From Wizards and House-Elves to Real-World Issues:
Political Talk in Fan Spaces

NETA KLIGLER-VILENCHIK[1]
University of Southern California, USA

Political talk enables citizens to form opinions and understand the significance of the political world. Yet young people in particular may find political talk intimidating or divisive, and may require alternative spaces to discuss politics. This article presents an ethnographic examination of political talk within the context of a face-to-face Harry Potter fan discussion group, as a case of a "third space" where shared popular culture interests serve as a starting point for political discussion. The analysis suggests three mechanisms explicating the process through which popular culture contexts can engender political talk: scaling up, broadening the political, and mobilization. Connections between popular culture and political communication are found to be particularly important for the political socialization of young people.

Keywords: youth, political talk, popular culture, fandom, political participation

Politics greatly impacts citizens' lives. This axiom is often taken for granted by scholars and pundits, yet it is not always apparent to everyday citizens. Theorists point to political talk as a way for citizens to deepen their understanding of why the political world matters to them, form opinions, and set the ground for taking collective action (Barber, 1984; Habermas, 1989). Yet, though we may agree with the importance of citizens' political talk for the healthy functioning of democracy (as not all do; see Schudson, 1997), many social structures make such conversations difficult. Although formal, rule-governed deliberation has received widespread scholarly attention (e.g., Gastil, 2008), much less attention has been paid to the ways that people think and talk about politics in everyday contexts.

Research on everyday political discussion has reached some mixed conclusions. In their extensive quantitative project, Kim and colleagues (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000) were encouraged by their findings of a relatively talkative citizenry—though much of this political talk is confined to the home. Eliasoph's (1998) ethnographic examination of political talk in a range of civic groups reached much more worrying conclusions, painting a picture of citizens who avoid political talk in

public contexts, pushing it instead to whispers in backstage contexts. What is largely missing is a focus on spaces in which young people—the citizens of tomorrow—talk politics.

One reason we may be missing young people's political talk is that it may occur in unexpected places. In their analysis of online discussion spaces, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) find that the potential for political deliberation occurs primarily in groups where politics is *not* the central purpose—groups around shared hobbies, interests, and activities. Building on various examples, Wright (2012) calls us to study political talk in nonpolitical spaces, which he sees as new forms of "third spaces." He explains that the scholarly focus on formal political discussion has "ignored the spaces where the vast majority of (everyday) political talk between 'ordinary' citizens is most likely to occur" (p. 6).

An investigation of alternative spaces to partake in political discussion is particularly important for young people. Many young people find political discussion controversial and divisive (Thorson, Vraga, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2015), and the language of politics feels distant and irrelevant to them (Buckingham, 2000). Moreover, some of the channels that in the past have socialized young people into political discussion and participation, such as traditional civic associations, are in decline among young people (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2008). At a time when people are increasingly skeptical and cynical toward the traditional political process (Norris, 1999), alternate spaces where young people can connect their interests with the realm of politics are crucial entry points into political talk and participation.

This article presents an ethnographic examination of political talk within the context of a face-to-face fan discussion group as a case of a "third space" where popular culture interest can engender political talk. In a six-week study group initiated by a 20-year-old group leader, an intergenerational group of fans discussed how the narrative of Harry Potter can promote activism and social change. Based on detailed field notes from the group's meetings and interviews with its participants, this article suggests three mechanisms that explicate how popular culture contexts can engender political talk: scaling up, broadening the political, and mobilization. Through these mechanisms, group participants could overcome some of the barriers to political talk and engage in vibrant discussions around current social issues. As young people renegotiate their relations to the political process, building connections between popular culture and political communication—both empirically and theoretically—is a particularly important endeavor for the political socialization of young people.

The Different Genres of Political Talk

As perhaps the strongest proponent of placing conversation at the heart of democracy, John Dewey saw civic interaction as the solution to the problems of modern democracy. Dewey famously argued that to revitalize democracy, the essential need is for "the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public" (1927, p. 208). His focus on the role of political talk was both as a precursor for civic engagement and as beneficial for individuals and their social development.

The role of citizens' talk in democracy received renewed attention around the turn of the 21st century. The work of Jürgen Habermas (1989) brought on an interest in deliberative democracy, in which communicative interaction among citizens is the central element. Most of this work has centered on deliberation as a formal, rule-governed process whereby citizens engage in purposeful discussion for the sake of decision making (e.g., Gastil, 2008).

Critics of the deliberation literature claim, however, that this approach employs a narrow definition of political talk—one that is limited to a specialized, formal mode of discourse (Sanders, 1997). Eveland, Morey, and Hutchens (2011) call for going "beyond deliberation" to examine informal political conversation: individuals as communicators within existing relationships. The focus on citizens' everyday talk is a descriptive, emergent one, which starts with listening to citizens. These studies have generally found citizens making agentic use of the resources available to them, including both media frames and personal experiences, in interpreting social issues (Gamson, 1992).

For scholars of everyday political talk, such conversations can promote civic agency, even if they do not fulfill the strict requirements of rule-governed deliberation. Kim and Kim (2008) call this "dialogic deliberation," the process through which citizens "freely interact with one another to understand mutually the self and others" (p. 53). To Barber (1984), it is the looseness and open-endedness of everyday talk that makes it indispensable for democracy. Yet despite a general agreement on the importance of political talk, few studies examine it ethnographically.

One of the landmark contributions to the study of political talk is Nina Eliasoph's *Avoiding Politics* (1998). Eliasoph asks how citizens create contexts for political conversation in everyday life. Individuals, she argues, do not come naturally equipped for discussion, debate, and disagreement—they need to learn those skills. Civic organizations are the schools for this—"institutions in which private citizens can carry on free and egalitarian conversation, often about issues of common concern, possibly welding themselves into a cohesive body and a potent political force" (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 11). In another ethnographic study of political talk, Kathy Cramer Walsh (2004) examines a group of senior citizens who meet every morning to chat at a corner store. Walsh sees their informal interaction as "a way in which people collectively develop tools of political understanding" (p. 2), a process of interpreting or making sense of political life.

When specifically examining youth, political discussion in the home is recognized as one of the socializing factors encouraging young people's engagement (Zukin et al., 2006). Engaging in political talk in private settings may help young people voice their opinions in public settings as well (Östman, 2013). This underscores the importance of spaces in which youth can practice their political voice.

Political Talk and Its Challenges

To examine youth's political conversation, we must begin by defining "political talk." Wyatt, Katz, and Kim (2000) distinguish between two types of "ordinary political conversation": political and personal. They define political conversation as discussion of national affairs, state and local affairs, the economy, and foreign affairs. Personal conversation, on the other hand, is centered on education, religion, crime,

personal matters, and sports and entertainment. Yet Wyatt et al. also state that discussion with political implications can take place during personal conversations.

Eveland, Morey, and Hutchens (2011) are critical of such definitions of political talk, which they see as suffering from poor measurement validity. To them, the key question is: How do people define politics in their daily lives? Ethnographic research attempts to answer this. To Eliasoph (1998), the defining element is not talk that is *about* politics—for example, through the specific topics listed by Wyatt et al.—but rather talk that is "public-spirited." Public-spirited talk is open to debate, devoted to questions about the common public good, and does not exclude questions of oppression or differences of opinion. Wright (2012) argues that, when studying nonpolitical spaces, traditional definitions of the political fail to capture the everyday life-politics that takes place. Thus, the narrow definitions of political talk used in quantitative research may not suffice to examine how people try to build connections between private and public concerns or, in the terms of C. Wright Mills (1959), build their "sociological imagination."

Building the sociological imagination requires opportunities to talk politics, and these are not always abundant. Eliasoph (1998) uses the term "political etiquette" (p. 21) to refer to the extent to which public discussion is deemed appropriate and desirable in different group settings. In many environments, discussing politics is considered inappropriate, and citizens pick up on these social norms: "People implicitly know that some face-to-face contexts invite public-spirited debate and conversation, and others do not; in contemporary U.S. society, most do not" (ibid., p. 6). Similarly, Warren (1996) claims that most people refrain from political discussion to avoid the "social groundlessness" of political space. People feel there is an absence of known rules and standards for political talk, causing anxieties and uncertainties around it. Heterogeneous social situations provide a particular challenge for political talk (Mutz, 2006). Dahlgren (2002) summarizes: "Political discussion can be uncomfortable and awkward, and it is perfectly reasonable that most people in most circumstances tend to shy away from it" (p. 8).

The anxieties around talking politics may be exacerbated when it comes to youth. Young people may find political discussion controversial and divisive (Thorson et al., 2015). Some young people may have perceptions of themselves as not sufficiently informed to engage in political talk (Thorson, 2010). Moreover, the language of politics feels distant to many youth. Buckingham's (2000) young interviewees saw politicians as "talking a different language" (p. 162). For these reasons, young people in particular may need to find ways to establish links between their personal lives, their interests, and the political sphere.

Political Talk for the Self-Actualizing Citizen—and the Fan

Young people's skepticism toward politics and politicians may be part of a more widespread phenomenon. The work of Lance Bennett and colleagues (e.g., Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010) suggests that we may be seeing a change in *citizenship styles*. According to this argument, the dominant citizenship style of the past century was one that sees civic engagement as stemming from duty or obligation. The "dutiful citizen" was expected to know how government and political institutions work, to be informed about current affairs, and to vote responsibly. In contrast, Bennett and colleagues suggest that increasing numbers of people, mostly younger populations, exemplify a model of "self-actualizing

citizenship." This model is rooted in social expression, where personal interests are shared through loosely tied networks and people engage in multiple forms of "creative civic expression" (Bennett et al., p. 398), often seen by participants as more meaningful than voting.

It is clear why it would be important for the self-actualizing citizen to connect politics to areas of interest and passion. If citizenship is indeed no longer primarily motivated by a sense of duty, young people need to be persuaded of the relevance of politics to their everyday lives. Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) makes a similar point when she asks, given decreasing levels of political engagement, whether politics can learn from entertainment how to create intense audience investments, "so that citizenship becomes entertaining" (p. 66). In the case study described in this article, citizens employ popular culture as a resource to facilitate and energize political conversation.

Importantly, the participants in this study are *not* casual engagers with popular culture. Rather, they are self-defined fans, participating in large, complex structures of fan communities, with institutionalized practices. Fans' engagement with their favorite texts is deep and emotional, and they employ a host of critical and interpretive practices (Jenkins, 1992). They are proud of their deep mastery of the text, which is often used as a form of social currency (Fiske, 1992).

Fans have often connected their favorite texts to real-world issues—for example to discuss gender, race, or sexuality (e.g., Gatson & Reid, 2012)—yet many of these real-world discussions arose as "unintended consequences" of conversations around fictional worlds (Saler, 2012). As John Street (1997) claims about the broader connection between popular culture and political communication: "The connection does not just 'happen': we have to see it as being created and administered" (p. 16). The case under consideration here is an intentional and strategic linkage between popular culture and real-world issues.

Method and Case Study

This article employs participant observation within the "extended case" method (Burawoy, 1991). Participant observation is an appropriate method to capture political talk in varying contexts. Employing it within the extended case method aims to reconcile the advantages of participant observation with the possibility of generalization. Generalization in this method is sought through theory building; the extended case method seeks to improve the applicability of theory by explaining underlying processes more closely.

In the extended case approach, case studies are "made" according to one's theoretical reading of them (Ragin, 1992). The case study underlying this article was chosen as a case of a third space in which popular culture interests are used to encourage political talk. My observation of this site seeks to explicate the mechanisms through which young people can bridge their shared interests and passions around popular culture toward political talk; these mechanisms can potentially be generalized to encouraging political talk through other areas of interest.

Specifically, this article discusses participant observation in a face-to-face study group titled Harry Potter as a Tool for Social Change (hereafter HPTSC).[2] The study group was part of the activities of a local chapter of the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), a nonprofit organization established in 2005. The HPA mobilizes young people across the United States toward diverse causes, including literacy, equality, and human rights, both online and through local chapters. The HTPSC study group was devised and executed through the initiative of the 20-year-old organizer of that local HPA chapter. The group met for six weeks at a public library, and each meeting lasted about one hour.

As the group's Facebook page explained, its aim was to investigate "how Harry Potter relates to current sociopolitical and personal identity issues." The group consisted of five core participants who attended all group sessions and five more casual participants who attended one or two sessions. Of the participants, two were adults in their 50s who were more interested in the political aspect of the discussions; the rest were youth in their teens and early 20s, all Harry Potter fans. Although the books served as the starting point for conversations, the group held in-depth discussions around current political and social issues, including Walmart's labor practices, racism, slavery, and the 2012 elections. Political issues were raised and thoroughly discussed in every meeting.

After receiving explicit permission from the group leader and all group members to participate as a researcher, I attended all HPTSC group discussions and took extensive field notes.[3] I volunteered to function as note taker and sent the group leader a short summary of each week's discussion. This allowed me to both contribute to the group and feel more at ease while taking notes. In addition, I interviewed almost all core participants, asking both about their experiences with the group and about their broader political involvement.[4] The group met for a limited number of sessions, and this bounded frame enabled me to observe the group process from beginning to end. Based on the extended case approach, the ethnographic data were analyzed with the aim of theory building. The analysis is presented through three mechanisms, explicating how popular culture contexts can support political talk: scaling up, broadening the political, and mobilization.

Scaling Up: Making Connections to Real-world Issues

Of the many possible barriers to informal political talk identified by the literature (Eliasoph, 1998; Warren, 1996), several factors may be particularly salient for young people. One of these is a general alienation toward politics. As Maura,[5] one of the HPTSC participants, described in her interview:

> Politics generally makes me think of just elections and all of the horrible commercials they make about their opponents. And just, I don't really like politicians. It seems like all they do is worry about how to get re-elected.

---

[2] The term *study group* emerged from the group leader; it is equivalent to a discussion group.

[3] This research was approved by the University of Southern California Institutional Review Board.

[4] One core participant expressed interest in being interviewed, but after the end of the study group sessions did not respond to my requests for an interview.

[5] All names are pseudonyms.

Research often highlights the importance of contexts such as civic classes as a space in which young people can develop the skills to discuss politics in a supportive atmosphere. But this ideal is not always met. Seventeen-year-old Astera, another HPTSC participant, explained in her interview why she prefers discussing politics at HPTSC rather than in her civics class:

> My civics teacher is not a fun person to argue with. . . . I can't tell if he is a bad listener or he intentionally changes what you are saying, but somehow he manages to take what you said, change it, and ask, "Well, is this what you said?" "No, it's not even a little bit of what I said."

Given a feeling of alienation toward party politics, and the limits of formal discussion spaces such as civics classes, young people may be lacking the kinds of spaces in which to discuss politics with peers in a supportive—and enjoyable—context. The case study discussed here suggests one potential way to overcome some of the barriers to political talk—through connections to a fantasy world. I term the process of crossing over from fictional worlds to wider public concerns *scaling up*. This section considers different ways in which scaling up facilitated the group's political talk and also observes moments of resistance to scaling up.

HPTSC is an intriguing context in that its explicit purpose was to link fictional worlds to political issues, or to scale up. The invitation to the study group read:

> The [name of the HPA chapter] invites you to an informal study group on how Harry Potter relates to current sociopolitical and personal identity issues. We will progress to discussing how the narrative of Harry Potter can be used to promote activism and social change.

The study group was the brainchild of 20-year-old Erin. Building on her extensive previous activist experience, Erin explained to me in interview that she came up with HPTSC "to really open up a dialogue about how to use these narratives as a tool to get other people involved in things." Accordingly, Erin intentionally structured the group discussion to facilitate scaling up, though whether this succeeded depended on the group interaction.

One example occurred in week four of the study group. The group was discussing the book *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, which revolves around Sirius Black, a convicted murderer who Harry believes betrayed his parents and turned them in to evil Lord Voldemort. Toward the end of the book, Harry finds out that Sirius is, in fact, innocent, yet he is sentenced to receive the "Dementor's kiss"—a removal of his soul.

Erin introduces the topic: "Throughout the whole book, Harry wants to kill Sirius. He thinks Sirius betrayed his parents, that it's his fault they died." For several minutes, the group holds a discussion that centers on the narrative: how Harry found out Sirius did not betray his parents and befriended him and

how he decided to spare the life of the real betrayer, Pettigrew. As the group considers Harry's motives, Erin guides the conversation (italics denote author's emphasis):

> Shelly: If he kills him he's just as bad. Killing won't bring an end to the suffering.
> Erin: Harry's idea about justice changes. Pettigrew can die, or he can be turned in to the authorities. Seeing Sirius ready to kill changed him.
> Tim: He saw himself in it.
> *Erin: We now have the death penalty—Prop 34 on the California ballot. It would replace death penalty with life without parole. In the wizarding world, it's a story about death penalty.* All the book we thought that Sirius needs to die, but we found out he doesn't, and neither does the guy who actually did kill Harry's parents.
> Shelly: We put innocent people to death. Once someone is put into death row the efforts to save them stop.
> [A 10-minute discussion of the death penalty and Proposition 34 ensues.]

This conversation exemplifies successful scaling up, which was planned ahead and structured by the group leader. Erin introduces the topic, enables participants to discuss the narrative, then intervenes to scale up by linking the discussion to the upcoming vote on Proposition 34 in the California elections.[6] Through Erin's guidance, this conversation flowed from the story world toward a lengthy discussion of the death penalty, which included naming the legal standards for decision (beyond reasonable doubt versus preponderance of evidence) and referencing study findings about whether the threat of execution deters crime.

Scaling up also took place without the group leader's intervention. In the following conversation, the group discusses the fictional characters' differing modes of activism. Note that Erin remains at the level of the narrative, whereas Michelle and Astera engage in scaling up (italics denote author's emphasis):

> Erin: Harry . . . works with different sides in the books, he's not willing to choose just one cause. . . . Unlike [Harry's friend] Hermione who focused on the house-elves.[7]
> Maura: And she did it in the wrong way.
> Michelle: That's not true!
> Maura: She should have done her research—the house-elves didn't want to be liberated.
> *Michelle: (Gets upset) That has been for years the argument for the enslavement of Blacks, that there were slaves who didn't want to be freed. It's clearly a reference to that. But they had centuries of brainwashing.*
> Maura: Hermione should have first talked to the house-elves and convinced them.

---

[6] The proposition eventually failed, maintaining the death penalty in California.

[7] House-elves are creatures who devotedly serve wizards and witches. Hermione starts the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare to advocate for freeing house-elves.

> *Astera: If you upset those you are supposed to serve, it means you're doing it wrong.*
> *It's like Invisible Children. If the Ugandans are upset about what you're doing, you're*
> *doing it wrong.*

In this example, the scaling up didn't come from Erin, who had planned to tackle the topic of house-elves the following week. Rather, it was Michelle's strong opinions that led her to denounce Maura's statement about the house-elves not wanting to be liberated and linking that to slavery. Astera then makes a different real-world connection: She references Invisible Children and the Kony2012 campaign that had gained attention earlier that year. Astera used Kony2012 to argue that activism in the name of others is not done correctly if it upsets "those you are supposed to serve."

Although these are two successful examples of scaling up, the study group also had many conversations that remained on the level of the narrative, without ever connecting to real-world issues. It is important to note that such instances are very valuable to the group. For many of the young participants, their strong connection to the narrative was their motivation to attend the group in the first place. But in some instances, attempts to scale up were actively resisted. These moments are worth exploring, because they explicate the challenges of scaling up.

One example is a conversation about the role of media and journalists in Harry Potter. As several participants try to connect the discussion to real-world media, Maura remains strictly in the narrative world and her dislike of a specific character:

> Astera: [Rita] Skeeter [a tabloid journalist in the Harry Potter books] is the worst. . . .
> She's the *National Enquirer* of the wizarding world. She makes up stuff, she thinks
> people will be interested.
> Erin: And are they?
> Astera: Yes, that sucks even more.
> Tim: Journalism is a business.
> Erin: So is it just Rita, or . . .
> Astera: She's symbolic.
> *Maura: But it's mostly just her.*
> Erin: Is our anger misdirected? Maybe it's bigger? Society made her role possible. Could
> they get rid of her, or would someone else just come along?
> *Maura: They should get rid of her.*

The group discussion included additional attempts to connect the fictional worlds to discussions of discrimination, racism, and incarceration—which were all subject to "scaling down." These examples illustrate a challenge inherent in connecting fictional contexts to real-world issues: Attempts to scale up may be resisted. It is interesting to note that, in almost all these examples, scaling down was done by a certain participant—Maura. To understand what accounts for this, we may search for some insights from Maura's interview.

Maura, 21 years old, is far from your average political junky. In her interview, she explained to me why fantasy and magic are more interesting than real life: "With magic, anything is possible . . . our world is kind of boring. You get a job, you grow up and you start a family, that's all there really is to life." Maura had never engaged in any form of activism or political discussion. The reason she attended the group meetings, she explained, was that Erin invited her, and "it doesn't require a lot from me, just show up and talk about Harry Potter; I can do that."

It is easy to be critical of Maura's insistence to remain on the literal level of fantasy rather than connect to real-world issues. An alternative viewpoint would be to recognize the value of HPTSC in allowing dreamy Maura to feel just as comfortable as die-hard activist Erin. The real value of political discussion through popular culture contexts lies in engaging those participants who are *least* likely to engage in political talk elsewhere—and Maura may exemplify exactly that.

Broadening the Political

Earlier in this article, we considered several definitions of the political, including Wyatt et al.'s (2000) distinction between political conversation (discussions of, for example, national affairs, the economy, and foreign affairs) and personal conversation (centered on education, religion, crime, and entertainment). This distinction does not apply well to HPTSC, where group participants discussed a wide range of issues as political. Often they talked about issues that would not be considered within Wyatt et al.'s definition of politics, but they talked about them in a public-spirited way (as Eliasoph, 1998, stipulates), connecting them to wider concerns, enabling difference of opinion and interrogating oppression. The group conversation demonstrates how slippery the distinction is between personal and political; conversations that start with personal issues can move to political implications and back within seconds.

One of the interesting things to note about the following conversations is that they *are not about Harry Potter*. The fictional world helped members come together, feel a connection, and create an environment of trust; once political etiquette was established, the group could have political conversations unrelated to the fictional narratives.

Consider the following conversation, in which the group discussed rape. According to Wyatt et al., this discussion would fall under personal issues, because it is a discussion of crime. Yet, of course, any crime is connected to social and cultural aspects and has implications for law, policy, and penal institutions. This is clearly exemplified in the group's discussion:

> Dave: Rapists go to jail, though I think they should be killed.
> Erin: Rapists don't always go to jail. Statistically, most of the time rape doesn't get reported. There is the culture of blaming the victim.
> Astera: They say she was asking for it.
> Maura: Especially if it was the husband.

> Shelly: Because you're considered the husband's property. How do you prove that your spouse raped you? Say that yesterday you had sex, and today you say no; what's the difference between the two days?
> Dave: Consent.
> Maura: Try to prove that to an all-men jury.
> Astera: Try to prove that to anyone.

The fact that this discussion would not be considered political for Wyatt et al. has wider implications than measurement validity. It is a dangerous distinction to be making theoretically, because it depoliticizes issues, divorcing them from their wider social implications.

A central topic in the group discussion—identity politics—would most likely also fall under the category of personal conversation in Wyatt et al.'s distinction. The two main identity topics discussed in HPTSC were LGBTQ identities and race/ethnicity. One conversation bridged the two: It started with a discussion of Laci Green, a YouTube vlogger who used the term *tranny* to refer to transsexuals and received a lot of flak. This led to a conversation about the use of labels for different social groups. The conversation was exceptional in terms of group participants' willingness to admit their own uncertainties about appropriate uses of labels and to discuss a topic that is often considered taboo:

> Tim: There's the question of labels. They have so much to do with the time and context—queer, gay, Black, Negro, colored. People used these words in the past when they were not offensive.
> Maura: And people get in trouble for having used these words when it was still acceptable.
> Erin: Now I think person of color is the most appropriate label.
> Maura: Is Black accepted? I never know; some people say I should use African American, but not everyone is African American.
> Astera: I can never decide. I generally use Black and if someone is offended by it I apologize.
> Tim: It's like Latino or Hispanic.
> Erin: Which are very different things.
> Shelly: And some people would prefer Chicano. But how do you know?
> Tim: You ask.

In this conversation, participants discuss the topic of race—a topic that is uncomfortable and thus often avoided, particularly among young Americans. Cathy Cohen (2011) talks about millennials and the "myth of a post-racial society." When young people claim we are in a post-racial society, she explains, this belies the deep social divides that still exist. Black youth, in particular, are "skeptical about the idea of a post-racial anything" (p. 198). It is important to note that none of the HPTSC participants were Black; the conversation may have progressed differently if they were. Yet the group wasn't homogeneous either. It included members of different sexual orientations, different religions, and different ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the group's tackling of the issue was decisively different from assuming that we are post-racial.

In another instance, the group linked race and discrimination to the prison system:

Tim: There's the problem of race in prison, young black men. I teach kids who all know someone who is in prison. Some statistics say more than 25% of young black men will spend time in prison. Some of it is just "walking while black."
Astera: In my civics class we talked about it that up to 1979 in [local city], after 10 pm blacks would get arrested.
Tim: Informal curfew.
Neta: There's the Bob Dylan song, Hurricane. It has a line—"if you're black, you better not show up on the streets."
Tim: It's a true story. This boxer who was arrested, he could have been a pretty good boxer. He was in prison for 15 years and Bob Dylan took him up as his project. But most people don't have Bob Dylan writing songs for them.

According to the distinction made by Wyatt et al., all the group discussions are nonpolitical, because they use entertainment content as a starting point. Yet that belies the many connections that people make between their personal lives and political issues—these connections are what makes politics resonate for people. For HPTSC participants, broadening the political goes beyond the question of scholarly definitions to actively valuing and encouraging a wide scope of discussions. It means including the broad range of topics young people are interested in and passionate about as important and legitimate. Although group participants did not use that terminology, their broadening of the political allowed a range of conversations to happen, and to be read through a politically relevant lens.

Informal political talk is not just communicating about policy; it is about understanding who you are, what your stance is, and building collective opinion. Quantitative research enforces political/nonpolitical distinctions out of methodological necessity, because to measure political talk you need to distinguish it from social talk. Yet ethnographic examination allows us to be attentive to the connections people make, and how politics is made resonant by linking it to the personal. The moments in which the personal turns into the political are exactly where we should focus our attention.

Mobilization: Where Does Action Fit In?

Much quantitative research on political talk considers it in relation to outcome variables such as civic engagement and political participation (e.g., Eveland, 2004). Ethnographic studies employ a different conception of the relative importance of talking and doing. In the Dewey perspective, political talk is valuable for its own sake—as a collective good, for the development of citizens—and not only when it leads to measureable outcomes such as voting. In Eliasoph's study, political talk was valued even more than social action. Eliasoph discusses volunteer groups whose focus on "solvable issues" caused them to avoid discussions that seemed political. This article suggests a middle ground between the two approaches, focusing on attempts to link talk to political action and examining whether and how these are taken up by participants. Unlike Eliasoph's volunteers, HPTSC group participants did not shy away from discussing political issues, even when such issues were controversial. However, the group faced challenges with translating these large concerns to actionable steps.

For Erin, the group leader, the purpose of HPTSC was closely connected to taking civic action. Erin envisioned a strong connection between talking about issues and acting upon them:

> I think if you're taking the time to continue to expose yourself and learn about it, something in you is just going to, like, you won't be able to live with it. You won't be able to—you feel you have to do something.

The link Erin describes between learning, talking, and doing is predicated on strong personal commitment. To her, learning about issues will necessarily lead to taking action, because one would feel strongly compelled to do so. Scholars agree that engaging in political talk is linked to taking political action, though through other mechanisms. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) consider the value of participation in civic associations for political participation. Such groups, they claim, are often the locus of attempts to stimulate political involvement through requests from others. Such invitations are much more likely to be met with a positive answer when they come from a personal acquaintance.

In HPTSC, group leader Erin often attempted to connect the issues the group discussed to actionable steps, as in this example about Walmart's labor practices:

> Erin: I also wanted to show you another video—it's a video the HPA did about Walmart. . . . They want to open another store in Chinatown, and people are trying to stop them. There was a teach-in on Thursday with students from Chinatown talking about why Walmart would be bad for their community. They come in with low prices, take the small businesses out of business, and offer no living wages, no health benefits.
> [After the video:]
> Astera: Go HPA!
> Maura: That was cool.
> Erin: I wanted to show you that, to show how Harry Potter can help engage in issues. . . . On Saturday there is a march in Chinatown, and I'm going. Let me know if any of you want to join. I will be train-pooling from the [name of station] at nine a.m.
> Astera: I have cross-country in the morning, but I might come afterward.

Erin's invitation remained unrequited, as did her additional mention of protests around Walmart two weeks later and an invitation to engage in voter registration for the HPA. In her interview, Astera told me that she wanted to go to the Walmart protest, but, because of sports practice, she could not leave together with Erin and felt uncomfortable going on her own. Maura also cited practical obstacles to joining when I asked her about it: "I would have loved to go to that protest against Walmart. I hate Walmart. But I didn't have a way to get there." Busy schedules and limited access to transportation are often cited as barriers to participation of young people, as are parental concerns—though we can also question participants' level of motivation.

Still, one possible value of these invitations may be an increased sense of political efficacy. As Zukin et al. (2006) note, most youth do not see themselves as able to make a lot of difference politically.

About half of young people agree that "people like me don't have any say about what the government does" (p. 118). In terms of making change in their communities, only 1 in 10 young people believe they can make a "great deal" of difference, and 4 in 10 say they can make "some" difference. Invitations to participate in action, such as those that occurred in HPTSC, may contribute to members' sense that something can be done.

Although this idea was not raised in group discussions, I discussed efficacy with some of the group members in interviews. Maura, for example, talked about discrimination as a social justice issue she feels strongly about:

> For a while I just didn't think that there was [anything I personally can do] because what can one person do against all of the injustices of the world. It's a daunting task. But there's other people trying and you can join them and just fight together, raise people's awareness to be like, "This is still going on; stop it."

Participating in group discussions, and being invited to participate in action, may have aided Maura's sense that "there's other people trying and you can join them."

It may come as a surprise that when HPTSC members discussed actionable steps, institutional politics was rarely on their radar. One of the possible concerns about the self-expressive citizen is a disconnection from traditional spheres of politics. At the same time, the group did not engage in a disavowal of the system. For example, the group valued voting and discussed voter registration as an actionable step the chapter can take:

> Erin: What are we capable of doing in HPA? One thing is voter registration . . .
> Tim: Many people are registered to vote, but the harder thing is to get them to vote, especially the younger people. That's where it really makes a big difference. You can get people registered, but if you have 30% of young people voting you're lucky.
> Shelly: So how do you get them to vote? How do you get them to care and learn? How do you make it cool?
> Erin: You write a book like Harry Potter and then you make the connections.
> Maura: Or you write Harry Potter, and then you tell people to vote.
> Erin: Yeah, if J.K. Rowling would say vote, the whole fan base would do it.

Although the group agreed on the value of voting, those who search direct linkages between the groups' discussions and partisan politics may be surprised. The following conversation, emerging in social chitchat after the formal ending of a group meeting, was the *one time* group members openly discussed their partisan identification, only to reveal their ambivalent stance toward that identity:

> Tim: You wouldn't believe it, but I'm a registered Republican.
> Shelly: I was, but I switched.
> Maura: I am too, by mistake. I chose Democrat, but somehow it came out Republican.
> Shelly: I feel like I'm a mole.

Maura: Me too; that's why I don't switch it. I like getting their materials.

Tim: My party drifted so far away from me the last 15 years. Both parties have become more radical. The left is more to the center, but the right has gone so far to the far right.

Erin: I think both parties are pretty similar.

This conversation can be seen as a wake-up call to the common use of partisan identification as a key variable in political communication research. Tim, who throughout the group meetings expressed liberal views, recognizes the contradiction himself when he asserts, "you wouldn't believe it, but I'm a registered Republican." Shelly talks about switching parties, showing the fluidity of this identity, often thought to be quite fixed. Maura is a registered Republican "by mistake." Moreover, she has no intention of fixing this mistake since she likes feeling "like a mole." And finally, Erin, *the* political animal of the group, claims that to her "both parties are pretty similar"—a statement we would usually attribute only to those with the most limited political knowledge and interest. This conversation, like many others the group held, reveals how much we still do not know about the way that citizens make sense of political life. To understand political talk, we need to start by listening.

Discussion

The context of the Harry Potter as a Tool for Social Change study group is admittedly an idiosyncratic one. The experience of dedicated fans, who have a mastery of a fictional text fueled by a strong emotional connection, and who attempt to make explicit ties to real-world issues, is not typical to many contexts. At the same time, this unique context—and the political discussions it engendered—can teach us much about the underlying mechanisms that can support vibrant political talk through popular culture, particularly for young people.

One could ask: Why did this group need Harry Potter? Why not just get together and talk politics? Some of the group conversations, as detailed in the descriptions of the second and third mechanisms, never touched on the fictional world. But it was the fan context—the love of the stories and the mastery of the text—that brought the intergenerational group of participants together and enabled these conversations in the first place. The connection to a fictional world helped create a context in which the group could overcome the anxieties of talking politics, the "social groundlessness" of it (Warren, 1996). Young people may feel disconnected from traditional politics. They may be anxious to discuss politics if its language is foreign to them (Buckingham, 2000) or if they feel insufficiently informed (Thorson, 2010), yet connecting these discussions to a text they are fluent in allows them to feel confident as contributors. Fictional worlds proved especially helpful to discuss issues that usually are perceived as thorny, such as racism and discrimination. Rarely would a group of strangers be comfortable talking about LGBTQ identities or race relations openly—not only as a way to enforce in-group/out-group boundaries (Walsh, 2004) but in a public-spirited manner that pays attention to questions of oppression (Eliasoph, 1998). Approaching these issues through the metaphor of fictional minorities—werewolves and house-elves— enabled these taboos to be penetrated, though some participants may resist those attempts. Moreover, once the group established its political etiquette, in which public discussion was deemed appropriate and desirable (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 21), and based on the group's wide definition of the political, a broad range

of discussions could take place that were of political interest to participants, many of them not connected to fictional worlds at all. Finally, although some of the discussions were connected to mobilization opportunities, these did not seem to be taken up actively by participants. The value of the invitations to participate may have been in a heightened sense of political efficacy, particularly given the ambivalent relationship toward institutional politics.

If, indeed, many young people are attracted to a model of self-actualizing citizenship in which they want to express their voice and connect their action to their interests, we need to increasingly pay attention to contexts that bridge political worlds and different areas that are of interest to young people—whether they be popular culture texts, games, social media, or other hobbies and interests. As Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) claim, young people are doing much of their political talk in spaces that connect to their leisure interests, spaces they are often much more passionate about than they are about politics.

Connections between popular culture passions and social issues are being made on an everyday basis, in various spaces in which people—and particularly young people—are engaging, both online and off. Nonpolitical online forums (Graham, 2012), film discussion forums (van Zoonen, 2007), and YouTube comments (van Zoonen, Vis, & Mihelj, 2010) are only some examples of "third spaces" where political talk can happen, often in unexpected ways (Wright, 2012). But theories of political talk have yet to specify the mechanisms through which this connection works. Extending beyond the specific context of HPTSC, this case study helps explicate the mechanisms connecting political discussion to different areas of interest. The three mechanisms suggested in this article elucidate how people can carve connections between private and public concerns, between nonpolitical and political contexts.

Scaling up (and down). The process of scaling up is one of translation. In the case of HPTSC, scaling up connected a fantastical world to real-world issues, but we can use this notion to think of any translation from a personal to a political context. Scaling up is particularly important for self-actualizing citizens, to cultivate the feeling that politics resonates with them. We also saw how the process of scaling down may operate, perhaps as an inadvertent tactic of a participant who is uncomfortable with political discussion or focused more on private than public concerns. To study political conversation in nonpolitical spaces, we need to identify moments of scaling up (or down), and understand the mechanisms through which scaling up can be supported.

Broadening the political. In HPTSC, the group's wide definition of the political allowed a broad range of issues to be discussed in a "public-spirited" manner (Eliasoph, 1998). Examining the group discussions showed the broad range of issues participants considered as political, as well as the muddiness of what quantitative scholars distinguish as personal and political (e.g., Wyatt et al., 2000). In examining nonpolitical discussion spaces, a narrow definition of the political not only limits our analysis but denies the ways that the political can be widened. As Dahlgren (2002) states, using a wide definition of the political "allows for more avenues for interesting investigation since it keeps open the border-crossing between the political and the non-political" (p. 6).

Mobilization. Informal political talk can be seen as valuable for its own sake or as a precursor for other outcomes, such as civic participation. Quantitative research often uses talk as a variable predicting

other outcomes (see Eveland, 2004). Ethnographic research often values talk for its own sake while paying little attention to the connection between talk and action. This article suggests observing attempts to link talk to mobilization and to institutional politics, and examining whether and how these are taken up by participants. Mobilization efforts can and should be examined in other nonpolitical contexts as well.

Increasingly, scholars argue for the need to more strongly connect the study of popular culture with that of political communication (Dahlgren, 2006; Delli Carpini, 2013). Underlying many of these arguments is the claim that popular culture is too powerful a force to disregard its role in political life (Street, 1997). This article argues that this move is particularly salient in the context of young people. Given the weakening of traditional forms of political socialization, such as participation in traditional civic organizations, young people need to find alternative ways to become interested and engaged in the political process (Bennett, 2010; Zukin et al., 2006). Bridging young people's passions and their political interest is one way to build such connections. Cases such as the one described in this article serve as powerful reminders that the worlds of popular culture and political communication are not separate binaries. Politics—just like popular culture—is often personal, emotional, symbolic, and reliant on fictions of various sorts.

References

Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Bennett, W. L. (Ed.). (2008). *Civic life online*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bennett, W. L., Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2010). Changing citizen identity and the rise of a participatory media culture. In L. Sherrod, J. Torney-Purta, & C. Flanagan (Eds.), *Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth* (pp. 393–424). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Buckingham, D. (2000). *The making of citizens: Young people, news, and politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Burawoy, M. (1991). *Ethnography unbound: Power and resistance in the modern metropolis*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Cohen, C. (2011). Millennials and the myth of a post-racial society. *Daedalus*, *140*(2), 197–205.

Dahlgren, P. (2002). In search of the talkative public: Media, deliberative democracy and civic culture. *The Public, 9*(3), 1–22.

Dahlgren, P. (2006). Doing citizenship: The cultural origins of civic agency in the public sphere. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 9*(3), 267–286. doi:10.1177/1367549406066073

Delli Carpini, M. X. (2013). Breaking boundaries: Can we bridge the quantitative versus qualitative divide through the study of entertainment and politics? *International Journal of Communication, 7*, 531–551. doi:1932–8036/20130005

Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. New York, NY: Holt.

Eliasoph, N. (1998). *Avoiding politics: How Americans produce apathy in everyday life*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Eveland, W. P. (2004). The effect of political discussion in producing informed citizens: The roles of information, motivation, and elaboration. *Political Communication, 21*, 177–193. doi:10.1080/10584600490443877

Eveland, W. P., Morey, A. C., & Hutchens, M. J. (2011). Beyond deliberation: New directions for the study of informal political conversation from a communication perspective. *Journal of Communication, 61*(6), 1082–1103. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01598.x

Fiske, J. (1992). The cultural economy of fandom. In L. Lewis (Ed.), *The adoring audience* (pp. 30–50). New York, NY: Routledge.

Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Gastil, J. (2008). *Political communication and deliberation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Gatson, S. N., & Reid, R. A. (2012). Race and ethnicity in fandom. *Transformative Works and Cultures, 8*. doi:10.3983/twc.2012.0392.

Graham, T. (2012). Beyond "political" communicative spaces: Talking politics on the Wife Swap discussion forum. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics, 9*(1), 31–45.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kim, J., & Kim, E. J. (2008). Theorizing dialogic deliberation: Everyday political talk as communicative action and dialogue. *Communication Theory, 18,* 51–70. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00313.x

Kim, J., Wyatt, R. O., & Katz, E. (1999). News, talk, opinion, participation: The part played by conversation in deliberative democracy. *Political Communication, 16*, 361–385. doi:10.1080/105846099198541

Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Mutz, D. C. (2006). *Hearing the other side: Deliberative versus participatory democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Norris, P. (Ed.). (1999). *Critical citizens: Global support for democratic government*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Östman, J. (2013). When private talk becomes public political expression. *Political Communication, 30*(4), 602–619. doi:10.1080/10584609.2012.737437

Ragin, C. (1992). Cases of "what is a case?" In C. Ragin & H. Becker (Eds.), *What is a case?* (pp. 1–19). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Saler, M. (2012). *As if: Modern enchantment and the literary prehistory of virtual reality*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Sanders, L. (1997). Against deliberation. *Political Theory, 25*(3), 347–376. doi:10.1177/0090591797025003002

Schudson, M. (1997). Why conversation is not the soul of democracy. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, *14*, 297–309.

Street, J. (1997). *Politics and popular culture*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Thorson, K. (2010). *Finding gaps and building bridges: Mapping youth citizenship* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison). Retrieved from http://gradworks.umi.com/34/48/3448739.html

Thorson, K., Vraga, E., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2015). Don't push your opinions on me: Young citizens and political etiquette on Facebook. In J. A. Hendricks & D. Schill (Eds.), *Presidential campaigning and social media* (pp. 74–94). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

van Zoonen, L. (2005). *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and popular culture converge.* Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.

van Zoonen, L. (2007). Audience reactions to Hollywood politics. *Media, Culture and Society, 29*(4), 531–547.

van Zoonen, L., Vis, F., & Mihelj, S. (2010). Performing citizenship on YouTube: Activism, satire and online debate around the anti-Islam video Fitna. *Critical Discourse Studies, 7*(4), 249–262.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walsh, K. C. (2004). *Talking about politics.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Warren, M. E. (1996). What should we expect from more democracy? *Political Theory, 24*, 241–270.

Wojcieszak, M. E., & Mutz, D. C. (2009). Online groups and political discourse: Do online discussion spaces facilitate exposure to political disagreement? *Journal of Communication, 59*(1), 40–56. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01403.x

Wright, S. (2012). From "third place" to "third space": Everyday political talk in non-political online spaces. *Javnost—The Public, 19*(3), 5–20.

Wyatt, R. O., Katz, E., & Kim, J. (2000). Bridging the spheres: Political and personal conversation in public and private spaces. *Journal of Communication, 50*(1), 71–92. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02834.x

Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2006). *A new engagement? Political participation, civic life, and the changing American citizen*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.