

Ashley Hinck, **Politics for the Love of Fandom: Fan-Based Citizenship in a Digital World**, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019, 257 pp., \$45.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

Kyle A. Hammonds

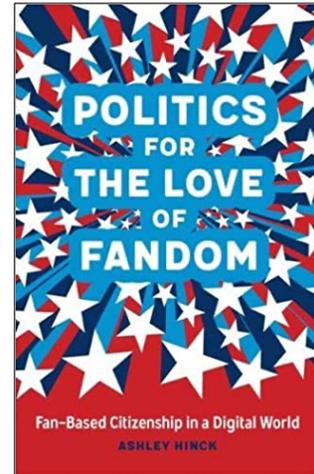
University of Oklahoma, USA

Politics for the Love of Fandom: Fan-Based Citizenship in a Digital World is a book about the ways that communication in and about fandom may influence civic action. Author Ashley Hinck presently works as an assistant professor of communication at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Hinck's major contention in the book is that fandom identity may act as a powerful impetus for pairing noncivic ethical frameworks (i.e., values acquired from participation in popular culture fandom) with civic ethical modalities. In other words, some people learn how to be citizens and how to participate in civic action by means of fandom activities instead of engagement with traditional political institutions. The writing covers both new scholarship on fan, communication, and rhetoric as well as information for institutional leaders who may wish to collaborate with fans regarding civic action.

The introduction to *Politics for the Love of Fandom (PLF)* orients the audience to the structure of the book in addition to reviewing literature on fan-based citizenship. Each chapter homes in on a different fandom case study to demonstrate the various nuances of Hinck's theoretical framework in action, with chapters four case studies presented in chapters 2 through 5, which are bookended by an introduction and conclusion. Aside from providing the layout for the book, the introduction presents evidence that, under certain conditions, desire for civic engagement may be activated based on commitment to fan-objects such as books or movies. A major thrust of the chapter clarifies typical identifiers of fandom groups. Fans are described as having an affective link to their fan-object, collecting specialized knowledge of fan-objects, participating in fandom communities, and participating in fandom activities that result in material productivity. These tenets of fandom form the foundation for later recommendations to practitioners, including the tendency for fandom groups to organize in online spaces. The rise of online fandom indicates that scholars may wish to further focus on digital sites for future research.

Chapter 1 expands on the introduction by exploring the conditions under which impulse for civic action may be activated in fans. At the level of communication and rhetoric, these conditions are constituted by the pairing of ethical frameworks to civic ethical modalities. Hinck uses the example of "Wizards for Obama" to convey the point. "Wizards for Obama" was a slogan added to a number of items, such as T-shirts, by the DeGeorge brothers—who are both active participants in Harry Potter fandoms—during the 2008 presidential election. The combined slogan and merchandise communicated the replacement of traditional political identities with fandom identity in a way that inspired political action, such as going out to vote and especially voting for Obama. Hinck argues that the possibility for pairing noncivic ethical frameworks (e.g., Harry Potter values)



with civic modalities (i.e., voting) has been largely enabled by the presence of a postmodern “fluid world” in which individual perspective and choice are norms of the society. The presence of the fluid world has resulted from years of progressive decline in trust for traditional civic institutions and increased geographic mobility, which enables choice in establishments beyond fixtures of local culture. For instance, most people can mix and match the institutions (schools, churches, political parties, etc.) with which they associate themselves and may thereby use their institutional affiliations as building blocks for social identity. As such, affiliation is fluid because an abundance of options for institutional and group associations exists. If one type of membership doesn’t feel right, someone can simply disconnect themselves from one area and link themselves to another. Online communities provide fertile ground for these choices among affiliations. One type of “glue” that may hold online communities together is fandom. Common love for a fan-object may bring people together, even though there is always the possibility of members engaging in discussion that spans beyond the immediate scope of the fan-object. In a fluid world, Internet fandoms represent one pervasive way that noncivic ethical frameworks may be associated with civic ethical modalities.

In the second chapter, Hinck begins the process of elaborating on the possible communication strategies for intentionally pairing noncivic ethical frameworks with civic ethical modalities. The strategy covered in this chapter is called *connecting*. Husker football fandom is presented as a case study to demonstrate the connecting tactic. In 2013, the TeamMates mentoring program collaborated with Husker football in a “Coaches Challenge” to recruit mentors for young people in Nebraska. The campaign paired frameworks to modalities through a connecting strategy that involved the deployment of links such as metaphors to associate the fan-object with civic action. In this case, the connection was made through metaphors such as “joining of the team.” TeamMates capitalized on a valued sense of togetherness, or being neighborly, and desire for belonging among Husker fans in their campaign. The strategy used advertisements in which Husker players associated being a mentor with being part of the Husker football team, directly connecting the values of teamwork and neighborliness associated with Husker football to the desired civic action.

Chapter 3 focuses on the case of Nerdfighters’ “Project for Awesome” and the pairing strategy of *expanding*. Nerdfighters are members of a video-blog fandom coalesced around the vlogbrothers YouTube channel. This case investigates a different kind of fan-object than previous chapters in the sense that, while the vlogbrothers videos may be viewed as fandom texts, they exist as an interactive and hypertextual set of communications within a community. As such, these vlogs stand apart from traditional tangible items that frequently constitute fan-objects. In their community videos, the vlogbrothers discuss topics that may traditionally be considered “nerdy” and work to disrupt negative stereotypes about nerds. Their “Project for Awesome,” based on core values related to awesomeness in the fandom (such as empathy and community), is designed to encourage YouTubers to advocate for their favorite charities and raise money for people in need. In this way, they paired the ethical framework of the fandom with civic modalities by expanding their values into domains beyond the immediate fandom context. Additionally, chapter 3 explicitly introduces analysis on fandom boundaries by highlighting ways in which fandom rhetoric may implicitly lead to exclusivity. These boundary rhetorics are occasionally addressed as recurrent themes of fandom communication in subsequent chapters as well.

Chapter 4 explicates Greenpeace's LEGO campaign and their use of a *retelling* strategy. In this case, Greenpeace created a video that references the popular *LEGO Movie*. The new video draws on nostalgia and the reframing of familiar LEGO narratives to present Greenpeace's call to action for LEGO fans to demand that the toy company cut ties with Shell Oil. The Greenpeace video recreates scenes from *The LEGO Movie* to convince the audience of the persistence of environmental damages caused by oil companies. Their conclusion was that Shell logos should not appear on LEGO items and that the famous toy company should not lend out their good reputation. The campaign was met with mixed success. Hinck points out that Greenpeace made a successful pairing between LEGO and their call to civic action by recreating movie scenes with the new persuasive message (retelling), but that the way in which Greenpeace used this strategy may have been alienating to some fans. While parents who purchased LEGO products for their children seemed to be generally convinced by Greenpeace's campaign, adult LEGO fans were occasionally disgruntled by the feeling that Greenpeace was targeting LEGO—and, by extension, LEGO fans—by accusing the company of unethical connections to the oil industry. One of Hinck's major takeaways is that the Greenpeace campaign served as a reminder for practitioners that well-made pairing strategies are centered around fans' love of the fan-object. The Greenpeace campaign was successful with a large portion of their audience; although some of the implementation choices for their pairing strategy prevented the more complete campaign successes found in previous chapters.

The last chapter of this book provides contrast with earlier cases by showing how attempts at pairing may fail. Hinck's writing in this section focuses on the 2014 Star Wars Force for Change charity campaign in which Disney partnered with UNICEF. Force for Change accrued support by offering Star Wars fans opportunities to win unique themed items or experiences. Although Disney successfully raised some funds for UNICEF by selling Star Wars merchandise, the money was collected by appealing to fans' desire for material goods rather than compelling them to explore UNICEF and the world problems addressed by the organization. In other words, the campaign merely invited fans to take a deeper dive into fandom without encouraging any investigation of civic public issues. Therefore, the campaign did not link noncivic ethical frameworks to civic ethical modalities.

PLF ends with a concluding summary chapter and a coda with recommendations for organizational practitioners who may wish to collaborate with fans. The coda represents valuable direction for bridging gaps between institutional creators of fan-objects and the fans themselves. Harnessing the types of fandom collaborations described by Hinck in this book would provide ground for fostering collective civic action in the midst of a fluid world with declining interest in elite, hierarchical political institutions.

As with all scholarly work, *PLF* is limited in explanatory scope. For instance, Hinck emphasizes the importance of fan interpretations of fan-objects in successful framework/modality pairings but sparsely addresses the processes or strategies whereby certain interpretations may be enabled or constrained. Practitioners would undoubtedly need some awareness of how fans create meaning in order to maximize their potential for successful pairings. Additionally, fandoms are often described as constituting their own sort of cultures and/or as emergent from broader cultures (e.g., Husker football fans in the larger vein of sports fandom), but the book rarely interrogates the role of culture in expressing, creating, or sustaining fandom. Questions about the pairing process may persist as well. While much of the book implies that people can learn ethical frameworks from fan-objects and fandom participation instead of traditional civic institutions, the

conclusion also discusses the occasional need for unpairing civic modalities from traditional civic frameworks before they may be [re]paired to noncivic modalities. This leaves the question of whether fans have to unpair civic ethical modalities from traditional political institutions (and their frameworks) before they can [re]pair those modalities to noncivic frameworks and how one may determine the circumstances in which this unpairing-to-pairing process is necessary for intentional, successful collaboration with fans. Another potential limitation of the work may be that the exclusionary boundaries of fandom rhetoric are occasionally noted, but the book sparsely grapples with detailed strategies for creating inclusive fandom spaces, especially in pairing processes. The questions inspired by *PLF* feel more encouraging than limiting, though. Hinck's work cultivates a powerful framework for future explorations of fandom, communication, and civic life—any remaining gaps in knowledge of the area may now be more clearly investigated with the concepts presented in *PLF*. Scholars and practitioners alike stand to benefit from Hinck's study.