

“Feel That You Are Doing Something”: Participatory Culture Civics

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Abstract

Young people’s civic engagement through online communities and peer networks has received increased attention in recent years. This paper examines groups rooted within participatory cultures, which mobilize their participants toward explicit civic goals. We draw on our research of Invisible Children and the Harry Potter Alliance—two media-centric, youth-oriented, participatory organizations—to identify their distinctive practices. Building on our analysis, we propose that both organizations engage in “Participatory Culture Civics” (PCC) as they support organized collective action towards civic goals, while building on the affordances of participatory culture. We describe three innovative PCC practices employed by these groups: Build Communities, Tell Stories, and Produce Media. The organizations’ ability to combine civic goals with the pleasures of participatory culture allows them to successfully engage young people. However, both organizations struggle to balance between the creative and community-based tenets of participatory culture, and the focused, product-driven goals of a civic engagement organization.



Keywords

Youth, politics, civic engagement,
popular culture, fan communities,
new media

“My friends and I, we all want to get involved, but we’re finding it hard to find the organizations to really get involved. I think ... things are so structured that you are limited with the amount of stuff you can do. With the Boys and Girls Club you are focused into one point, and right now we are all trying to experience all these different things and we want to help in all these different ways. With the HPA being such a new organization and having such multiple scopes, you are able to dabble in a little bit of everything, and actually feel that you are doing something.” (Dana, member of the Harry Potter Alliance)

This quote by Dana of the Harry Potter Alliance captures what many young people told us over several years. Countering allegations of civic apathy and social isolation often leveraged against the millennial generation, young people like Dana want to be involved in their communities and participate in civic life. They want to build strong connections with other youth and take civic action in ways that differ from more traditional modes of civic engagement. Dana’s experience challenges claims made by scholars around the turn of the millennium when Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community” (2000) ushered in a decade of concern around declining participation in civic and political life in the United States. Pointing to the dwindling membership in traditional civic groups, Putnam warned that a “treacherous rip current” of civic disengagement threatened American society (Putnam 2000: 27). Other scholars lamented that young people’s withdrawal from civic and political life is so significant that it “endangers the healthy functioning of democratic polities” (Galston 2001: 6).

But, as Dana’s quote implies, young people’s perceived disengagement from civic life may not grow out of apathy. Rather, we may be witnessing a mismatch between young people’s emergent “civic styles” and more traditional modes of civic engagement. Examining young people’s civic aspirations and motivations, more scholars now acknowledge that young people engage with civics in new ways, often through online communities and peer networks (e.g. Bennett, Wells & Rank 2009; Ito et al. 2009; Jenkins 2006). Complicating the civic decline narrative, other scholars see young people take creative and innovative action online, sometimes

achieving political outcomes that may not have been possible without new media (e.g. Kahne and Cohen 2012).

Lance Bennett (2008) suggests these contrasting perspectives on young people's engagement emerge through two distinct civic paradigms. One paradigm focuses on the "dutiful citizen" whose role it is to participate in government-centered activities (such as voting), trust public officials, and follow public affairs in the news. The dutiful citizen joins traditional civic associations as an expected form of civic participation. According to this perspective, youth participation is in decline (though the past few presidential elections in the US saw a youth vote surge). The second paradigm, which Bennett calls the "engaged youth" viewpoint, identifies a new spectrum of civic actions employed by young people, who—in the context of the affordances of new media—often choose creative ways to act upon their civic beliefs. The change, according to this paradigm, may not be in young people's levels of engagement, but rather in their conceptions of what civic action looks like.

Situated within the "engaged youth" paradigm, we investigate young people's new and creative ways of civic participation. We focus on youth involved with two nonprofit organizations, the Harry Potter Alliance and Invisible Children. The Harry Potter Alliance, established in 2005, mobilizes fans of Harry Potter (and other young people) around issues ranging from literacy and equality to human rights, by using metaphors from the popular franchise. Established the same year, Invisible Children is an organization devoted to capturing warlord Joseph Kony and putting an end to his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), thereby "ending the longest-running war in Africa." In 2012, Invisible Children received international attention when their online video *Kony2012* became the fastest spreading video of all times, inciting a public controversy around the organization and its tactics.

We see Invisible Children and the Harry Potter Alliance as having an important characteristic in common. Namely that both organizations combine the social and structural affordances of participatory cultures—including a strong sense of community, low barriers to participation, informal mentorship structures, and support for creating and sharing one's creations (Jenkins et. al. 2006)—with the pursuit of explicit civic or political goals. Our research

suggests that these organizations differ from traditional civic organizations because they explicitly build on, and scaffold, their members' creative and participatory practices. Digging deeper, we analyze these organizations through the lens of the Participatory Culture Civics (PCC) practices employed by young participants in these organizations¹. We define PCC practices as *activities that support organized collective action towards civic goals, while building on the affordances of a participatory culture*. The examined organizations have developed unique approaches that reflect their distinctive character and resonate with their young members.

At a time when traditional civic organizations are losing touch with young people, and young people often feel excluded by or are repelled from the world of partisan politics, the organizations examined in this article have given young people alternative ways to get involved. These groups resonate with young people, and have shown the ability to successfully mobilize them toward civic goals, by building on the youths' emergent media practices. At the same time, the organizations often face challenges in striking a balance between the bottom-up tenets of participatory culture and the focused, goal-driven approach of a civic organization. The practices employed by these organizations, as well as the challenges they try to overcome, should interest those working to mobilize youth as well as scholars of media and civic engagement attempting to assess the status and health of youth civic engagement and its expressions online.

Our analysis draws on research we conducted on the Harry Potter Alliance and Invisible Children in 2010 and 2011 and is, therefore, rooted in the ways in which these organizations operated during that time period. In the sections below, we introduce the participatory practices we identified and show how they combine cultural and social participation with civic and political goals. We examine how these practices aid youth engagement and identify limitations of the PCC approach. Finally, we re-evaluate the PCC practices in the light of events that occurred after our research—most notably, the phenomenal spread and critical backlash against Invisible Children's *Kony2012* film, and, most recently, IC's strategic restructuring decision to focus all energy on their work aimed at Africa. We discuss the tensions that organizations face when employing PCC practices and the necessity of organizational support for their sustainability.

Case studies

Since 2009, the Civic Paths Project at the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, led by Professor Henry Jenkins, has examined intersections between participatory culture and civic engagement through in-depth case studies of youth-driven organizations. The PCC practices we describe in this paper emerge from research we have conducted with the Harry Potter Alliance and Invisible Children². While different in many ways, these two organizations share several characteristics: they were started and led by young people; they have an explicit civic goal; they make extensive use of popular culture; and they enable their young members to partake in the shaping of their own participation experience. Comparing the two organizations helps us clarify the strengths and weaknesses of each; at the same time, when listening to the members' stories, we were struck by the many PCC practices the two organizations shared.

Our focus on organizations (rather than communities or social networks) may be somewhat surprising given our interest in participatory culture. Many manifestations of participatory culture are indeed characterized by broader networks and more informal affiliations. The two organizations we consider tap those broad, informal networks, but are also characterized by (some) clear leadership, roles, and organizational structure. As we will see, the careful balance between formal and informal characteristics may be a key feature to these organizations' moments of success. Importantly, these organizations cannot be characterized as simply "online," or "mediated," organizations. Rather, their online/mediated components are complemented by, and further encourage, face-to-face participation.

The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) is a nonprofit organization established by activist and stand-up comedian Andrew Slack. Inspired by the student activist organization "Dumbledore's Army" in the Harry Potter narratives, the HPA uses parallels from the fictional content world as an impetus for civic action. It mobilizes over a hundred thousand young people to promote a range of campaigns around their three main areas of focus: literacy, equality, and human rights. Building on a handful of paid staff members, a larger network of volunteers, and over 130 local chapters dispersed around the US, the HPA's campaigns include an annual book drive, voter

registration events, and phone-banking campaigns to protect marriage equality. The HPA has also partnered up with other organizations, for instance to raise over \$123,000 for Partners in Health in two weeks, as part of the Helping Haiti Heal campaign. HPA's recent campaigns include Equality FTW (for the win), raising \$95,000 for action around immigration, education, and LGBTQ equality³.

The San Diego-based non-profit Invisible Children (IC) received world-wide attention—and critique—after their 30 minute film *Kony2012* became the fastest spreading video of all time in March 2012, reaching 112 million views in six days (<http://corp.visiblemeasures.com>). Our research with IC predates this event by several years. IC is an organization dedicated to “use the power of media to inspire young people to help end the longest running war in Africa” (www.invisiblechildren.com), fought by Joseph Kony and the rebel army LRA. At the time of our research, IC—and the war they were trying to address—was known mostly to the young people who had encountered it in screenings at their schools, colleges, or churches (IC was not making much use of online channels of circulation at the time). IC had launched several campaigns—notably the “Global Night Commute” and “Displace Me”, two nationwide demonstrations that each drew over 70,000 young participants, and took partial credit in urging the U.S. government to pass the LRA disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act in May 2010. In Central Africa, IC's activities included funding schools, offering scholarships to students, and installing radio transmitted emergency message systems to warn local inhabitants if the LRA is approaching. In the United States, IC's activities focused primarily on awareness-raising, fundraising, and political action to end the LRA's armed conflict.

The successful spread of *Kony2012* brought IC unprecedented attention, but also unprecedented criticism. Most critiques centered on Invisible Children's financial operations, their focus on filmmaking over “on-the-ground” action, their “savior attitude”, and their support of military intervention (e.g., Oyston, 2012; Zuckerman, 2012). Besides criticizing the organization itself, many critiques were also launched toward the young people who enthusiastically “liked” and “shared” the campaign through their social networks, and who were presented as naive, gullible, or as

“slacktivists” (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson 2013). At the height of the critique towards his organization, Jason Russell, one of IC’s founders, suffered a public emotional breakdown, further heightening IC’s public relations crisis.

Kony2012 significantly changed how IC functions and how it draws on participatory cultural practices. While we return to these changes in the discussion section, we stress that the research underlying the practices we describe happened *before Kony2012*. Still, we believe our pre-Kony analysis has much to teach us about how an organization like IC could reach immense spreadability through the mobilization of its networks, but also about ways in which the organization and its members may have been unprepared to rebut their arguments in the face of contention. But first, we begin by discussing how organizations like the HPA and IC build on participatory culture to encourage their members’ civic action.

From participatory cultures to civic and political participation

The concept of participatory culture was originally proposed by Henry Jenkins to discuss fan communities. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992: 46) discusses fandom as “a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community”. The technological and cultural changes in the last decades made it increasingly easy and accessible for participants to take an active role in the production of culture. Building on these extended possibilities for cultural participation, Jenkins et al. (2006) broaden the scope of participatory culture:

A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s own creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another. (Jenkins et al. 2006: 3).

Forms of participatory cultures include online communities, collaborative problem-solving in formal and informal teams, but also individual cultural activities, such as producing creative

content or circulating content. Young people often gather around shared interests while simultaneously forming friendships through participation (Ito et al. 2009). When examining different forms of participatory cultures, we see how they come to represent powerful examples of alternative sites for learning and participation (see Delwiche and Henderson 2012). Rooted in participatory cultures, organizations that make use of PCC practices offer opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, cultural expression, and civic empowerment, within contexts that invite and reward participation.

Recent debates further interrogate participatory cultures. In conversation with Henry Jenkins, Nico Carpentier (2013) distinguishes between different *participatory intensities*, or different levels of participation within a specific social practice. Carpentier asks us to move beyond the “the emptied rhetoric of participation” (Carpentier 2013: 3), and instead interrogate Pateman’s definition of full participation—equal power position of all actors in decision-making processes. In response, Jenkins argues that participatory culture may best be understood as a utopian goal, “meaningful in the ways that it motivates our struggles to achieve it and provides yardsticks to measure what we’ve achieved” (Carpentier 2013: 2). This more nuanced understanding of a participatory culture is crucial to our examination of PCC practices.

The PCC practices described in this article are also informed by our work with the MacArthur Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) and their concept of participatory politics, defined as “acts that are interactive, peer-based, not guided by deference to elites or formal institutions, and meant to address issues of public concern” (Kahne & Cohen 2012: 3). PCC and participatory politics are strongly connected concepts. Both stress that characteristics of participation are a crucial entry point into understanding current youth engagement; both share a focus on peer-to-peer informal processes. That said, PCC emphasizes *cultural* participation as crucial to some forms of youth mobilization. PCC practices can thus be understood as a subset of participatory politics, which is firmly rooted in social and cultural participatory communities.

Cultural participation, we argue, is key to PCC practices as employed by the Harry Potter Alliance and Invisible Children. In the previous work we have conducted on these organizations we identified three components central to these organizations’ recruitment, mobilization, and

sustained action: shared media experiences, a sense of community, and wish to help (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012). “Shared media experiences” refer to the members’ coming together around texts that have a particular resonance for them. These shared media experiences constitute shared cultural capital between participants, and, in the second component, help form their shared identities as part of a community. A third component of experience is one more familiar from “traditional” civic engagement: an altruistic desire, a “wish to help”. Members describe their commitment to help others, often expressed in terms of social justice, equality, or structural change. For some members, this desire comes from parental socialization, political views, or faith (traditional influences on the youths’ emerging political identities), while others are inspired by their participation in shared cultural activities, such as watching IC films or attending Wizard Rock concerts⁴.

The pleasurable nature and emotional investment of such activities raise the question of the importance of affect for these organizations. The role of affect in civic and political engagement is a fraught topic. A growing body of work in various disciplines complicates the privileging of the rational at the expense of the emotional in civic and political engagement (Brough & Shresthova 2012). Alberto Melucci (1989) stresses the affective dimensions of understanding why people join social movements. Poletta & Jasper (2001) call to further examine the role of emotions shaping collective identity within social movements. Stephen Duncombe (2007) points out that affect and emotion can be used as key drivers in supporting and sustaining activism. Relying on this body of work, our research endeavors to explain how groups like the HPA and IC connect play, fun, sociality, and affect with civic action. As Peter Dahlgren points out, engaging citizens is a prerequisite for them to enter a process of civic action: “One has to feel invited, committed and/or empowered to enter into a participatory process” (Dahlgren 2011: 8). In the following sections, we analyze how the HPA and IC build on cultural and social affinities to invite youth to act civically.

Method

We conducted 60 interviews with HPA and IC staff and members between 2010 and 2011⁵. We began our sampling process through contacts we got from the organizations, and it snowballed from there. The semi-structured interview protocol touched on how the participant became involved with the organization; what activities she does with the organization; what are things she values about the organization; and a focus on skills that the participant feels she gained through her participation. The interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours and were later transcribed. Through an inductive analysis, we identified an initial large set of emerging practices. Through iterative in-depth analysis we then converged on the research-driven practices featured in this article. In addition to interview data, we conducted extensive ethnographic research, including participation in local events, following online forums, and media analysis. The ethnographic component of our research, and particularly the media analysis, enabled us to examine how youth create meanings through the media artifacts they produce and share—a topic we often also discussed with the young people in their interviews. We see processes of creating, circulating, and sharing media around civic and political causes as examples of participatory culture civics (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013).

The “Create” Practices of Participatory Culture Civics

As stated, we define Participatory Culture Civics (PCC) practices as *activities that support organized collective action towards civic goals, while building on the affordances of a participatory culture*. Figure 1 provides an overview of the PCC practices that HPA and IC foster in their members, as emerged from the research. We divide these practices into two clusters. The first is a set of three practices that, we believe, are distinctive to organizations that build on participatory culture and represent an innovation in contrast to traditional modes of activism. We call these “Create” practices to reflect their focus on the creation, sharing, and building of community ties, encouraged through media and narrative. These “Create” practices are at the center of our findings.

Our analysis reveals that both the HPA and IC are media-centric organizations, in the sense that new media are not just tools to be utilized; such groups are organized around and through these means. Media use within these organizations is both vertical (leadership driven) and horizontal (peer-to-peer driven), remaining firmly rooted in the participatory practices of these communities. The tensions around these forms of media use run through our discussion of these organizations’ practices. These groups’ negotiation between top-down organizational and bottom-up participatory practices is crucial to their ability to engage youth and encourage them to use media towards civic goals, yet it is also the source of challenges they face in this endeavor.

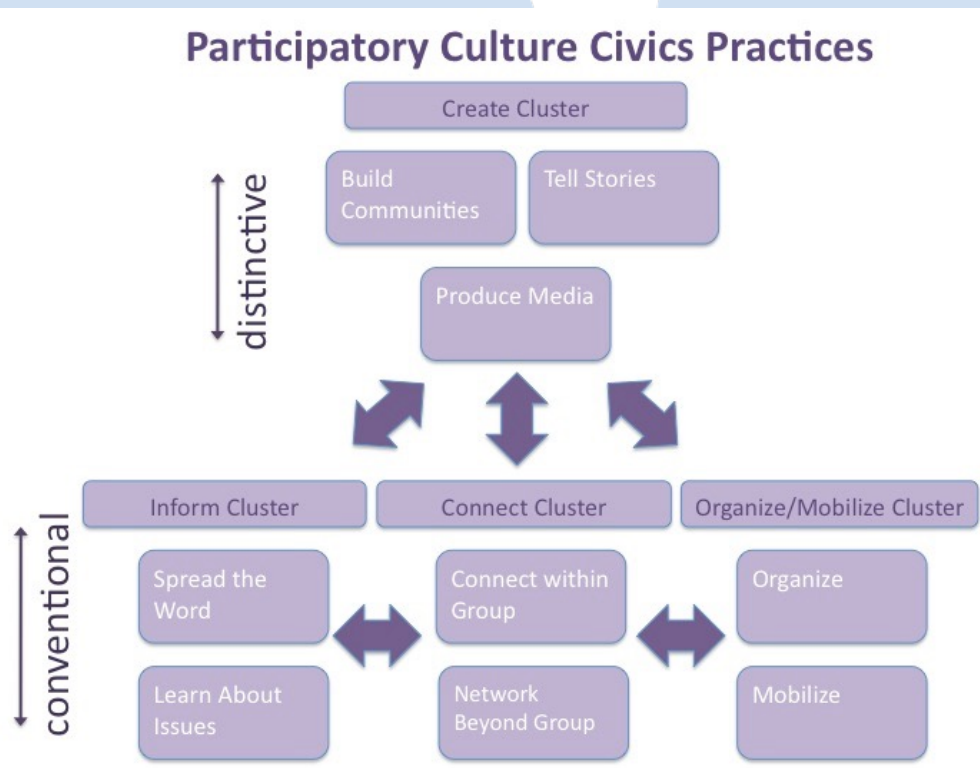


Figure 1. Participatory Culture Civics practices

While this paper focuses on the innovative “Create” practices, it is important to note that in our research, a second set of PCC practices emerged, which consist of more conventional practices common to many civic organizations. These practices include: 1) Inform – practices that focus on the acquisition and sharing of information, including the members learning about the issue and spreading the word to others; 2) Connect – practices that support communication with other group members, as well as strategic networking with others beyond the group; 3)

Organize and mobilize – practices that build structures to scaffold and motivate members towards sustained civic action. While we could expect to find many such practices in traditional civic organizations, in our case study groups these practices often exhibited a special flavor. The innovative “Create” practices on which we focus informed all of the organizations’ functioning; also shaping these more “conventional” practices. For more detail on this second set of practices, see Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012.

Subsequently, we define the set of distinctive “Create” practices and offer examples of their manifestation in our two case study organizations.

Build Communities: For the mostly young participants in IC and HPA, peer-to-peer connections and friendships are central in their lives (Bukowski, Newcomb & Hartup 1996), yet the social aspect of participation is often ignored by traditional political organizations. In contrast, both our case study organizations employ conscious efforts to foster social bonds between members and to build on their existing friendship ties.

The HPA brings people together through a shared affection for the Harry Potter narratives. As Kara, a HPA staff member, explains:

That’s the big thing for me, like I love the books so much ... but Harry Potter wouldn’t mean nearly as much to me if it weren’t for the community.

HPA members use the term “community” to refer both to the HPA, and, at times, to the broader Harry Potter fandom. The Harry Potter fandom is known as a particularly prolific one, which has produced fan fiction, fan art, musicals, plays, an opera, as well as a new field of sports – Quidditch. The HPA builds on the fan community’s infrastructures for its civic goals, for example, by running introductory and training sessions at Harry Potter fan conventions or registering voters at Wizard Rock concerts.

In addition, the HPA taps the story world of Harry Potter to help members relate to each other and act collectively. For example, many Harry Potter fans claim affiliation with one of the “houses” at Hogwarts⁶. Such affiliations allow young people to more intimately connect their own identities and the world depicted in Rowling’s novels. Building on these affiliations, many

HPA campaigns include “house competitions” where members can win points for their respective houses, for example, by registering voters or donating the most books.

Despite the community’s strong social ties, many HPA members see themselves as shy and introverted. Such members may be as much motivated by opportunities to socialize with others as by a desire to change the world:

I think there’s this balance that for them it’s equal parts making a difference and equal parts meeting more people, and connecting with people that probably are kinder to them in a way or just more similar to them. (Virginia, HPA chapter organizer)

Some HPA members claim they would be intimidated by “traditional” non-profits that lack such social bonds.

Establishing community ties is also a crucial practice for IC. Staff and members claim that such social connections are part of what distinguishes their organization from other non-profits. For example, IC interns work at the headquarters for a period of two months, while sharing a house with other volunteers. Ruth, one such intern, compares this to other professional settings:

It’s something that first struck me when I got here, was that Invisible Children is a lot about relationships and it’s not just this disconnect ... you work together, you play together, you eat together, you know?

More casual participants, who attend IC events and movie screenings, also experience this sense of friendship. Before *Kony2012*, IC’s films circulated mostly through a network of roadies, who traveled across the country for several months and screened IC films at schools, colleges, and churches. IC roadie Tina explains their role:

These are actual people and you are giving a personal connection, which I think is lacking in a lot of organizations. People connect with Invisible Children not just because of the cause or because of the movie, they connect because they know the roadies ... There is a big personal touch and there is a face to what they are giving, it’s not as distant as some organizations can be.

HPA and IC members are at a time of their life when they negotiate identity and status among their peers. While many youth civic organizations bracket such peer-to-peer connections as secondary concerns, our case study organizations—building on the affordances of a participatory culture—integrate social connections, friendships, and community into all their civic activities.

Tell Stories: Storytelling, understood as a “collective activity in which individuals and groups contribute to the telling, retelling, and remixing of stories through various media platforms” (Brough & Shresthova 2012), has long been recognized as an important dimension of social movements (Polletta 2006). Our case study organizations employ storytelling as a PCC practice when they use narratives to encourage a connection to the organization and emotional investment in their goals.

We examine storytelling through the concept of the “content world”—a “network of characters, settings, situations and values that forms the basis for the generation of a range of stories” (Jenkins 2012). For IC, the core content world includes their long-form documentary films as well as shorter video clips, Twitter feeds, blogs, and apparel (Swartz 2011). While most audiences are familiar only with *Kony2012*, this was the organization’s eleventh movie. For long time members, IC has succeeded in creating not only isolated media artifacts, but constructing a world in which members become a part of the founders’ journey to end the war in Africa. For most IC members we talked to pre-Kony, encountering the organization’s media at a screening or through friends was usually their first step to becoming involved members. IC’s first movie, *The Rough Cut*, provides the core of the group’s organizational narrative, and for most early participants, it constitutes a form of shared “canon”.

The members say that it was IC’s storytelling skills that increased their emotional investment in the cause and their connection to other group members. Jenny, an IC roadie, explains:

It goes back to the filmmakers and how they have been inspiring people and telling the story, I think it just connects and you want to do something. Once you

see the story, you want to give something ... and it is easy to pass on the passion of the story and then people want to get involved.

Before the public backlash about IC's simplistic depiction of the war in Africa or its promotion of a military intervention (see, e.g., Zuckerman 2012), most of the interviewed members were overwhelmingly positive about IC's ability to tell stories. The exception was one respondent who voiced some dissent around the privileging of American stories within IC.

At the same time, in contrast to what we would expect in an "ideal" participatory culture, IC's storytelling operation is centralized, mostly relying on their core production staff. The leadership has been reticent in encouraging its membership to narrate their stories. One effort to move beyond such a centralized narrative was the "my IC story" initiative. In preparation for the "Fourth Estate," a retreat for IC's young leaders in 2010, participants were asked to upload and share their first-person video accounts of why they joined IC. At the retreat, IC staff helped participants refine these personal accounts through concerted feedback, having participants rework their stories and consider ways to adapt them to different audiences or different lengths. Finally, participants recorded one-minute IC stories, which were to be used later as part of the participants' fundraising efforts for the organization. In this example, IC was more open to member participation, though it was still structured and shaped by the organization.

Storytelling is as central for HPA as it is for IC, though it takes different forms. The organization teaches participants how to deploy their shared investment in the Harry Potter narratives to explain the group's goals and mission. Jane, an HPA chapter member, explains:

Whether you use personal stories, or a broader story that a lot more people are familiar with, every group uses some sort of story to explain something or to get people excited and rally people around a cause. It just happens to be that the story we use is a major pop culture phenomenon where people dress up in weird costumes and write songs about things in the books.

HPA Founder Andrew Slack describes the group as creating a "Dumbledore's Army for the real world," situating their civic actions within a larger heroic narrative, allowing them to maintain

and extend the fantasies that drew members to Harry Potter. The HPA cites specific passages from the book as springboards for discussing current events, or asks “what would Dumbledore do?” to justify their decision to get involved in various social issues.

Compared to IC, HPA is less concerned with tightly controlling member narratives. Embracing the participatory culture ideal of valuing the members’ contributions, HPA consistently encourages members to circulate their own stories, which reflect their emerging concerns. For example, many fans had been angered by body-size restrictions placed on rides at the newly opened Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Orlando (Murray 2011). Reacting to these grassroots concerns, the HPA started the “Body Bind” campaign, inviting members to create blogs and vlogs “denouncing harmful body images and learning to see the beauty in ourselves and others” (HPA 2011a). Sharing personal stories became a way to connect to a shared identity and to create awareness around a public issue (body image). While the campaign veered from the main focus of the organization’s civic goals, its value was in the sense of empowerment and affinity that members felt through their participation.

HPA’s approach privileges participation over tight control of messaging, seeking to create a space where everyone can share their stories. By contrast, IC uses storytelling to communicate the leadership’s goals and vision to members and to offer powerful media that participants can spread to a larger community. Despite efforts like the “My IC Story”, IC storytelling remains largely centralized and professionalized. This tendency, as we will see in the discussion, has become more extreme in the aftermath of *Kony2012*.

Produce Media: Rooted in legacy media conceptions, “production” raises expectations of elaborate media texts (such as films, songs and radio programs), which require advanced skills and specialized professional equipment. Participatory culture, on the other hand, is characterized by generally low barriers to artistic expression, and support for creating and sharing creations with others (Jenkins et al. 2006). Within participatory cultures, many members can and do see themselves as active producers. In the “Produce Media” PCC practice, we examine how the organizations use the creation and circulation of content as a way to promote civic goals.

HPA's blog and vlog (video blog) have been central vehicles for interacting with their participants. Both channels are run by HPA volunteers, with contributors recruited from a wide base of members. While the HPA blog addresses mostly existing members, vlog entries are posted on YouTube and circulated via social media to a potentially wider viewership. The vlog connects the HPA with other fan groups, particularly "YouTubers" for whom video has become a dominant communication practice. Lisa, one of the HPA vloggers, explains that translating a non-profit organization's messages into video is challenging:

It's a weird thing because there is the YouTube community and for people like Wizard Rockers or people who just started out as vloggers, it's very easy to translate that into video. But for the HPA, you know, we're a non-profit organization and most non-profits don't have vloggers for sure, and their videos are usually something that they'll commission, they're not really engaging or interactive so we've always had to try and reconcile that.

The HPA vlog tries to balance sharing information about the HPA's campaigns with encouraging members to discuss more open-ended topics, as is often the norm in vlogging. The HPA vloggers found that their most successful vlogs connected the group's goals with more general themes of fan interest. Not every HPA vlog is necessarily "about" civic engagement, yet all of them revolve around issues pertinent to the community.

HPA vloggers also made a strategic decision about their production standards. Over time, many prominent "YouTube celebrities", who started as amateurs, have become sophisticated video producers, deploying high-end cameras, lighting, and editing software. The HPA vloggers decided not to compete in this "arms race" and instead are self-consciously "out-of-style":

Having an intro at the beginning with a teaser, that's like out of style, like if people have them at all now they're out-froze and they're usually a lot more professionally made with links to everything that you've done. ... I mean that's the thing is, that we're not a typical channel so that's where we can get away with these things where they don't quite apply to us. (Lisa, HPA vlogger)

HPA vloggers often felt that their viewership was disappointingly low. The average vlog was viewed by a few hundred people. At the same time, this admittedly limited viewership is a very active one. The vloggers end every vlog with a question for viewers to answer, often sparking lively dialogue among participants. Thus, success may be measured less in terms of “eyeballs” and more in terms of encouraging conversation.

As hinted before, IC’s production practices differ from those of the HPA. IC’s founders are former cinema school students, who celebrate the professionalism of their work. In the IC headquarters, the media production division is jokingly referred to as “Narnia”, and only those working in the division are allowed to enter it, reinforcing its unique status. IC members take great pride in the group’s media and often cite their films as moving people into action:

There is just no way that if you have a beating heart and a pulse in you, that you can watch any of their films and not be moved into action afterwards ... there is always something that resonates within you, just, wow, this is powerful. (Brian, IC member)

IC interviewees rarely mentioned peer-created media production. Some of IC’s local clubs did, on occasion, create media to support their local fundraising and other activities, yet they did not feel their own media production was as significant as the media from the centralized production team. Adam, a member of an IC club at a college, distinguishes the group’s media from user-generated content:

Anyone can make a film these days, I’m going to make a YouTube video or something. But the fact is that they [IC] actually have this really high quality, like high production value films, and I think the music and stuff really plays a part in it.

In fact, raising the technical bar may, in some cases, discourage peer-produced content. While IC does not strongly encourage peer-production, they do place a strong emphasis on the members’ participation in the *circulation* of their videos and messages. The YPP network, in fact, identifies circulation of media as a form of participatory political participation for young people (Kahne &

Cohen 2012). In the case of IC, sharing media contributes to their sense of collective identity, as was evident when IC members were responsible for the initial active circulation of *Kony2012* in the first hours after its release (Lotan 2012).

While the HPA primarily uses its production to encourage conversation among members or communicating with partner groups (like the YouTube community), IC's media speak to a broader audience. Produced by a largely professional team, IC's polished media elicit much pride in members, yet HPA's more "amateur-style" production may encourage more grassroots participation.

Discussion

By employing these three distinctive PCC practices—build communities, tell stories, and produce media—the organizations examined in this article invest time, thought, and energy into creating civic engagement that is *actually engaging* for young people. They conduct politics through a new language and a different set of practices than more traditional organizations, as they tap into young people's desire for fun, sociality, affect, and creative expression in order to motivate deeper commitments to civic agendas. At the same time, we see these groups negotiating difficult tensions between the different pulls of participatory culture and of pursuing civic goals. These tensions speak to the debates around youth civic engagement in general, and particularly youth civic activism online. These debates were particularly visible in the aftermath of *Kony2012*'s immense spreadability and the strong backlash toward IC.

One such tension exists between valuing *process vs outcome*. Participatory culture privileges an environment in which all members are potential creators whose contributions matter. This inherently produces some products that are rudimentary and rough. The HPA endorses these processes when they invite members to creatively contribute to campaigns, acknowledging that the ability to experiment is crucial to participatory culture processes. Yet at times, when pursuing specific goals (e.g. fundraising), these organizations seek professionally-crafted products that elicit strong emotional reactions in viewers. Even before *Kony2012*, IC was more tentative when it came to encouraging participatory production and mostly relied on media

created by its professional production department. As we followed the organization in the aftermath of *Kony2012*, we found that IC became even more hesitant about allowing a multiplicity of voices, instead exerting tighter control over their messaging.

Another tension exists between *amicability vs rebuttal*, or defending your own position in the face of opposition. In more traditional political organizations, members are socialized to perceive their position as opposed to another political party. In internal discussions, members may discuss counter-arguments to their position and learn how to defend their beliefs, ferociously if needed. The HPA and IC tend to operate differently. Building on the ideals of a participatory culture, and to counter the viciousness often associated with partisan politics, these organizations foster supportive, welcoming environments. Members tend to offer polite feedback, not sharp critique. They often try to avoid discord. These characteristics make these organizations very inviting and hospitable to young people, as opposed to perceptions of “dirty” politics. At the same time, such an atmosphere may leave participants ill-equipped to face sharp criticism, as was the case with the pushback on IC’s *Kony2012* campaign. The IC members we talked to post-Kony recounted how they were caught off guard when criticism leveraged against IC’s priorities around capturing Joseph Kony. They felt unprepared to defend their position. Their experience with IC as a largely consensus-based organization had not prepared them with the skills they needed to engage in a contentious political debate.

A third tension regards *spreadability vs drillability* (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013). While spreadability refers to circulation across and among cultures in participatory ways, drillability describes the “vertical descent into a text’s complexities”, or in our context, digging deep into civic issues. The incredible spreadability of *Kony2012* was a testimony to IC’s ability to create powerful, emotionally resonating media. On the other hand, the organization was strongly critiqued on a lack of “drillability” in its message, on simplifying the story with dangerous consequences (Zuckerman 2012). IC members, who were well-versed in spreading the word, had to learn to “drill deep” to respond to difficult questions concerning the campaign. Collaborating with each other and often without support from the organization’s leadership, IC members struggled to research questions concerning IC’s relations to the religious right or its stand on gay rights. They then used social media to share their findings with each other.

These tensions may be inherent challenges in the marriage between participatory culture and participatory politics, leading us to ask about the conditions in which PCC thrives within an organization. Advocating for the study of participatory organizations, Carpentier (2013: 13) observes that “the existence of a formal organizational structure allows an explicit definition of participation as (one of) the objective(s) of the organization, which commits the people involved ... at the levels of decision-making procedures and production practices.” As we study HPA and IC over time, we observe that they make different choices around participation, emanating from their core values and goals. The HPA continues to pursue a range of civic campaigns that still embrace participatory processes, even if this affects “efficiency” or measurable outcomes. For HPA, participatory practices are intentional and encouraged. Since *Kony2012*, IC renewed its commitment to one goal: capturing Joseph Kony and disarming the LRA. The employment of participatory practices had worked well for IC as a way to build a movement and create enthusiastic supporters without whom the spreadability of *Kony2012* would not have been possible. Yet, in the aftermath of this event, IC’s organizational decisions moved away from supporting participatory practices among American youth, focusing instead on their Africa-oriented efforts as their key priority. While PCC practices strongly resonate with young people, they require deep organizational commitment, particularly in the face of challenges and critiques.

We end with a more practical question: how may more traditional organizations adopt and learn from the more successful practices of PCC organizations? Our analysis suggests that young people engage and mobilize when they can link civic activities to their social and cultural lives and interests. Our case study organizations help make these links as they mobilize youth to care about, and take action around, civic issues. The civic practices we identify also clearly point to the central role that media, especially new media, play in these contexts. As PCC organizations, both the HPA and IC cultivate a media-centric engagement through informal and formal structures based in participatory culture. Countering the narrative of civic decline, these organizations succeed in mobilizing young people by offering them alternative ways of participating that build on their emerging media practices. More traditional organizations may look to these practices and structures as tools to engage youth in ways that genuinely value their interests, their communities, and their participation.

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¹ Soep (2014) is doing related work on young people's tactics of participatory politics, yet that research focuses on the tactics employed by individual young people while the PCC practices described here focus on organizations' collective practices.

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³ In recent years the HPA has been forging partnerships with other fan communities as part of their Imagine Better initiative, which seeks to connect multiple fandoms to civic engagement. This endeavor is beyond the scope of this article.

⁴ "Wizard rock" is a musical genre of Harry-Potter themed music.

⁵ This study was reviewed and approved by the Internal Review Board at the University of Southern California.

⁶ "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry" is a school of magic in the Harry Potter narratives.

