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### “It’s Called Giving a Shit!”

*What Counts as “Politics”?*

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In November 2012, MIT’s Futures of Entertainment conference assembled representatives from several of our case study organizations to discuss participatory politics. But, when asked if they identified as activists, each participant distanced themselves from this term. Bassam Tariq of the 30 Mosques project thought it was “awful” that political categories were imposed upon Muslim cultural, social, and religious practices; in his projects he tried to “stay away” from politics in order to focus on “universals,” things everyone can “relate to,” and ideas that are “more open-ended” rather than “imposing an agenda.” Dorian Electra, whose music videos have been widely embraced by Students for Liberty, argued that “being too politicized” might distract from her work’s educational and entertainment value. The Harry Potter Alliance’s Lauren Bird acknowledged that the group, while nonprofit and thus nonpartisan, was involved in a range of political issues, but Bird stressed that members might have widely divergent perspectives; ultimately the HPA was “more on the side of human rights” rather than a particular political “ideology.” In each case, their comments revealed something about the negative ways these youth perceived institutional politics and the ways they define their organizations in opposition to those negative qualities.

As the young panelists expressed their hesitations about situating their work as political, the audience, mostly from a slightly older generation, were expressing, via Twitter, their dissatisfaction with what they characterized as a “backlash” against activism or a denial of the political stakes of these young people’s public expression. One audience member summarized the situation as a “wow” moment when “the young panelists . . . knee-jerked away from claiming their work is political.”

“Why is activism considered a dirty word?” another audience member asked. “Of course human rights is ideological . . . EVERYthing is political,” another vehemently argued. Yet another summed up the collective response, “On the semantics front, it’s not called ‘activism.’ It’s called ‘giving a shit.’”

These experiences at the Futures of Entertainment conference have haunted us as we have been writing this book, forcing us to continually ask such questions as: What counts as “politics”? Who gets to decide? Throughout this book, we have referred to these youth as activists, because they are seeking to bring about social and political change through their work. Yet some of them adopt other frames for their activity. Who are *we* to identify as “political” activities the participants themselves sometimes understood in different terms—as participation in fan communities, forms of sociability, extensions of their cultural and ethnic identities, tools for education and cultural change, forms of charity and public service, ways to “decrease world suck”? And how do we think about the problematic relationship between these attempts to “change the world” and institutionalized politics?

On their own terms, some of the groups and networks we are discussing provide preconditions for a civic culture, performing such tasks as articulating shared identities or values, fostering greater knowledge and awareness of political issues, encouraging civic conversations, or modeling civic practices, as we saw in relation to the Harry Potter Alliance and the Nerdfighters in Chapter 3. We have argued throughout that fostering a culture of participation—both cultural and political—can be valuable in and of itself, especially for youth, quite apart from the specific outcomes of their efforts. Couldry (2010) discusses such preconditions in terms of the ways young people can develop and deploy their own voices as political agents. Ethan Zuckerman (2015) discusses these preconditions in terms of the latent capacities of some groups to mobilize politically *under the right circumstances*. So what are the right circumstances? We’ve examined a range of different circumstances that have moved individuals and groups from cultural participation to participatory politics, and yet there’s so much more we still have to understand about what kinds of organizational and leadership structures need to be in place to enable such transformations.

Some of the groups' activities can be described as charitable, such as the Harry Potter Alliance campaigns to raise money for disaster relief in Haiti or to provide books for libraries in Africa, Invisible Children's work on the ground in Uganda to counter the consequences of child soldiering, or the efforts of the Nerdfighters to use YouTube to increase the visibility of various nonprofits. Some are conducted in the spirit of "the personal as political" that has motivated previous generations of identity politics movements around race, gender, or sexuality, even as our current understanding of identities is multiple, intersectional, fluid, and contradictory. Consider, for example, the ways the DREAMers' "coming out" videos borrowed practices from the LGBTQ movement and the Latino testimonio tradition, as well as from self-help programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous. We might want to consider more deeply when "coming out" constitutes a personal statement—asserting greater control over one's own life conditions, claiming a certain kind of identity and agency—and when it addresses institutional politics as a call for immigration reform, though this example makes clear how hard it can be to separate the two. Other activities are explicitly cultural, as in some of the projects in the American Muslim community. Here, the goal is to increase visibility, build community, or challenge stereotypes that block young Muslims' full acceptance into American society. Yet for this particular group, the cultural is always already political. The panelists' comments at MIT suggests that activism is often understood as "politically correct," as embodying the concerns of "special interests," as rigid and uncompromising, whereas these youth are seeking ways to reimagine the civic that allow for diverse voices to be heard and some consensus to be achieved.

Not all of these groups will achieve their civic and political goals. Throughout, we've identified many points where these efforts can break down, including gaps between centralized leadership and dispersed communication or a lack of readiness to engage in contentious politics (as in the case of Invisible Children), struggles to increase diversity (as in the case of Nerdfighters and the Harry Potter Alliance), the chilling effect of surveillance (as in the case of American Muslim youth), the denial of the rights to become citizens or limits to access to communication technologies (as in the case of the DREAMers) or tensions between institutional support and participatory politics (as in the case of Students for Liberty).

We could have pushed further to consider, for example, generational divides in terms of what constitutes appropriate political speech (and thus an inability of those in power to comprehend particular forms of the civic imagination), the impact of systemic forms of exclusion, the many dysfunctions of the American political process, the marginalizing and trivializing representation of these campaigns through news coverage, or the ways that certain topics get proclaimed as the exclusive realm of institutionally sanctioned experts and closed off from popular discourse. We've also discussed in Chapter 2 a series of paradoxes and contradictions—competing pulls and tugs—which these groups must navigate between goals and process, comprehensible and complex stories, activism and entertainment, consensus and contention, spreadable and drillable messages, and top-down and bottom-up approaches. And, as Nico Carpentier might suggest, we also should be attentive to these groups' structures of governance—the ways that they support and sustain their members' active and meaningful participation and, as we saw with IC, the ways they may fall back on minimalist participation structures.

Yet, for each of these groups, there are moments when their activities cross over fully and unambiguously into the political, doing things or addressing concerns that we would understand as political if conducted by any other group—registering people to vote, lobbying elected officials, advocating public policies, mobilizing street protests—and we cannot simply separate these activities from a range of other practices that inspire them. If they are not always activists, they are activists at least some of the time. Pippa Norris (1999) discusses “the new politics:” “[P]olitical activism has been reinvented in recent decades by a diversification in the *agencies* (the collective organizations structuring political activity), the *repertoires* (the political actions commonly used for political expression), and the *targets* (the political actors that participants seek to influence)” (215–216). So we are seeing politics conducted through fan organizations (new agencies), politics conducted through creating and sharing music videos (new repertoires), and politics directed against Lowe's, Warner Brothers, and Lionsgate (new targets) rather than towards elected officials.

Dahlgren (2009) might argue that these groups, organizations, networks, and communities constitute civic cultures, understood as “cultural patterns in which identities of citizenship, and the foundations of

civic agency, are embedded" (106). Civic cultures provide the preconditions for political action, and this book has explored some of the ways that those potentials are being realized or thwarted within the current media landscape. What we've called the civic imagination is a fundamental dimension of Dahlgren's civic cultures, shaping the ways people come to think of themselves as political agents, and those civic cultures are, in turn, being shaped by the collective imagining of their participants. In many cases, these imagining communities are addressing classic political questions, such as the DREAMers' focus on what makes someone a citizen or the Students for Liberty's ongoing exploration of the relationship of individuals to government.

As we saw in Chapter 1, there has been an increased need for more precise descriptions of different conditions that get labeled as participation, as a rhetoric of participation engulfs many kinds of contemporary social and cultural activities, from liking someone on Facebook to designing open source software, from contributing to YouTube to organizing a political movement. We might start with the question of what we are participating in—a purely commercial transaction or some form of "community" (itself a vexed word in contemporary commercial discourse) where participants work together to achieve shared goals. We might also ask what features characterize particular kinds of participation and what factors pull a participatory community toward civic engagement and political action. Our assumption here is that these groups have achieved varying degrees of participation (never fully achieving the ideal of maximalist participation), and that we all live in a *more* participatory culture, by which we mean both that more people have the communicative capacities to help shape cultural production and circulation and that more groups are offering members more chances to meaningfully contribute in terms of setting their agendas, defining their tactics, and creating their messages.

### Popular Culture as a Civic Pathway

Our book has been mapping some of the "civic pathways" that might enable young people who are active in participatory culture to see themselves as political agents and get involved in practices designed to "change the world." The groups we have discussed often display a

complex blending between interest-driven and friendship-based networks. Even with an organization like the Harry Potter Alliance, a textbook example of how an interest-driven network can mobilize its members for political agendas, our research has encountered many people who are participating not because they share a passion for Harry Potter but because they were invited to participate by friends who do. Even in those cases where people are acting on a strong self-interest, such as the DREAMers, we find a social and cultural basis for their involvement—for example, as an extension of their interests in crafts, graphic arts, or video production. And even where groups are formed around a shared political philosophy, as with Students for Liberty, getting involved expands their friendship networks. So all of our cases show a complex interweaving of the cultural, social, and political.

Popular culture offers shared references and resources participants use to help frame their messages and provides platforms through which they can stage their hopes and fears about the world and thus start to exercise the civic imagination. Popular culture facilitates shared affective investments that bond members together, providing a vision of change that is empowering, meaningful, and pleasurable as they conduct the often hard and discouraging work of political activism. Popular culture performs bonding functions within the group and also bridging functions toward a broader public. So, for example, when the DREAMers tap into superhero mythology, this shared reference point allows them to make common cause with Imagine Better, which used the release of *Man of Steel*, a reboot of the Superman saga, for a cultural acupuncture campaign focused on immigrant rights. And beyond this, we have found examples of the use of superhero analogies across all of our case study groups, suggesting many unrealized opportunities for these groups to communicate with each other around shared visions and interests. (Jenkins et. al. forthcoming).

Jonathan Gray (2012) describes the role that signs and costumes drawn from the realm of fandom played among those who organized an extended protest against Wisconsin governor Scott Walker's anti-collective bargaining policies:

I start with the observation that these signs aided camaraderie. Protesters came from a wide range of backgrounds, as Madison's Capitol Square



*Star Wars* iconography used in efforts to oust Wisconsin governor Scott Walker (photograph by Jonathan Gray).

filled with local teachers, graduate students, senior citizens, firefighters, snowplow drivers, high school students, professors, undergraduates from around the state and country, steelworkers, and many, many more, including a wide swath of concerned citizens of Madison. But how do such individuals and such distinct communities come together and work together toward a common goal? How do they create a communal understanding of what is going on and of their role in this?

*Star Wars*-themed signs, which depicted the governor as an “Imperial Walker,” evoked shared cultural experiences and their playful tone dispelled some anxieties that had arisen around the mainstream media’s, often hostile, depiction of the protests. Furthermore, they conjured up empowering images of what it meant for these people to stand up against what they saw as entrenched power. Whether or not they were hardcore *Star Wars* fans, they were adopting these images because of their symbolic or mythic value. Their hopes for political transformation (or at least the removal of an unpopular governor from office)



Meme linking Dora the Exploror to the treatment of undocumented immigrants.

were expressed through a shared language drawn from popular culture, which might be deeply valued by some and only superficially appreciated by others.

Gray's example also reminds us of the difference between a fan activist group, such as the Harry Potter Alliance, that grounds its many campaigns in a single content world and other kinds of movements—such as Occupy or the Wisconsin protests—that tap different fictional universes for their rhetorical ends. So for example, we've discussed the DREAMers' use of superhero metaphors, but their media productions display a much broader range of cultural references, as in this graphic, which shows Dora the Exploror, one of the few Latina characters in contemporary children's media, having been subjected to the brutal treatment that border guards sometimes inflict on immigrants.

Some DREAMers are no doubt fans of Superman or Dora the Exploror; for others, these borrowed images are a means to an end, yet few seem as overtly hostile to popular culture as activists of the culture jamming era would have been. The above meme is directed at the INS, not Dora's producers, and it depends on our sympathy for the beloved character.

We are observing a shift in the language of social change from realist to utopian or fantastical modes, from traditional forms of political

education to a style of politics that borrows heavily from entertainment. What does it mean, as we've seen in the case of second-wave libertarians, to translate economic theories into a music video or, as we've seen in the case of American Muslims, to turn back a stereotype with a joke? Can we use dance to address horrific conditions in Africa, as Invisible Children tried to do? Richard Dyer (1985) makes the case that entertainment often offers us not a vision for what actual political alternatives might look like but rather a taste of what utopia might feel like, with its values expressed through our sense of empowerment, intensity, and plentitude in contrast to our real-world constraints.

Tapping into the language of popular entertainment may allow participants to bring some of those affective intensities into their work. Here, again, Gray's (2012) discussion of the Wisconsin protests proves helpful: "All of the *Star Wars* signs framed the protests in larger cosmological terms, calling for the protesters to stick around for Episode VI and the celebratory ending. So too did the Harry Potter and *Lord of the Rings* signs invoke grand and grueling battles of good versus evil. They referenced a battle that would be neither quick nor easy, but would reward continued investment, and that was absolutely vital." His comments suggest something else: popular culture provides models for what movements might look like—as in, for example, the ways that the HPA calls itself "Dumbledore's Army for the real world" or Imagine Better has anchored its critiques of economic inequalities to the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games*. This is at the heart of what the group means by "imagine better," a phrase that takes advantage of two possible interpretations—to do a better job of imagining alternatives to current social conditions, and to imagine a better world and work to achieve it. So-called realist modes often depict problems as overwhelming, conditions as irreversible, thus offering a profoundly disempowering mindset for thinking about politics. Much as earlier civil rights movements discussed their "dreams" or imagined entering the "promised land," these rhetorical and expressive practices increase efficacy as movement participants sought to work around or get past current inequalities and injustices. We shall overcome, indeed.

Zizi A. Papacharissi (2010) talks about a new "civic vernacular," Pippa Norris (2002) about new "repertoires" for civic action, each identifying ways new symbolic resources, new modes of communication, and new

rhetorical practices are changing political speech. These new rhetorics impact how we express affiliations with others, how we articulate our political identities, and especially how we deal with those with whom we have significant disagreements. Many of the youth we interviewed experienced the language of American politics as both exclusive and repulsive. Instead, they are creating forms of speech that make sense in their everyday lifeworlds, speaking about politics through channels they already use to connect with their friends. There is much we still need to know about the ways these emerging political rhetorics break down, coming across to those with institutional power as childish rather than engaged, self-involved rather than self-empowering, or escapist rather than pragmatic.

### Political Storytelling and Transmedia Mobilization

We've argued that these groups are seeking to bring about social change by any media necessary. In discussing the immigrant rights movement in Los Angeles or, more recently, Occupy Wall Street, Sasha Costanza-Chock (2010, 2012) argues that transmedia mobilization (which he is increasingly calling transformative mobilization) often means a decentering of traditional authorities, so that all participants are seen as having an expressive capacity, free to construct and circulate their own media, framing their message in different languages to reach different audiences. As they do so, these activists reject traditional models of strategic communication that stress the construction of a unified message or stable identity; no one instantiation of the message is likely to reach all potential audiences, while deploying diverse communication practices is likely to accelerate the spread and extend the reach of their shared agenda. Because of the diversity of participants and the lowered stakes of each communication practice, such movements may be highly generative, testing different media platforms or rhetorical practices, as these networks seek new ways to spread their message. These diverse media productions can stimulate more intense discussions, even where individual messages are simplified.

Yet there are also risks that such diffused, decentralized strategies may be more easily co-opted through the broadcast capacity of concentrated media. Michelangelo Signorile (2012), a longtime queer activist and talk show host, discussed the success and limits of a grassroots effort to call out the fast food chain Chick-fil-A for its owner's support of homopho-

bic organizations. Signorile argues that the campaign’s participatory approach made it easy to join but difficult to control its messaging: “Our enemies distorted our message and reframed the story. . . . How did we allow it to happen? Because there was no coordinated effort on our side. The controversy was largely driven by blogs, social media and very loosely organized grassroots activists, with no coordinated leadership.” For Signorile, the distributed framing of issues is always going to be less coherent than corporate communication strategies that speak with one voice—another reason why the groups we are discussing here constitute “precarious publics.”

In a much discussed essay focused on the logics that drive collective and connected action in the digital era, W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012) draw a contrast between older movements, which took a long time to develop, but came with shared identities and agendas, and more contemporary movements, which have been able to take shape quickly, often through tapping into the personal narratives and individual experiences of participants, but depend on much looser agreements. The first type is slow to emerge, they argue, while the second struggles with issues of coherence and sustainability. Our focus on groups and networks here prompts us to step back a little from their stress on the personalized or individualistic nature of such political efforts, which they argue, see “politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances” (743). However, we share their sense that it is important to identify the mechanisms that enable such movements to solidify around collective concerns and exert sustained pressure on the system to accommodate their demands.

Within this model of transmedia mobilization, youth are encouraged not only to help spread preconstructed messages, but also to “give account of themselves,” as Couldry (2010) defines voice, linking their own personal experiences to a larger collective good. Many of the youth discussed across this book have grown up in a world where tools for producing and sharing media were widely accessible. Not surprisingly, their ability to deploy these practices toward civic ends drew them into participatory politics. During one of our webinars on participatory politics, activist Joan Donovan shared a personal trajectory that connected her early involvement with music to her activism around the Occupy movement and highlighted the useful skills she picked up along the way:

As a teenager I was heavily involved in the Boston straight edge hardcore scene. I was introduced to anarchist ideals and began thinking more and more about global politics. Unfortunately, there was no support for feminists or women in that environment, so I started playing in bands to meet more people. Singing in a band put me in touch with many women who felt the same way. Together we formed a collective named “Mosh-trogen” and we put out a zine that focused on women’s issues. Many late-night talks and writing sessions solidified our resolve to change the Boston music scene. We did this by holding benefit concerts that featured female musicians and donating the proceeds to local feminist organizations. Some members of Mosh-trogen went on to volunteer at those organizations later. For me, the DIY culture of punk and hardcore taught me how to get organized. After learning the basics of booking an event, publishing a zine, and making music, I extrapolated how to build a community and be politically engaged on my own terms.

These youth were not simply stuffing envelopes, as might have been the experience of earlier generations who volunteered with political organizations; many of them were expressing why the cause matters to them through the media they created themselves.

Marie Dufrasne and Geoffroy Patriarche (2011) discuss political engagement in terms of different genres of participation, with an understanding of genres less as a set of shared conventions and more as a set of shared practices. A genre, they argue, is “a type of communicative action recognised by a community (an organisation in this context) as appropriate to attain a specific objective.” Objectives are “social constructs” and “collective conventions” that reflect member’s shared and recurring experiences (65). Drawing inspiration from organizational communication scholars Wanda Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates (1998), Dufrasne and Patriarche describe these genres in terms of how participants address a series of core questions—why, how, what, who/m, when, and where. These genre conventions provide participants’ efforts with what Mimi Ito et al. (2015) describe as “shared purpose and practice.”

So a project like 30 Mosques offered a template that others could follow, a set of basic principles around which shared representations might be constructed. And this model was taken up by a range of individuals and groups, each seeking to change the ways American Muslims were

perceived. The focus on Ramadan addressed the when question, while the desire to localize this model gave them more flexibility in terms of where. Focusing on who and why, the DREAMer movement encouraged contributors to start with a simple statement, “My name is X, and I am undocumented.” Focusing on how and what, Invisible Children provided workshops to instruct participants how to tell their own IC stories at the Fourth Estate gatherings. Focusing on what and when, the Harry Potter Alliance periodically offers prompts, encouraging members to explore aspects of their personal identities. Neta Kligler-Vilenchik (2013) offers this account of how Nerdfighter practices encourage creative participation:

Members of collab channels often set a theme for the week (e.g. “the Oscars” or “your first kiss”) that solves the problem of deciding what to talk about. Being assigned a regular day means you have a responsibility to the other group members and don’t want to disappoint them. Some collab channels even impose playful “punishments” for not creating a video on your day, often consisting of dare-like tasks such as smearing peanut butter on the face while talking. (34)

Such calls for action (whether implicit, as in the case of 30 Mosques modeling, or explicit, as in the case of the HPA’s formal prompts) constitute the creation and reaffirmation of genres of participation. By contrast, for many of the youth we interviewed, institutionalized politics offers a narrow set of genres: checking a box on a ballot or signing a petition frustrates those who have grown up within a more participatory culture. Yet even the organizations themselves tend to define success in terms of activities that can be quantified—numbers of views on YouTube, number of retweets on Twitter, number of voters registered, amounts of money raised—and we can anticipate that this tendency to stress quantity over quality of experiences will only increase as we plunge even deeper into an era of big data (for a useful critique of how big data miscounts some forms of civic expression, see Crawford 2013). All of this suggests an even more literal notion of what “counts” as politics.

There is also a tendency for people talking about “storytelling” in politics to focus on the narrative as a product, but we would argue for the value of storytelling as a process. Members of the University of Chicago’s Black

Youth Project are dedicated to mobilizing communities of color “beyond electoral politics” in ongoing struggles over freedom and equality. The group was hosting a conference of young black community leaders as the not-guilty verdict was handed down in the case of George Zimmerman, who had been accused of murdering Trayvon Martin, a black teenager on his way home from buying snacks in his father’s neighborhood. Devastated by the outcome, BYP participants decided to produce a spoken word response video—“#BYP 100 Responds to George Zimmerman Verdict”—that conveyed their collective concerns. Following another BYP meeting on the Princeton University campus, a car full of participants was pulled over by the cops, allegedly for a broken taillight (which those in the car deny existed). The youth whipped out their video cameras and began recording their conversations with the law enforcement officials; they were able to transform what might have been another example of racial profiling into a teachable moment. They posted the resulting video and called it “BYP 100: Black Youth, Black Police, & Transformative Justice.” As one of the BYP members explained, “This is a healthy dialogue that would never have happened if we were individually confronting the police. This is the healthiest dialogue between a public police and young black people that I’ve ever seen, and that’s transformative justice right there, in the flesh.” Videos were produced and circulated around both events. The videos reached a wide array of audiences, but the meaning of these events are not reducible to the video content. Working together to create a collective statement or to hold a mediated conversation with the local police created communication contexts that mattered to those participating. The production process helped, in the first case, in bonding and, in the second, bridging across differences.

#### Circulation and Attention (Wanted or Otherwise)

Some critics have dismissed these new forms of activism as attention seeking, yet traditional demonstrations, focused on getting as many bodies as possible into the streets, also seek to render visible their base of support. There’s still some tendency to apply standards of broadcast media in looking at social networking practices. So there is an enormous emphasis on the 100 million people who saw *Kony 2012* in its first week, numbers which, as we’ve seen, dwarfed hit television series and

Hollywood blockbusters. This extraordinary example of grassroots circulation thrust Invisible Children's cause into the center of a political controversy for which it was poorly prepared. The traffic crashed its site, its staff were overwhelmed, and the group's leaders were emotionally crushed by the backlash's intensity. Invisible Children got more visibility than it could handle.

Thorson et. al.'s (2013) research on the video-sharing practices of the Occupy movement establishes that many participants' videos were not intended to be seen on such a massive scale; YouTube was often deployed as an archive where media was stored for personal reference or as a means of sharing experiences between different Occupy encampments. Many of the video blogs produced by American Muslim youth or the coming out videos produced by the DREAMers were intended for relatively small audiences, aimed at reaching at most a few hundred viewers, many of them friends or other movement participants. As we discussed in chapters 4 and 5, making these videos allowed their creators to cement their own emerging cultural or political identities and forge ties with others struggling in similar circumstances. And this may explain why many of them have disappeared from larger circulation once they achieved these personal and local purposes.

These communication practices thus serve a range of purposes for participants, some of whom are seeking high degrees of visibility, some of which are actively threatened by unwanted attention. As we saw in Chapter 4, there is a tremendous and justified anxiety about unwanted attention, from government surveillance directed against some American Muslim political organizations to elders in their own communities who disapprove of how youth are practicing Islam or haters directing their anger against them. Such unwelcome and often hostile views are the negative flip side of attention-based activism. So, for example, the DREAMers' coming out videos served an important role in forging collective identities around shared experiences of subordination, marginalization, and oppression, yet they could also expose them to sanctions by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or become tools in political struggles close to home. Pedro Ramirez, former student body president at Cal State Fresno, came out as undocumented (Marcum 2010), after a fellow student "outed" him during a battle over campus politics. Consequently, the student ran a persistent social media

campaign seeking to get Ramirez removed from office and deported, posting phone numbers for the FBI and ICE and providing instructions to supporters on the best way to put pressure on the university administration to take action against him.

We see our case study groups making different choices, often video by video, in terms of how they negotiate tensions between publicity and privacy. And as Zuckerman (2012b) suggests, these choices are shaped by the network's own models for political change. Those who want to bring about changes on the cultural level through educating the public and shifting popular opinion may need a different degree of visibility than those who seek a more focused exchange with specific government officials who have the capacity to directly alter the policies that impact their lives—the difference, for example, between the wide circulation of *Kony 2012* and the tactics IC adopted in training people to directly lobby their congress members. These groups do not always correctly calibrate the scale of communication, and they do not fully control their digital afterlife (Soep 2012)—far from it! We acknowledge, as skeptics like Jodi Dean (2005) have argued, that there is some risk that expressive politics can sometimes become an end unto itself—an exercise of voice with little or no hope of influence, as circulation displaces rather than encourages mobilization. Many would identify *Kony 2012* as a spectacular example of circulatory politics outstripping real-world impact, though, as we showed in Chapter 2, this story is much more complicated than is often suggested. There are other ways to understand what is taking place at such moments: cultural and social change may be cumulative; campaigns may increase visibility without achieving immediate success; individuals and groups may be acquiring and mastering competencies and resources that they can deploy more effectively in the future. If we consider, for example, the waves of change regarding racialized violence, each protest has brought these issues to the attention of more diverse segments of the population, groups have been quicker to respond to the next catalyst, and there are marked shifts in public opinion over time. Whether such efforts will bring about institutional or systemic change may be a separate issue, but insofar as education and cultural change can have an impact on how people live in relation to each other (including individuals working within larger institutions who may impact how they address such issues), the coupling of expressive politics with traditional kinds of

street protest—again, change by any means or media necessary—seems to be reasonably effective.

### From Engagement to Participation

Building on earlier work by Amna (2010), Dahlgren (2011) urges us to consider “the subjective predispositions behind participation,” identifying four basic kinds of motivation:

- Interest (which he defines as “the perceived potential for satisfaction deriving from everything from basic curiosity, to a drive for knowledge, as well as the seeking of pleasure”)
- Efficacy (“a confidence in one’s ability and a sense that participation is something amenable, within reach, that can be successfully enacted. At bottom it has to do with a sense of empowerment.”)
- Meaningfulness (“the rewards are perceived in rather private, normative, cognitive and/or affective terms”)
- Duty (“a sense of obligation, loyalty or solidarity, some kind of social value that resides beyond the self”) (96)

We might understand these underlying motivations as helping to move people from engagement to participation: “Engagement refers to subjective states, that is, a mobilized, focused attention on some object. It is in a sense a prerequisite for participation. . . . For engagement to become embodied as participation and therefore give rise to civic agency there must be some connection to practical, do-able activities, where citizens can feel empowered” (Dahlgren 2009, 80–81).

Our research confirms what has been argued by a growing number of political commentators, perhaps most notably W. Lance Bennett (2008a): that the notion of the dutiful citizen is in decline, but that it is being displaced by a stronger emphasis on shared interests. As such, these models push against what many critics have described as the individualizing and personalizing logics of neoliberalism; networked publics depend on social connections among participants and often demand that we care about the plight of others.

Neta Kligler-Vilenchik et al. (2012) discuss the mobilizing structures they identified through their study of Invisible Children and the Harry

Potter Alliance: “shared media experiences” (or what we here call content worlds), “a sense of community,” and “the wish to help.” The first two, which they see as characteristics of fan communities, might be described in terms of “interest” and “meaningfulness,” whereas the later might best fit under Dahlgren’s notion of “efficacy.” These organizational and rhetorical practices maximize participation by strengthening participants’ motivations and directing them toward desired civic outcomes.

The Harry Potter Alliance’s Not in Harry’s Name Campaign—mentioned briefly in Chapter 3—gives us a rich example of how meaningfulness might inspire political action. The group called out Warner Brothers, the studio that produces the Harry Potter movies, because the chocolate manufacturers the studio had contracted to create chocolate frogs and other confections for their theme park attractions were not certified as deploying Fair Trade practices. The HPA cited an independent report produced by Free2Work that gave the involved chocolate companies an F in human rights, suggesting that there were legitimate concerns regarding their labor policies and practices. The group collected hundreds of thousands of signatures on petitions intended to shame the producers into adopting better labor practices. As Lauren Bird (2013) explained in the video blog *When Our Heroes Fail*, HPA supporters felt directly implicated in these suspect labor practices:

We chose Harry Potter chocolate because that chocolate comes with a story that is not only near and dear to our hearts but is a story about justice and equal rights. Plus it is chocolate being sold primarily at a theme park for kids. It is pretty disturbing to think that the chocolate these kids are eating at this magical, wonderful place was possibly, coercively made by kids like them in another part of the world. . . . We are Harry Potter fans. That means that this chocolate matters more to us than whether Snickers bars are ethically made. But this also means we’re going up against our heroes, the people behind the story.

Bird openly acknowledged the HPA leaders’ ambivalence about this campaign, especially their uncertainty about confronting a studio whose good will they depend upon for other work they do. Yet Bird insists that fans have both a right—and an obligation—to question what’s being done “in Harry’s name.” Throughout this campaign, HPA members

confronted conflicted loyalties, a tension that also surfaced, as we saw in Chapter 3, when Imagine Better found itself at cross-purposes with Hunger Games fans during its conflicts with Lionsgate. After almost four years of sustained advocacy, the HPA scored a remarkable victory: Warner Brothers announced in January 2015 that they were shifting all of their contracts to Fair Trade companies and publicly thanked the Harry Potter Alliance for its efforts to call these issues to their attention. HPA executive director Matt Maggiacomo wrote a celebratory email to the group's members: "Fan activism has never had a victory like this before. An achievement of this magnitude has required four years, over four hundred thousand signatures, and a lot of help from many passionate and dedicated people."

And, of course, fandom represents only one of the many possible spaces where people come together around their shared passions and interests, any of which are potentially springboards for civic and political participation, as can be seen by research on forms of protest within gamer communities or the ways that craft and maker communities (Ratto and Boler 2014) unite participants with diverse skills that can be tapped for real-world social action. We might position our case studies along this axis: the DREAMers and the American Muslim cases are both more closely aligned with identity politics (though they also are consciously bridging across dividing lines between ethnicities and nationalities); the Nerdfighters and the other fan activists embody what John Hartley (1999) has described as "DIY citizenship," having forged a political identity based around resources borrowed from popular culture; and the Students for Liberty seek to erase notions of identity politics altogether, focusing on a radical notion of the individual who defies demographic categories. This continuum suggests that some youth have greater choice in the range of civic identities they may adopt than others—i.e., those who have the privilege to be relatively unconcerned about the immediacies of their own conditions may be able to perform more playful kinds of political identities than, first things first, those who are fighting for recognition of their basic rights. That said, the continuum breaks down again when we consider how many of those involved in the DREAMer movement or the cultural projects we discussed in the American Muslim case study also selected from and constructed their identities around materials borrowed from popular

culture, in part because they wanted to forge strong bonds with others from their generation as they sought to demonstrate why they belonged in the United States, and in part because almost all young people today engage in what Hartley describes as “the practice of putting together an identity from the available choices, patterns, and opportunities on offer in the semiosphere and the mediasphere” (185). Some of these youth have political identities thrust upon them, but their politics emerge from the choices they make in terms of how to respond to those outside suppositions about who they are.

We might similarly distinguish our case studies between those that involve acting in one’s own interests (as in the case of the American Muslims and the DREAMers) versus acting from what one perceives as an altruistic stance (as for Invisible Children or the various fan activist projects), though this framing masks the ways that some of the rhetorics associated with these groups stress how “meaningful” it is to participate in a movement to change the world, themes Melissa Brough (2012) emphasized in her discussion of Invisible Children. This distinction breaks down further when we look at HPA members working around LGBT or body image issues, which may impact their own lives more directly. We might also distinguish between efforts motivated by a single goal—the capture of Joseph Kony or the passage of the DREAM Act—that participants pursue through different strategies and tactics (the DREAMers’ shift toward a more overtly oppositional stance) and networks that redefine their social agendas to reflect emerging issues, as in the case of the Harry Potter Alliance, Nerdfighters, Imagine Better, and Students for Liberty.

### The Social Dimensions of Participatory Politics

We can sum up some of the shifts we are describing as a change from thinking of politics in terms of special events, such as elections, toward understanding political participation as part of a larger lifestyle, one closely integrated into other dimensions of young people’s social and cultural lives. Dahlgren (2011) writes, “Participation is fundamentally a social act, based in human communication, and contingent on sociality. All too often analyses ignore the importance of sociality in stimulating and maintaining participation, how interactions with others actually

serves to support (or not) participatory activities” (97). We might think about the roles Facebook, YouTube, and other media platforms play in participatory politics not through technological determinism, but rather with the recognition that many key dimensions of young people’s social lives get conducted through these various social media platforms: this is where they meet their friends, and thus, it is as natural for them to act politically in this space as it was for participants in earlier civic organizations to forge ties at the local bowling alley, coffee shop, church, or barbershop.

Writers such as Cass Sunstein (2009) argue that the online world has a polarizing effect on political discourse, suggesting that our ability to identify conversation partners based on their ideological alignment forecloses the possibilities of engaging with people with different perspectives. Sunstein’s argument rests on the assumption that the most important spaces through which we frame our political perspectives are explicitly political, rather than imagining that communities framed around a range of other interests might also be the site of sociability from which emerge shared ideas about what might constitute a better society. Remember Robert Putnam’s bowling leagues were, at the end of the day, focused on bowling, even if they had other civic and political effects. Lana Swartz and Kevin Driscoll (2014), for example, document the kinds of political conversations that occurred on PriceScope, an online site that facilitates conversations among buyers and sellers of expensive jewelry. Participants found that their shared interests in buying, say, wedding rings, cut across differences in ideological perspectives, such as debates around same-sex marriage, and allowed them to reassert their common interests following heated debates: “I hate your politics but love your diamonds.” By contrast, Megan Condis (2014) explores how the desire to create an “apolitical” and “disembodied” space of conversation within certain gamer and fan communities (her focus is on *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*) creates a context where certain perspectives, particularly those concerning sexuality and gender, get ruled as disruptive or off topic. Here, the desire to preserve sociability results in the exclusion of some voices, even as it masks the privilege enjoyed by others.

Inserting politics into everyday social interactions has a price, which may involve creating discomfort and disagreement in spaces where one

seeks friendship and fellowship. These stakes are often underestimated, as when writers like Malcolm Gladwell (2010) decry the lowered risks of online activism or when critics describe changing your profile picture green (to support the Iranian revolution) or pink (to support marriage equality) as the lowest-cost forms of activism. In fact, as Molly Sauter and Matt Stempeck (2013) note, such activism does involve the risk of social ostracism for youth in communities that do not already support such views, since their profile picture will be seen by parents, teachers, other students, religious leaders, anyone who is part of their social network:

By going pink, people are standing up as allies and creating the perception of a safe space within their own friendship communities online—spaces where gay people may face stigmas and bullying. . . . But going pink was still, in many individuals' social networks, an act requiring some degree of bravery, because it's a more controversial topic, closer to home, and likely to alienate at least one social contact.

What may seem like a simple, low-cost gesture online may translate into any number of heated and risky exchanges on the ground. Researchers in Harvard's Good Participation project (another part of MacArthur's Youth and Participatory Politics Network) document that many of the youth they interviewed chose not to talk about their political and civic activities in their social media profiles (Weinstein 2013). For some, their volunteer activities are no more a part of their social identities than their after-school job at McDonald's, whereas for others, their political activities are simply understood as an aspect of their lives different from their interactions with their friends on Facebook. And for the members of some of our groups—the DREAMers and the American Muslim youth—the risk that any political speech they engage in online will become the target of surveillance is a serious one.

Concerns that political talk may disrupt everyday social interactions also account for why many participants in our case study groups frame issues in terms of consensus rather than contentious politics or sometimes downplay their own status as activists—the desire to capture and punish an evil warlord is assumed to be something with which few can disagree, and so the goal is to help people understand the stakes, not to debate what actions should be taken. This consensus orientation

may account for why many IC supporters were ill prepared to rebut the critiques leveled against the group after the release of *Kony 2012*. By contrast, the young DREAMers and American Muslim youth lack the ability to frame their politics in terms of consensus; they know that they are facing strong opposition not only to their views but to their very existence, and thus, like the Freedom Riders before them, they have trained themselves from the start to face and overcome challenges to their perspectives. In both cases, political solidarity gets formed around shared experiences, values, and visions, yet there is also a heightened awareness of conflicting interests in the surrounding culture.

We can see how sociability and political advocacy get negotiated by looking at the example of Julian Gomez. This college sophomore and regular video blogger for the Harry Potter Alliance drew attention to the DREAMer movement when he came out as undocumented in a video explaining why he would be unable to attend LeakyCon, a popular fan convention. On the one hand, the video reaffirmed his status as a fellow fan by, for instance, its inclusion of personal photographs taken at a previous convention held closer to his home and references to the content world, comparing the plight of the undocumented with Voldemort’s attacks on “mudbloods,” wizards born to Muggle parents. For fellow fans, Julian was one of them, someone they knew from his previous video blogs, someone who cared about the same things they did. But, at the same time, the video used his desire to attend a convention across the country from where he lived to dramatize the everyday realities of being undocumented: he is unable to get a driver’s license, and he lacks even the ID required to take an airplane or an Amtrak train. HPA members were encouraged to share their own reflections about what makes one an American and heated discussions about immigration reform broke out on the HPA’s YouTube channel and other fan forums.

However, many fans embraced this issue as a practical problem to be solved. Ultimately, the community found a way to get him to LeakyCon by pooling their resources. In a video produced after the event, Julian explained his mixed feelings:

I was amazed at how great people were, but I thought they were missing the point. I wanted people to be that passionate about discussing immigration policy flaws, not getting me to LeakyCon. But it turns out that

it is kinda the same thing. People's willingness to help out someone they think deserves the same rights that they do, including being able to attend this conference, shows that they see me the person and not me the undocumented immigrant. They see me the Harry Potter fan. They see me missing out on something I wouldn't have to if I just had the right papers.

Attending LeakyCon also provided another opportunity for Julian to educate Harry Potter fans about immigration reform: immigrant rights activist Jose Antonio Vargas flew in specifically to speak at the gathering and subsequently forged a partnership with Julian and other HPA members to help document the lives of young DREAMers.

### *Assessing Participatory Politics*

Lest we be unclear, the kinds of practices we document in this book, for us, count as politics, though the question remains whether some of these approaches are more productive than others. We have said that we are “cautiously optimistic” about the kinds of participatory politics documented here. On the one hand, we are seeing many examples of how our case study groups, through their mechanisms of translation, are helping young people who might have otherwise fallen through the cracks become more civically engaged and politically empowered. We are seeing young people, who might otherwise have felt excluded from the political system, find their voice and exert some influence on issues that matter to them. Networks (such as the DREAMer movement or #BlackLivesMatter) facilitate collective action; members feel part of something larger than themselves.

Yet many of those whom the Youth and Participatory Politics survey (Cohen and Kahne 2012) identified as having engaged in some forms of participatory political practices did so on their own, within a culture that stresses personal empowerment over collective action, without access to the symbolic resources and infrastructural supports provided by the kinds of organizations our book has discussed. Many of these youth will feel discouraged by their inability to make change, by the fact that their media productions fail to circulate and their messages go unheard, by the hostile reception they receive for their views within their social spheres, and so forth. The kinds of networked publics we are describ-

ing are often themselves precarious but individualized actions are even more so. Many lack access to digital technologies; they lack an understanding of how participatory politics works; they do not see themselves as having anything to contribute to larger conversations about politics; they fear that they can not live up to society’s impossible ideals about what constitutes an informed citizen; and they lack the social connections to adopt a more monitorial perspective on social change. Lissa Soep (2014) has identified other potential risks of participatory politics:

Content worlds can feed sensationalization; they can ultimately be unsustainable and thus set up the participants for disappointment, resentment, cynicism, and missed opportunity; they can reveal a kind of saviorism that denies agency to those with direct knowledge and the most to lose; and they can invite slippage to the extent that participants eager to connect with the widest possible audience sometimes obscure the specificity of particular struggles. (71)

Some exceptional individuals will find their ways past such obstacles and engage in tactics that are personally meaningful and politically effective. There are always exceptions, but the kinds of organizations we study increase the effectiveness of their political efforts and, more importantly, provide gateways for youth who would not otherwise have been encouraged to participate politically. In that sense, they provide “consequential connections.” Lissa Soep will have more to say about how these practices relate to connected learning in her Afterword.

Dahlgren (2011) discusses such concerns in terms of what he calls “contingencies,” factors that “both facilitate and hinder participation” (100). These constraints push potential participations toward the “solo sphere, a politics focused on ‘personal identity’ rather than ‘collectively intervening in the social world and contesting power relations’” (103–104). Many of the platforms deployed for participatory political practices are privately owned, commercially focused, and often adopt policies more attentive to the corporation’s desire to profit than by a desire to maximize opportunities for participation (Campbell 2009). Some of the youth we’ve discussed here are literally disenfranchised—lacking the basic rights as citizens that might traditionally have allowed them to make their voices heard by democratic institutions—and many others

may be effectively so, as attempts to restrict voter registration, including a movement away from registering voters through public schools, discourage American youth from participating in elections. Many others are discouraged from political participation by a breakdown of basic trust in government institutions: as of 2014, only 7 percent of Americans felt strong or moderate trust in the U.S. Congress, for example, a crisis point from which it may be very hard to recover (Lightman 2014).

We can see some of the tactics and rhetorics deployed here as politics through other means, politics directed at other targets, politics through other languages. They reflect a desire to disassociate one's self from institutional politics, but not from the idea of social change. We have seen through our research youth who are strongly engaged in political debates, actively participating in change movements, with access to traditional institutions and networks, with a strong sense of empowerment and efficacy, but with little or no motivation to vote. For some of the groups we study, relevant political change may come only through institutional politics—such as the DREAMers' struggle for citizenship—but they still often represent these struggles in terms of their ability to make meaningful choices in the context of their everyday lives—to get scholarships, to go to LeakyCon—and they are still forced to adopt alternative political tactics because they are denied the right of citizens to vote or petition their government.

All of the cases discussed here have some connection with political institutions. We discuss those connections most extensively in considering the relationship between Students for Liberty and a range of conservative think tanks and funders, yet we could also talk about the partnerships that the HPA forges, campaign by campaign, with a range of NGOs and nonprofits, the ways that Invisible Children brought government officials to participate in its Fourth Estate events, the ways that DREAMers measured their success in part based on how their concerns were taken up during highly visible events such as State of the Union addresses and presidential nominating conventions, or the ways that the American Muslim youth groups were funded by government agencies and foundations. Such connections can be understood as valuable ways of translating voice into influence but they also come with institutional entanglements that may threaten more participatory political practices.

Given the general disillusionment with government expressed by many of the young people we encountered, the way the Futures of Entertainment panelists distanced themselves from politics and activism now comes as no surprise. During our research interviews, young people repeatedly resisted labeling their work as explicitly political after having spent the previous one to two hours vividly recounting action they took around civic and social issues. Differences also surfaced across the various cases studies. The DREAMers were the most likely of all the groups to see their work as explicitly political. The American Muslims were the most emphatic in distancing themselves, and their civic work, from formal political and activist categories.

### *Co-Opting Participatory Politics*

If these new kinds of civic cultures are developing a new repertoire of mobilization tactics, communication practices, and rhetorical genres, it should be no surprise that institutional politics is increasingly mimicking their languages, especially the blending of popular culture and political speech. During the 2012 presidential campaign, we saw Samuel L. Jackson tapping into his star persona as a trash-talking action hero eager to rattle the complacency of suburban voters, all in the service of the Obama reelection effort ("Wake the F\*\*K Up"):

Sorry, my friend, but there's no time to snore  
 An out-of-touch millionaire's just declared war  
 On schools, the environment, unions, fair pay  
 We're all on our own if Romney has his way  
 And he's against safety nets  
 If you fall, tough luck  
 So I strongly suggest that you wake the fuck up

We also saw Joss Whedon, the popular showrunner of fan-favorite series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, jokingly endorsing Mitt Romney ("Whedon on Romney") as the candidate best able to prepare America for the impending zombie apocalypse (for more on Whedon and fan activism, see Cochran 2012). Such videos attract attention

through their unconventional representations of the political process, their pop culture references, and the ease with which they can be circulated through social media. Both of these videos make the assumption that young voters are culturally and politically savvy, that they are in on the joke, and that they recognize that popular culture metaphors do not fully explain the political process. They speak to a generation whose political education came from *The Daily Show*.

Yet such practices may also patronize young citizens. A series of campaign spots produced by the GOP, for example, speak to a fear of participatory politics. During the 2008 election, John McCain's campaign released "Fan Club 2.0," a spot designed to diminish what pundits had described as the "enthusiasm gap" between the two parties, making fun of young people's passionate embrace of Obama. "Fan Club 2.0" used parody not simply to spoof the candidate but to discourage democratic participation, telling first-time voters who had been excited by the Obama campaign to, in effect, "get a life."

A subsequent GOP advertisement ("The Breakup") depicted young people who wanted to "break up with Obama" as if he was an ill-advised Facebook friend, whose controlling behavior was too big of an imposition: "We met on Facebook. He had me at 'hope and change.' . . . Our parents warned us about this. . . . We're over. You can keep the change." Such rhetoric tries to speak the language of participatory politics, but it also trivializes the political agency of youth. While political media artifacts such as these deploy some of its tactics—depending more on grassroots circulation via video sharing than paid advertising on broadcast media—and its rhetoric—the use of parody and pop culture references—they are designed to delegitimize participatory politics.

### Contacts and Exchanges between Our Case Study Groups

While this book's case studies clearly share many similarities when it comes to repertoires of action, imagined outcomes, media-specific practices, and engagement through participatory politics, they are also clearly very different. Our five cases intentionally represent distinct communities facing specific challenges and thus adopting different responses. To state the obvious: context matters when it comes to participatory politics. Clearly, actions and issues relevant to one community

may not resonate with the same urgency in another. Different groups have different resources, access to power, networks, and risks.

And yet, we were repeatedly struck by the ways issues that mobilized one case study community were embraced by others. Many of the young libertarians we interviewed, for example, expressed sympathy for DREAMers and their cause. Herman, from Texas, said:

I think “illegal immigration” is heroic because, frankly, this used to be a land where they said, “Are you tired and poor, and are you yearning to be free?” That was supposed to be our legacy—the ability for anyone to come freely and build a life for themselves. But the way that the government has now progressed . . . if you are somebody who just wants to come and work for a little while, if you need some place to go and get refuge from your foreign government because they are being oppressive. Oh no, man, you might as well just throw a rock against the wall and they are not going to notice. They price people out in immigration by requiring massive amounts of money just to get to the door through paperwork.

Herman explained that his support for immigration reform was primarily related to his belief that open borders made the most *economic* sense, though he also said he felt anti-immigration laws were rooted in xenophobia and racism, as did some other SFL interviewees. The overlap between libertarians and DREAMers on the issue of immigration illustrates how, even though certain groups may be motivated by different beliefs and circumstance, sometimes surprising commonalities exist. Likewise, immigration reform, of tantamount importance to DREAMers, may have been only a tangential concern for many HPA members until they learned that someone in their own community was affected by it.

Another crossover between our cases surfaced when American Muslims became a visible part of the programming at Invisible Children’s 2013 Fourth Estate event. Speaking to their youth supporters in UCLA’s Royce Auditorium, Jason Russell and Jedidiah Jenkins, the event’s moderators and members of IC’s leadership team, introduced Linda Sarsour, their American Muslim activist guest speaker:

JASON RUSSELL: Obviously we are all here united under this roof  
because we all believe that all humans no matter where you come

from, no matter what you look like, no matter what your belief is, we are all equal . . .

JEDIDIAH JENKINS: But sometimes it's actually easier to care about someone that's 10,000 miles away than to care for your own community. And sometimes it's even hard to understand the people in your own community that look different from you or maybe you've already decided who and what they are and you don't even know.

Sarsour, who serves as the advocacy and civic engagement coordinator for the National Network for Arab American Communities in New York, came on stage and built on Russell's and Jenkins's comments, sharing personal experiences that both connected her to and separated her from most of IC's youth supporters:

I am here today really to share my story with you and to take you on my own journey. I want my story to be a story that you think about when you see another Arab or Muslim or when you come across people from our community wherever you are in the world. And I also want my story to be a story of an American that comes from a community that might have a different experience than you.

With this introduction, Sarsour took her audience back to September 10, 2001, describing how profoundly her life changed over the next 24 hours as she involuntarily went from being a “mom, college student, daughter, regular person who felt like a New Yorker, and felt like anyone else living in the city” to someone who was seen as an “enemy, a stranger, a foreigner to the very city that I lived in, the country that myself, my family, and my children called home.” Sarsour appealed to IC supporters to look past religious and cultural differences and get to know more about people that may follow a different faith. Later, she and other panelists (all of them Christian) participated in a breakout session provocatively titled “Is Religion Destroying the World?”

American Muslims surfaced several more times during the event, for instance when Marium Elarbi, an alumnus of IC's first Fourth Estate, connected her decision to start wearing the hijab to mustering the courage to get involved with IC:

In August 2010, right before starting my senior year in high school, I decided I was going to start wearing hijab (or the headscarf). For so long I had been avoiding doing that. . . . I started to realize that I needed to stop worrying about what everyone else was going to think. . . . [I]n choosing to wear the headscarf, I am now being honest about who I am. Everyday people who will see me will know that I am Muslim. And, I am OK with that. I am proud of that. [applause] In connecting the dots, I realized that deciding to wear the hijab has been part of this entire journey and it gave me the confidence to attend the first Fourth Estate Summit.

Through Sarsour and Elarbi, IC supporters developed a deeper respect for Muslims and Islam as those attending the Fourth Estate event were able to connect their own faith and values to supporting religious freedom in the United States.

As issues spread between our case study communities, they often were reframed to render them relevant to particular contexts. When HPA supporters rallied around Julian’s undocumented status, they focused on finding a way to get him to LeakyCon rather than embarking on a campaign for immigration reform. Context gets even more complex when we consider IC youth support for American Muslim youth. As we also discussed in Chapter 4, the American Muslim youth we interviewed generally distanced their faith-related civic engagement from politics and activism as they responded to the already politicized situation they faced on a daily basis as Muslims in the United States. In contrast, IC youth may have learned about the problems confronted by American Muslim youth when they heard Muslim peers speak about their 9/11 experiences at the second Fourth Estate; the IC youth defined acceptance of diverse faiths (including Islam) as an explicitly civic, even political, stance, especially within an organization that historically had strong ties to Christian churches. What one community sees as political, another may declare to be apolitical, even if (and at times precisely because) outsiders disagreed with this categorization. All of this indicates a need for a more nuanced, and culturally inflected, understanding of what constitutes participatory politics.

## Is Everybody Happy?

One example of the need for such a nuanced understanding emerged on May 2, 2014, when the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) released a music video, “American Muslims Get . . . Happy!,” set to Pharrell Williams’s pop hit “Happy.” Initially released in November 2013, Williams’s song topped the charts in many countries for weeks in early 2014. The song was originally released alongside “Happy in . . . Los Angeles,” a music video shot in 24 hours as a publicity stunt, which featured Williams and other famous and not-so-famous personalities dancing around Los Angeles. Responding to this original music video, more than 1,950 videos were set to this song and uploaded to YouTube from 153 countries around the world. Riding this phenomenon, Julie Fersing and Loïc Fontaine (who are based in France) created the [wearehappyfrom.com](http://wearehappyfrom.com) site in May 2014 to catalogue and map the various “Happy” videos.

Shot in one day in Washington, D.C., the MPAC “Happy” video featured a diverse cast of American Muslims who moved, clapped, lip-synced, and danced to the song’s upbeat lyrics. Though the playful video may not—at first glance—appear to have political meaning, the MPAC made two significant statements through its production. First, the video situated American Muslims in dialogue with other local communities around the world who had created and uploaded their own “Happy” videos, signaling that Muslims are just like other people, a theme often expressed by American Muslim youth. Second, MPAC explicitly dedicated the video to Honesty Policy, an anonymous group that had released “Happy British Muslims” a few months earlier and found itself embroiled in a controversy about whether popular music and dance (or movement to rhythm more broadly defined) are appropriate under Islam.

In an analysis of the “Happy” phenomenon and other “georemixed” videos, Ethan Zuckerman (2014) argues that though these videos may not advocate a political party or a cause, they are nonetheless “political”:

When the residents of Toliara, Madagascar make their version of “Happy,” they’re making a statement that they’re part of the same media environment, part of the same culture, part of the same world as Pharrell’s LA. . . . Happy in Damman, Saudi Arabia features wonderfully goofy men, but not a single woman. Beijing is happy, but profoundly crowded

and hazy—intentionally or not, the video is a statement about air pollution as well as about a modern, cosmopolitan city.

Two other “Happy” videos, from Tehran and the Armenian capital of Yerevan, are worth considering here for their political relevance. The Tehran version of “Happy,” which features young women and men dancing together in ways that are unacceptable under Iranian laws, led to the arrest of six participants. They were later released after they made official statements asserting that they had been coerced into participating in the video’s production. In the meantime, #FreeHappyIranians emerged as an expression of protest over the situation. In a different vein, the Yerevan “Happy” video was created with support from the U.S. government and showcased on the YouTube channel of the American embassy in Armenia, featuring alumni of U.S. cultural exchange programs and the U.S. ambassador to Armenia and acknowledging this fact in the final credits. Interestingly, an otherwise identical version of this video, uploaded by Lumen, the production company responsible for it, does not feature these final credits, effectively obscuring the U.S. government’s role in the project.

Regarding these, and other, versions of “Happy,” Zuckerman (2014) suggests that “perhaps a video that asserts that you and your friends are part of the wider world is political only if your nation has consciously withdrawn from that world. Perhaps it’s political any time your city, your country, and your culture are misunderstood or ignored by the rest of the world.” Shresthova (2013) makes a similar argument in her analysis of dance specific georemixes. Taking a close look at Bollywood dance-themed flash mob videos uploaded to YouTube, Shresthova identifies a productive tension between how these flash mobs occupy real-world geography and the ways they achieve a broader mobility as their videos are circulated online. Focusing on the CST Bollywood Flashmob, an event staged at Mumbai’s central train station, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, which had been devastated by a terrorist attack in 2008, Shresthova argues that the combination of dance, location, music, and circulation through social media allowed the CST flash mob to assume a significance that was intentionally both context specific and politically ambiguous.

Despite their disciplinary differences, Zuckerman and Shresthova both identify geography as a crucial dimension for understanding when

and how participatory culture becomes participatory politics. We agree, and see expanding the scope of our case study–based approach beyond the United States as a logical, indeed necessary, next step. When we issued a paper call for submissions to a 2012 special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* on fan activism, we were overwhelmed by submissions from all over the world, informing us about everything from the use of political remixes and spoofs in the German elections (Jungherr 2012) to the ways that pop stars in Korea (Jung 2012) and Hong Kong (Li 2012) had succeeded or failed in attempts to politically mobilize their fans.

Researchers working outside the United States describe rich connections between participatory culture and participatory politics. Aswin Punathambekar (2012) argues that the “strong relationship between participatory culture and civic/political engagement would not come as news to anyone in India.” Through a study of the third season of *Indian Idol*, the local version of the *Idols* singing competition, he recounts how the show’s audience vote became a mechanism that “created the possibility and the space for the renewal of everyday forms of interaction across ethnic, religious, spatial, and linguistic boundaries that had been subdued and rendered difficult, if not impossible, over the decades.” In another India-based study, Ritesh Mehta (2012) explores an instance of what he calls real-world “flash activism” inspired by the Bollywood film *Rang De Basanti*, whose plot centrally involves civic action. In this case, as Mehta describes, a cinematic protest inspired one in the real world that emulated the film in both method (both involved sit-ins at the India Gate in Delhi) and cause (both protested high-level government corruption) in ways that actually helped produce tangible results.

These (and other) studies only scratch the surface of an important area for further research. Around the planet, young people are deploying references to popular culture and the infrastructures and practices of participatory culture as gateways into engagement with the core political struggles of their times. In some cases, they are tapping into local forms of popular culture, while in others, they are connecting to forms in global circulation, especially those associated with Hollywood blockbusters (see Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013 on the various movements inspired by James Cameron’s *Avatar*) or popular music (“Happy”). In some cases, they are localizing genres of participation

from elsewhere—again, the “Happy” phenomenon, but also the Occupy movement—often because they encountered these tactics through videos shared online. All of these cases involve processes of adaptation and transformation, as participants’ actions need to be rendered meaningful to their local communities and effective within the context of local traditions and beliefs. As these processes of localization occur, video traces of the actions involved may also be put into circulation, and in turn may inspire further activities somewhere else on the globe. All of this reflects the remarkable communication capabilities available to many young people, even as many others are blocked from meaningful access to these technologies and to the skills needed to enter into this conversation. Mapping these various forms of participatory politics may help us to better understand what counts as politics in the early 21st century. Identifying the contingencies that block participation (or increase its risks) may illuminate the struggles for basic rights that will need to be waged before we achieve our hopes for a more participatory culture.

### A Meeting of Two Generations

Having started this chapter with a cross-generational exchange about what counts as politics, we wanted to end with another such encounter. John Lewis, currently a U.S. representative from Georgia, was speaking in summer 2014 at the Aspen Idea Festival on a panel moderated by *PBS NewsHour* anchor Gwen Ifill. The Aspen audience was thrilled and moved to hear Lewis describe what it was like to be the youngest featured speaker during the March on Washington, to be one of the first hit by police on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, to be with Robert F. Kennedy when he learned about Martin Luther King’s assassination. His talk was inspiring, empowering, and grounded in the wisdom of his 60 years as a civil rights advocate.

A young Asian American man asked what advice he would have for young people who wanted to make change, and Lewis began his response by speaking about the role of new technologies:

You are much better educated, you are better informed, you have all of this new technology. We didn’t have a fax machine. We had one of these old mimeograph machines you just turned and turned. You have

an obligation, your generation, young people, have an obligation, a mission, and a mandate to push and pull and not be satisfied and do everything possible. . . . I hear too many people say, “I am not going to participate. That’s not my cause.” We have to participate. Politics controls everything we do in America, from the time that we are born until the time we die, so you have a moral obligation, a mandate, to push and get out there and do everything you can to leave this little piece of real estate we call America a little greener, a little cleaner, and a little more peaceful for generations yet unborn.

Lewis’s shift from technology to notions of participation was a telling one, consistent with our argument across the book: change comes not simply through access to technologies but through structures that support young people’s political participation. Lewis has explicitly been using comics to translate lessons he learned in the civil rights movement into a language he hopes will reach young Americans (see Lewis and Aydin 2013). Earlier, he had identified immigration reform and marriage equality as part of the “unfinished business” of the civil rights movement, so he was aligned with these young people in terms of their views of what some of the core issues of the day were.

But the question remained, what counted as political participation? What were the new models for political change? A young African American woman rose from the audience, and asked, “Do you think we’d be better off staying out of office if we are interested in getting something done, insofar as Congress seems to have a hard time with that?”

And there was suddenly a gaping generational divide between them. Lewis had fought for voting rights, had struggled to insure that the first African Americans were elected to local, state, and national offices, and had spent two decades in the U.S. House of Representatives. For him, institutional politics was the way through which you could change laws and make a difference. The young woman, by contrast, represented a generation that was politically engaged, socially aware, but deeply skeptical that a deadlocked government was going to act on behalf of its causes. The always eloquent Lewis stammered; Ifil tried to rephrase the question, but the exchange ended with no real answer. Lewis, clearly uncomfortable, restated a call to help elect new people who could change Congress, and then concluded, “I think there are people today who get

involved but they do not believe in the political arena. I think there are people who want to tear down rather than to build."

If Lewis had thought back a few decades, he might have remembered a time when it was impossible for African Americans to imagine achieving political success through representative government, might have thought about the progress that was made through social and cultural means, might have thought about the support mechanisms that were offered by the black church or the political roles played by cultural figures such as Ruby Dee or Mahalia Jackson (both of whom were also part of the March on Washington). You could fault this young woman, perhaps, for giving up hope in making the system work again, but you would have to respect the ways that her generation was still fighting for equality and justice, while pursuing politics through other channels.

This book has offered a range of examples of young people working together to try to change the world, some working within "the system" (institutional politics), some working around "the system" (seeking change through other mechanisms) but all imagining politics as something that fits into their everyday lives, something in which they were invited to participate. They had found ways to share their own stories and express their own voices, often through producing and circulating their own media, to set the agenda and frame the message. We cannot understand these practices by bracketing off the cultural from the political: for these youth, the cultural is the gateway into the political. They are seeking political change by any media necessary.