Dumbledore's Army, Still Recruiting
Fan & Media Activism as Practice

Anne Ganzert

A group of people are holding banners stating "Terminar con la Detencion de Mi-grantes", "End Queer Detention" and "Save Liberty. Act now", in a picture posted under the hashtag #DAfightsback. But it is their shirts, stating "Books turn Muggles into Wizards" or "I don't go looking for trouble. Trouble usually finds me. Harry" that might guide the spectator to the realization, that, rather than referring to the district attorney, DA is 'Dumbledore's Army', a branch of the Harry Potter Alliance, which is arguably one of the largest fan-activist organizations to date.

Fictional stories throughout the ages have told tales of conflict, resistance, and the oppressed rising up against far greater powers. A fair share of these texts, plays, films, or shows have provoked uproars in the public, be it from critics, conservative guards of moral, or affected audiences; however, fans of specific narratives have begun to mobilize for causes that are only remotely related to the media product of their affection.

Therefore, this chapter will focus on activist practices, their mediation, facilitation, and narrative framing, as they appear in the realms of pop culture fandom and fan activism.[1] The assumption is that activist or resistant practices emerge from a seemingly unpolitical background, mobilizing fans into action for various causes. The chapter will therefore question media activism and the taking of sides and sites from a perspective based in fandom studies and reflect on the possibility of having a pool of potential activists, connected through their shared fandom, ready and willing to engage for multiple causes of differing degrees of personal importance. Additionally, the effect and relevance of these seemingly 'petty protests' will become evident as a ground to practice, in every sense of the word, the taking of sides and sites.

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[1]   Sports fans most certainly also employ strategies of activism or protest, but cannot be the focus of this chapter.

'Petty Protest'

Cornel Sandvoss convincingly stated, that it "has become next to impossible to find realms of public life which are unaffected by fandom" (2005: 3). Contemporary fandom has presented various levels of media activism, including protests against a show's content or cancellation with prime time shows and daytime soaps alike (cf. Scardaville 2005). Other more clearly political protests, have used pop cultural references and codes to put across their message, for example the use of *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017) costumes to protest Anti-Abortion law-making worldwide (see below). The former has in itself become a trope that is reflected within pop culture and is often framed as futile effort and petty protest by nerdish characters, when being a fan is part of a fictional character's traits. One example of this are the phone calls made by Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre and Prady 2007), where he demands that the Syfy Channel either continue his favorite TV show or decrease its quality to help viewers lose interest before it is canceled (S06E21).

The efficacy of such protests, however, are often overlooked or dismissed in fiction. Real life responses to series' cancellations tend to be socially dismissed as the actions of those who have no true issues in their lives,[2] framed (in the press) as futile, or occasionally celebrated when, every once in a while, a studio is persuaded to put out a closing movie for a series or another channel picks the show up for continuation.[3] Fictional depictions of protest, for example the "Gabehcoud" demonstration[4] shown in *Homeland* (S05E05, Gordon and Gansa 2011),[5] follow more traditional structures, usually political and leaning to either the left or the right, but embody strong limitations as demonstrations, strikes, or sit-ins have a fixed duration and place of occurrence, and they end when either the event finishes, the site is taken by the police, or the demands are met. Longer lasting resistant movements that build up, evolve, and change are seldom included in contemporary narratives. One such outlier is the very popular fictional protest of *Panem* (from *The Hunger Games* series, Collins 2008).

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2   Or the other way around, where the younger generation is described as protest lazy (cf. Gafni 2015).

3   I.e. when Universal Pictures decided to wrap up Fox's series *Firefly* with a movie, after the shows cancellation (2005).

4   A crowd of protesters with different modes of disguises, masks, hoods, etc., and signs are shown demonstrating outside the Russian embassy in Berlin. Police troupes and news teams flank their chanting, while the camera follows the protagonist through the crowd.

5   Interestingly another form of protest occurred within the show's production, when street artists were hired to spray slogans on the set of a Syrian Refugee Camp with Arabic script. The graffiti read "There is no Homeland" or "we didn't resist, so he conquered us riding on a donkey" among other things and clearly went against the production's guideline of being apolitical (cf. Heba y Amin n.d.).

Student protesters in Thailand have employed the signature hand gesture described in the books and shown in the movies to signalize their protest against their government and leaders. Albeit entirely arbitrary, this symbol carries with it an entire construct of ideas, of small, oppressed groups rising up against an overpowering government. The mobilization of this protest in a country with a history of military coups and political strategizing shows that the iconography developed in the movies inspired the protest practices of Thailand's young adults who responded to the projection of choosing to make a difference (cf. Loughrey 2014)[6].

In this light, discarding fan protest as petty protest is most certainly myopic, as these brief examples convey, how the practices of protest in fandom travel, mingle, and develop. The fact that most of these instances are based on Hollywood productions, shows, or movies should not be forgotten, as it also transports ideas about consumerism, capitalism, and modes of civil engagement to countries and contexts that might significantly differ.[7] US-American ideas, concepts, and privileges therefore also manifest where and when these modes of fan protest are used to take a side, where young people live in lamentable circumstances, yet "these are the same people that in another corner of the world would instead have the luxury to argue over [Panem's protagonists] Gale vs Peeta for hours on end." (ibid., n.p.)

Turning Fans into Heroes

With these preliminary reflections, let me come back to the case mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The *Harry Potter* fandom, forming since the first book was published in 1997 (which is also four years after the Internet was made public domain), has gone through all sorts of wonderful and fascinating twists and turns (cf. Frankel 2019).

In 2005 Andrew Slack[8] started the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA). This was a time of peak public interest and fan engagement as the sixth and second to last book set for release that July and the fourth movie for that November. Hence, the HPA could tap "the existing infrastructures of the thriving Harry Potter fan community" (Kliger-Vielnchik 2013: 11). More than 15 years later, when writing this chapter, the Harry Potter Alliance is a well-structured, inviting, and professional organization, and their efforts have gained a public seal of approval, especially as J.K. Rowling has

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6   Pop-culture symbolism has long been intertwined with history and protest, and is a well-covered topic in the press for example in the context of the 2019 Hong Kong Protest.

7   It certainly also re-iterates engrained structures of classism, racisms, genderism etc.

8   There is no connection to the term of 'Slacktivism', even though the latter is closely connected to social media (Cf. Dennis 2018).

respectfully acknowledged the alliance's efforts (her quote is featured prominently on thehpalliance.org).

Typically for fandom, as can be seen with fan fiction or gaming etc., more advanced writers, artists, or players, share their ways of doing things with others through social media or platforms especially created for that purpose. As everywhere, there are hierarchies within the production communities of the *Harry Potter* fandom, conflicts, and copyright issues, but fandoms in general, and this one included, are understood as transformational, and progressive even if not always positive (cf. Wojton and Porter 2018; Bennett 2014; Clements 2018).

The HPA, unlike this heterogeneous field of potential fan engagement, aims to be strictly positive, morally clean, and conflict free at least within its ranks. It offers a variety of options to engage with its causes. Be it "Accio Books" that has donated 350,000 books to communities lacking libraries since 2009. Or "Dumbledore's Army" that has recently partnered with RAICES (The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services) and been especially vocal concerning the North-American migration politics. Or the "Granger Leadership Academy", a retreat for fan activists where they can brainstorm new strategies and learn skills. According to the press kit, the HP Alliance is present on six continents, and has local chapters in 35 countries.[9] While this is impressive in itself, it is not my aim to list the HPA's achievements and goals. What I find most interesting is the way in which potential fan activists are addressed and how they are educated in the practices. For example: Since its start, and with the more recent sequels and transmedia stories from the Potter Universe, the HPA has also plugged into the fandoms of *The Hunger Games*, *Man of Steel*, *Pokémon*, and other popular communities. Most of these instances tackle a specific issue, like "Hunger is not a Game"[10] and come with handbooks, pamphlets, action manuals, and free training.

For example, they address domestic violence through the fictional character of *Jessica Jones* (Marvel 2001), while the *Pokémon* themed toolkit says:

> "Through Pokémon we're going to explore the following issues: Imposter Syndrome, Environmentalism and Respectful Tourism, and Mental Health! […] This toolkit is designed to help you think like a Pokémon master in order to create a positive impact on the world around you." (HPA: 4)

All of these toolkits are downloadable and tailored to different age groups, so that group leaders, educators, and fans can use them. Additionally, the "Wizard Activist School" training section on the HP Alliance's homepage is built like a webinar, with

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9   Yet in Rowling and Potter's homeland, the United Kingdom, only two chapters of the alliance exist, while in the US 136 are listed online.

10   According to one of Kliger-Vielnchik's interviewees, the campaign did not resonate as much in the Hunger Game fandom.

questionnaires, explanatory videos etc. The HPA defines itself and fan activism as follows:

> "What the HPA does is called fan activism: using the power of fandoms to promote social change. Fandoms can come from books, TV shows, movies, games – any creative media that people are passionate about. By connecting real world issues to elements from these fandoms, fan activism uses the energy, creativity, and community of fandoms to accomplish positive social change." (HPA: Wizard Activist School 2019)

Passion, as it is mentioned here, seems to be a driving factor, and a way to distinguish instances of fan activism from duty or pressure. It also defines the huge amount of free labor that goes into the HPA's activities. The whole operation is based around the idea of the infamous pupils of 'Hogwarts – School for Witchcraft and Wizardry' as presented in the books by J.K. Rowling, and fans' phantasy of going there or belonging to a magical world. Additionally, the general idea of the story is about friendship, belonging, fighting back, and standing up for what you believe in. Another motivational aspect of the narrative that attracts Harry Potter fans to activism is the idea that evil can actually be beaten. In an article for the BBC, Hephzibah Anderson noted that "the core narrative chronicles the attempted extermination of Muggles and 'mudbloods' by Lord Voldemort and his sidekicks", making the fight of Dumbledore's Army there and here one against fascism, and the causes adaptable to contemporary activism (Anderson 2018: n.p.).[11]

Structurally, the four school houses in the army have certainly adapted, the characteristics described in the books influence the way they tackle current issues: *Gryffindors* are brave and courageous and *Ravenclaws* value creativity and learning. When telling their stories of protest, the HPA members can call upon these attributes to communicate what is needed and to situate themselves within the logics of the fictional world. Notably the HPA rehabilitates the house of *Slytherin*. As the home of all dark witches and wizards, who typically have an egocentric or even cruel approach, the house is included into the positive activities of the HPA, by focusing on positive attributes such as resourcefulness and ambition. All *Harry Potter* fans tend to, and HPA members are encouraged to, sort themselves into one of the houses and help gain points for the house cup. These points are given not for good or bad behavior or magical proficiency, as teachers would award them in the story world, but through fan activism that is tagged or labeled with the house's name or colors on social media, in photos, or other documentation. Additionally, and especially through the documentation, these activities also take place within

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11   Smaller modes of activism, such as SPEW, Hermione's attempt to improve the life and working conditions of the school's house elves, are also very direct sources to look at.

the contexts of social media platforms, which have their own modes of communication, politics, and visibility and are sites where fan activists can communicate with potential members. Henry Jenkins quotes Andrew Slack with the following statement:

> "Without new media, I don't know what we would be doing. I don't think we would exist. We would be like students at Hogwarts without wands. We would be a club at one or two high schools, [...] we probably would have a hard time being an organization that has 50 clubs that are really active, [...] and a message that gets out to 100,000 young people in Japan and in places...just all over." (Jenkins/Slack 2009: n.p.)

Even though many of the posts try to lead visitors to the blog space "This Week in Wizard Activism", the commercial aspects and 'like economy' of social media are embedded into the HPA's activism, and especially in the posts of the members, as they demand and absorb the time and energy of the users, as well as their data and other currency.

Similar overlaps can be seen with the shirts mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Some merchandise is created for charity, and hence outside WarnerBros.' economic influence, yet uses fonts, design, and quotes from the *Harry Potter* brand[12] to raise funds for charity work. The community, standing on the base of a common love for the world of *Harry Potter*, is turned into consumers of branded merchandise, and often presents their fandom to non-fans and each other through the wearing of shirts, pins, scarfs, or displays of tattoos, stationary, or stickers. Adding to the variety of items, means a source of income for the HPA and founding for their activities, and a satisfied need of fans for new themed products. It also means a commercial infrastructure, which tends to complicate the relationship between the members and the organization. While this apparent discrepancy between fan club and administration may be discussed in the fandom that exists outside the HPA, it is excluded from the discourse around the activism. Typically, when fans sell their fan art, or make a living of anything stemming from fandom, conflict ensues. Here, it might seem even more contradictory, that an activist group based on a massive commercial success would fight, amongst other things, against media consolidation and "has confronted the very system that has so successfully produced and distributed the Harry Potter content worlds." (Brough and Shresthova 2011: paragraph 4.10)

But many "networked activists strategically draw resources from and at the same time fight against structures of commercial pop culture." (Ibid.) Hence, the HPA are not alone in this contradiction, many examples from fan activism and

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12   The issue of fanwork and copyright is a complicated one as is but gets even more complicated when money is generated and then donated to altruistic programs.

other, non-fictional inspired, instances of resistance and protest are strongly intertwined within the systematics they aim to take a site against. The next section will therefore focus on these relations.

Systems of Resisting

The connections and contradictions explained above shift the focus to more fundamental ideas of power and resistance. To Foucault and many others, activism, protest, or civil disobedience is inextricably connected to power: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." (Foucault 1978: 96) Even though Foucault describes a "plurality of resistances", and even though one cannot exist without the other, a simple difference remains: that one part is in power and another is resistant to it.

In fandom, where the so called 'powers that be' describe anything or anyone that is part of the entertainment industry and somehow positioned opposite to fandom (Wojton and Porter 2018: 9f), the questions are the same as they are with any power system, any resistance, oppression, or taking of sides: who gets to call whom resistant or place them and their needs in the margins? Who is the 'I' that takes a side? Are people enabled to deflect such an ascription and is "at least in theory, the presence of protest is a marker of individual freedom" (Strate 2018: 232)? Are the processes that make one site the center and another the periphery the same? And is every act of difference, deviation, or expression against norms instantly resistance?

There is indeed a danger of watering down all involved parties, of "diluting our notion of the political to a point that makes it difficult to debate the merits of different strategies and tactics for civic participation." (Brough and Shresthova 2011: 3.11) Yet there is resistant potential even in the smallest of things, even if "it does not necessarily entail a breach of law, but does entail a breach of expected behavior, whether social, legal, or moral." (Ricks 2017: vii) Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Dahlgren Johansson show how many authors from sociology and philosophy "agree that resistance is an *oppositional act*. Like all acts, resistance is situated in certain time, space, and relations, and engages with different (types of) actors, techniques and discourses." (2013: 12f) When studying fan protests, the situatedness in time and context can become very complicated, intersectional, international, and intertextual.

An example for this can again be found in the HPA as there are various positions from which to express oneself as fan. Taking a side as a fan in this world can even mean opting for the darker side of magic, to follow he-who-shall-not-be-named, even though the vast majority of fans associate with the 'good' side of the

story and sign up as eager students of Hogwarts and members of Dumbledore's Army. This decision is relatively clear cut as the plots and values are very straight forward about what is considered 'good' or 'evil'. Most fans also choose (or have a virtual sorting hat chose) their house affiliation, thus positioning themselves in alliance with specific virtues, values, and skills. The American school Ilvermory from the Potter sequels also has four houses; however, these "new Houses do not seem to have the same resonance within the fan community" (Hautsch 2019, 143), and the American fans are also free to align with the UK Hogwart's houses. Fans are also free to choose from a variety of narratives in which to base their experiences, including the plot of the original books, the plot of the prequels or sequels, whether Hermione is a WOC[13], and whether they join the X-rated areas of fan fiction... As such, *Harry Potter* fans may make many decisions in positioning themselves long before they become involved in the fan activism described above.

   This act of positioning oneself may be one of the reasons why some fandom research frames being a fan as inherently resistant. However, the impulse of being or calling yourself a fan is not based in opposition but in affect: in the joy, or love, or fascination for whatever it is a person is fan off. If indeed: "fandom is born out of fascination and some frustration" (Ito, boyd, and Jenkins 2016, 14), the relationship between fan and object is indeed precarious. Affection and frustration can easily become action or resistance, and if the emotional connection to the fan object wavers, will the motivation to be a fan activist waver with it? What then is a fan activist? What significance does the term 'fan' bring to the act of activism? Active fans have been at the core of many studies and are often distinguished from consumers of the products. (Bielby, Harrington, and Bielby 1999) In this context they are described as participating in fan clubs, online message boards, and other channels. "An activist fan acts strategically, usually in concert with others, to achieve a particular goal." (Scardaville 2005: 882) I want to follow Brough / Sherthova and their broad take on fan activism "to incorporate the range of intentional actions by fans, or the use of fanlike strategies, to provoke change." (2011: 2.4) Fandom has been read as being resistant, as in progressive, even though countless examples of fanfiction do not express forward thinking. "Many fans have resisted efforts to bring politics into fandom, seeing their fan activities as a release from the pressures of everyday life, or preferring the term *charity* rather than the more overtly political term *activism* to describe their pro-social efforts." (Jenkins and Shresthova 2012: paragraph 1.9) But at least from a media focused standpoint fandoms are indeed oftentimes transformative (obsession_inc 2009), as are fan practices such as "appropriating and remixing content, developing communication infrastructures and

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13   The debate about Hermione's ethnicity is an ongoing topic in fandom, with many art works showing her as a Woman of Color, and gained new momentum when her role was cast with actress Noma Dumezweni for the London premier of "Harry Potter and Cursed Child" (2016).

practices within fan communities, online networking among groups with shared interests, self-publication in dialogue with popular content worlds" (Brough and Shresthova 2011: paragraph 2.6). These practices are what is being used when fans take a site, when they strive to bring change to any sort of situation, and increasingly in highly political contexts. For example, and as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the dresses from Margaret Atwood's novel and the ensuing TV show *A Handmaid's Tale* have been seen at protests "from Argentina to the US, the UK and Ireland, and has emerged as one of the most powerful current feminist symbols of protest, in a subversive inversion of its association with the oppression of women." (Beaumont and Holpuch 2018: n.p.) Taking aesthetic and connoted elements from other time periods and context is of course a re-mix practice typical of the Internet era, just think of the genealogy from historical plotter Guy Fawkes, to Alan Moore's graphic novel and film adaptation *V for Vendetta* (1989), to the uptake of the mask by the hacktivist group 'Anonymous'. James Cameron's Na'vi beings from the movie *Avatar* (2009) have been aesthetically re-mediated by protesters at the West Bank, where people in Na'vi costumes and blue body-paint "approached an Israeli military barricade, where they were subjected to a tear gas attack. Photographs and video of the protest were then circulated online, catching the attention of news media outlets." (Brough and Shresthova 2011: 2.8) The media coverage and circulation of images is highly important to many forms of activism, and no less for fan activism, as already described for the efforts of the HPA for internal and external communication. But it does make a difference whether pop cultural references are employed in an ongoing protest for media attention or broader communication of issues or whether a fandom, a community attached through a shared affiliation with a fiction, a performer, or a team takes up a cause. Lady Gaga fans for example have been mobilized by the singer, so that the 'Little Monsters' have been active for causes endorsed by Gaga (cf. Bennett 2014). Based on their attachment to the star and her very direct addressing and appellation of her fans, Gaga can "encourage an active response to causes from her online fan base that reaches beyond the online currency of simple clicks and retweets." (Ibid.: 143) Similarly, as the HPA relies solely on the fandom's preexisting engagement with the story world, any member can freely join any of the diverse campaigns.

Membership in the Harry Potter Alliance does not of course automatically stem from being a fan. New members complete a specific signup procedure and join a chapter before receiving the newsletter with updates and activities. Kliger-Vielnchik examined the processes of translation, that move a person and their efforts from participatory culture to participatory politics and vice versa (2013: 15f). Through these translations networked individuals, by definition part of different groups, can develop civic identities that have a voice and political agency or that are able to take a side. Four mechanisms are mainly involved when these translations into political activism occur. First, the social and emotional connections that

fans have for their favored cultural text and for other members of the fandom. Second, the, well-practiced, modes of creative production and content spreading. Third, the space of discussion both off-and online. And fourth, the facilitation of an informal discussion, that goes about "creating and supporting spaces and opportunities for conversations about current events and political issues." (Ibid.: 16-17) For the HPA, all of these mechanisms take place both privately and publicly as well as online and offline. In being active with the HPA, fans communicate both their fandom and their activism, their belonging to a community and their affiliation with certain aspects of the story world.

Although fandom is always heterogeneous, it develops subgroups and cells, and shows gestures of othering as well as being exclusive on economic, political and sociological levels. Hence, the "We are all Humans" sign, held up at the #dafightsback protest this chapter started with, may have a much longer shadow when we consider the modes of protest and media activism connected to fans and fandom. These modes of community building, mobilization, activation, and practices allow reflections on media activism and the taking of sides in a realm that is highly political – despite the magic.

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