

TURNING FANS INTO HEROES: HOW THE HARRY POTTER ALLIANCE USES THE POWER OF STORY TO FACILITATE FAN ACTIVISM AND BLOC RECRUITMENT

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ABSTRACT

How do you get people – particularly young people – to engage with social and political issues? Activists and academics alike have been plagued by this question for some time, and answers to it have ranged from greater organizational involvement to framing. Another possibility is meeting youth where they are at; that is, connecting youth’s existing interests in popular culture with broader social problems and issues. A group that is doing just that is the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), a story-fueled non-profit organization that turns fans into heroes. In this chapter, we trace the development of the Harry Potter fan community, the stories’ resonance with fans, and how the HPA has drawn on the community and the story for

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mobilization. We argue that the HPA leverages culture in two ways that are relevant for social movements and political communication scholars. The HPA is able to tap into the fan community for bloc recruitment using its ties and connections to media – in this case, the fictional story – as a point of mobilization. Additionally, the HPA is able to bloc recruit from mass society – a process they refer to as “cultural acupuncture” – by strategically connecting the story with social justice issues when cultural attention is at its peak. We conclude with a discussion of the HPA’s impact on its members and how bloc recruitment and cultural acupuncture may be relevant for other fan communities.

Keywords: Fan activism; Harry Potter; social movements

In the fifth book of the Harry Potter series, we are introduced to the Order of the Phoenix, an underground group of adult witches and wizards who are leading the battle against the evil wizard, Lord Voldemort. They are older revolutionaries who have been fighting the villainous wizard for decades; often using their government jobs to act as moles or gain clandestine information. After spending summer vacation at the order’s headquarters, Harry Potter and his friends, Ron and Hermione, form their own youth version of the Order of the Phoenix with their classmates at Hogwarts in order to prepare themselves for the dangers of the war in ways their school curriculum had been failing to do. Naming themselves Dumbledore’s Army, after the leader of the Order of the Phoenix, the youth group relied on their ingenuity to prepare for the oncoming war against Lord Voldemort and his followers. They taught themselves practical defense skills; held their meetings in a little-known room that Harry discovered in the Hogwarts castle; and alerted each other of upcoming meetings through enchanted coins they carried, a creation of Harry’s friend, Hermione. Much like many youth activist groups in our world, Harry and his friends saw a problem in society, believed they had the power to do something about it, mobilized together, learned new skills, and used technology in innovative ways to work toward solving the problem.

Although they are rarely recognized as such, fictional stories like Harry Potter are a form of media that people react to and use in much the same way that they do the Internet or television. Indeed, Harry Potter may be an unlikely place to start looking for the relationship between media and movements, but media, like fictional stories, that are created for entertainment can motivate activists and organizations for social change (see [Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016](#)).

One such youth activist group is the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), an organization that often calls itself a Dumbledore's Army for our world. The HPA is a story-fueled nonprofit organization that turns fans into heroes. Founded in 2005, the organization, which believes in the power of story as a tool for social change, functions primarily online – even lacking a physical office for its six full-time employees. However, in that time, it has managed to spawn over 200 organized chapters, which exist physically on school campuses, in libraries, and in local communities across 6 continents and 35 nations. The majority of its members are primarily Harry Potter fans, many of whom would not have identified themselves as activists prior to participating with the HPA.

In this chapter, we outline how the HPA operates and how it is able to get groups of youth – who in many other contexts would not participate in politics – to become activists. We show how the stories, skills, and values of fan communities (i.e., their culture, collective identity, and resources, [Jenkins, 1983](#); [Polletta & Jasper, 2001](#); [Taylor & Whittier, 1995](#)) make them amenable to mobilization around social justice issues ([Jenkins, 2012b](#); [Scardaville, 2005](#)). We then highlight how the HPA, a fan-community affiliated advocacy organization, draws on the pre-existing fan's enthusiasm and the power of the Harry Potter story to tap into the fan communities in two ways: by treating fan communities as a source of bloc recruitment or by connecting to the broader cultural zeitgeist's interest in a pop culture phenomenon at strategically chosen times in order to generate awareness and social change. By connecting the story to fan activism, groups like the Harry Potter Alliance are able to “reframe” broader social issues and civic engagement into more relatable and more accessible forms ([Benford & Snow, 2000](#)), and bring hundreds of thousands of young members together to work toward social change on issues ranging from literacy to human rights and from economic equality to mental health. We conclude by discussing some of the broader political and biographical effects of the HPA's efforts.

FAN ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

Social movements and protest behavior – that is, petitions, protests, marches, and cultural symbols – have permeated modern political and social life ([Meyer & Tarrow, 1998](#)). Police and protester interactions are increasingly institutionalized, and protests are often heavily scripted events ([McCarthy, McPhail, Meyer & Tarrow, 1998](#)). Corporations have adopted social movement tactics to generate interest and support for their products and industries ([Walker, 2009](#); [Walker & Rea, 2014](#)). On an individual level, several studies

have found that youth are increasingly drawn to nontraditional political behavior like social movements, indicating that this trend is likely to continue (Dalton, 2011; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Carpini, 2006).

One way that social movements have permeated society has been through fan activism. Fans are a staple of modern society, and, although not often thought of as such, fictional stories, and the fandom¹ that surrounds them, can be a motivation for action. Jenkins first used the term “fan activism” in his book *Textual Poachers* to describe fans of the television show *Beauty and the Beast*, who fought the cancellation of the show by organizing mass actions consisting of writing letters to the network, handing out flyers on street corners, calling radio stations, and even leaving fliers in copies of *The Beauty and the Beast* at libraries (Jenkins, 2012b). Fans adopting social movement tactics in order to keep a show on the air or protest a show producer’s decision are common versions of fan activism. Since Joss Whedon’s television show, *Firefly*, went off the air in 2002, fans have not stopped fighting for its return, devising new schemes every few years. Fans of the *Doctor Who* spinoff *Torchwood* were so aghast when a beloved main character was killed in 2009, that a public memorial to his name exists to this day in Mermaid Quay, Cardiff, where the television show was set.

Fan communities on their own are not social movement communities. To borrow from the 1955 landmark teenage drama, fans are activists without a cause. However, there are many ways in which fans are ready-made activists. Beyond their shared institutional base and collective identity, fans devote significant energy to reimagining their favorite stories in new circumstances or grappling with literary theories to dig deeper into the narrative. They are often the earliest adaptors of new media, used to create, consume, and share content based on the stories. They find and form communities around the stories they love and are capable of activating those communities quickly and broadly thanks to their existing networks or technologies, which they have familiarized themselves with in order to share content and discussion. These abilities to interact critically with text, use technology in innovative ways, and amplify their message all assist fans in achieving their fan goals – whether that is making friends or getting more eyes on their art. Overall, fan engagement with media – be it text, television, or film – is nonpolitical, but the traits and actions learned as a part of fan communities as well as the underlying values and messages of the media they care about can also be used to achieve activist objectives.

Henry Jenkins (2012a) defines fan activism as “forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through

the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture.” Drawing from Jenkins’ work, as well as others (Brough & Shresthova, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Jenkins, 2006, 2012a), we know that fan activism is community-oriented, relies on the infrastructure of pre-existing fan groups, and draws on the rich stories the books, films, games, and television shows that these groups have championed. Fan activism is particularly appealing for youth because it is often fun. It draws on their shared experiences with the media, the communities, and friendships that emerge from the fan communities, and the desire to help others (Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012).

Although fan campaigns display the communities’ staggering passion, drive, and organizing power, the typical fan community does not have a social cause they are fighting for. Instead, fans form collective identities around their interests in media, arts, and culture (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, & Zimmerman, 2016; Scardaville, 2005),² often naming themselves things like Potterheads, Directioners (fans of the band One Direction), or Brogres (fans of the *Shrek* movie series) to assert their common interest and institutional base. Fan communities are also linked through the many actions they take: fans create media around the stories they love, in the form of fan fiction, fan art, videos, and even music. Indeed, what makes fan communities effective overlaps considerably with elements that make social movement communities effective: a sense of collective identity for participants, powerful cultural symbols and values, and informal skills that facilitate action (Benford & Snow, 2000; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Taylor & Whittier, 1995).

Protest participants come to social activism largely through a process of being invited to participate, developing social ties, and then becoming full participants (Klandermans, 2004; Munson, 2010; Schussman & Soule, 2005). Fan activism follows a similar path, but takes two different forms (Brough & Shresthova, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2009). In the first, fan activists – already connected through their fandom – use social movement tactics (i.e., protests and petitions) to support specific cultural products or practices. This includes the fans of *Star Trek*, soap operas, and *Beauty and the Beast* who, as discussed earlier, used petitions and protests to keep their shows on the air fit this category (Scardaville, 2005). Earl and Kimport (2009) find that these instances of groups using traditional protest tactics to address a broad range of radically diverging, often nonpolitical issues have increased. In the second form, activism is explicitly political but, again, it is driven by fan communities organized around nonpolitical interests. Examples of this include soccer clubs mobilizing in opposition to racism and sexism (Totten, 2015), and groups like the HPA drawing on the values of the fictional world to mobilize to support

LGBTQ rights, fair trade practices, and other “real world” issues (Jenkins et al., 2016). Both forms are exemplars of how social movement ideas and tactics have expanded beyond what we traditionally perceive to be the political (Earl & Kimport, 2009; Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2015; Polletta, 2008).

Fan communities tend to have sets of beliefs and practices that are amenable to mobilization. They are connected and invested in the stories and worlds constructed by their choosing. Indeed, many of these stories offer underlying values and beliefs, heroes and villains, and motivational or cautionary stories for fans to draw on for motivation. Similar to social movements, identification with these elements helps generate a sense of collective identity among participants (Polletta & Jasper, 2001), and, once involved, the bonds with other participants help deepen participants’ commitment to the groups (Fireman & Gamson, 1979; Munson, 2010). Although they are intended to entertain, it does not preclude these forms of pop culture from motivating political action as well.

Fans can also use these beliefs and values to connect, or “frame,” issues with broader interests and concerns (Benford & Snow, 2000). Social movement scholars identify several ways that movements can draw such connections. Movements can link multiple congruent but disconnected frames together (frame bridging), sharpen or aggrandize existing values or beliefs (frame amplification), expand existing frames to incorporate a broader set of concerns (frame extension), or change old understandings into new ones (frame transformation; Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Like social movements more broadly, fan communities can frame connections between the fictional worlds they love and the problems they see in the real world, using the values and beliefs that make their favorite stories resonate as motivation for responding to real-world issues.

Indeed, as Jenkins (2006, 2012b) highlights, some of the defining elements of fan communities are their desire to play a more active role in the production of media and culture and to be active consumers. Fans not only consume the stories, they tell, retell, and remix them; making them their own in the process. Thus, framing may not only include drawing connections between disparate political stories, but also activists connecting the political with popular culture as well. Indeed, by telling and retelling stories, fans “help shape the contours of content worlds that may serve as affective resources and organizing structures for the mobilizing of collective action” (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). The storytelling skills, and comfort with publicly sharing views and beliefs is a resource that can be useful for social movement mobilization. We typically think of resources as money, space, or time, but participants’ social capital is a resource too (Cress & Snow, 1996; Jenkins, 1983; Lim, 2008). Discomfort with publicly sharing their political views can impede

individual participation (Eliasoph, 1998; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). Fan communities can be particularly amenable to addressing these impediments to activism by offering a context where participants are able to grow accustomed to more public expressions of interests and beliefs and making activism itself more fun and (comparatively) less serious.

Media has played an important role for social movement mobilization (Gitlin, 1980; Rohlinger, 2002; Roscigno & Danaher, 2001), and the proliferation of new media has enabled expanding the reach and recognition of fan activism and social movements more broadly (Earl, 2010; Earl & Kimport, 2009). Youth are often early adopters of new media, and the Internet and social media offer a new outlet for engaging with the stories in ways that would be considerably more difficult without them. Such new outlets allow fans to engage the stories – and each other – in ways that are often across media platforms, or “transmedia” (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). Fans discuss episodes on message boards, edit wikis,³ documenting the characters, events, and worlds of the shows they love, write their own stories based in these worlds, and attend meet-ups and conventions to socialize with other. Understanding how this digitally fostered engagement blossoms into fan activism offers insight into how new media has influenced youth engagement and participatory politics more broadly.

Bloc Recruitment and Cultural Acupuncture

Fan communities are subsections of mass culture with their own collective identities, values, practices, and interests in various media, including movies, books, and television shows. As Fine and Kleinman note, culture can be widespread throughout a population, but “identification serves as the motivation for socialization into the subculture and subsequent contributions to it” (1979, p. 18). Here, we argue that fans’ identification with the community enables advocacy organizations with ties to fan communities to mobilize in two ways. Advocacy organizations can mobilize the fan communities as a source of bloc recruitment for engagement, or they can motivate people to get active by tapping into the broader cultural zeitgeist at strategically chosen times and drawing connections with activist issues – often by tying large cultural events (e.g., movie releases, tours, etc.) to specific political issues – a process that Slack (2011) refers to as “cultural acupuncture.”

Fandom can be a source of bloc recruitment for advocacy organizations. Bloc recruitment refers to “the way in which social movement organizers often recruit members and participants among groups of individuals already

organized for some other purpose” (Oberschall, 1993, p. 24; see also Diani, 2013; Oberschall 1973). By tapping into existing groups and organizations, movements are able to benefit from existing leadership structures, resources, and meeting places, and avoid the sometimes tedious work of recruiting participants. Researchers have highlighted how the Black church was an organizational base for the civil rights movement (McAdam, 2010; Morris, 1986), the Protestant churches and fraternal lodges were sources of recruitment for the Ku Klux Klan (McVeigh, 2009), and the punk scene of the 1980s and 1990s offered a philosophical and cultural basis for the animal rights, feminist, and anti-corporate movements (Cherry, 2006; Leblanc, 1999; Moore & Roberts, 2009). Indeed, in each of these examples the movement had strong ties to the communities that they were bloc recruiting from.

In his overview of the topic, Diani (2013) identifies three basic types of bloc recruitment. These include political organizations redirecting their issue focus from one topic to another, nonpolitical organizations becoming political or adopting a political role, or organizations recruiting people already bonded by their involvement in a community activity. Yet much of this work has focused on bloc recruitment that draws from groups and individuals already organized as activists (Diani, 1995; Xu, 2013). Further, bloc recruitment research still lacks a clear outline of what makes it possible (Diani, 2013).

Here, we argue that the HPA is able to effectively bloc recruit from the – ostensibly apolitical – Harry Potter fan community because of its authentic connections with the fans’ community and collective identity, and its ability to highlight the value-laden subtext of the story. In the process of bloc recruiting, the HPA takes the rich characters, values, and events of the story and brings them into conversation with specific social problems. As Allen, in the process of discussing the relationship between expressive and decision-making discourse loops, explains, “the songs that serve to build solidarity within an oppressed group may eventually come to have an impact on structural-level decisions by providing framing concepts that the group ultimately uses to articulate its claims ... for collective action” (Allen, 2015, p. 191). Put another way, groups like the HPA are able to use the story to “reframe” broader social issues and civic engagement into more relatable and more accessible “aspects of the ‘world out there...’ in ways that are ‘intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists’” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198, see also Benford & Snow, 2000). Only, in this case the “re-framing” is connecting the fictional media and nonfictional world instead of two disparate social issues. The HPA’s ability to “extend” frames beyond the confines

of the fictional media helps them to reframe social problems in ways that are more relateable, gives fans an opportunity to connect with these issues on a deeper level, offers a more exciting starting point for those who are new to activism, and facilitates bloc recruitment. It is also an approach that makes them distinct from the modal social movement organization. As with other social movements (Jenkins, 1983), organizations like the HPA play a crucial role in promoting interest in social and political issues.⁴ Such fan activist organizations are most effective in doing so when they are authentically connected to the fan community and have the ability to deeply engage with the same cultural touchstones, making helping others achievable and meaningful.

In addition to bloc recruiting fan communities, advocacy groups may also use mass interest in pop culture media events – such as movie debuts, book releases, and high-profile tours – to mobilize mass society; a process referred to as “cultural acupuncture” (Slack, 2011). Pop icons and cultural events such as film, television, and album releases already hold affective power over people, and grab considerable media and public attention (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). This is particularly relevant for social movements because, as Diani notes, “the really crucial process for mobilization, the transmission of cognitive cultural messages, often happens through channels other than networks such as, for example, the media” (Diani, 2013, p. 149, see also Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Roscigno & Danaher, 2001). Instances where advocacy organizations can connect the real-world problems they care about – like fair trade or racial discrimination – directly to pop culture events at the height of their attention may help these organizations to “surf the popular imagination, hitching themselves to Hollywood’s publicity to reach a larger public” (Jenkins, 2012a; see also Duncombe, 2007). By using fictional media like Harry Potter or the Hunger Games to educate on real-world issues, advocacy groups are able to pique the interest of fans that would otherwise be unfamiliar with the topic, and develop blocs of potential activists. Fans, being natural creators and organizers, are then quick to mobilize and take action around the issue. Andrew Slack, the cofounder of the HPA, defines this “cultural acupuncture” as a process where groups move the energy around a cultural event toward “creating a healthier world” (2011). 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 recognizes the larger public’s investments in these popular media and seeks to utilize their ability to get under people’s skin in the process of encouraging political action.

Cultural acupuncture offers a number of different advantages for advocacy groups. Advocacy organizations can help youth – a particularly important group for mobilization (Earl, Maher, & Elliott, 2017; McAdam, 1986) – find their own creative ways of engaging with issues when they meet them where their interests are at rather than waiting on youth to seek them out. By mapping fictional media on to real-world concerns, advocacy organizations also offer people, particularly youth, a set of metaphors for making sense of contemporary issues – in essence building a bridge between micro- and macropolitics (Jenkins, 2012a). Cultural acupuncture is also useful for attracting media attention for an issue. Media networks are often more open to political stories when they have the added “public interest” connection to a cultural event like a movie premier. Thus, through cultural acupuncture, culture becomes a resource for advocacy organizations to use to mobilize people and make the world a better place (Polletta, 2008).

Of course, aiming to tap into fleeting moments of popular culture can be more effective for broad awareness and “thin” engagement (such as signing petitions or contributing to hashtags) than “thick” engagement (such as attending protests or creating sustained participation) (Tufekci, 2014; Zuckerman, 2014). But even “thin” involvement is crucial for sustained social movement mobilization (Barberá et al., 2015), and – although it does not have to be – can be a gateway to more committed engagement (Munson, 2010; Schussman & Soule, 2005). In the following sections, we outline how the origins of the Harry Potter fan community and how the HPA drew on these community ties to mobilize for a better world.

DATA AND ANALYTIC APPROACH

The goal of this study is to treat the HPA as a case of fan activism and outline the elements that make the HPA effective from an insider’s perspective (Ragin & Becker, 1992). We draw on one of the author’s experiences as a member and spokesperson for the HPA, as well as participant observation, interviews, internal organizational documents, and survey information to outline how the HPA operates; particularly, how it is able to bloc recruit from the fan community and from society more broadly. The combination of insider knowledge about the Harry Potter community and the HPA’s campaign decisions, framing approaches, and institutional logics offers important insights into how this organization is able to mobilize the fan community. We combine these insights with information drawn from published articles by HPA

leaders that explain the logic and approach of the organization, interviews with ten chapter leaders about their connection to, and experience within, the HPA, examples, cases, and campaigns from the HPA website and archive, and results from internal membership surveys of chapter leaders and members in order to make a holistic case for the HPA's approach to mobilization.

THE HARRY POTTER FAN COMMUNITY

The Harry Potter fan community developed while many of its original fans were still in secondary school or just starting university. Enamored with the magical world of Hogwarts and stuck waiting for years in between each book release, Harry Potter fans turned to the Internet to find an outlet for their enthusiasm. They drew fan art, wrote fan fiction, discussed the latest news around the upcoming film series, and theorized endlessly about what would happen in the next installment. They gathered, not so much on the official Scholastic, Bloomsbury, or Warner Bros. websites, but on fansites built by their peers. MuggleNet, for example, which would become the #1 Harry Potter fansite in the world, was created by a 12-year-old homeschooler named Emerson Spartz. The Potter Puppet Pals, a series of flash animation episodes that would later become one of YouTube's earliest viral videos, was created by a group of middle schoolers.

Like other fan communities ([Jenkins, 2012b](#)), enthusiasm for the story and a desire to communicate about it with other people drove Potter fans to learn new skills for expression. Whether it was learning to code a website, writing a story, producing a podcast, or even getting a deeper understanding of literary techniques by dissecting the books to figure out what would happen next, the young Harry Potter fan community grew incredibly savvy. As the Internet evolved from blogs and fansites to podcasts and online video, Potter fans were among the first to experiment with the new technological terrain. Indeed, fans flocked to new media because they wanted a platform on which to share or consume the content they created and because they wanted to find other people with whom they could discuss the story. In the early days of fandom, fans circulated zines and newsletters via snail mail. Social media has made connections and content faster and more numerous, but in the early days of the Harry Potter fan community, it was still very new. As the fans grew up alongside the boy wizard, social media was developing along a parallel trajectory, continually providing the fans with new ways to create and spread the content they created.

Wizard Rock

One of the primary ways the parallel development of social media and fan enthusiasm for the Harry Potter books and movies intersected was the creation of Harry Potter-themed music, known as wizard rock. Wizard rock was founded by Paul and Joe DeGeorge, a pair of brothers with passing resemblance to Harry Potter, who wondered what would happen if Harry Potter quit the quidditch team and became a punk rocker. In their band *Harry and the Potters*, the brothers perform in character (both as Harry Potter), dressed in matching punk interpretations of the boy wizard – nixing the Hogwarts robes for worn-out jeans with lightning bolt belt buckles. Their songs are all from Harry’s perspective and cover topics ranging from his unbearably awkward first date with Cho Chang to inconsistencies in wizard economics and, of course, fighting Lord Voldemort.

In their early days, they performed mostly in bookstores and libraries: an homage to their literary beginnings as well as a cheap solution to finding all-ages venues. They were already a hit with any crowd, thanks largely not only to their name (anything branded Harry Potter in the early aughts was going to get attention), but also due to their presence, charm, and song-writing ability. All of this changed in fall of 2003 when a popular Harry Potter fan fiction writer, Cassandra Clare, posted about the band on her LiveJournal (a popular blogging site), and the post was picked up by several of the biggest Harry Potter fansites. The brothers’ email inbox was overflowing with thousands of emails from fans – along with one \$400 web server bill for excessive downloads on their music. With a newfound base of fans, they were able to go on tour across the United States in the summer of 2004 and in the United Kingdom that winter (Anelli, 2008).

In addition to the burgeoning interest in *Harry and the Potters*, the rise of MySpace had a massive impact on wizard rocks’ solidification as a music scene. By 2005, MySpace had become the most popular social networking site for high school and college students. MySpace offered something that LiveJournal and its other predecessors did not: music hosting. Instead of needing to buy your own domain and server space for uploading, storing, and sharing your music, anyone who wanted could upload an MP3 file and could do it at zero cost. The site’s music uploading feature did not require a record label or any sort of evidence to prove that you were an established musician. Anyone who wanted to could upload their music and share it. Bands with names like the Parselmouths, the Moaning Myrtles, and the Butterbeer Experience began popping up online, amassing sizable followings as word rapidly spread throughout the Harry Potter fan community about

“wizard rock.” Kids as young as seven, like Darius Wilkins of the Hungarian Horntails, gained enough popularity online to perform at live shows alongside *Harry and the Potters*. The bands, largely made up of high schoolers, were recording full-length albums, selling merchandise, and eventually going on tour together. They were becoming better musicians and carving out skills and fanbases that would serve their careers in early adulthood. It was a miniature nerdy redux of the punk revolution and it happened because of a few key elements: the fan enthusiasm for Harry Potter, the serendipitous birth of a new digital platform, and a story with enough mileage to inspire thousands of songs from dozens of bands all singing about the same fictional universe.

Internalizing the Story

At first, it may seem like a great leap to presume that all Harry Potter readers who care about the Harry Potter story will care about LGBTQIA issues or share the common value of equality and representation for the oppressed represented in Harry Potter, but the gap may not be as wide as originally perceived. After all, what happens when an entire generation grows up reading the same story that unfolded throughout the course of their childhood and adolescence, literally growing up alongside the characters they were reading about? Many of Harry Potter’s earliest fans, referred to as the “Potter Generation” (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013), were between 6 and 16 when the first book was published and between 15 and 25 when the series ended, and the time they spent waiting for the publication of the next books in the story were a time of crucial adolescence. As mentioned before, it motivated Potter fans to find online communities and content as they waited for the next book. Many were around the same age as the characters in the books, or later the young actors who played them, as the book or film was released. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were not just characters in a vibrant and detailed fictional world; they were the Potter Generation’s peers. They grew up together, experienced milestones of adolescence together, and were therefore that much more likely to identify in a deep, long-lasting way with the characters, as well as the ideals and morals that they exhibited.

Harry Potter helped raise the children of our generation by instilling in them some of the basic moral conceptions of right and wrong. In the series there is a very clear “good side,” epitomized by Harry Potter, which embodies the basic qualities of love, loyalty, courage, and forgiveness. Juxtaposed is a very clear “bad side,” epitomized by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, which embodies all the negative qualities of deceitfulness, vengeance, and killing. (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013, p. 43)

Indeed, young Harry Potter fans got a superpowered dose of passive learning by reading not just one book, but seven books – often reading them, having them read to them by their parents at bedtime, or listening to the audiobooks multiple times – and supplementing that with repeated viewings of the film adaptations. Due to the extended period of time and thickness of their engagement with the series (attending book releases dressed up as characters, frequenting fansites, etc.), the level of immersion was incredibly high for young readers of Harry Potter. Not only might young fans absorb political messages from the books (such as ideas of dark money in government and media corruption), but their long-term exposure to the Harry Potter universe, Gierzynski and Eddy posit may have led them to “internalize the perspectives of [the books] and to see the world as similar to the world portrayed in [them]” (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013, p. 29). Indeed, these internalized perspectives are what the HPA has sought to bring to the surface and mobilize for a better world.

The Origins of the Harry Potter Alliance

Co-founded by Andrew Slack, the HPA is one of the premier examples of fan activism (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). Slack, a young comedian, was initially drawn to the themes of subversion that ran through the book series. Despite being a world-renowned children’s book, the very first lines of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* mocked everything to do with normalcy. They read:

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn’t hold with such nonsense. (Rowling, 1998, p. 1)

Slack was thrilled to find that the Harry Potter series turned everything that should be true in canonical literature on its head. The hero is a scrawny boy with glasses. The stuffy English boarding school setting is not one of elitism or gloom, but rather a lively democratic institution where every child attends for free and cannot wait to go. Giants are friendly. Werewolves are misunderstood. Enslaved elves are fighting for a living wage. This was not a typical fantasy novel.

In the course of reading the book, Slack stumbled upon an answer to a problem that had been gnawing at him. While touring colleges across the United States with his sketch comedy troupe, Slack was becoming disillusioned with the fact that his group could fill the campus auditorium with

enthusiastic students while an Amnesty International or the Student Peace Alliance meeting would be lucky to see five students attend. He thought there must be a way to get young people as excited about social action as they were about things like a comedy show. After reading Harry Potter, and observing the huge effect it was having on kids all around the world, he had an idea.

Slack and his comedy partner, Seth Soulstein, had previously talked about using popular culture and the power of story as a way to bring people together around social justice issues. Slack shared with Soulstein how the Harry Potter books were filled with palatable examples of complex issues such as prejudice, discrimination, media corruption, oppressive governments, and political activism. Young people reading the books could understand those issues through the black-framed lenses of Harry Potter so why not use the parallels as a tool to instruct on real-world issues like the conflict in Darfur or the punitive corruption in our own government?

As Soulstein and Slack began working on how to transfigure this kernel of an idea into an actual movement, Slack, tracking every mention of Harry Potter in the news, came across an ad for an upcoming performance by *Harry and the Potters* in nearby Boston. Slack went to the show and afterwards eagerly told the DeGeorge brothers about his idea for an organization that would educate and mobilize Harry Potter fans to create social change. Paul, it turned out, did not need much convincing. *Harry and the Potters* was already doing this, in a way, and he was itching to do it more directly.

The concept for the band was largely inspired by Harry's anti-authoritarian attitude in the books, which resonated with the brothers' DIY punk ethics. Several years into touring as Harry Potter, the brothers still used their namesake as a moral compass in decision-making as they navigated the music industry. As Melissa Anelli put it in her history of the Harry Potter fan community:

Harry Potter would never pose with sexy girls for publicity. Harry Potter would never play a show that kids couldn't get into ... Harry Potter would never sign with Live Nation. Harry Potter would never milk their listeners and fans for overpriced merchandise or albums. Harry Potter would fight the dark forces of evil and the record industry establishment as if they were one. (Anelli, 2008, p. 116)

As their band became more popular and more opportunities were flung at them, they always looked back to what Harry would do in their position – a fictional guiding light for their real-life choices.

The DeGeorge brothers tried to inject Harry's morals into their performances too. They performed in the kids' section of libraries because they wanted to encourage literacy. They sang about reading being just as cool as

rock ‘n roll, and they threw quick allusions to real-world issues into otherwise canon compliant lyrics. Like in their hit “Voldemort Can’t Stop the Rock,” in which they reference the creation of the parental advisory labels on CDs, singing, “We won’t let the Dark Lord ruin our party/just like Tipper Gore tried with the PRMC” (*Harry and the Potters*, 2004). So Slack and Soulstein’s idea became Harry and the Potters’ latest homage to the boy wizard cum punk activist.

With Paul DeGeorge on board, Slack and Soulstein had access to the online Harry Potter fan community and Paul’s 80,000 strong friend list on MySpace. They planned their first event for October 10, 2005, a wizard rock show raising money for Amnesty International – one of the organizations J. K. Rowling worked for before writing Harry Potter. They played for a full house and raised about 5,000 dollars. It was enough to give their new venture some exposure. That night, Slack started a MySpace called “HP Alliance” and posted a bulletin with some of the thoughts he had been sharing with Soulstein and DeGeorge. The bulletin quickly spread through the fan community on MySpace and, in one night, the HPA was a global organization.

CAN FAN ACTIVISTS HAVE IMPACT? YES!

Over the next 10 years, the HPA would turn their founders’ idea into actual social change while expanding into a global organization with members on multiple continents. In contrast to traditional social movement organizations, the HPA has never been tied to any specific policy agenda. While this has presented its own challenges, which we will discuss later, it has also enabled the organization to draw on the power of the story to mobilize fans to address a range of political, corporate, and cultural problems, and, despite the organizations’ roots in “lighter” media, it has had very real impact on multiple social problems.

The HPA has successfully pressured corporations to change their product sourcing practices. In 2010, they began a conversation with Warner Bros. to find out whether their licensed Harry Potter chocolate (such as chocolate frogs and other treats from the series) was produced ethically. After an initial amiable response from Warner Bros., the HPA sought a report from an independent organization, Free-2-Work, which gave Warner Bros. an F in ethical sourcing. From there followed four years of back and forth with Warner Bros. as the HPA mobilized their members to sign a petition, send letters, and create videos. The HPA even began manufacturing their own Fair

Trade chocolate frogs to sell to fans who were disappointed at the lack of transparency in the licensed candies. At the end of 2014, after several meetings, the support of J. K. Rowling, a partnership with Walk Free, and 400,000 petition signatures, Warner Bros. agreed to make all Harry Potter chocolate Fair Trade or UTZ-certified by the end of 2015 ([Harry Potter Alliance, 2015](#)).

The HPA has also been a vocal supporter of net neutrality since the organization's inception. In 2014, following the announcement of new Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules that would green light pay-for-priority schemes for Internet Service Providers (ISPs), the HPA activated their membership in a big way. Partnering with Public Knowledge, they brought together over 20,000 video creators and their fans to leave comments for the FCC, speaking out against the proposed rules and in favor of reclassification of ISPs. In addition, they encouraged members to create videos, which they played on a jumbotron outside the FCC's offices in Washington D. C. ([Harry Potter Alliance, 2014a](#)). At the start of 2015, after four million public comments, FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler announced that they would reclassify ISPs as common carriers under Title II of the Communications Act.

In early 2014, the HPA mobilized their members to fight back against the passage of Senate Bill 1062 and House Bill 2153 in Arizona, which aimed to legalize discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs, by setting up a website where members around the world could easily email the Arizona governor and ask her to veto the bills. The HPA also encouraged its members to tweet, make phone calls, send physical letters, and attend local protests ([Harry Potter Alliance, 2014b](#)). Governor Jan Brewer vetoed the bill in late February 2014.

The organization has also made strides with cultural outcomes. One of their longest running campaigns, and the one that has had a significant impact within the Harry Potter community, has been around LGBTQIA issues. When the HPA first began vocally supporting marriage equality in 2007, they were met with resistance from a significant chunk of the fan community. However, they did not let that deter them. They continued to run campaigns in support of LGBTQIA rights, leading the Harry Potter fan community in support of marriage equality as well as against bullying and discriminatory legislation. Their persistence paid off and by 2013, their campaigns for marriage equality were met with universal support within the community. One of their T-shirt slogans, "If Harry Potter taught us anything, it's that nobody should have to live in the cupboard" even became so ubiquitous in the Harry Potter fan community that in 2015, J. K. Rowling tweeted fan art of the phrase without realizing its origin from the HPA ([Rowling, 2014](#)).

The HPA's energy has spilled over into using electoral and other social movement-adjacent tactics as well. In 2009, they organized to stop the passage of Proposition One, an anti-marriage equality bill in Maine. In a single day, HPA members knocked on nearly 700 doors, collected 30 absentee ballots, and made 3,597 phone calls – breaking Mass Equality's phone banking record by 1,200% ([Harry Potter Alliance, 2009](#)). They saw similar results during phone banking initiatives in 2011, when they made 6200 calls for marriage equality in Rhode Island and again in 2012, in support of marriage equality in Maine as well as the DREAM Act in Maryland – both of which passed ([Harry Potter Alliance, 2011, 2012](#)).

The HPA has been active with voter registration efforts as well. They have registered thousands of first time voters through a recurring Wizard Rock the Vote program, which sets up voter registration booths at wizard rock shows around the United States during election years. In 2012, they partnered with popular video creators John and Hank Green to boost youth voter turnout by encouraging young people to take selfies outside the polling station and sending them physical stickers in the mail as congratulations for performing their civic duty; over 5,000 young people in the United States participated. They have raised thousands of dollars to protect civilians in Darfur and Burma, and collected over \$123,000 to send 5 cargo planes of life-saving relief supplies to Haiti following the earthquake in 2010. Their annual book drive has collected and donated over 300,000 books around the world and helped stock libraries in Rwanda, the Mississippi Delta, Brooklyn, Detroit, Kansas City, England, and the Netherlands.

The HPA's organized chapters have been able to achieve a diverse array of accomplishments over the years by taking their fan activist methodology and running with it on their own:

- Masaka HPA (Masaka, Uganda) helped build a school in their community, which previously did not have one.
- Lexpecto Patronum (Lexington, KY), created a chapter-run book bike program.
- The KC Keepers (Kansas City, MO) traveled to the state capital with local youth to advocate for state library funding.
- The Order of the Panther (Whitman, Massachusetts) knitted over 60 blankets for a local children's hospital.
- Dutch and Belgian HPA and HPA Germany (the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany) worked together to create a refugee toolkit detailing issues and ways to help for Europeans.

- The Chocolate Frog (Guyana) donated over 100 toys and books to a local children's hospital, and have since started a pen pal program with them.
- London Loveiosa (London, UK) ran a book drive at Platform 9¾ at King's Cross Station.

RECRUITING WIZARD ACTIVISTS

The HPA's success is commendable, but it raises questions about how the organization has been able to mobilize a group of young, seemingly nonpolitical, people around a diverse array of issues. It is not like the HPA could just shout ideas and issues into the ether, and expect anyone who has read Harry Potter to hear them. Instead, the organization has relied on its ability to bloc recruit (Diani, 2013; Oberschall, 1973) from the most passionate and well-networked of Harry Potter readers: the online fan community. Thanks to its ties with wizard rock and the utilization of MySpace, the HPA was born into an existing well-networked global fan community at the height of the Harry Potter phenomenon. Many HPA members began as and have remained members of the larger Harry Potter online fan community and, increasingly, members of other fandoms beyond Harry Potter. They created content, made friends, and took action on issues relative to the fandoms they loved. The HPA has drawn on these fans' enthusiasm through the organizations' ability to convincingly tap into the story, to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of participants, and its ability to make activism more appealing by meeting potential participants where they are. In effect, the HPA has channeled fans' talents and enthusiasm into creating fan activism toward creating a positive change.

The HPA has been able to bloc recruit from the Harry Potter fan community in part because of its ability to connect fans' interest in the story with broader political and social issues. While real-world strife should not be confused with fighting for the rights of fictional people, such "frame alignment" (Snow et al., 1986) between real-world problems and familiar and well-loved characters can help unlock compassion and impart confidence in individuals, particularly youth who are facing unfamiliar terrain.

Using a story to educate on a real-world issue is a means of piquing the interest of fans who would otherwise be unfamiliar with the topic, and developing a bloc of potential activists. Fans, being natural creators and organizers, are then often quick to mobilize and take action around the issue. For an organization with a young, fan-oriented membership that has been new

to – or potentially even disinterested in – activism, this mechanism is particularly important because it treats cultural touchstones as resources for understanding broader issues (Polletta, 2008). The HPA has used examples such as the Hogwarts groundskeeper, Hagrid, being ashamed of being a half-giant, the Defense Against The Dark Arts professor, Remus Lupin, hiding his status as a werewolf, Harry's best friend Hermione being called a "mudblood" due to her nonmagical heritage, and Harry himself literally being forced to live in a cupboard because of his magical abilities in order to shed light on the discrimination faced by LGBTQIA individuals, undocumented immigrants, neurodivergent people, and other oppressed minority groups. A particularly salient point of these comparisons has been how quickly and unquestioningly Harry befriends characters who are different than himself and openly discriminated against. Even if at first he does not understand, he soon comes to accept and defend them. As readers, we do too.

The HPA has also been able to bloc recruit fan activists, thanks to the training its organizational affiliates have provided. Given many members' low involvement with traditional activism, each campaign has included educational elements and resources for members who may be encountering an issue or taking action for the first time. Indeed, the HPA's emphasis on youth civic education has, perhaps, been its primary cause as it has strived to not simply use fan power to accomplish great tasks, but to help empower those fans to make social change on their own, after and beyond their involvement with the HPA.

In this sense, the HPA is a kind of activism 101. The majority of its members are fans first, activists second, if at all. In fact, even after years of participation with the organization, many still hesitate to call themselves activists. Yet, HPA members have reported learning new skills, developing a stronger sense of identity, increasing or continuing their civic engagement, and developing social ties – all crucial biographical outcomes (Giugni, 2004) – as a result of their involvement with the organization. When asked what skills they have learned from being in a chapter, along with improvements in areas such as leadership and organizing, many individuals interviewed added that they have gained a group of friends with whom they can openly discuss social change. This is crucial because, for many, prior to joining the HPA – for a number of reasons – they did not have a social circle they could discuss their opinions on politics or activism with, and now they do.

While most discussion and many actions begin online, the HPA's work is increasingly happening offline. The organization boasts over 200 organized chapters in 45 US states, 25 countries, and on six continents. These groups function as satellite organizations to the main organization.⁵ Many exist on

college or high school campuses, though many more are community-based and a few are housed in public libraries. They are asked to support the HPA's main initiatives, but they are also encouraged to act autonomously and run their own campaigns that are relevant to their interests or the needs of their local communities. They do not pay dues. In fact, conversely, they are provided with training and resources for fundraising and are able to apply for grants from the main organization. The HPA also runs a leadership conference called the Granger Leadership Academy, which gathers chapter organizers and potential members for a weekend to train in effective community organizing and social justice concepts.

Chapter organizers – the individuals who lead chapters – are the HPA's most engaged members. In a 2017 survey of HPA chapter organizers, 57% said they were not involved in social activism prior to joining the HPA and 63% of them joined because of the HPA's approach and its connection to fandom.⁶ Many had some level of civic awareness or the desire to effect social change, but no venue through which to achieve it. Hilde K., a chapter organizer from the Netherlands, said:

I got involved with the HPA because I had been interested in doing something with activism, but other organizations always seemed very intimidating to me. Many organizations gave me the impression they were clubs for Proper Adults and Serious Business. Activists at organizations like Green Peace or Amnesty International would probably scoff and snigger if I made a remark on how child soldiers are kind of similar to the children of Panem that get put into the Hunger Games.⁷

For young people who feel intimidated by a barrier of entry at more traditional activist organizations, the HPA has provided a welcoming space to explore new concepts without the expectation of pre-existing knowledge. As one respondent to an internal survey explained, “[t]he HPA makes finding fellow activists so much less intimidating, because it’s first and foremost a learning ground where you are not expected to be perfect from the moment you walk in, and because of the link with fandom, which helps you feel like you are surrounded by ‘your people.’” Another member responded to the question of whether she was an activist saying, “I wouldn’t consider myself ‘activist enough’ to call myself an activist. I would, however, call myself a wizard activist, if that counts,”⁸ referring to the HPA's popular identification of their members as “wizard activists,” a fun take on a sometimes intimidating epithet that is evidently more palatable to many members. Clearly, for these participants, and many others, the combination of a learning environment and ties to the community made participation easier and more accessible.

The concept of meeting people where they are at is a cornerstone of the HPA and another way in which it helps to facilitate bloc recruitment. It is crucial in terms of education and open discourse for each campaign because so many HPA participants are young people encountering new ideas for the first time. Saul Alinsky encouraged this practice:

As an organizer, I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be. That we accept the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be – it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be. That means working in the system. (1989, p. xix)

It is not so much that any HPA members would automatically be against proposed initiatives, but rather that they have been asked to grapple with concepts for the first time. A young person who has never interacted with, for example, undocumented immigrants or LGBTQIA individuals, might at first have trouble sympathizing with their struggles. Some activists may turn them away at the door, but the HPA takes the time to, as mentioned above, draw parallels to familiar characters and unlock a certain level of understanding. If you do not convey issues in ways that resonate with people, it is unlikely that they will become active.

CULTURAL ACUPUNCTURE

In addition to using the power of the story to mobilize members of the Harry Potter fan community, the HPA also sees the story as an opportunity to mobilize people more broadly. Since its inception, the HPA has organized campaigns around film and book releases to tap into the cultural attention around the Harry Potter series. It has done so through many of the same practices that it uses for bloc recruitment (i.e., connecting to the story and appealing to a sense of collective identity), but, in order to draw in larger society, the HPA has planned small, achievable acts of protest that have been rolled out at strategically chosen times. This way, young, often hesitant, participants have been able to engage with minimal cost or commitment.

The HPA has run a number of campaigns addressing issues ranging from human rights and genocide, to LGBTQIA issues, to fair trade practices; all designed to incorporate young participants. For instance, the “Deathly Hallows campaign” (2011) directed attention from the film release toward a number of issues – all tied to a plot device from the story, horcruxes – including child slavery, illiteracy, bullying, and wage inequality. Actions for these campaigns were thematically connected to the story and often low cost

(i.e., mailing letters to the CEO of Time Warner to protest the companies' chocolate sourcing, or donating books for poor communities). For the "What Would Dumbledore Do?" campaign – which was tied to the release of the *Half Blood Prince* – the HPA asked young participants to identify the values and practices that Dumbledore taught them by wearing a nametag with these values written on them to the premiere.

It is not just about the headlines or the issues. The connections to the story run deep. Every HPA campaign has been planned in great detail with hours of discussion on which metaphors and symbolism to use in which ways to most effectively and authentically spread the word. What will excite fans? What will resonate most powerfully? What is true to the spirit of the story, the fan community, and the cause all at once? Slack (2009), in an editorial that ran prior to the premiere, underlines these connections between the story and broader acts of resistance:

Dumbledore was the only one that Voldemort feared because Dumbledore addressed him by his original name of "Tom Riddle" and approached him as though he had not a fear in the world, as though nothing had happened to interrupt his stroll up the hall. This kind of confidence is something that has been exhibited by the Dr. Kings, the Gandhis, the Aung San Suu Kyi's in facing great tyrannies.

After the final Harry Potter movie had been released in 2011, the HPA prepared for a potential decrease in the popularity of Harry Potter by planning campaigns based on other stories, specifically ones that Harry Potter fans had migrated to, such as *The Hunger Games*. The HPA worked with fans of the series on a 4-year campaign that focused on economic equality in coordination with the release of each *Hunger Games* movie. Timing the campaign around the movie releases has been the purposeful embodiment of cultural acupuncture. As Slack explains:

In short, 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, the power of new media to communicate that message and invite each of us to truly "Be A Hero." What we do not have is the luxury of keeping the issues we cover seemingly boring, technocratic, and inaccessible." (*Harry Potter Alliance*, 2011)

Not only are fans most amped up as they approach the unveiling of new content, but the media is much more likely to pick up a press release about *The Hunger Games* in the weeks surrounding the movie opening. The media is doubly more likely to pick up a press release about a group organizing around economic inequality when their organizing has ties to the biggest movie release of the month.

Every year from 2013 to 2015, the organization ran a campaign concurrent with the release of each Hunger Games movie. Titled *Odds in Our Favor*, the campaign – organized in collaboration with the Fight for 15 organization – shed light on issues of economic inequality while offering a message of hope and resources to take action. Drawing parallels to the massive inequality gap portrayed in the dystopian young adult series, the Odds in Our Favor campaign encouraged fans to share their stories on social media via the hashtag #MyHungerGames, which aimed to open up the pervasive personal narratives of the daily realities of income inequality in much the same way that the #YesAllWomen hashtag did with the daily realities of misogyny. Thousands of people shared their stories via the #MyHungerGames hashtag. Many of these participants confessed that they were sharing their stories of hunger, debt, homelessness, and other struggles publicly for the first time due to the shame they had experienced as a result of the stigma that exists around poverty. Additionally, the HPA partnered with workers’ rights organizations to use Hunger Games symbolism in their protests for fair wages and encouraged their members to go out and support protests and deliver letters of protest to local outlets of major corporations like McDonald’s and Wal-Mart.

In the 4 years of running their *Odds in Our Favor* campaign, the HPA managed to get coverage of fast food worker protests and income inequality in several prominent publications. The campaign received coverage in *The New Yorker*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, as well as CNN, BuzzFeed, MTV, The Huffington Post, Wired, and much more – contributing to a broad shift in discussion not just of the true message of the Hunger Games story (one which was often lost in the movie’s emphasis on corporate sponsorships), but more importantly around the pervasive issue of economic inequality.

Limitations of Story-Based Mobilization

There are, of course, limits to basing bloc recruitment and cultural acupuncture on connections with communities and stories. While cultural acupuncture does employ the same frame alignment as fan activism – using parallels from popular media to mobilize fans based on shared sentiments –, it may fail to create sustained engagement. Where fan activism taps existing and self-sustaining fan communities, cultural acupuncture often aims to reach a broader participant pool by grabbing onto a fleeting moment in popular culture. As discussed above, this can be effective for broad awareness, but it can fall short of mobilizing sustained engagement (Tufekci, 2014; Zuckerman,

2014). Optimally, organizations like the HPA can work to address this challenge by bloc recruiting existing fan communities while using the spike in popular attention to recruit more broadly, but balancing the interests of committed and casual fans can be difficult.

Cultural acupuncture and bloc recruitment can also stall without deep connections to the fan communities and the stories that they identify with. One of the strengths of the HPA is its leaders' ability to authentically engage with the community. But that is not something that anyone can do, and authenticity with one fandom is not necessarily transferable to another. There have been times where the HPA, in failing to make deep connections with a fandom, has learned this lesson the hard way. To offer one example, the HPA paired with the non-profit "Just Label It" for a campaign on pro-genetically modified organisms (GMO) labeling that coincided with the release of *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*. The campaign connected Khan – a genetically modified creature – to GMOs in order to raise awareness about food labeling, and asked youth to email their legislatures. Despite being casual fans of *Star Trek*, the HPA struggled to translate their proposed cause on a deep enough level to resonate authentically with Star Trek fans. The failure to connect with the Star Trek community underlines the fact that "fannish civics requires deep knowledge of the specifics of each involved fan community and mastery of its content world. These are not aspects are not easily learned – they are the product of years of being an 'insider'" (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016, p. 125).

Even instances where the organization is able to connect with the fan community and encourage participation can go astray. For instance, complex issues like genocide and inequality can be oversimplified. Oversimplified issues can reify hurtful stereotypes, and potentially harm participants' willingness to participate by exposing them to unexpected criticism and giving the impression that issues are easily addressable with enough willpower. To offer an example, the Kony2012 campaign has been accused of emphasizing entertainment and engagement at the expense of conveying the complexity of the issue (Shresthova, 2016; Zuckerman, 2012). The HPA attempts to balance the competing demands for simplicity and complexity by working with trusted issue-focused organizations like Fight for 15 and Free-2-Work to ensure that a diverse set of perspectives are able to weigh in on campaigns.

Drawing on fiction to mobilize around real-world issues presents its own set of issues. As noted above, the fictional story should not be confused with the real-world challenges of nonfiction people. Fiction is a good, often powerful source of inspiration or tool for making sense of unfamiliar topics, but fiction should inspire compassion and contextualize the nonfictional world; not conflate the two. To offer a hypothetical example, advocating for gay rights

for Dumbledore (Netburn, 2007; or some other fictional character) misses the point that real people need their choices and identities supported a whole lot more than a fictional character does. Indeed, organizations working at the intersection of fictional and real worlds must work diligently to not minimize the real struggles of real groups and communities.

Finally, fiction provides a useful access point for young participants, but it does not offer a clearly identified end or goal. The issues that social movements confront are stubborn, complex, and often take years to truly have an impact on a policy or cultural level. Organizations play an important role in keeping people involved and mobilized. If participants' connections are to fictional worlds and fan communities, it is quite possible that participants are not going to remain committed long enough to see tangible change. So fan communities may bring ingenuity and energy to issues, but it is imperative that there be some effort and energy toward building sustained mobilization around issues.

CONCLUSION

Formed in 2005 at the height of Pottermania, the HPA took advantage of its deep connections with the Harry Potter fan community – particularly the world of wizard rock – to mobilize the energy for social change. By connecting with the powerful story and rich characters of Harry Potter and the energy of the fan community, the HPA demonstrates that it is possible to draw on what is ostensibly apolitical pop culture to make a number of tangible impacts on society, and draw attention to global issues of human rights and fair trade as well as national issues like LGBTQIA rights and economic inequality. We have shown that the HPA has been able to be so successful because it has engaged with the fan community and the Harry Potter story in two particular ways. First, the HPA has effectively used its deep understanding of the story and the fan community to successfully bloc recruit fan activists (Diani, 2013; Oberschall, 1973). Second, the HPA has drawn on the story to tap into the broader public interest in pop culture to mobilize for change; a process it refers to as “cultural acupuncture.” Although not without their limitations, both of these tactics have been effective for expanding mobilization, particularly among youth.

These findings have theoretical ramifications for how we understand the intersection of social movement recruitment, new media, and youth. For social movement scholars, these findings shed light on how bloc recruitment operates by highlighting the importance of authenticity and strong ties for

effectiveness. Prior examples of successful bloc recruitment have shown cultural insiders leveraging those connections for mobilization (Cherry, 2006; McVeigh, 2009; Morris, 1986), and more work along these lines will shed light on recruitment processes more generally. Second, the HPA's effective use of cultural acupuncture reiterates prior work highlighting the potency of culture for conveying social movement messages (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Polletta, 2008). Indeed, emphasizing how pop culture – be it song lyrics, books, movies, or sports – can be used to mobilize prosocial behavior is important in a context where movements are consistently fighting for attention. Indeed, the Red Cross has been using sports rivalries in similar ways for decades (American Red Cross, 2016). Third, much of the research on movements and media focuses on how movements use media to spread their message or try to influence coverage (Crossley, 2015; Rohlinger, 2002). However, as the HPA shows, the media itself can be mobilized for social change, even when it was produced for entertainment. Finally, youth play a crucial role for sustaining social movement vitality (Earl et al., 2017), and the HPA's success with targeting youth as a group for activism reiterates the need to deliberately build paths for youths to follow into activism.

What the HPA has shown is that people who are assumed to be disinterested in activism – whether that be pop culture fans, young people, or another group – have untapped passion, which can be activated through authentic communication. Indeed, we argue that social movements can expand their base beyond the already-engaged by focusing on meeting people where their interests, knowledge base, and medium of choice are already at – even if those interests are not explicitly political. The key, the HPA has found, is not simply injecting pop culture references into a campaign, but rather taking the time to authentically engage with participants and empower them to be thoughtful, creative activists in their own right. *The HPA's mission is to turn fans into heroes, and they recognize that our world has an infinite cache of potential heroes.* Each one just needs someone to crash down their aunt and uncle's door at midnight on their birthday, or bring them along on a rescue mission with some lost droids, or enroll them in a gifted academy in upstate New York, and tell them, you can be a hero and the world needs you.

NOTES

1. Here, we use fandom and fan communities interchangeably (for more on fandom, see: H. Jenkins, 2006, 2012b).

2. This can be applied to music and sports scenes as well (Haenfler, 2006; Torok, 2013). Here, we focus on fan communities built around fictional cultural products.
3. A wiki is a website – like Wikipedia.org – where multiple people can add, revise, and edit content in a collaborative manner.
4. Fan communities can make the political turn on their own or see political interests emerge out of their substantive interests. However, these paths to activism are likely to be responsive to a separate set of stimuli (such as external threats like show cancellations or changes in access, i.e., modifications to net neutrality). These are sufficiently different contexts than the case presented here, and we encourage future research to explore them in more depth.
5. The tension between local and national organizational interests is a classic concern for social movement scholars (J. C. Jenkins, 1983; Walsh, 1981). However, here we are focused on how the HPA is able to recruit fan activists. Future research should explore how these tensions may be different for fan-based advocacy organizations.
6. These data are from an internal survey of chapter organizers.
7. Personal interview with Hilde, K., 2014.
8. Hilde, K., personal interview, 2014.

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