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reflection | media + politics as told by *spreadable media* and *by whatever media necessary*

Finally, I managed to dive into the books that had first made me excited about my thesis project. I anticipated reading many more than I did not because I misjudged my time but because I misjudged my interest. I had anticipated merely skimming the books, looking for and marking relevant passages. Instead I actually read vast portions of both Spreadable Media by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green and By Any Media Necessary (BAMN) by Henry Jenkins et al. Both books feature numerous pages marked by stick-its with quotes I have to type up as there was no chance I was doing so this weekend.

I was so fascinated by these books because it was the first time I was reading academic and research books on media, political participation and youth – an intersection of topics that I find extremely interesting. I hadn't yet encountered this niche of academia in my studies and it was just so cool to read about other people thinking critically about topics that intrigued me – it not only reinforced many of my ideas but opened my eyes to a wide range of things I had yet to consider.

Thus, as I have yet to type up all the quotes from the books – which I plan to do for future reference – I want to use this paper to discuss four of the major ideas that I really found interesting, perplexing or just things that I kept thinking about. I haven't reached any conclusions really – rather these are areas I am in the midst of postulating so they terminate in questions rather than answers.

#1 | the focus on not being 'activists'

I was very surprised reading Chapter 7 of BAMN to learn of the conscious effort people put on not distancing themselves from the term 'activist'. Describing a YPP conference the authors hosted, they make it clear that almost all of the youths interviewed in relation to the various organizations profiled in the book, made it very clear that they were not activists. In fact, with the exception of the Muslim Americans (who acknowledged the inherently political nature of their mission) many of those involved in the group were reluctant to associate their cause/actions with politics or anything resembling institutional politics traditional systems. Even the members of Students for Liberty – a libertarian organization who receives considerable funding from right wing think tanks grounded their beliefs in the economic rather than political realm.

As someone who has always been interested in politics I was shocked by how clearly these individuals disillusionment with the political system shone through. There was such negative connotation to tradition politics that they were doing anything in their power to distance themselves. Instead of seeing politics as inherent in their civically, culturally and socially related endeavours they saw the political sphere as the domain of bureaucracy, ineffectiveness and divisive party politics.

On top of this, the authors talked about the increasing perception of politics as being politically correct and people avoiding discussing politics for the sake of civility and not offending. What

really scared me is to read these quotes from teens and fellow young adults and realize that in becoming so concerned as a society about political correctness and offending people, we've created a vacuum of dialogue where people just feel disempowered and want nothing to do with politics.

Questions: Why is politics so powerfully associated with negative imagery and rhetoric? Is there any way to re-stimulate political dialogue? How does one attempt to break through millennials negative connotations of 'politics' to reposition it as a productive pursuit?

#2 | piggy-backing off popular culture + fandom

Another think brought to my attention through these two books was how powerful using other vehicles to get to social/cultural/political issues can be. I had never really thought about 'fans' and fandoms as being vehicles for civic action. I was aware that fans were some of the biggest producers of media content and were heavily invested in the original media of which they were fans (I mean I'm a die-hard Harry Potter fan who dabbled heavily in the fanfiction world) but I hadn't made the connection to civic action before.

Both books however make credible claims as to the power of using fandoms to do good. These people are used to media creation, dissemination and participation – hence, they have the skills all they need to do is to redirect the intent. Additionally, fandom presents a way to get a whole new segment of the population or group of people involved in an issue. People who are undocumented immigrants (usually) instinctively care about the plight of fellow undocumented immigrants but your average Harry Potter fan has much less connection. That can all change however, as it did when a Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) vlogger all of a sudden could not travel to LeakyCon because of his undocumented status. He made a video explaining his absence from the convention and the HPA rallied around him – ultimately getting him to the convention and also forging a new connection between DREAMers and the HPA. It's stories like this – and even HPA, Nerdfighters and Imagine Better as organizations themselves – that show how social networks based in fandom can be powerful actors of social change as people have something in common other than the issue – they are all FANS. This not only makes it less intimidating to join the group but also gives them a powerful media rich repository of shared identity and memory on which to draw – the source work of which they're fans. From DREAMers co-opting of Dora and Superman to HPA's refashioning of the DA the iconography and narratives provided by popular culture provide an incredible structure for the tough battle that civic engagement can be.

Questions: what makes a fandom or group of fans move from participating exclusively in their fandom and utilising that fandom to produce a positive change? How can we facilitate this transition from participation to (civic) engagement? Are there fandoms that still remained untapped? How does one prompt a group to start "giving a shit"? How do you bring civic engagement and issues to new audiences??

#3 | empowerment + connectivity vs traditional activism

In both books, there was an emphasis placed on empowerment and connection – the idea that people are prodded towards civic engagement and actually attempting to affect change when

they feel their actions matter and are empowered. This was perhaps the most interesting realization I had. Since its inception I had been framing this project (and my own interest) in "turning clicktivism to activism". Even in how I had framed the issue in my own mind there was a devaluing of the purely electronic forms of participation (more on that with #4). But more than that I was trying to think about how to motivate people to do more than *just* sharing a video. But, in doing so I was missing something key: that people only act when they feel empowered. When they feel their actions *will make a difference*. When they feel that they aren't simply just cogs in the ever turning wheel of bureaucracy, stuffing mailers for a political candidate. In a way, this is the power of digital participation and online communities – they're a new avenue that enable people to connect and they are a powerful way to turn the tide of disempowerment and disillusionment. The digital space is a place people can make connections and create a group which then gives them the comfort and passion to pursue real world issues: for example, the HPA taking on Warner Brothers over using Free Trade Chocolate at Harry Potter world. Hence, I see the need to broaden what I am looking at. It's not a question of activism over clicktivism rather I need to look at it like a process. First you introduce people to clicktivism and the world of online civic engagement. They build comfort, explore their views and then from there one *builds* to activism involving real world action/significance.

It's an interesting nuance because in many ways I understand the POV of many of the millennial activists who say they are able to accomplish more through non-traditional routes of political action (i.e. clicktivism and new media). However, at the same time, there is a large contingent of these people who believe that part of this is boycotting traditional political streams like voting. This in my mind is still incredibly difficult to reconcile. I just still can't wrap my mind around sacrificing ones vote as an "act of protest" or using it some way to make a statement. Not voting is saying something. Quite the opposite it's saying nothing – it's quite literally giving up your constitutional right to a choice, an opinion and a say in how this country is run. It is the first step. I understand those who are too young – but in many ways in my mind if you choose not to vote you also forfeit your right to critique the government as you have actively *not* had a say in its formation. However, I'm very much interested in reading more rationalization of other people's points of view.

Questions: how do we reintegrate disillusioned individuals into the political system? How do you respect people's views and encourage people to take action outside traditional politics while still having them turn out to vote? How does one facilitate the transition from clicktivism to activism??

#4 | the fundamental lack of understanding of new + emerging media

Ultimately, the other big takeaway form these two books was just how little we understand new media and its impact on the conception of participation – especially in a political sense. BAMN made it clear that there remained quite a bit of confusion still regarding how best to define participation and what it looked like in the digital sphere. Potentially more importantly, there remains no concrete way to quantify/measure the impact beyond quantitative numbers of shares, likes and views. Numbers that, while easily digestible, fail to account for the more important community building, thought processes and connections. This lack of understanding of how to meaningfully measure and process digital participation was also seen in Spreadable Media albeit,

focused more on the TV realm than the political one. Spreadable Media looks at the "surplus" audience and the fact that increasingly people are streaming their TV shows online – legally or not – and networks are struggling to account for them. The traditional advertising model has been based on the demographics of a show and being able to promise companies a certain number of eyeballs on the screen at certain hours. This coupled with a ratings system that has yet to account for audiences who don't watch the show religiously at its screening time mean that these audiences are not being understood or taken advantage of. More than that, Spreadable Media actually makes the argument that, contrary to the stereotype of people who download shows being cheapskates, that they are sometimes your most diehard fans as they are going through the extra effort to watch the show. Thus, they are more likely to buy merchandise and/or recommend the show to others and yet this important impact is in no way being captured by current analytics.

Reading about this lack of understanding, I was brought back to a personal statement I wrote for the Warren Bennis Scholars Leadership Program here at USC (if I can find it I will put it in the google Drive) in which I talked about my belief that it is not that my generation doesn't care about civic engagement and politics, it's that the vehicles for communicating political information are so antiquated that we don't know how to connect to them. Hence, I see an interesting parallel and mirror going on: on one hand the older generation and the analytical tools they have developed are unable to measure. Quantify or understand the patterns of engagement of youth today. Similarly, the younger generation does not naturally connect to long TV reports or newspapers leaving them with a lack of comprehension or feelings of alienation towards the current traditional political institutions.

Questions: How do we meaningfully measure digital participation? Is there a way to market to these 'surplus' audiences or at least tangibly measure their presence? How does one simultaneously help the older and younger generations understand each other's modes of communication?