Participatory Culture:
From Co-Creating Brand Meaning
to Changing the World

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A new generation of change makers /// Over the past two decades, a growing portion of the general public has expanded its communication capacities, exerting a much greater degree of control over the production and circulation of media than ever before. In the process, they have been participating in the culture around them in powerful new ways.

Culture jammers in the 1990s overtly opposed their targets, in particular global organizations and their brands. Naomi Klein's book "No Logo" was one of the most known initiatives of that movement. The media landscape was much different in those days: Television was dominating mass communication, and the culture jammers' objective was to block and jam the flow of what they perceived as manipulated images created by Madison Avenue and the culture industry. Back then, activists felt they could remain on the outside looking in and did not participate in the culture of consumption they were critiquing.

Today's change-makers are still strongly invested in appropriating and remixing content from "the empire of signs" and are still holding corporations accountable for their unhealthy impact on our lives. The means they use to broadcast their messages out to the world and the modes they use to motivate popular support behind their causes, however, have changed. Young people's personal use of social media like blogs, networks and online platforms allows for collective action. This generation moves seamlessly between being socially and culturally active to being politically and civically

THE HARRY POTTER ALLIANCE (HPA)

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Established in 2005, at the peak of the media hype surrounding J. K. Rowling's best-selling children's book series, the Harry Potter Alliance has mobilized more than 100,000 youth by its own estimates. These members have formed more than 90 chapters worldwide (mostly in the U.S.) through which they participate in various forms of human rights activism. The organization connects fans through campaigns and calls to action, a loosely knit network of chapters, and an online presence that includes discussion forums, a well-designed website, frequent vlogs, and a presence on a wide range of social media platforms. The community members consider themselves "Dumbledore's Army of the real world", seeking to make the world a better place. The organization's website explains their approach as follows:

"Just as Harry and his friends fought the Dark Arts in JK Rowling's fictional universe, we strive to destroy real-world horcruxes like inequality, illiteracy, and human rights violations."

"Our mission is to empower our members to act like the heroes that they love by acting for a better world. … Our goal is to make civic engagement exciting by channeling the entertainment-saturated facets of our culture toward mobilization for deep and lasting social change."

Some of the HPA's successes include raising over $123,000 for Partners in Health in Haiti in a two-week period, collecting and donating books for community centers, and registering voters during Equal Marriage referendums around the country.

http://thehpalliance.org/what-we-do/May 8, 2014

engaged, applying skills they learned making fan vids or recording skateboarding stunts to capture and share what was happening at their local Occupy encampment. Popular culture is their shared mythology; remix is how they share meaning and motivate others to action. This isn't a Twitter revolution; they are trying to change the world through any media necessary. As opposed to the former culture-jamming paradigm, this form of participatory action is referred to as "cultural acupuncture". Cultural acupuncture seeks not to block the flow but to tap into the culture's circulation.

The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), cultural acupuncture, and fan activism /// Stories, signs and symbols play a crucial role in such culture-change-projects and so do fan communities emerging around popular themes. Previously, fan subcultures were known for activities such as attending conventions, making fan videos, writing fan fiction, engaging in cosplay, or debating interpretations with likeminded around their objects of enthusiasm. Now they are applying those skills to promote social justice. The Harry Potter Alliance is a powerful example of what we are calling fan activism, deploying those shared stories to rally support around new political agendas. (see Box for information on the HPA)

Pinning political and social causes to Harry Potter works because the story world has a huge following and is familiar to an even larger number of people. It 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. The following example shows how "cultural acupuncture" works and what it can mean for related brands.

Not in Harry´s Name: No chocolate from child labor /// In its "Not In Harry's Name" campaign, the HPA pits itself against Warner Brothers, the creator of the Magical World of Harry Potter in Orlando and licensor of the edible products and collector items sold there and online. In particular, the focus is placed on Chocolate Frogs (the real-world version of a popular candy in the fiction) that they suspect are being produced in unfair ways, possibly even involving child labor.

In an initial effort, the HPA attracted more than 16,000 signatures on a petition calling for Warner Brothers to make all Harry Potter chocolate fair trade. They argued that young Harry Potter fans should not be sold chocolate that was produced by child labor, a perspective that grew from fan

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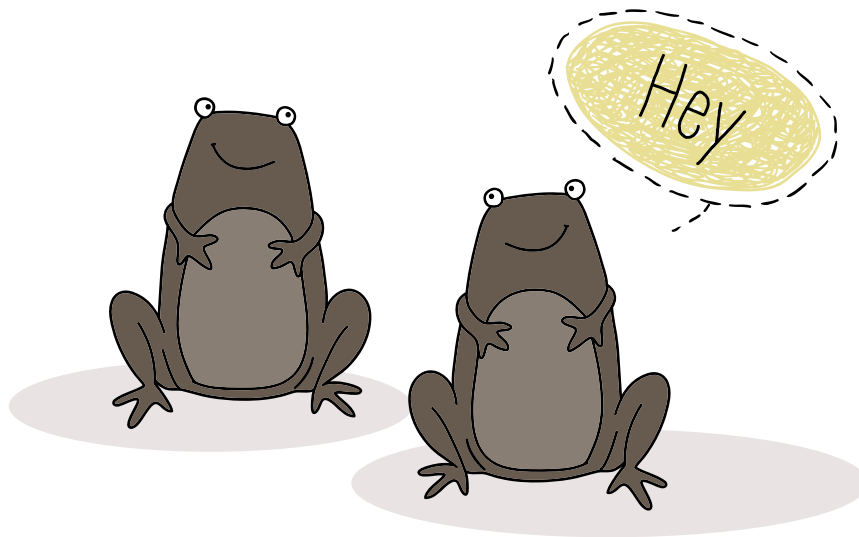
"engagement" with and sense of "ownership" over the Harry Potter franchise. In order to stress the effort's grassroots nature, they had more than 200 members send along pages of signatures. Even this tactic was motivated through references to the core texts: Readers might remember what happened when Uncle Vernon tried to ignore Harry's Hogwarts letters: More letters showed up ... and this is what the HPA organized as well. The studio responded to the HPA petition by (some would say patronizingly) reassuring their fans that they were complying with all operative international laws and their own internal standards. Additionally, that they had investigated the companies producing their chocolate and were satisfied with their labor practices. The response contained all standard elements of traditional corporate responses to such concerns.

Signatures, shared messages and HPA fair-trade frogs
/// Rather than accepting the company's claims at face value, the HPA demanded that the studio release a report from their internal investigations. The community gathered more than 60,000 signatures on their new petition and gained significant media coverage. They used all sorts of social media messages like videos, blogs or vlogs to point out that fans of the Harry Potter series were responsibly advocating for children while the leaders of Warner Brothers were acting irresponsibly.

In a third phase, the HPA contracted with a fair-trade chocolate company to produce and market their own chocolate frogs. They actually demonstrated that such products could be produced without relying on companies with exploitative working conditions, when there is a commitment to do so.

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Though Warner Brothers has remained nonresponsive, choosing to sit out the storm of bad publicity rather than open up their labor practices and subcontracts to closer public scrutiny, the message did not remain unheard. Can Warner Brothers withstand mounting pressure from a grassroots movement comprising their own core fans? Will they respect this grassroots effort to hold them accountable? For the Harry Potter fans, this is about more than chocolate contracts: They are seeking to educate their following about the issues surrounding fair trade, so they can be even more effective advocates in the future, whether they win or lose the current battle. This is all part of what the Nerdfighters, another fan group that has partnered with the HPA, calls ''decreasing world suck'', a goal that allows the group to act upon a range of different social concerns, identified bottom up by their core followers.

Participatory culture and commercial brands /// All of this is to say: Corporations often worry about losing control over their brands. The reality is that they had already lost control years ago, and well-organized groups of their supporters, not simply their foes, can use their brands and their fictional franchises as resources for their own cultural and political efforts.

Corporations have reacted to the digital revolution in different ways, but much interest has centered on ways of benefitting from consumers' desire to participate. Media companies are seeking to increase fan engagement, brands want to build brand communities, and many businesses are deploying crowdsourcing to identify potential new products or reframe their messages. As they attempt to ''harness the wisdom of crowds'', they have had to allow greater space for fan expression and participation, ceding some degree of control over their content in hopes of building a new relationship with their consumers. A more complex set of relationships between producers and consumers is emerging, with the fans often pursuing their own interests even in the face of opposition from media companies and brands. As a result, brand managers should be prepared for action beyond their immediate control and might like to consider the following recommendations to prevent brand-damage.

> *Understand cultural trends* /// Cultural and social develop-ments are more relevant for brand management than ever before. Missing or underestimating developments and being caught flat-footed can cause a great deal of harm because dissatisfaction is often voiced powerfully and may spread very quickly.

> *Live up to what you promise* /// Brands often actively par-ticipate in, draw on and even promote cultural trends, but any source of inauthenticity can serve as a hook for criti-cal questions. To avoid becoming the target of grassroots resistance, brands should very carefully confirm that all their touchpoints are truly in line with the values they promote. And as the ''Not in Harry's Name'' campaign shows, consumers are no longer satisfied with nice words; they demand proof.

> *Take a stand or get labelled* /// In these kinds of environ-ments, it becomes increasingly difficult to take a neutral standpoint when it comes to socially relevant views. If brands do not take a clear stance and prove it in their everyday actions, they can anticipate that their most hardcore supporters may be among the first to hold them accountable with little chance of being stopped by the official rights-holders. Anything you say can and will be used against you in the court of public opinion. The best way to respond is not to shut them down, not to ignore them, but to get into the game. Keep in mind that in this age of networked communication, if it doesn't spread, it's dead. And if they aren't talking about you, they are going to be talking about someone else.
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FURTHER READING

Jenkins, Henry (2006):
Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,
New York University Press.

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Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning
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New York University Press.