for inclusivity earnestly

reflects their educational and ideological goals. A possible indication for this reading is the

group's attempt to increase their inclusivity among "hard to reach" populations such as different

racial and ethnic groups, as well as their clear stance on some issues, such as LGBTQ equality.

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[114] NOLO law for all. "Limits on Political Campaigning for 510(c)(3) Nonprofits", accessed March 2013,
http://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/limits-political-campaigning-501c3-nonprofits-29982.html

Racial and ethnic diversity is a complex issue for both groups. On the one hand, both define themselves as completely inclusive—everyone can fit in. At the same time, their membership is relatively homogenous, with a majority of white and middle/upper class participants. Members often explain this homogeneity in terms of shared interests (the groups just attract those who are interested in certain kinds of content) or the nature of online culture, which skews white and middle class. None of the HPA members and Nerdfighters belonging to minority groups mentioned any structural barriers to their participation, and none said they had ever felt excluded or marginalized, yet they acknowledged seeing few people of their own ethnicities within these communities. The whiteness of fandom remains a troubling concern for groups that pride themselves on embracing a more inclusive attitude.[115]

Both groups have a stronger track record as spaces where young people feel comfortable expressing and negotiating queer identities. Many Nerdfighters and HPA members said their views on sexual equality were strongly shaped by having LGBTQ-identifying members:

> I learned so much from there because yes, I am supportive of LGBTQ quality, but I don't even live in a community in which it's so prevalent, in which there are a lot of LGBTQ people. So, I wouldn't even know that many people who are of LGBTQ identity, unless I know them online. So, reading these articles, especially about people who are genderqueer, I didn't know anything about that and I think that really helped shape my understanding of the world and that educated me (Satya, 17, HPA).

Sheila, a 15-year old Nerdfighter, feels that LGBTQ rights are particularly close to her heart, as her father came out as gay when she was two years old. Sheila is involved with the Trevor Project, which addresses gay youth's challenges around coming out, experiencing bullying and preventing suicide. Sheila's local Nerdfighter group started an "LGBT branch":

> With my Nerdfighter group, we actually started an LGBT branch of it… So my friend runs that and she's trying to organize like monthly meetings just to discuss things if

[115] Sarah N. Gatson and Robin Anne Reid "Race and Ethnicity in Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 8 (2012), see http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/392/252

you're either supporters or experiencing it, so I went to a meeting and it was basically people talking about their coming out stories or, if they hadn't come out yet, their stories of struggling or whatever. And it's really interesting, because like, yes, we're young kids and we're teenagers and most of us are not even old enough to drive yet in that group, but like we know who we are (Sheila, 15, Nerdfighters).

Vera (16), also a member of this LGBT branch, felt more comfortable in the Nerdfighter group than at her school's Gay-Straight Alliance, where she felt that gay youth are separated out:

I mean like because a lot of us are part of the LGBTQ spectrum, like we're all a bit gay pretty much. So, it's really nice to have that kind of community and like that support and stuff… And so it's just nice to be able to [ask], am I the only one who feels this way? And it's cool that there are people who feel the same way as you do about certain issues.

Vera's references to the "LGBTQ spectrum" imply a nuanced perception of queer identity that goes beyond simple dichotomies of gay or straight. In Nerdfighteria, this perspective was built mostly bottom-up from discussions among youth, particularly on Tumblr, but it was also amplified by the VlogBrothers.

In the Vlogbrother video "human sexuality is complicated…,"[116] Hank Green explains that "all dichotomies are false dichotomies: gender identity, as well as sexual orientation and gender roles, are not binaries but rather a spectrum." Green mentions a new idea he was exposed to "on Tumblr, yesterday"—"romantic orientation": the question of who a person is inclined to form romantic, as opposed to sexual, relationships with. What's really important, Hank says, is "that we trust ourselves, and we understand ourselves, and we love and respect ourselves, and that we grant that same understanding and respect to the people around us."

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[116] VlogBrothers (2012, October 12). Human Sexuality is Complicated… [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXAoG8vAyzI
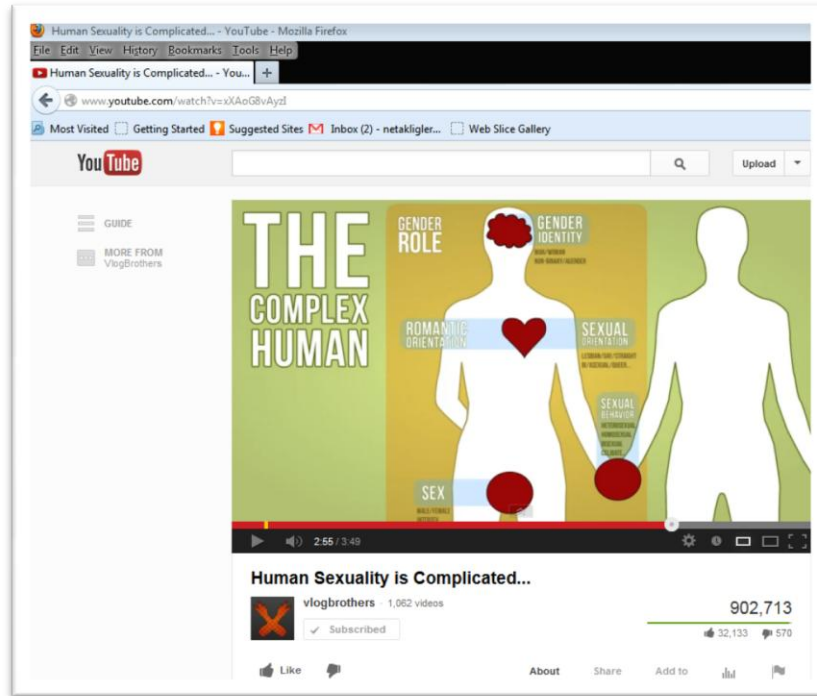
Fig 12. "Human Sexuality is Complicated" – Vlogbrother video about gender

On his "unfiltered backchannel" on YouTube, Hankschannel, Hank shared that he was quite worried about making this video.[117] He admitted he wanted to do such a video for ages, but that it's "scary, dangerous ground" because of people's strong reactions. When interviewed, though, John Green identified this video as a particular success:

> It was a great video and it also welcomed lots and lots of trans-people into our community who I think otherwise, you know, might never have discovered our community, also a lot of people of color who are in the LGBT community really enjoyed that video and felt like it was something that was made by a good ally, for lack of a better term. And I think that made them feel welcome in Nerdfighteria.

For the HPA, being active around LGBTQ equality is seen as grounded in the Harry

Potter narratives. In March 2013, around the time of the Supreme Court's hearings around same-

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[117] Hankschannel (2012, October 11). "Worried" [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4DWYYh1BCM&list=UUOT2iLov0V7Re7ku_3UBtcQ&index=37

sex marriage, the HPA released a statement on marriage equality, authored by Andrew Slack and addressed to "fellow members of the heterosexual community":

> While there are many Harry Potter fans against equal marriage who have asked us to look at "both sides" of the argument, as if an argument had only two sides and that was it, I'd prefer it if you and I together could look at our privilege for being heterosexual in this society.

Straight people, Slack argues, do not confront the challenges of coming out, do not suffer discrimination and even death threats for their sexuality, and can take for granted basic rights such as the ability to marry the person you love. Typical for the HPA, these issues were then connected back to the Harry Potter content world:

> Let us instead look at each other as equals and learn from each other and take the lessons that we have learned from Harry Potter about the power of love, to heart.

> Harry Potter's eleven years living in a cupboard for his identity as a Wizard reminds us that no one should have to live inside of a closet for their identity. Dumbledore, and we as readers, understand with great sympathy those like Hagrid a half-giant and Lupin a werewolf, struggling to live in the closet because of their identity. Dumbledore allows for them to come to Hogwarts despite the objections of those who know of their identities – in the HPA we have spent years working to create an environment where those still living in and out of the closet because of their sexual orientation will not be legally subjected to existential intolerance and irrational prejudice.

Slack refers to a specific page number ("In Half-Blood prince page 624"…), signaling his identity as a fan with deep textual knowledge. Evoking the books helped the HPA to position LGBTQ equality as a basic right rather than a political controversy.

Erin, a 20 year-old HPA chapter organizer, led a 6-week study group entitled "Harry Potter as a tool for social change." The invitation to the group explains:

> The [name of the local chapter] invites you to an informal study group on how Harry Potter relates to current sociopolitical and personal identity issues. We will progress to discussing how the narrative of Harry Potter can be used to promote activism and social change, particularly within [local town].

Each week's discussion was devoted to a certain book from the Harry Potter series, sometimes connected to specific themes (e.g., "Our fifth meeting will focus on evil, fear, and hate. We will discuss which characters, creatures, spells, and more we hate or fear most and explore possible definitions of "evil" as seen in the Harry Potter series."). The group held six weekly meetings, attended by fans in their teens and twenties, but also two adults in their 40s and 50s who had only basic familiarity with Harry Potter and were more drawn to the political conversations. While the books served as the discussion's starting points—and as the main hook for most of the younger participants—the group had in-depth discussions around burning controversies, including Walmart's labor practices, racism, slavery, and the 2012 elections. The group leader often helped create the bridge between the content world and real world concerns:

> Erin: Throughout the whole book, Harry wants to kills Sirius. He thinks he betrayed his parents, that it's his fault they died.
>
> [Several minutes of discussion around the book: how Harry found out Sirius did not betray his parents and became close friends with him, and how he decided to spare the life of the real betrayer. Erin then transitions:].
>
> Erin: We now have the death penalty – prop 34 on the California ballot. It would replace death penalty with life without parole. In the wizarding world, it's a story about death penalty. All the book we thought that Sirius needs to die, but we found out he doesn't, and neither does the guy who actually did kill Harry's parents
>
> Shelly: We put innocent people to death. Once someone is put into death row the efforts to save them stop.
>
> Tim: There was a journalism class that got an assignment to research a death penalty case. They found out that a guy on death row was not guilty. In Illinois they decided to stop the death penalty because they said they can't trust the system, and it's not better or worse than anywhere else. Once someone is dead, it's over.
>
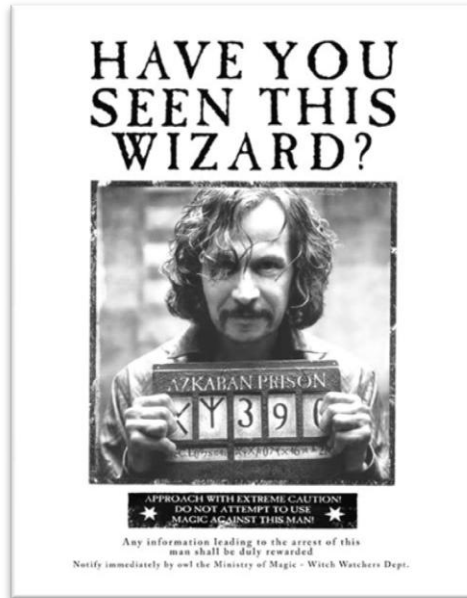> [10 minute discussion of the death penalty and prop 34 ensues]

Fig 13. Sirius Black as prisoner– a metaphor to discuss the death penalty [118]

The discussion flowed from the introductory parallels to the story world towards a more in-depth

and lengthy discussion of the death penalty, one that included naming the legal standards for

decision ('beyond reasonable doubt' vs. 'preponderance of evidence') and referencing study

findings about whether the threat of execution deters crime. The participants would soon have an

opportunity to vote for or against proposition 34 in the upcoming elections.[119] Erin, the group

leader, had planned to raise this topic beforehand, and her allusions and parallels to J.K.

Rowling's novels enabled others to feel more comfortable joining such a discussion.

Within Nerdfighteria, we can see that without such guidance and support, shared

interests and a sense of community do not necessarily translate into vibrant political discussions.

While members of Nerdfighteria acknowledge the value of political discussion, their everyday

conversations often steer away from politics, instead focusing on discussing favorite TV shows,

YouTube videos and Young Adult novels. Even the many Vlogbrother videos that are devoted to

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[118] RPF, accessed May 2013, www.therpf.com
[119] The proposition eventually failed, by about 6 percentage points, maintaining the death penalty in California.

explicitly civic and political issues do not necessarily translate into conversation topics in Nerdfighters' social encounters. In the course of three monthly meetings of a local Nerdfighter group, the most political issue that came up was the status of "hippies" as a counterculture. Conversations on Facebook group pages for local Nerdfighter groups are likewise mostly devoid of political discussions, despite members' self-identification as socially concerned. The group's "political etiquette," it seems, focuses mostly on reactions to Vlogbrother videos and does not necessarily translate to conversations among the young people themselves.

Conclusion

Through a study of Nerdfighters and the HPA, this report identified three mechanisms of translation: tapping content worlds and communities, creative production, and forming opinions and discussion. Future research may address how prevalent these mechanisms are in other participatory culture groups and which other translation mechanisms exist. For now, let's evaluate how these different mechanisms lead to participatory politics outcomes within the two groups examined.

Tapping content worlds and communities

The HPA is organized around fans' connections to a specific fictional narrative which provides a shared reference point for engaging with real world concerns. These parallels are employed by the leadership and by specific members, building on existing fan practices. The HPA also successfully taps the fandom's existing infrastructures (such as conventions, quidditch leagues, Wizard Rock concerts, blogs, podcasts, and fan fiction sites). These mechanisms help the group achieve participatory political outcomes, including *development of civic identities* (e.g. feeling the world of Harry Potter helps elucidate real-world concerns) and *mobilization* to specific

actions (e.g. registering voters in Wizard rock concerts). On the other hand, such content world connections may limit the group's reach, especially as Harry Potter is losing its traction.

Nerdfighters are connected around the VlogBrothers' YouTube videos as the key piece of shared content. More broadly, they feel connected to "nerdy" interests or a "nerdy" identity—yet "nerdy" may mean different things to different members. For most members, Nerdfighteria is mostly understood as a social space—a friendship- and interest-driven network. The content world is not generally used to make sense of political issues. At the same time, the VlogBrothers deploy many of their videos to alert and educate members about current events and to articulate the common goal of decreasing world suck; the practices help participants to *develop civic identities*, and can result in successful short-term *mobilizations*, such as raising money for charities or creating videos about non-profit organizations for Project 4 Awesome.

Creative Production

For the **Nerdfighters,** the VlogBrothers model an approach for creating content that is fun and entertaining to watch but also intelligently discusses key civic and political issues. Nerdfighteria encourages young people to create their own videos and addresses some challenges young people often face when attempting to produce and spread their own content (through the structure of collab channels, for example). At the same time, there is a challenge in using spaces and genres designed for entertainment toward political expression. Thus, the potential for *political expression* through their own creative production is not always realized, or in some cases, results in types of political expression illegible to those outside the group.

The **HPA** also inspires a range of creative production, including writing blogs and producing audio podcasts which often explicitly tie cultural and political issues. The HPA, however, tends to be more centralized in their production, and their output may reach much more limited audiences. In an attempt to reach wider audiences and give new faces to the movement, the HPA

has launched their vlog channel. Here, the challenge is often how to translate the non-profit's civic goals, such as informing about issues, raising awareness around a campaign, or publicizing outcomes, with YouTube's cultural language. Some of HPA's most successful videos connect political issues (such as immigration reform) to fannish concerns, such as attending a fan conference, though this narrative frame may also limit a wider discussion of political issues. The HPA thus encourages *political expression* through its creative production, but struggles with reaching wider audiences for their message. Moreover, while *civic identities* are developed in powerful ways, the practice of production is not as widespread as for the Nerdfighters.

Forming opinions and discussion

While many acknowledge the importance of informal discussion of political issues, such conversations are deemed out-of-place, divisive, or requiring specialized knowledge in many social contexts. The HPA and Nerdfighters overcome some of these challenges, yet struggle with others. **Both groups** help young people identify and learn more about political issues that are important to them. **Both groups** include diverse participants, for example across political affiliations, though this is often a delicate balancing act. The **HPA** may be more successful in creating spaces where *political discussion* is deemed appropriate and desirable. **Nerdfighters** value civil discussion, but their gatherings are dominated by social and cultural concerns.

Chart – Mechanisms of Translation Facilitating Participatory Politics Outcomes

Mechanism of translation	Participatory Politics Outcomes	Group	Evaluation of ability to facilitate outcome[120]
Tapping content worlds and communities	Developing Civic identity	HPA	Strong – Content world helps make sense of issues
		Nerdfighters	Moderate – VlogBrothers raise civic issues, goal of decreasing world suck
	Mobilization	HPA	Moderate – Specific content world may limit potential reach
		Nerdfighters	Strong – Successful short term mobilizations to online action
Creative production	Developing Civic identity	HPA	Moderate – Fewer members engage in production, but strong impact for those who do
		Nerdfighters	Moderate – Many engage in production, but challenge to translate into politics
	Political Expression	HPA	Strong – Clear political goals, challenge in translating to cultural language
		Nerdfighters	Moderate – Sense that their creative production is not the "right venue" for political expression
Forming opinions and discussion	Developing Civic identity	HPA	Strong – Helps make sense of issues and become informed
		Nerdfighters	Strong – Helps make sense of issues and become informed
	Political Discussion	HPA	Strong – Creating space where political discussion is deemed appropriate
		Nerdfighters	Weak – Value civil discussion but it is mostly absent from social contexts

Considering these differences between the two groups may help us to develop some generalizations for other participatory culture groups. The Nerdfighter model may more closely

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[120] This is considered in aggregate, on the level of the group. It may, of course, differ across individuals.

resemble groups that come together around shared cultural interests and that engage, sometimes peripherally, with civic and political issues—some examples include fans of *The Last Airbender* boycotting the film for casting white actors for Asian American characters;[121] or "the Colbert nation"—fans of *The Colbert Report*—participating in rallies at the National Mall.[122]

Fan studies identifies many cultural benefits for participants in fan communities, such as feeling a sense of community and belonging, giving and receiving emotional support, expressing creative impulses and feeling self-realization. This is true in these examples, along with a stronger political dimension. However, in each example, we never see a one-directional "transition" from cultural participation to political participation; rather, we see a careful negotiation to preserve the balance between the two. Cultural participation is valuable not only as a stepping-stone for the political, but in its own right. This report's focus on *mechanisms of translation*—defined as "practices through which cultural connections in the groups serve to scaffold different participatory politics outcomes"— might help us to identify a broader range of approaches. Over time, we can perhaps identify mechanisms common across a variety of cultural groups, as well as evaluate which are better suited for different participatory politics outcomes.

At a time when re-invigorating young people's civic and political participation is a priority on the national agenda, the HPA and Nerdfighters offer us innovative—and at times surprising—models of success. These groups offer spaces where participants' enthusiasms around popular culture and their sense of social community are not only acknowledged, but valued and harnessed. Those working with youth—educators, youth organizations and non-

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[121] Lori Kido Lopez, "Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*," *International Journal of Cultural Studies 15*(5) (2011), 431-445.
[122] Marcus Schulzke, "Fan Action and Political Participation on *The Colbert Report*," *Transformative Works and Cultures,* 10 (2012), see http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/rt/printerFriendly/316/283

profits—may benefit from learning some of these lessons as we reimagine the connections

between cultural participation and participatory politics.

Methodological appendix

Media analysis

I have been following the groups' communications online, including primarily, for the HPA, their email list-serv, Facebook page (national and specific local groups), and Tumblr, and for Nerdfighters, the YouTube channel (of the VlogBrothers and of individual Nerdfighters), Facebook group pages for local groups, and Tumblr sites for individual Nerdfighters.

Ethnographic component – participant observation

As part of the research, I conducted participant observation at local and national events for the two groups. With the exception of contexts where participation was completely open to the public (e.g., a VlogBrother tour), I received permission from a group leader to attend and conduct participant observation.

For the HPA research, I participated in numerous events (including quidditch matches, parties, social change events, Wizard Rock the Vote events and more) of a local chapter, of which I have been a member (and researcher) for over two years. I also participated in a six-week seminar on "Harry Potter as a Tool for Social Change" with another local chapter in the summer of 2012. I conducted participant observation at LeakyCon 2011, a Harry Potter fan conference, where I attended all the HPA-relevant sessions, as well as at Ascendio 2012, a different fan conference with a slightly older audience. I also attended the Quidditch World Cup in New York, at which the HPA presented, participated at the opening event for the Imagine Better library at a Brooklyn Charter School held in honor of the HPA, and conducted ongoing conversations with Andrew Slack and other leaders at the HPA.

For the Nerdfighter research, I attended Nerdfighter-related sessions at LeakyCon 2011, including the Nerdfighter meet-up with the VlogBrothers. I saw the VlogBrothers again in their January 2012 tour around the release of *The Fault in Our Stars*, as well as at VidCon 2012,

where I met in person many of the Nerdfighters I had interviewed online. I also participated in several monthly meet-ups of a local Nerdfighter group, several members of which were interviewed for the project. After concluding the Nerdfighter interviews, I also interviewed John Green of the VlogBrothers.

Participant-observation allowed me to see how issues that were discussed abstractly in interviews were manifested in group contexts. Participating in events and getting to know members personally was also helpful in recruiting interview participants and gaining trust, particularly for younger respondents (those under eighteen).

Interviews

Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with young members of the HPA (including the Imagine Better network) and Nerdfighters. As noted, there is a lot of overlap between the groups, and many of the interviewees identified with both (or all three) groups, yet each interviewee was grouped into a "primary" affiliation. Of the fifteen HPA members that were interviewed, two were identified with the Imagine Better network (these were primarily Hunger Games fans), and thirteen with HPA. There were ten young women, four young men, and one participant who identified as agendered. Mean age for HPA participants was 23, with two participants under 18 and four over 25. Out of the fifteen Nerdfighters, twelve were women and three men. Nerdfighter interviewees were slightly younger, with mean age 18.5 and nine participants under 18.

I began my sampling process from group members I had met during my participant-observation and snowballed from there. Additional interviewees were contacted through Facebook group pages. I made particular efforts to sample males and members of minority groups, who never-the-less make up a small portion of participants, as the groups are

predominantly white and female. Interviewees were usually contacted through e-mail or, predominantly for younger participants, through Facebook, and were invited to participate in the research. Parental consent was required for participants under 18. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype or, in five cases, face-to-face. Interviewing through Skype enabled me to reach participants from all over the country, and eased the process particularly for underage interviewees for whom both transportation and safety were concerns. While technical issues arose in a few interviews, the advantages of online interviewing outweighed the disadvantages.

After consenting to participate, the interview protocol began with a mapping exercise, where participants were asked to draw a map or image of their life and the things in their life that matter to them. If they did not do so on their own, they were asked to also place the groups on this map. This exercise served as an icebreaker, particularly with some of the shy participants, and helped me identify issues to focus on in the interview. For example, sometimes at this stage I would learn a participant I had met through one of the groups (e.g. Nerdfighters) turned out to also be a member of the HPA, or vice versa. Next, the interview protocol touched on how the participant became involved with the group; what activities she does with the groups; what are things she values about the group; comparing the group to other activities in her life (particularly other civic activities). In each interview, I sought an area of particular interest and honed in on that. Thus, some interviews focused more on creative production; others more on past civic experiences, etc. Participants were also asked to elaborate on terms used by the group, such as "nerdy," "fan," or "decreasing world suck." A third part of the interview protocol was more conceptual; here, the participant was asked to define, or bring up what they think of, when they hear the following words: citizen, good citizen, activist, and the political. This section often raised additional interesting discussions. Interviews lasted between 1.5-2 hours and were later

transcribed. Full transcripts of the interviews were analyzed and coded for both conceptual and

emerging themes.

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