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"Cultural Acupuncture": Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance

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

> By translating some of the world's most pressing issues into the framework of *Harry Potter*, [the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA)] makes activism something easier to grasp and less intimidating. Often we show them fun and accessible ways that they can take action and express their passion to make the world better by working with one of our partner NGO's [non-governmental organisations].
>
> Andrew Slack, Harry Potter Alliance (2009)

Written two decades apart, these statements by Fiske and Slack illustrate shifts in how fan activity connects the popular imagination and real-world politics. Both claim that fandom's "sense of solidarity . . . [and] shared resistance" empowers individuals to make decisive steps towards collective action. Fiske sees fandom as an informal set of everyday practices and personal identities, while Slack describes organisations with institutional ties to NGOs. In Fiske's view, participants' fantasies shape how they see themselves and the world, while Slack describes a conscious rhetorical strategy mapping fictional content worlds onto

real-world concerns – what he calls "cultural acupuncture". Slack notes how dispersed members of fannish communities are connected into a networked public that is capable of coordinated action.

While Fiske's concepts of resistance, fan discrimination and semiotic productivity shaped the early evolution of fan studies, his claims that fan participation might lead to enhanced political agency and civic engagement have been less explored. Nonetheless, they seem to offer a starting point for more contemporary work on fan activism. Some 20 years ago, the relationship between the micropolitics of everyday life that Fiske describes and the macropolitics of public policy was the subject of debate between critical and cultural studies. Jim McGuigan (1992), for example, singles out Fiske's claims about Madonna fans as indicative of a tendency to substitute meaning-making for "material" politics. Adopting a position closer to Fiske's, David Buckingham (2000: 29) warns: " 'Micro-politics' should not come to be seen as a substitute for 'macro-politics.' On the contrary, the challenge is surely to find ways of building connections between the two." Slack offers us a much more fully articulated theory of how fan activism can bridge the micro and macro, one tested by the HPA's successful mobilisation of fans in human rights campaigns.

Fiske's Madonna fans, however far-fetched his claims may have seemed at the time, were among the forerunners of Third Wave feminism, much as Riot Grrls moved from being fans of popular music to producers of their own DIY culture (Conti, 2001). The Riot Grrls performed as fans, as cultural producers, as activists and as ideological critics, helping to map potential links between these roles and activities. Third Wave feminism has, in turn, provided models for subsequent forms of fan activism. For example, Clan PMS and the Game Grrls movement challenged hurtful gender stereotypes in computer games and the surrounding culture (Jenkins, 2000). The Sequential Tarts (DeVries, 2002) confronted representational and retail practices that were hostile to female comics readers. In both cases, participants' claims of fan status gave them credibility for critical interventions that were focused on pop culture industries.

Some might still dismiss these activities as not fully political in that they direct their energies at changing corporate practices rather than governmental policies. Yet attempts to shape policies, institutions and values are increasingly recognised as political, even if they are not directly tied to parties or governments. Lizabeth Cohen (2003) argues that throughout the 20th century, many groups – among them, women and racial and ethnic minorities – have sought to reform or transform

dominant practices through coordinated efforts as consumers. In the digital world, the forums for expressing political concerns, and the policies and infrastructures that shape our capacities to do so, are controlled by private interests. Our political struggles often take place through languages and contexts that are heavily shaped by commercial culture, making fan and consumer activism central to contemporary social movements.

A striking feature of post-millennial politics is the ways in which pop culture references are shaping political rhetoric and movement practices, while at the same time, as Earl and Kimport (2009: 223–225) suggest, the characteristics of social and political movements are "perpetual" and "ubiquitous" features of everyday lives. Accordingly, fan activism has moved from a crisis response to, for example, programme cancellations into a consistent, ongoing engagement with real-world concerns.

For the purposes of this discussion, "fan activism" refers to forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors that are drawn from popular and participatory culture. I am describing as "civic" those practices that are designed to improve the quality of life and strengthen social ties within a community, whether defined in geographically local or dispersed terms. As we seek to better understand the logics of fan activism, we may need to explore points of overlap between it and other, closely related forms of cultural politics. How, for example, might we describe groups that deploy practices from participatory culture, seek to construct their own media content worlds, and adopt a more playful approach to activism, but do not originate in a pre-existing fan community? Or how might we characterise efforts to mobilise specific images from popular culture within more conventional partisan or activist campaigns (see Brough and Shesthrova 2012)?

Following a brief history of fan activism, I will explore the HPA, a sustained effort to mobilise a network of fans of J.K. Rowling's fantasy books around an array of different issues and concerns, ranging from human rights in Africa to rights to equal marriage, from labour rights to media concentration and net neutrality. My focus will be on the HPA as an organisation, addressing its tactics, rhetoric and underlying theory of cultural activism, rather than on how individual members develop greater agency and efficacy (see Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2012). The HPA embraces a politics of "cultural acupuncture", mapping fictional

content worlds onto real-world concerns. A content world is the network of characters, settings, situations and values that forms the basis for the generation of a range of stories, in the hands of either a commercial producer or a grassroots community. So the content world around Harry Potter includes characters such as Snape and Dumbledore, settings such as Hogwarts, situations such as the sorting of students into houses by the Sorting Hat, and values such as friendship and maternal love, any or all of which can be used to generate new narratives or to tap into the meanings that are associated with the original stories. What Slack calls cultural acupuncture is a means of deploying elements of the content world (and their accumulated meanings) as metaphors for making sense of contemporary issues. The HPA speaks of the "eighth book" in the Harry Potter series (which canonically has only seven) to describe how participants extend the story through their choices and practices as fan activists.

A brief history of fan activism

Fans often entered civic discourse when they assert their collective rights as the most active and engaged segments of the media audience. The fan identity is often an embattled one, and efforts to save shows from cancellation or to rally support for a film project have helped to cement social ties between fans, define their shared interests, and shape their public status. The 1969 effort to "save *Star Trek*", led by Bjo and John Trimble, was the defining early example of fan activism (Lichtenberg et al., 1975). Having run the art show at the annual World Science Fiction Convention for more than 15 years, the Trimbles were deeply immersed in fandom's infrastructure, practices, rhetoric and values (Trimble, 1999). Through ties to Gene Roddenberry and his long-time secretary Susan Sackett, the Trimbles identified strategies for intervening in NBC's decision-making process to ensure the series' survival. Bjo Trimble's "Do's and Don'ts of Letter-Writing" (n.d.) still informs more recent "save our show" campaigns. The spread of these practices across different fan communities illustrates a complex, interlocking history, with fans forging collective identities sometimes around specific texts and sometimes around genres or subgenres. The resulting structure has sustained itself over decades of shifting tastes and its traditions are handed down to subsequent generations. Such a structure means that fans of a particular franchise have a more extensive set of allies for more localised campaigns through cross-fan alliances – fandom's latent capacity.

More recent campaigns innovate practices that are designed for an era of networked communication. For example, fans of *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2008) responded rapidly to news of the series' cancellation (Jenkins, 2006b). Affiliated websites included sophisticated analyses of how networks make decisions about shows and provided arguments in *Stargate*'s favour, contact information for key decision-makers, a range of potential tactics to gain their attention, and, perhaps most significantly, sample letters in multiple languages. *Stargate*'s declining ratings in the USA were not matched in other markets, and thus its fans sought to mobilise international affiliates to keep the series in production. In another case, the campaign to save *Chuck* (2007–2012) used social media to get supporters to buy foot-long sandwiches from Subway, a series sponsor (Seles, 2010). Subway's increased sponsorship, inspired by this show of support, tipped the scale for *Chuck*'s renewal.

Whether such efforts constitute activism according to traditional political criteria is an interesting question. Political scientists recognise some forms of cultural activism, such as rallying to protest budget cuts for public broadcasting, to protect local arts institutions or to save public landmarks. Functionally, fan attempts to protect texts that they see as meaningful represent similar efforts to shape the cultural environment, though they rarely get taken seriously in literature about activism, suggesting a residual distinction between high and low culture. Gene Roddenberry's efforts to link science fiction with a utopian and humanist philosophy, which included support for racial and gender equality (Fern, 1996), helped to fuel the Save *Star Trek* efforts. Martin Luther King Jr allegedly urged Nichelle Nichols to remain on *Star Trek* because Uhura's presence on the bridge was a statement that his dream might be realised. Nichols in turn redirected support for *Star Trek* to promote female and minority participation in NASA's manned space programme. Barbara Adams, an alternative juror in the 1996 Whitewater trial, made fan activism more visible when she wore a Star Fleet uniform into the courtroom, citing *Star Trek*'s idealism as an alternative set of virtues against which to position the trial's legal and political struggles.

Andrew Ross (1991) recounts how science fiction fan organisations such as the Futurians and the Committee for the Political Advancement of Science Fiction functioned in the 1930s and 1940s as spaces for debating radical political ideas, recruiting fans into larger labour and social movements, and paving the way for more socially conscious forms of science fiction. The female-led fandom of *Star Trek* was closely affiliated with larger movements to promote feminist themes through science fiction (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995), and discussions of

the Vulcan philosophy of "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations" anticipated more recent fan debates about the genre's representation of racial diversity (e.g. the extended online discussion within the science fiction community which became known as "Racefail '09"). These recent debates have spawned activism around the "white-casting" of genre films (Racebending.com) and the formation of an alternative press focused on publishing genre fiction by people of colour (Verb Noire) (Klink, 2010).

Such utopianism also empowered a group of queer fans, the Gaylaxians, to organise their own letter-writing campaign to get a gay or lesbian character added to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994) (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: 237–266). While the first letter-writing campaign partnered with Roddenberry against the networks, the Gaylaxians put pressure on *Star Trek*'s producers to remain true to Roddenberry's ideological commitments, seeing the inclusion of same-sex couples as following the same logic that had led to the inclusion of female officers and a multiracial crew. The Gaylaxians sought to reach queer youth at risk because of our homophobic climate, as does Dan Savage's more recent It Gets Better campaign. The producers dismissed the Gaylaxians as "activists" or "interest groups", but they asserted their status as "fans" with a deep investment in *Star Trek*. This rhetorical move hints at fans' sense of entitlement, based on their emotional engagement with and extended support for "their" series. These fans, collectively and individually, defined themselves in opposition to commercial interests while supporting the values that are embodied within these content worlds, even against the worlds' own producers.

By the time these fan groups had defined an issue, identified decision-makers, developed tactics, and educated and mobilised supporters, they had completed all of the steps required for activism. Those who participated in such efforts had built the infrastructure and acquired the personal and organisational skills to take meaningful action. Those who succeed in such efforts might also find their civic voices and be more likely to take such action in the future. In *Entertaining the Citizen,* Liesbet van Zoonen concludes that fan practices embody, "in abstract terms, the customs that have been laid out as essential for democratic politics: information, discussion, and activism" (2005: 63). All of this suggests that fandom may represent a particularly powerful training ground for future activists and community organisers.

Other well-established forms of fan activism centre on efforts to resist censorship or to defend participatory practices against threats from commercial rights holders. Muggles for Harry Potter was organised by

the American Library Association, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Electronic Frontier Foundation in response to efforts by the Christian right to ban Rowling's books from schools and public libraries. Alternatively, Defense against the Dark Arts arose when Warner Bros sent take-down notices to fan websites that the studio claimed infringed franchise materials, and the group helped to reshape the company's policies for dealing with fan participation (Jenkins, 2006a). Both efforts moved from a desire to defend fan practices towards a more critical perspective on constraints on participatory culture, from specific crises to a critique of current IP regimes. The Organization for Transformative Works, which publishes *Transformative Works and Cultures,* represents a concerted effort by fans to defend participatory culture, including by developing new platforms for distributing fan-produced materials outside the commodity logic of Web 2.0 and new academic and legal defences of fan cultural practices.

As this brief account suggests, fan activism includes many different kinds of mobilisation, some directed at promoting the interests of the fan community (lobbying to protect series from cancellation, organising against censorship or cease and desist orders), some involving struggles over representation (such as the Gaylaxians' efforts to get a queer character on *Star Trek*) and some involving commenting on public policy (whether Adams' personal statement or the HPA's collective action). All tap into fandom's communication infrastructure and social networks, and all deploy fictional content worlds and fan rituals, practices and rhetoric to motivate participation.

John Tulloch (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: 143–172) characterised *Doctor Who* fans as a "powerless elite" who cannot influence the decisions that most impact their cultural pursuits, but who exert considerable discursive power in shaping the popular memory of favourite texts. Fans leverage that discursive power to extend their voices beyond their own community, forming alliances with other invested groups, attracting mainstream coverage and increasing their persuasiveness. Lori Kido Lopez (2011) reaches a similar conclusion in her account of Racebending.com, an organisation that was launched to protest against the "white-casting" of characters who are presumed to be Asian when the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–2008) was made into a live-action feature film:

> Some of the organization's strongest and most effective tactics rely on the skills developed as members of the fan community: honing their arguments through community discussions, producing and editing

multimedia creations, educating themselves about every facet of their issue, and relying on their trusted networks to provide a database of information.

Enter the HPA

The experience of reading, debating, performing and rewriting Harry Potter has been shared by many in the millennial generation (Anelli, 2008). Rowling's stories of the boy wizard, the remarkable school Hogwarts, and the battle against the Dark Lord became global bestsellers. Emerging alongside the popular embrace of the Internet, Harry Potter fandom has developed new media platforms and practices (Scott, 2010). The community was among the first to use podcasting and blogs, to develop beta reading practices to improve fan fiction, to distribute mp3 files (such as those of Wizard Rock) through social networking sites, and to use machinima production practices to construct fan vids. Over the coming decade, Harry Potter fandom will function as the feeder for many subsequent fan communities, much as *Star Trek* fandom modelled Baby Boom fan practices and politics. The HPA needs to be understood as yet another example of innovative practices emerging from this fan community.

Started by Andrew Slack, a twentysomething trained community organiser who has a background in working with troubled youth, the HPA is fan activism on a previously unimagined scale. The group currently has more than 100,000 members in more than 70 active chapters across the world, organised and mobilised by Slack and his 40-person staff, both volunteer and paid. The group collaborates with more traditional activist and charity organisations, such as Doctors for Health, Mass Equity, Free Press, The Gay-Straight Alliance and Wal-Mart Watch. When the HPA takes action, the results can be staggering. For instance, it raised $123,000 to fund five cargo planes transporting medical supplies to Haiti after the earthquake. Its Accio Books! Campaign has collected over 55,000 books for communities around the world. HPA members called 3,597 residents of Maine in just one day, encouraging them to vote against Proposition 9, which would deny equal marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples. Wizard Rock the Vote registered more than 1,000 voters.

Fan communities have long supported favourite charities, including efforts on behalf of the homeless (popular among fans of *Beauty and the Beast* (1987–1990)), the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation (*Starsky and Hutch* (1975–1979)), and Equality Now and Kids

Need to Read (*Serenity* (2005) and *Firefly* (2002–2003) fans, known as Browncoats). Fans of a particular franchise often choose to support specific causes because they perceive them as being tied to the theme of the franchise or because key actors or producers are involved. The HPA links members to a range of such charity and relief efforts, but it also promotes activism around structural changes. As Slack explains,

> We do want people to both volunteer with people at a local AIDS clinic as well as advocate for better treatment of AIDS victims in Africa. We want our young people tutoring underprivileged kids and helping them read, getting them engaged in the Internet and learning those things, but then also challenging the rules of the game that are making it possible for kids to go without food.
>
> (Jenkins, 2009)

Running the HPA from his living room in Somerville, Massachusetts, Slack is a charismatic leader who inspires his volunteer army and part-time paid staff, but also embraces more dispersed and decentralised power structures that allow members a greater voice in the organisation's decisions. Local chapters participate in national campaigns but also initiate their own activities that reflect their own agendas (e.g. veterans' rights) and solicit participation by other chapters. The HPA's regular online exchanges become places to negotiate the group's sometimes competing priorities. Unlike most activist groups and charities, the HPA is not defined around a single mission; rather, it embraces a flexible framework that is inspired by Rowling's content world, enabling it to respond quickly to any crisis or opportunity and to its dispersed members. This mixture of strong leadership, dispersed membership, social networks and flexible structures informs many contemporary forms of activism, ranging from the US Tea Party movement to youth uprisings in the Arab world. The HPA demonstrates how the pop culture worlds that are central to fandom offer particularly rich resources for supporting collective action and reaching young people who have not yet embraced political identities.

Among Slack's first moves was to join forces with prominent fans, directly courting Wizard Rock stars, podcast producers, fan fiction editors and writers, high-profile bloggers and convention organisers. Paul DeGeorge, who, together with his brother Joe, fronts Harry and the Potters was an early and important HPA supporter, recruiting other performers to participate in Wizard Rock the Vote, Rock Out against Voldemedia and other HPA campaigns (Scott, 2010: 263–264). Paul

DeGeorge helped to spearhead the Wizard Rock EP of the Month Club, which for two years raised money for literacy-related non-profits by offering members exclusive CDs by groups such as the Whomping Willows, the Moaning Myrtles, Tonks and the Aurors, Danny Dementor, MC Kreacher and the Shrieking Shack Disco Gang. Many groups wrote songs that are tied to specific HPA campaigns and the HPA uses their concerts as major recruiting sites.

While Slack was relatively new to fandom, support from other prominent fans helped to establish his credibility and broaden his reach. In July 2007 the group worked with the Leaky Cauldron, one of the most popular fan news sites, to organise house parties around the country that were focused on increasing awareness of the Sudanese genocide. Participants listened to and discussed a podcast that featured real-world political experts, such as Joseph C. Wilson, former US ambassador to Gabon, and John Prendergast, senior advisor to the International Crisis Group, alongside performances by Wizard Rock groups. While some fans contested his allegiances, Slack's own mastery of the Harry Potter texts helped to overcome any lingering perceptions that he was an "outside agitator", a concern that echoed the reality of Communist Party interventions in the science fiction fan world in the 1930s.

Instead, Slack worked within the structures of fandom, using such things as the House Cup competition. Hogwarts is organised around four houses – Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff – each of which embodies different ideals and virtues. Harry Potter fans deploy many different "sorting" mechanisms to place members into appropriate houses, and many feel a strong sense of identification and affiliation with their house. (I am, for the record, a loyal member of the House of Ravenclaw.) The HPA recruits high-profile heads for each house who encourage members to take action for the cause. (Ravenclaw's house has been headed by Evanna Lynch, the actress who plays Luna Lovegood, the best-known Ravenclaw character, and by young adult author Maureen Johnson.) For example, Wrock4Equality was a House Cup competition, where members earned points for each person whom they contacted in the effort to rally voters against Maine's Proposition 9. Such structures respect things that fans value, even as leaders sometimes nudge them beyond their comfort zones as budding young activists.

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

Many of the HPA's most effective videos simply depict students, in their bedrooms, speaking directly into the camera. The HPA has formed a strong partnership with the video blog community Nerdfighters, whose capacity to mobilise its members was a key factor in the HPA's success in a 2010 Chase Manhattan Bank online competition. Other HPA videos, such as a campaign supporting workers' rights that depicted Harry's battles against the Dark Lord, WaldeMart, involve broad parodies of the Rowling content world.

Imagine better

Speaking at the 2008 Harvard graduation, J.K. Rowling told a generation of young students who had come of age reading her books: "We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better." Neither a generic celebration of the human creative capacity nor a simple defence of bedtime stories, Rowling's talk describes how her early experiences working with Amnesty International shaped the books. Linking imagination to empathy, she calls out to those who refuse to use their imaginations:

> They choose to remain comfortably within the bounds of their own experience, never troubling to wonder how it would feel to have been born other than they are. They can refuse to hear screams or to peer inside cages; they can close their minds and hearts to any suffering that does not touch them personally; they can refuse to know.
>
> (Rowling, 2011)

Rowling's speech has become a key source of inspiration for HPA members: her notion of the socially engaged imagination connects their love of her content world with their own campaigns for social justice. Slack has named a recent initiative to forge partnerships between the HPA and other fan communities Imagine Better.

Rowling's call to "imagine better" could describe a range of movements that are embracing "a politics that understands desire and speaks to the irrational; a politics that employs symbols and associations; a politics that tells good stories" (Duncombe, 2007: 9). Zoonen (2005: 63) has similarly questioned the divide between the affective commitments of fans and the cognitive processes that are associated with active citizenship: "Pleasure, fantasy, love, immersion, play, or impersonations are not concepts easily reconciled with civic virtues such as knowledge,

rationality, detachment, learnedness, or leadership." For Duncombe, the way forward bridges this divide by means of "ethical spectacle" (124–175) – public performances that are pleasurable, participatory and playful, yet also confront reality. Whereas Mark Dery (1993) described 1990s cultural and political movements as "jamming" dominant culture, Duncombe alternatively suggests that activists surf the popular imagination, hitching themselves to Hollywood's publicity to reach a larger public.

Slack describes this new form of activism as "cultural acupuncture". Writing in the *Huffington Post,* he explained:

> Cultural acupuncture is finding where the psychological energy is in the culture, and moving that energy towards creating a healthier world…We activists may not have the same money as Nike and McDonald's but we have a message that actually means something…What we do not have is the luxury of keeping the issues we cover seemingly boring, technocratic, and inaccessible. With cultural acupuncture, we will usher in an era of activism that is fun, imaginative, and sexy, yet truly effective.
>
> (Slack, 2010)

Recognising that the news media were more apt to cover the launch of the next Harry Potter film than the genocide in Darfur, Slack saw the HPA as a way to identify key cultural pressure points, thus redirecting energy towards real-world problems. Pinning political and social causes to Harry Potter works because this content world has a large following, is familiar to an even larger number of people, has its own built-in mechanisms for generating publicity and is apt to attract many subsequent waves of media interest. Harry Potter constitutes a form of cultural currency that can carry the group's messages to many who would not otherwise hear them and that channels our emotional investments. Fans' previous attempts to tap the power of source material have been primarily focused on the source's power as a shared reference point within the fan community itself, whereas Slack's notion of cultural acupuncture also recognises and seeks to deploy the larger public's investments in these popular media to get under people's skin and prod them to take political action.

Unlike some political groups that dismiss popular culture as "bread and circuses" and "weapons of mass distraction", the HPA respects fans' existing emotional investments, seeing them as deeply meaningful and also as potential motivators for political change. Moving beyond

fantasy, the HPA educates its community about issues that it should be concerned about, returning to the content world for powerful analogies. In that sense, we might draw parallels between the ways in which the HPA taps the Harry Potter mythos and the ways in which, say, the civil rights movement of the 1960s deployed Biblical allusions – such as the Promised Land and the River Jordan – that were familiar to its churchgoing supporters. Fandom is not a religion and does not depend on literal belief, but it recognises the power of great stories to move hearts and minds. Catherine L. Belcher and Becky Herr Stephenson's 2011 book, *Teaching Harry Potter*, describes how a range of educators have offered their students ways into Rowling's content world that reflect their lived experiences as undocumented immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, special-needs kids and so forth, seeing it as offering many potential identifications and messages. Fandom represents a space where shared allusions become socially and politically meaningful.

Cultural acupuncture inspires civic participation by mapping content worlds onto real-world problems. Writing for *In These Times*, Slack describes Harry Potter in terms that resonate post-9/11:

> Imagine a world faced with unpredictable attacks that are carried out by a cult-like network. Led by a charismatic figure that is rarely ever seen or heard from, this network continues to claim responsibility for heinous acts that include random kidnappings, the destruction of bridges and mass murders. Stateless and living among the masses, its members have become so hard to track down that the government is at a loss. Officials have begun to focus more on the image of "looking tough" than on creating real safeguards to protect its citizens. The world has become haunted by fear.
>
> (Slack, 2007)

Against this backdrop of Death Eater terrorists, bungling or manipulative government officials, a deceptive press and repressive school authorities, Rowling tells how one young man organised his classmates into Dumbledore's Army, a loosely organised activist group, to go out and fight evil – sometimes working alone, sometimes collaborating with adult groups such as the Order of the Phoenix, but always carrying much of the burden of confronting Voldemort and his minions (Slack, 2010).

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

> Young people are depicted in the books as often smarter, more aware of what's happening in the world, than their elders, though there

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

(Jenkins, 2009)

James Paul Gee (2007: 45–70) argues that games are effective tools for mobilising learning because they offer their players clearly defined roles and goals, offering compelling identities and new epistemic perspectives, the capacity to act in meaningful ways, and clear paths to success. The HPA similarly offers its participants roles within larger-than-life campaigns, roles that Slack sees as echoing the power of myth as described by Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung: "What if we gave our teenagers the opportunity to imagine themselves as the heroes that they have grown up watching, rather than treating their precious minds as nothing more than a way to line the pockets of some CEO?" (Slack, 2010). The HPA's playful deployment of terms like "Voldemedia" and "WaldeMart" maps the personalised embodiment of evil in the content world to an expanding understanding of real-world harms. Consequently, the HPA allows its young members to know who they are as activists, what they are fighting against and what they are fighting for – all key steps towards achieving social change.

Battling the Muggle mind-set

For the HPA, overcoming the "Muggle mind-set" and releasing the power of fantasy represent vital first steps in becoming an activist. When many Harry Potter fans think of Muggles, they think first of the narrow-minded Dursley family who keep Harry locked away in the cupboard under the stairs out of fear of and embarrassment about his magical capacities. Harry is literally closeted at the saga's start and emerges as a key political figure by the series' conclusion – a classic coming-out story. Building on Rowling's depiction, the HPA depicts Muggles as embodying racism, sexism and homophobia, as seeking to constrain cultural diversity through shame and fear: "The 'Muggle Mindset' . . . that pervades our culture is unimaginative and two-dimensional. It is a system based on fear that sets normalcy as one's aspiration" (Slack, 2007). The HPA uses

the elastic concept of the "Muggle mind-set" as an all-purpose signifier for those forces that resist social justice, including many that are the targets of other kinds of activism, such as conformity, commercialisation, authoritarianism and the politics of terror. The term "Muggle mind-set" is as loose and as encompassing as, say, "neoliberalism" or "dominant ideology", and, like them, it links structures of belief, power and action. In challenging the Muggle mind-set, the HPA is able to link the personal and the political in ways that are inspired by feminist and queer activist groups. The Muggle mind-set is, of course, a simplification of the more complex representations of the politics of diversity within the Harry Potter books themselves, given the degree to which Rowling criticises the wizarding world for its own insensitivity to "mudbloods" and the rights of house elves, the ways in which she uses the Society for Protection of Elfian Welfare to spoof certain forms of student activism, and how Dumbledore himself defends the rights of Muggles (Carey, 2003; Horne, 2010).

In their final struggles with Voldemort, Harry, Hermione, Ron and their classmates had to seek out and destroy seven horcruxes – magic objects of supreme evil that contained hidden fragments of the Dark Lord's soul. In the months leading up to the release of the final movie, the HPA launched an ambitious campaign to identify and direct its collective energy against seven real-world horcruxes. Some, such as the Starvation Wages Horcrux, called attention to global human rights issues; HPA members who pursued it sought to get Warner Bros to commit to license Harry Potter candies only to fair trade companies. Others represented concerns in young people's lives. For the Dementor Horcrux, the HPA partnered with Reachout.com, an online support group for teens considering suicide: "Like Harry, many of us may feel debilitated by the dementor-like experiences of anxiety, depression, low body image, and lots of feelings, thoughts, and behaviours that knock us off balance" (Harry Potter Alliance, 2010a). The Body Bind Horcrux helped members to push back against distorted body images, while for the Bullying Horcrux the HPA joined forces with the Gay-Straight Alliance to battle homophobia in schools. Its efforts against bullying included both collecting signatures for the Make It Better Oath and making phone calls to voters in Rhode Island to urge them to support an equal marriage initiative there. Some of the HPA's horcruxes required concerted efforts on a national scale, while others encouraged personal reflection and localised action. While critics might see such short, focused efforts as token gestures, the overall horcrux campaign was designed to help participants to understand the links between

campaigns for social justice, and the internalised fears and anxieties that block many from taking meaningful action. The horcruxes were peda-gogical devices that helped participants to see themselves and the world differently, much like the preparation that Hogwarts students under-went prior to their final confrontation with the gathering forces of evil. They were intended less to create immediate fixes than to map the terrain upon which social change must take place.

As they battle the Muggle mind-set, HPA members often draw sage advice from Hogwarts' headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. A 2009 cam-paign asked members to wonder: "What would Dumbledore do?" Slack refers often to the Dumbledore Doctrine – a loose set of ideas drawn from the books:

> [Dumbledore] discusses how prevailing ideas of racial superiority for full-blood wizards must be transformed into curiosity and interest in people's differences. Half-giants, like Harry's friend Hagrid, shouldn't have to hide their identities. House elves in servile positions must be allowed freedom and respect. Indigenous populations, like the Centaurs and Merpeople, must be treated with the reverence and fairness they deserve. And unconventional marriages, such as the one between Lupin, the werewolf, and Tonks, the full-blood witch, should be welcomed so long as they bring more love into the world.
>
> (Slack, 2007)

Dumbledore Doctrine provides a launching point for the group's efforts to support legalising gay marriage, because they see the acceptance and embrace of diversity as core values in the Harry Potter narratives. Slack sometimes compares Dumbledore with real-world political and philosophical leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and the Dalai Lama, on the basis of their shared philosophies of tol-erance and social justice. Some HPA members challenge this tendency to read Dumbledore as the moral centre of the books, arguing that Dumbledore's motives are not always pure or wise. Other critics have questioned whether the books offer a consistent or progressive focus for fan activism, pointing out that, like many other popular texts, the Harry Potter franchise is a contradictory blend of progressive impulses and retrograde elements. Such debates about character morality reflect fandom's existing interpretive practices, sustaining fan engagement as new members offer their own insights into core ethical and psychologi-cal dilemmas. Should fan activism in the future be understood as acting on a shared set of ideologies and dogmas that shape how fans read the

world, or can we imagine a kind of politics that builds on the ongoing debates that fans have about how to interpret and how to evaluate the characters, actions and values that are depicted in a favourite text?

Empowering youth

While the HPA is open to members of all ages, the group has focused its energies on attracting young people who have grown up reading the books and on helping them to find a path towards political engagement. According to HPA chapter coordinator Sara Denver (personal communication, July 2011), of the organisation's 98 chapters, 24 are hosted by high schools and 33 by colleges and universities, suggesting strong student representation in the group. An informal survey conducted by Ben Stokes of the University of Southern California's Civic Paths research group found that the median age of members is 21, again suggesting a strong youth focus, which has also been borne out by the Civic Paths team's fieldwork and qualitative interviews with 27 members of the HPA. The fieldwork provides rich examples of young people who have assumed leadership roles in the organisation and who have come to embrace activism as a result of the HPA's rhetoric and practices. (For more on this fieldwork, see Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2012.)

In starting with a fantasy about youth empowerment, the HPA addresses many prevailing concerns about young people and civic engagement. Current scholarship (Buckingham, 2000; Gibson, 2003; Levine, 2007; Bennett, 2008; Wattenberg, 2008) suggests that young people are rarely addressed as political agents, that they are not invited into the political process, and that they are not consulted in the political decision-making process, whether local, state, national or global. Existing literature suggests that young people are most apt to become politically involved if they come from families with a history of citizen participation and political activism; if they encounter teachers, especially in the civics classroom, who encourage them to reflect on and respond to current events; if they attend schools where they are allowed a voice in core decisions; and if they participate in extracurricular activities and volunteerism that give back to their community. Most forms of activism reach the same core group of participants, who are already politically engaged, and redirect them towards new issues. However, the HPA is targeting young people who are engaged culturally, who may already be producing and sharing fan culture, and it helps them to extend their engagement into politics, often deploying existing skills and capacities in new ways. Kahne et al. (2011: 2) discovered

that involvement in online networks focused on shared interests (e.g. fandom) also shapes political identities: "online, nonpolitical, interest-driven activities serve as a gateway to participation in important aspects of civic and, at times, political life, including volunteering, engagement in community problem-solving, protest activities, and political voice".

As researchers such as David Buckingham (2000) have long argued, young people often feel excluded from the language and processes of adult politics. In most cases they are not invited to participate; their issues are often not addressed; and the debates are framed in a language that assumes familiarity with debates and policies. By contrast, the HPA's "cultural acupuncture" approach is imaginative and playful, offering an alternative set of metaphors and analogies that are already part of young people's lives, much as Fiske understood fans as transforming mass-media content into "cultural resources" for critiquing the dominant order (Jenkins, 2011: xxx–xxxi). The HPA embraces grassroots appropriation as a way of generating a new vocabulary for talking about political change.

HPA leaders and members may object to Fiske's characterisation of such practices as "resistance" (Jenkins, 2011: xxxiii) since they see themselves as building on the framework that Rowling, herself a human rights activist, provided. Nevertheless, they do prioritise the struggle for social justice ahead of those commercial motives that shape Warner Bros' management of the Harry Potter franchise, as is made clear by the HPA's November 2010 campaign to encourage the studio to contract with candy companies that observe fair trade policies. The effort defines HPA members as fans of the franchise and as consumers who are likely to buy affiliated products, but also mobilises content-world expertise to challenge studio decisions:

> When Hermione Granger discovers that the food at Hogwarts, chocolate included, is being made by house elves – essentially unpaid, indentured servants – she immediately starts a campaign to replace exploitation with fairness . . . In Harry Potter's world, chocolate holds a unique place: it is a Muggle item with magical properties. Chocolate is featured prominently throughout the books as a powerful remedy for the chilling effects produced by contact with dementors, which are foul creatures that drain peace, hope and happiness from the world around them . . . It is doubtful that chocolate produced using questionable labor practices would have such a positive effect, both in Harry's world and ours.
>
> (Harry Potter Alliance, 2010b)

Rather than seeing the licensed candies as mere commodities, the HPA evaluates them according to their meaningfulness in the content world and then links their "magical" powers to the ethics of how they are produced and sold: "As consumers of Harry Potter products, we are interested in supporting and purchasing products that are true to the spirit of the Harry Potter franchise." Throughout its campaign, the HPA holds open the prospect of a meaningful collaboration with corporate interests, but it also pledges to use boycotts and buycotts against the studio and its subcontractors.

In *The Future of Democracy*, Peter Levine argues, "There are limits to what adults and institutions can accomplish, given the opacity of youth culture and young people's resistance to being manipulated. Therefore, it is important that young people themselves have the skills and values they need to make their own sphere as constructive as possible" (2007: 76). In some ways, fan activism flies in the face of Levine's claims: fandom has historically been a space where youth and adults work together, outside the hierarchies that shape relations at school or home, because of their shared interests and mutual passions. Strikingly, though, Slack and many of the other core HPA leaders are in their 20s and early 30s – closer in age to the young activists than their parents and teachers, though experienced enough to mentor them and to help to negotiate with more adult-centred organisations.

Beyond the Potter franchise

The HPA has long hitched its campaigns to the release of the books and, more recently, the release of the feature films. Such moments offer a window of visibility as the news media go into a feeding frenzy around all things Harry. For example, the HPA drew coverage from mainstream media outlets through a bit of imaginative (if geeky) street theatre, staging an epic battle between the Death Eaters and the Order of the Phoenix in New York's Columbus Circle tied to the 2010 release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1*. These releases also represent moments where new fans discover the series and old fans renew their commitment.

With the 2011 release of the final feature film, the HPA's leadership faced a crisis of sustainability. Would what they had built over the previous five years function in the absence of new waves of media attention? Many fan communities – including those centred on the *Star Trek* franchise, *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Firefly* – have sustained creative energy and social ties over a decade or more of lapses in commercial output, although they have often retrenched, growing

smaller but more intense, and taking greater ownership over the content world. Yet an activist group, by its very nature, needs to reach beyond its own community if it wants to make a difference. So, under the banner "Imagine Better," the HPA is now seeking to forge alliances with other fan communities (for *Firefly*, *True Blood*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Twilight* and *Glee*, among many others). However, as it does so, it may need to disconnect its goals and practices from the specifics of the Harry Potter content world. How far can it go, and remain Dumbledore's Army?

One factor working in its favour is that many fans are nomadic, moving across content worlds and sometimes genres in the course of a lifetime in fandom. Many fan conventions are organised around broader generic rather than franchise-specific categories – and some of these, such as slash, originate from fan reading and production practices rather than industry discourse. So perhaps the HPA's core themes can be grafted onto a broader range of popular myths that may also motivate young people to take political action. Linking together Harry Potter and *Twilight* seems, on the surface, a smaller step than bringing in *Glee* fans, since they are both fantasy worlds rather than mundane ones, but to see them in this way is to focus on only one dimension of these franchises, and not necessarily the one that is most relevant to fans. Perhaps further expansion will result in innovations in new media platforms and practices, new issues and tactics for reading and responding to real-world problems through acts of collective imagination. What happens next will tell us a lot about how much we can abstract from the HPA model to forge new theories of youth and civic engagement.

My focus here has been on the processes of cultural acupuncture, deploying popular culture metaphors and analogies to refresh political rhetoric. In the case of the HPA, such metaphors remain closely linked to fan culture. But what happens when fandom incubates new discursive frames that feed back into mainstream politics? For example, Whitney Phillips (2009) has written about how 4Chan, a controversial online community that started as a place to discuss manga and anime, has deliberately generated memes and spread them across the Internet. Among them, she argues, was the Obama Joker imagery deployed in the Tea Party's campaign against "Obamacare". Or consider how undocumented youth, organising in support of the DREAM Act, have claimed Superman as another "illegal alien" who has nevertheless contributed to truth, justice and the American way (Zimmerman, n.d.).

Such efforts deploy pop icons, already holding affective power, to grab media and public attention (see Brough and Shresthova, 2012). Such efforts defamiliarise the issues and offer a welcome sense of play and pleasure to struggles for social justice. As the Joker might put it, "Why

so serious?" Writing about this larger movement to integrate pop culture and politics, John Hartley claims: "While it may not look very much like the Habermasian public sphere, it is clearly attracting the attention of those who are notoriously hard to reach by traditional technologies of citizenship" (2012: 147). Such efforts rely for their success on general knowledge rather than fan expertise: they deploy aspects of popular culture texts that are familiar even to those who have not encountered them directly.

Fan activism pushes deeper, dealing not with isolated references but with the full content world, recognising and rewarding fans who know more and imagine better. Certainly, some of the HPA's allusions are widely recognised – Dumbledore's Army, perhaps – facilitating meaningful partnership with non-fan organisations that value the creative energy that the Harry Potter books unleashed. Yet, as fan activists, the HPA members mobilise obscure characters and events, even quoting specific dialogue, and thus reward fan mastery. Fan activism works because of its fannishness. This fannishness extends beyond specific ways of reading texts to specific forms of fan participation (including cosplay, Wizard Rock, fan fiction and fan vidding), some of which may look strange outside the community. However, each contributes to fandom's ability to organise and mobilise quickly, to frame issues and educate supporters, to get the word out through every new media platform and channel. This ability is what ultimately distinguishes fan activism from the more casual deployment of pop culture references.

Acknowledgements

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