

May 2015

"Boredom Is Always Counter-revolutionary": Affective Political Activism in Participatory Online Communities

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“BOREDOM IS ALWAYS COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY”:

**AFFECTIVE POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN
PARTICIPATORY ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

by

Paromita Sengupta

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in Media Studies

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2015

ABSTRACT

“BOREDOM IS ALWAYS COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY”: AFFECTIVE POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN PARTICIPATORY ONLINE COMMUNITIES

by
Paromita Sengupta

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015
Under the Supervision of Dr. Michael Newman

My thesis examines how fan communities on Facebook can become centres of political activism, operating through members’ affective ties to the cause and community, and networked communication. I conduct an ethnographic study of two Facebook communities—the street-photography page *Humans of New York*, and the page of the anonymous internet comedian who calls himself the Facebook God. Through a discursive analysis of the content of these pages and socio-political issues discussed by the members, I try demonstrate that Facebook activism can serve as an important gateway to civic engagement, through affective politics and connective action. Participatory online communities allow members to reimagine political issues in deeply personal terms, through storytelling and communal solidarity. Therefore, these spaces can become virtual classrooms for potential political activists, by redefining activism as a fun communal endeavor, and lowering the boundaries of participation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Michael Newman for his patience, good humour, and all the help and feedback he provided for my thesis. I would also like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Elana Levine and Dr. Richard Popp, for their advice and encouragement. Finally, I am eternally grateful to the Department of Journalism, Advertising and Media Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for giving me the independence to discover my own academic interests, and for helping me realize that I did, in fact, want to end up studying media for a living.

“Boredom is Always Counter-Revolutionary”: Affective Political Activism in Participatory Online Communities

As political activists and cultural scholars of the 2000s became disillusioned with the neoliberal ideals of Web 2.0, the early enthusiasm about the potential of online media for implementing tangible social change was dismissed as being naive and myopic. Current attempts to raise awareness or make political statements on social media are often dismissed as ‘slacktivism’—a derogatory term for political endeavours which cause a brief ripple of interest, but inevitably die down due to their lack of concrete agendas, or long-term goals.¹ Social media movements like the viral ALS Ice Bucket Challenge of 2014 are often regarded as little more than publicity stunts.

However, online communities provide spaces where a geographically-disparate group of individuals can come together by virtue of their shared appreciation for a particular cultural artefact, or a shared interest, which can lead to animated discussions and debates. These interests can be varied and culturally-diverse, but it is possible for a non-political discussion in an unregulated online forum to have unexpected political ramifications. Gary Alan Fine describes social movements as a “bundle of narratives”, which work within an interactional arena to share organizational goals and strengthen the commitment of members.² Online communities can become interactional arenas, by encouraging political engagement through affective ties with the community and the cause, and even large-scale political activism. The strength and coherence of social

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted”, *The New Yorker*, October 4th 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-3?currentPage=all>, accessed February 1st 2015.

² Gary Alan Fine, “Public Narration and Group Culture: Discerning Discourse in Social Movements”, *Social Movements and Culture*, ed. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) p. 128

movements is based on what Fine calls the “idioculture” of a group—a communal political identity created through the “appropriation and personalization of established traditions and through the creation of indigenous traditions.”³

Social media scholars have also theorized that the structure and accessibility of online communication enable users to treat the space as a digital classroom, where discourses of power and hegemony are debated. Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Barry Wellman describe a virtual classroom as “both an instrumental group—in which students and instructors want to accomplish goals—and a community—in which students exchange emotional support, information, and a sense of belonging.”⁴ They emphasize that the true pedagogical advantage of an online classroom is its potential for participation. Instead of one-way learning through lectures and presentations, a virtual classroom facilitates active interaction, evaluation and cooperation between students and instructors.

In a study on the role of discussion in an online learning environment, Randy Garrison proposes the Community of Enquiry (CoI) model of virtual communities, which is premised on three elements—social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Social presence is defined by the affective connection that the members of an online community develop with each other. Cognitive presence is determined by the community’s intellectual engagement with the issues being discussed, through a process of collaborative and reflective thinking. Teaching presence is the design, facilitation and medium of instruction within the online learning environment.⁵ The Community of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Barry Wellman. “Asynchronous Learning Networks as a Virtual Classroom”, *Communications of the ACM* 40 (9), 1997: 46

⁵ D.R. Garrison, “Online Community of Inquiry Review: Social, Cognitive and Teaching Presence Issues”, *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 11 (2007): 61-72.

Enquiry is a useful theoretical model for studying online communities, especially communities which are actively interested in political discussions and social reform. It defines these communities as spaces where members are encouraged to discuss political issues, and collectively brainstorm ways to solve problems through cost-effective initiatives and networked communication. These participatory efforts eventually lead some community members to develop an increased interest in activism, through blogging, volunteering, and even culture-jamming. Therefore, even though these communities eschew active political mobilization or organizational politics, they can often serve as gateways to civic engagement.

In my thesis, I will discuss two participatory online communities, and evaluate the way they function as virtual classrooms or training arenas for political activism. Both groups began as fan communities for internet micro-celebrities, but they gradually developed into sites for affective political engagement. The “social presence” of these communities was initially created through the members’ affective ties as fans of the internet celebrities who ran these two Facebook pages. However, as the pages and the content they post became explicitly linked with activist movements, the members began to develop affective bonds with the causes endorsed by the pages, and discussed in the comment sections. The “cognitive presence” is created through the discussion sections, where the community members come together and vocalize their support or critique for the content posted by the moderators. Because of the spirit of solidarity and liberal humanism of these communities, these conversations often function as prompts towards reformative action. The members discuss a variety of topical socio-political issues, including fundamentalist religion, gay rights, the abortion debate, immigration reform,

and the concept of the post-racial society. It might seem like the “teaching presence” is created by the moderators who started the pages, post content and choose activist initiatives for the communities to work on. However, since the idiocultures of both communities depend on the participatory contributions of the members, the moderators are not really teachers or instructors in the traditional sense—their roles as moderators are contingent on the interaction and feedback of the communities. Instead, the moderators lower the boundaries of participation for their fan communities, and present to them a picture of activism as a fun and engrossing communal activity. Subsequently, they collaborate on activist initiatives with their fan communities, through affective political ties, networked communication, and a loose, flexible political agenda.

My first case-study is the Facebook page *Humans of New York*, run by street-photographer Brandon Stanton, who uses storytelling and affective involvement with the anonymous subjects of his photographs to create empathy and solidarity amongst his fans. My second case-study is on the Facebook page of the political satirist and comedian who professes to be the real Judeo-Christian God—a progressive, liberal, outspoken deity, who champions gay rights, gender equality and abortion rights, and claims to have been tragically misunderstood by organized religion. Each group qualifies as a participatory fandom, because it involves a network of individuals socializing around their shared appreciation of a cultural artefact, and generating collective intelligence and affect.⁶ Significantly, neither group has a narrow or specific political agenda. Their ideologies are loose and flexible, and adapt easily to changing circumstances. These

⁶ Nancy K. Baym, “The New Shape of Online Community: The Example of Swedish Independent Music Fandom”, *First Monday*, <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1978/1853>, accessed February 9th 2015.

tactics prevent the creation of personal agendas, and allow the members to converge around larger issues. Moreover, each group engages with social reform through what Bennett and Segerberg call “connective action”, which is based on personal action frames, and results in the reimagining of political engagement as “an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances”.⁷ Instead of being associated with formal organizations and active recruitment, connective action uses fluid social networks, personalized manifestos and storytelling to create prolonged protest movements, whose adaptability plays a considerable role in their success.

The elements of performance and playfulness in the spectacle of protest make online spaces particularly adept at showcasing this particular form of political engagement. Despite being dismissed as a breeding ground for armchair politics, new media is a forum where conflicting discourses of identity may be performed and experimented with, and where the cultural barriers between text and reception, performer and audience may be dismantled. Political performers and neophyte activists can play at changing the world by roleplaying as superheroes, anonymous vigilantes, members of Dumbledore’s Army, or even God. By appropriating these templates of heroic behaviour for personal (and communal) empowerment, fan performances constantly reinvent the political as the personal. Each of the two groups I discuss uses digital media and connective action to create an alternate template of political activism, which moves away from organized groups and political mobilization, and instead advances the modules for a form of DIY citizenship, based on tolerance, humanitarianism and social reform.

⁷ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, “The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics”, *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (2012): 739-768

I chose these two particular groups, because there are interesting similarities and differences in the ways in which they engage with political activism. Both my examples are Facebook fan pages which were created in the early 2010s, and gained considerable fan followings within a span of two years. Neither of the two groups was initially created with the intention of becoming a space for political activism. However, between 2012 and 2015, both groups evolved into spaces for participatory political activism through the contributions of their moderators and their fan communities. They advocate a perspective of critical inquiry and liberal humanism, and try to create political idiocultures based on personal storytelling, tolerance and empathy. Therefore, both groups generate discussions which reimagine the personal as the political, and the political as the personal.

However, Brandon Stanton, the creator and moderator of *Humans of New York*, has a very specific political vision for the community. Although he welcomes participatory contributions from the community, in the form of supportive discussions and fundraising, he has recently started moving away from the principle of participatory activism which characterized the community in its early days, and he has started becoming involved in more explicitly organizational philanthropic projects, such as collaborating with the UN on a global peace mission. Thus, although this community has been involved in some remarkably successful activist projects, certain members of the community have become disillusioned with Stanton's personal attitude towards social reform, and his policy of regulating comments in order to preserve a contrived spirit of harmony and camaraderie on the page. The God page does not have the viral popularity of *Humans of New York*, and the activist endeavours of the group have smaller and more localized political ramifications. Moreover, the sharp political satire of the God page

garners considerable hatred from religious fundamentalists and conservative governments, which results in the page being banned frequently. However, the anonymous moderator of the God page is far more receptive to the participatory contributions of the community, and does not regulate communication on his page. God encourages fundraising projects, but the causes are publicly nominated by the community, not chosen by God himself. Unlike Stanton, who is gradually moving towards a politically-correct and socially-acceptable module of institutional philanthropy, the Facebook God behaves like an elusive mythological trickster, always darting around the fringes of legally-permissible behaviour and disturbing the established categories of propriety. The God page is a more open and egalitarian space for political discussions, allowing the community to enjoy a more active role in the shaping of the group's political idioculture. Therefore, despite the fact that both communities use affective politics and networked communication for their activist endeavours, their principles and tactics are markedly different, and present two contrasting views of social media activism.

Literature Review

Fan Activism and Participatory Politics: The Youth and Participatory Politics research group defines participatory politics as “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern”.⁸ This is aided by the use of new media technology, which facilitates the creation of networked interactions and open-ended participation, and therefore lowers

⁸ Joseph Kahne et al., “Youth, New Media and the Rise of Participatory Politics”, *Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network*, March 2014, <http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/publications/203>, accessed February 1st 2015.

barriers to cultural production and circulation. Because these communities often lack the resources and manpower for active political recruitment, participants must have strong affective ties with the cause and the community in order to participate in activist initiatives. Popular film and television actors such as Ian Somerhalder (*The Vampire Diaries*) and Misha Collins (*Supernatural*) frequently urge their Twitter fans to participate in online petitions and fundraisers conducted by various charitable organizations. When pop star Lady Gaga started an activist campaign to repeal the homophobic ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy of the American military, she used social media to mobilize her extensive network of devout fans (who call themselves the ‘Little Monsters’ and look up to her as the ‘Monster Mother’). She posted a tweet saying, “All hands on deck Lil Monsters: Key Senate vote this Tues. on #DADT repeal. We need 60 senators. Call your senator now.” She also used her website to offer talking points, and urge her fans to oppose any filibusters or amendments that would sustain the ban.⁹ These activist initiatives are premised on direct and dialogic nature of social media communication, which allows fans to feel more intimately connected with the celebrities by responding to a personal call to action from a much-loved public figure.¹⁰

Fandoms that converge around popular culture often appropriate the content of the base text, and extend their engagement through activism around related issues. For instance, when the producers of *The Last Airbender* cast four white actors to play the (formerly Asian) protagonists, and then cast a South Asian character as the main

⁹ CNN Wire Staff, “Lady Gaga Rallies for ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Repeal in Maine”, *CNN*, September 21st 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Music/09/20/gaga.gays.military/>, accessed April 20th 2015

¹⁰ Lucy Bennett, “Fan Activism for Social Mobilization: A Critical Review of the Literature”, *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/346/277>, accessed April 20th 2015

antagonist, the fans raised vociferous protests against what they termed Hollywood ‘racebending’. Their transformation from fans to political activists was explicitly rooted in the rhetoric and ideology of the show itself.¹¹ Their activist website Racebending.com referenced the concept of element ‘bending’ in *The Last Airbender*, but it also marked the fans’ criticism of an industry where roles which should employ actors of colour were unabashedly handed out to Caucasian actors. As such, the website operated as a forum for larger debates about racial representation and ‘whitewashing’ in the media industry. The fan agitation around ‘racebending’ is a clear illustration of Henry Jenkins’ concept of textual poaching, or the idea that fans deliberately reconstruct ideas from the primary text in order to stage resistance and reclaim agency.¹² Jenkins believes that textual poaching often crosses the line into fan activism, which he defines as “forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within the fan culture itself...often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships...framed within metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture.”¹³ This includes movements like ‘Superman is an Immigrant’, which reconfigures one of the most iconic figures in American mythology as an undocumented immigrant who uses his considerable powers to assert his nationalistic identity and fight for the American way. The movement asserts that immigrant families are also part of the Superman fandom and the American way, and uses this perspective to campaign for immigrant reform.

¹¹ Lori Lopez, “Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15 (2012): 431-445.

¹² Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge: New York, 1992)

¹³ Henry Jenkins, “Fan Activism as Participatory Politics: The Case of the Harry Potter Alliance”, *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*, ed. Matt Ratto and Megan Boler (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014)

Fandom scholars such as Liesbet van Zoonen believe that fandom and activism can work concomitantly, because "fan communities and political constituencies resemble each other in terms of activity: both are concerned with knowledge, discussion, participation, imagination of alternatives, and implementation." She explains that the emotional investments that fan communities have with the fan text intrinsically lead to rationality, as fans try to discuss and deliberate the qualities of the text, and propose alternatives which could serve to improve the text, if only the fans were allowed to have their way. If the fans find links between the narrative of the text and 'real-world' counterparts of those issues, their "affective intelligence" translates well into political activism.¹⁴ A great example of this is the Harry Potter Alliance—a fan activist group which tries to utilize the shared solidarity of dedicated fans by creating campaigns based on the mythology of the *Harry Potter* universe. The HPA often transforms political campaigns into fun competitions, by dividing participants into four groups named after the four school houses of Hogwarts. The house which gets the highest number of petition signatures, or the greatest amount of donations, wins the imaginary house cup. Jenkins and the Civic Paths research group at USC Annenberg recently conducted a year-long ethnographic study of HPA, where they concluded that the group owed much of its success to the fact that "[it] is not defined around a single mission: rather, it embraces a flexible framework inspired by Rowling's content world, enabling it to respond quickly to any crisis or opportunity and to its dispersed members."¹⁵ At the same time, the community constantly reinforces the need to make politics fun and accessible for its

¹⁴ Liesbet van Zoonen, "Imagining the Fan Democracy", *European Journal of Communication* 19 (2004): 39-52

¹⁵ Henry Jenkins, "Cultural Acupuncture: Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance", *Transformative Works and Cultures*, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/305/259>, accessed February 1st 2015.

neophyte activists, mainly by allowing them to feel like ersatz superhero figures (much like the protagonists of their fandoms), saving the world one pledge at a time. As HPA founder Andrew Slack put it, “What we do not have is the luxury of keeping the issues we cover seemingly boring, technocratic, and inaccessible. With cultural acupuncture, we will usher in an era of activism that is fun, imaginative, and sexy, yet truly effective.”¹⁶

Fun/Affective Politics: The tradition of ‘fun politics’ harkens back to the strategies of disorder and pleasure cultivated by the Yippies, or the members of the Youth International Party. They were a radical, countercultural protest movement of the 1960s, whose founder Abbie Hoffman famously declared that “revolution is a game that’s just more fun”.¹⁷ In order to counter what they saw as the laborious, outmoded and ultimately alienating routines of anti-war agitation, the Yippies proposed an alternative politics of “ecstasy and joy”, through the creation of a ludic and highly-participatory theatrical space, which abandoned erudite ideology in favour of playful, political hi-jinks. This included dropping LSD in the water supply of New York City, nominating a pig for US Presidency and staging displays of public fornication, or ‘fuck-ins’. The idea that politics can be fun was later taken up by groups like the Lower East Side Collective, co-founded by Stephen Duncombe. Duncombe believes that personalized participation means “opening up our organization to new voices and tailoring our tactics to make use of individual personalities and proclivities.” LESC was also greatly influenced by Marshall Herman and his theory of ‘Marxist humanism’, which propounded activism that was

¹⁶ Andrew Slack, “Cultural Acupuncture and a Future for Social Change”, *The Huffington Post*, July 2nd 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andrew-slack/cultural-acupuncture-and_b_633824.html, accessed February 1st 2015

¹⁷ In Benjamin Shepard, “Play as Prank: From the Yippies to the Young Lords”, *Play, Creativity and Social Movements: If I Can’t Dance, It’s Not My Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2011)

“expressive, playful, even a little vulgar.”¹⁸ These groups believed that if spectators saw activists having fun, they might be inspired to “jump off the fence and join the struggle”.

In fan cultures, that sense of fun and empowerment can contribute to powerful affective ties between members of the community. The feelings of enjoyment that fans derive through their engagement with the fan text can be heightened through a process of roleplaying that allows the fans to feel like they are extending and contributing to the narrative of the base text through their political engagement. There is no dichotomy between play and labour when activism is seen as an extension of the fandom’s affective involvement with the fan text. In her book on affective politics, Zizi Papacharissi says, “Because affect precedes any cognitive categorization of engagements as play or labour, affective attunement supports activity that has the potential to be both (*playbor*)...Digital media invite affective engagement through activities that both exploit affective and other labour, and promise empowering forms of play.”¹⁹ According to Papacharissi, these affective ties are created through communal narratives, which help define the idioculture of the communities, as well as the boundaries of participation— “Technologies network us, but it is narratives that connect us to each other, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others.”²⁰ Recent studies in social media, such as the works of danah boyd²¹ and Jose van Dijck²² have also suggested that communities on social media are held together through the feelings of engagement—“The connective affordances of social

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Zizi Papacharissi, “The Present Affect”, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) p. 26

²⁰ Papacharissi, p. 5

²¹ danah boyd, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014)

²² Jose van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

media help activate the in-between bond of publics, and they also enable expression and information sharing that liberate the individual and collective imaginations.”²³ Therefore, fan activist groups like the Harry Potter Alliance, which come together out of a shared love for a narrative universe, and operate through digital networks, are doubly-empowered to develop strong affective bonds through feelings of fellowship within the community. The narrative connects them and allows them to engage with socio-political issues which have parallels in the fictional universes that they know and love. If these groups turn to participatory politics, they use their fan websites, discussion forums, and Facebook fan pages as training arenas for discussing issues, spreading information and awareness, and conducting fundraising programs which often supplement their offline political engagement. They can experiment with a wide array of tactics and principles, and their efforts can be archived for the benefit of future activists.

The Ethical Spectacle: The concept of the “ethical spectacle” was first introduced in an article by Stephen Duncombe and Andrew Boyd, and further illustrated in Duncombe’s book *Dream: Reimagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. Duncombe stresses that the concept of the ‘spectacle’ must be reappropriated from its Marxist connotations of societal impoverishment and artificiality, and channelled into a form of reform which is both ethical and emancipatory. According to Duncombe, “The truth does not reveal itself by virtue of being the truth: it must be told, and told well. It must have stories woven around it, works of art made about it; it must be communicated in new and compelling ways that can be passed from person to person, even if this requires flights of

²³ Papacharissi, 2014

fancy and new mythologies.”²⁴ Like the Marxist humanists and 1960s countercultural pranksters, Duncombe believes that active political engagement (or what he calls “the truth”) will not be effective if it is perceived as being laborious and alienating. Instead, political action must be embodied in the form of the dramatic and participatory spectacle, which engages the audience through the strategic use of stories, and allows politics to become “as much an affair of desire and fantasy as it is of reason and rationality”.

DIY Citizenship: In 1998, University of Toronto professor Steve Mann introduced two computer courses in order to teach his students to “resist the hegemony of...surveillance technologies” and view technology as a user-driven, participatory, and essentially political enterprise. ‘Maktivism’ as Mann called it, “combines the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos of home renovation with the DIT (do-it-together) ethos of the GNU Linux and Free Software movement.”²⁵ Mann’s concept of Maktivism is composed of what he calls ‘enquiry’ and ‘praxis’, or the process of critical thinking followed by the material process of translating thought into action. However, Mann also insists that Maktivism is inspired by the hacker ethos of tinkering, or to “build something, first, and then figure out what it is or what it can be useful for afterward.” In many ways, my case-studies are similar to Mann’s model of Maktivism. Both groups are centres for counterhegemonic thinking and engender varying degrees of political mobilization. More importantly, neither community foresaw what it would eventually evolve into. God started out as a comedian who made fun of organized Christianity. The HONY fandom came together out of a shared appreciation of Stanton’s photographs, and the quirky sartorial choices of his subjects.

²⁴ Stephen Duncombe, “Ethical Spectacle”, *Beautiful Trouble*, <http://beautifultrouble.org/theory/ethical-spectacle/>, accessed April 2nd 2015

²⁵ Steve Mann, “Maktivism: Authentic Making for Technology in the Service of Humanity”, *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*, ed. Matt Ratto and Megan Boler (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014)

Their flexible political agendas and constantly-changing membership allowed them to modulate their methods and engagement according to the demands of the situation. Therefore, both groups are based on a template of lifestyle politics formulated as alternatives to mainstream protest strategies. Matt Ratto and Megan Boler refer to this model of civic engagement as “DIY citizenship”, or the process of innocuous discussion and debate, which can prove to have unexpected political consequences, because “they potentially challenge existing systems of authority—questioning ownership rights to media, for instance, or putting to test traditional systems of peer review.”²⁶ The accessibility of social media decontextualizes and universalizes the space of performance, allowing shared stories to become the foundation of a model of improved and improvised citizenship, with a zero-tolerance threshold for social prejudice.

Repertoire of Contention: Charles Tilly’s “repertoire of contention” proposes that political activism does not exist outside a historical framework. The performance of protest is an acquired skill, and the tactics are chosen from a “culturally and historically specific” set of precedents. Tilly himself criticized the repertoire for imposing boundaries on activism—“people generally turn to familiar routines and innovate within them, even when in principle some unfamiliar form of action would serve their interests much better.” The repertoire follows a cyclical pattern, whereby experimental forms of collective action spring up during moments of crisis; the most successful and transferrable of these tactics are then adopted as part of the repertoire during quieter times.²⁷ However, scholars studying digital activism in the mid-90s pointed out that the

²⁶ Matt Ratto and Megan Boler, “Introduction”, *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*, ed. Matt Ratto and Megan Boler (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014)

²⁷ Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977)

rapid diffusion of information on the internet made it difficult to isolate ‘moments of crisis’ from ‘quieter times’.²⁸ The movements most adept at capitalizing on this tumultuous influx of information must necessarily combine a high level of critical awareness with a flexible agenda, instead of being aligned to a specific ideological cause. Brett Rolfe refers to these as “hothouses for innovation”, which allow the modules of the repertoire to be scrambled and re-assembled in new and unprecedented ways, the results of which can then be diffused to the larger (and more ideologically specific) activist community.²⁹ The “digital repertoire of contention”, as described by Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, is a form of web activism characterized by flexible political ideologies, lower barriers of participation, reduced costs of organizing and a distinct principle of collaboration.³⁰ By providing (mostly unregulated) spaces for members to discuss issues, share stories and challenge socio-political preconceptions, participatory online communities continually reinvent and add to the digital repertoire of contention.³¹

Facebook Activism: In her book on technology and the public sphere, Zizi Papacharissi comments on society’s growing disenfranchisement with traditional forms of political engagement, such as voting, community involvement and volunteering, and relates this trend to a parallel growth in scepticism about the effect of citizen action on improving public affairs. However, she believes that technology can present these individuals with a new civic vernacular, through a mix of practices that are both “actual” and “potential”.³²

²⁸ Sidney Tarrow, “Cycles of Contentious Action: Between Moments of Madness and the Repertoire of Contention”, *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, ed. Mark Traugott (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995)

²⁹ Brett Rolfe, “Building an Electronic Repertoire of Contention”, *Social Movement Studies* 4 (2005): 65-74

³⁰ Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, “A New Digital Repertoire of Contention?” *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

³¹ Rolfe, 2005

³² Zizi Papacharissi, “Contemporary Democracies, Civic Engagement and the Media”, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Malden: Polity Press, 2010), p. 16

In other words, as Manuel Castells has pointed out, social media can add to an offline political movement's existing repertoire through email campaigns, online fundraisers and virtual sit-ins, or it can create entirely new tactics and protest movements.³³ The facilitation of fan networks on Facebook through the creation of community pages, encourages groups with affective ties and similar feelings about a cause to come together. Interested members can subscribe to updates simply by clicking 'like' on a Facebook page, or joining a group. They are sent notifications every time a member posts something, or every time the group creates a new event. The comment sections of the posts operate as discussion forums, and the threaded system of comments recently introduced by Facebook makes it easy for members to reply directly to each other's comments and thereby facilitate an engaged discussion. Sometimes these discussions create alternative sources of knowledge and information about political issues. Laryssa Chomiak describes how protestors in the Tunisian Revolution used Facebook to organize events and raise awareness through sharing links to videos and news coverage of the protests. Moreover, antiregime symbols gained viral popularity on Facebook, as protestors changed their profile pictures to images of the black Tunisian flag, thereby giving the image the status of a symbolic weapon. Finally, when President Ben Ali authorized a nationwide ban on Facebook as part of his repressive strategy, the protestors started using proxies and external servers such as Hotspot Shields provided by the global Tunisian diaspora to access Facebook, turning the simple action of logging into a social media network into a performance of mass defiance.³⁴

³³ Manuel Castells, "Virtual Communities or Network Society?", *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)

³⁴ Laryssa Chomiak, "Architecture of Resistance in Tunisia", *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism*, ed. Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014)

Another popular activist tactic used on social media sites is online petitioning. Petitioners can share the links on their Facebook pages, and they can be signed and shared by the other members of the community. Subsequently, these discussions can lead to offline political engagement with perceptible reformative effects. For instance, in May 2009, a posthumous video was discovered, where the victim of a murder accused Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom of murdering him. While the video was being investigated for authenticity, a host of Facebook groups and pages sprung up, demanding Colom's resignation.³⁵ The pages helped spread awareness and information about the murder, as well as the protest movement, and the online mobilization of thousands of protestors eventually led to mass demonstrations, with more than 50,000 participants. Eye-witness accounts of these protests, in turn, made their way back to Facebook through a form of citizen journalism, where they helped to spark more discussion. Therefore, the space of social media actively encourages a form of DIY citizenship through the proliferation of information, group discussion and, occasionally, offline political action.

Methods: I have an affective interest in these two Facebook groups, having been an active member of both groups since 2012, shared many of their posts, and participated in community discussions. I have been a first-hand witness to way in which the political idiocultures of these groups changed and developed between 2012 and 2015. My research methodology is a form of virtual ethnography, through observational research based on online fieldwork. This method of studying political activism had its limitations, because

³⁵ Summer Harlow, "Social Media and Social Movements: Facebook and an Online Guatemalan Movement that Moved Offline", *New Media and Society* 14 (2012): 225-243

the sample of study was limited to people with the socio-economic capability and the technical literacy to have Facebook accounts, and be active enough on Facebook for the endeavours of these communities to have a perceptible effect. I was not able to supplement my virtual ethnography with offline interaction or participant-observation of the communities, because the vastness and global diversity of these groups made it impossible for the entire communities to converge in an offline location in any way.

However, virtual ethnography allowed me to focus on the way the tools of social media influence the way these groups communicate, create awareness and organize reformative projects. The threaded system of comments afforded by Facebook makes it possible to trace the linearity of a discussion, and members' 'likes' and comments on each other's posts can often make for interesting analysis. I also wanted to supplement my observation of the audiences of these two social media communities with the content with which they interacted, and the discourses they used to talk about socio-political issues, for a more coherent understanding of the communal identities which framed their interest in political activism. I examined at least 200 individual status updates, memes, photographs and links posted by each of these two groups (dating back to 2012), as well as the discussions conducted by the audiences in the comment sections of the posts. This allowed me trace the development of the two groups, and contrast their political idiocultures. I also read media coverage of the two groups, including professional and amateur blog posts, newspaper articles and interviews. Finally, I examined how contemporary socio-political issues were discussed by each of these two communities, and how the role played by the two page moderators influenced these discussions. This method of research allowed me to trace the chronological development of the political

idiocultures of the two communities, and determine the extent to which this development was influenced by the moderators and the community members. I used secondary research from digital anthropology, fan studies, literary theory, and new media studies to substantiate and validate my own findings.

Chapter Division

Chapter 1: Introduction. In this chapter, I have introduced my topic by discussing how online communities are conducive to conducting participatory political activism through affective ties and connective action. I have also discussed the relevance of the Community of Enquiry model in my analysis of online communities as virtual classrooms. Finally, I have briefly described the two communities which serve as my case-studies, and explained why I have chosen these particular examples, with reference to some of their similarities and differences. This chapter has also reviewed some of the most current and relevant scholarship on fandom, new media activism, and participatory political engagement, and defined the core terms of my argument.

Chapter 2: Humans of New York. In this chapter, I will study the Facebook community *Humans of New York*, run by photojournalist Brandon Stanton. I will conclude that the HONY fan community is far more politically-inclined than Stanton himself, and through the participatory contributions of the members, the page went from being a platform for showcasing street-photography, to a space for conducting political discussions through participatory storytelling, and eventually to a site of political activism with tangible offline reformative effects. I will also explain how Stanton's attempts to use his

photography to derive a concept of universal humanity has been perceived as naïve and myopic by the HONY community, leading to disillusionment amongst the members. Moreover, Stanton's comment-regulation policy limits the political discussion on the page to a socially-acceptable degree of liberalism, and further alienates the more explicitly political members of the community. Therefore, the HONY community has started creating a host of spinoff pages, which use the format and idioculture of HONY, but contextualize it within local political issues and grassroots activism.

Chapter 3: The Facebook God. In this chapter, I will describe how the improvisational online performance of the Facebook God is a piece of political satire specifically designed to counter the discrimination and intolerance of fundamentalist Christian groups. I will discuss the relevance of political satire in civic engagement, and examine how the participatory contributions of the God community encouraged the political idioculture to evolve from fun, mischievous political satire to a support group where members can find comfort, solidarity, and empathy through stories and communal roleplaying. I will also describe how the eponymous moderator of the page actively encourages communal participation, because the satire of the group is premised on roleplaying into the moderator's 'authentic' God persona.

Drawing on the concept of the trickster in the American mythological tradition, I will explain how God qualifies as a postmodern political trickster, through the content he shares, the participatory segments he conducts and the culture-jamming projects that he engages in, with the help of his fan community. Finally, I will consider the relevance of God's virulent anti-fan community, and the way their expressions of intolerance are incorporated into his satirical performance. To conclude, I will compare the idiocultures

of the God group and *Humans of New York*, especially with regard to the moderators' regulation policies, and the level of community participation they encourage.

Chapter 4: Conclusion. In this chapter, I will discuss the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, as it relates to political participation through online media. I will use Zizi Papacharissi's theory of the new civic vernacular of online media, and explain how my two case-studies create a new civic vernacular of political participation through affective political ties, connective action, and a loose, flexible political agenda, and thereby create lowered boundaries of participation for neophyte activists. Finally, I will compare and contrast the extent to which the moderators of the two groups encourage participatory contributions of their communities, and discuss how their styles of moderation influence the civic vernaculars of their communities.

Reform Photography and Participatory Storytelling:

The Multiple Discourses of Tolerance on *Humans of New York*

Humans of New York (HONY) was started in 2009 by street-photographer Brandon Stanton, who wanted to gather 10,000 photographs of New Yorkers, framed against an interactive map of the city. To put his subjects at ease and loosen their inhibitions, he made conversation with them, starting on a lighter note and graduating to personal questions such as “What is your greatest struggle right now?” or “If you could give some advice to a large group of people, what would it be?” Eventually, Stanton started turning isolated snippets of conversation into captions for his photos, leaving the subjects anonymous. The cryptic, decontextualized captions make the anonymous subjects seem universal and relatable, and their stories are deliberately without closure, thereby presenting a variety of possible outcomes, and encouraging the audience to come together and construct the narratives. Therefore, although Stanton has accounts on multiple social media platforms to showcase his work, his Facebook page has much higher traffic than his Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram accounts. Unlike the other platforms, Facebook posts have comment sections where fans can have an extended discussion and contribute to the narratives in new and unprecedented ways—they critique the responses, try to figure out how the stories ended, or find stories of their own to share. Constructing a coherent story out of the fragmented pieces is a theatrical, almost ritualistic process, conducted by the subject, the artist-performer and the fan community. Through this collaborative micro-storytelling, the fans build an affective idioculture of tolerance, promoting identification with the speakers and amongst themselves.

Between 2012 and 2015, HONY has transformed from a photography project into a viral internet sensation. Stanton's Facebook page currently boasts more than 12.5 million followers, and at least a few hundred thousand fans like, share and comment on each new post. In 2013, Stanton turned his blog into a book of photographs, which sold 30,000 copies as pre-orders, and remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 28 weeks. HONY has also won a Webby Award for "Best Use of Photography" and a People's Voice Award for "Best Cultural Blog". HONY's current reputation for using photography for socio-political reform has much to do with Stanton's gradual turn towards fundraising and other social reform projects inspired by the subjects of his photographs, and the stories they told. However, HONY also owes much of its success to Stanton's vast, transnational fan community. Although this fandom originally came together through their appreciation for Stanton's photographs, it is HONY's liberalism and social conscience which provided an impetus to its growth, and turned it into a fan activist movement, with members who participate in discussion threads and fundraising campaigns with equal ebullience.. The fans actively bolster Stanton's philanthropic endeavours, and turn them into fun and engaging political endeavours, operating through affective political engagement, connective action, and a distinct culture of tolerance.

However, the sheer magnitude and diversity of the HONY fan community often create perceptible tensions between Stanton's personal vision for his blog, and the opinions of his more vociferous and politically-motivated fans. The HONY fandom communicates primarily through social media—through status updates, blog posts, discussion threads, and the comment section of the Facebook page itself. The interactivity of digital communication allows the barriers between artist and audience to be

dismantled, providing fans with the opportunity to shape the political idioculture of HONY, and even critique the object of their fandom, especially when they regard Stanton's political policy to be naive or circumscribed. Through some of Stanton's most recent projects, it has become clear that he is trying to derive an overtly-sentimental and universal impression of global humanity—an endeavour which does not account for problematic socio-political factors, minimizes Stanton's own position of privilege, and does not view humanitarian interventionist methods through any form of critical inquiry. The HONY community, on the other hand, has displayed several attempts to mediate Stanton's problematic saviour complex with a more critical attitude towards social reform, by questioning his motives in blogs and comment sections, and by creating a host of spinoff projects which engage with local politics, while keeping to the familiar 'Humans of' format. Through the creation of disparate discourses of tolerance, the fan community enables HONY and its larger social media legacy to become discursive sites for examining the dynamics of tolerance, liberalism and social activism.

Photography as Political Activism

In *Camera Lucida*, the book where he outlines his theory of the affective power of photography, Barthes develops the twin concepts of "*studium*" and "*punctum*". He defines *studium* as the socio-political and cultural discourses of a photograph, and *punctum* as a personal memory from a private repertoire, which "stings the viewer" when there is a "match between a signifier in the scene (in the photograph), and a scene in the

memory.”³⁶ The *punctum* has a metonymic power of expansion, which can arouse a range of emotion, from tenderness and empathy to abject horror. In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag claims that what Barthes calls the *studium* and the *punctum* can be effectively channelled into the use of photographs as shock therapy—“for photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock.”³⁷ She goes on to describe how war photographs served as effective anti-war rhetoric during the Vietnam era. According to Sontag, the grotesque verisimilitude and shock value of photographs of death and mutilation can serve as powerfully understated political statements—“[The photographs] reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus”.

The shock value of photography makes it very effective for human rights activism, with photographer-activists claiming vehemently that the viewfinder can be a powerful tool for enacting political change. These photographers prefer to think of themselves as advocacy journalists, who eschew objectivity in favour of a deeply personal point of view. For instance, in post-Civil War America, Jacob Riis took to photographing the slums and immigrant population of New York City’s Mulberry Street, with a view to exposing the unemployment, exploitation and squalid living conditions of these workers. Instead of limiting himself to the role of photographer and spectator, Riis started using these photos in a series of lectures on the need for social reform for these workers. The lectures made dexterous use of text and image to enhance viewers’ affective engagement with the causes, and provoke maximum public outrage.³⁸ Riis went on to publish his photographs in a book called *How the Other Half Lives*, which hastened the

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Vintage Reprint, 1993)

³⁷ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003)

³⁸ Michelle Bogre, *Photography as Activism: Images for Social Change* (Oxford: Focal Press, 2012)

development of the New York State Tenement House Act of 1901, which banned the construction of dark, poorly-ventilated buildings in the state of New York. However, the book's real impact was the establishment of 'muckraking'—a form of investigative journalism, or social exposé, aimed at raising public awareness by transforming images of urban poverty, corruption and exploitative labour into a public spectacle.

Muckraking and social reform photography are also premised on the correlations between the discursive analysis of the *studium*, the painful clarity of the *punctum* and the spur towards tangible action. According to Glenn Ruga, cofounder of socialdocumentary.net, "Human rights photography is actionable as opposed to representational...the power of the work is really to make change. It's not strictly to represent something out there in the world, but the act of presenting this work and looking at this work itself can make change. It sparks public discourse, it can spur reform, and it can shift the way we think about these situations in the world and ourselves."³⁹ Similarly, Leslie Thomas, activist and founder of the Art Works Projects believes that "My goal is to be the most emotionally manipulative person possible...Then I want to forge an emotional connection and get you to call or write and do something."⁴⁰

Although HONY was originally more about Stanton's documentary impulse, his own interest in philanthropy, combined with the participatory contributions of the HONY fan community, have been pushing the project towards a form of praxis intervention, where the discourses of tolerance which are disseminated in an online discussion forum

³⁹ Brian Storm, "Visual Storytelling about the Human Condition", *Nieman Reports*, <http://niemanreports.org/articles/visual-storytelling-about-the-human-condition/>, accessed March 23rd 2015

⁴⁰ David Gonzalel, "Turning Art into Activism", *The New York Times*, February 20th 2012, <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/20/turning-art-into-activism/>, accessed March 24th 2015

are embodied into a plan of action, with tangible offline effects. It is Stanton's responsibility to use his photos and captions for the "emotional manipulation" required to create discussion and form an emotional connection. For the HONY community, the first stage of action consists of sparking public discourse around topical socio-political issues like immigration rights, eating disorders, or the American public school system. In the praxis stage, the HONY community collaboratively translates their support into offline efforts, such helping an international student from Bosnia find an immigration lawyer to help him maintain his visa status, or writing to a bulimic teenager, offering advice and support (and convincing her that there was no shame involved in seeking professional help for her condition), or even helping the public schools in one of the most impoverished neighbourhoods in Brooklyn get library books, new computers, mentorship programs and organize ten years' worth of summer school programs for their students.

Participatory Storytelling as Idioculture on HONY

Humans of New York did not start out as a space for participatory political activism. It did not even start out as being participatory. Originally, the photos were only posted on Stanton's blog, which had no discussion forums or comment sections, or any place for his fans to engage with his work. However, as Stanton put it in an *Ask Me Anything* session on Reddit, "The path of HONY has been a constant process of ditching what's not working, and doubling down on what's working...Prime example: I noticed that social media was where my growth was. So I removed my 'free-standing' website, and began

hosting 100 percent of my content on social media.”⁴¹ The participatory storytelling in the comment sections creates an idioculture of interactive performativity and social inclusion. One of Stanton’s favourite tricks is to combine a group photograph with a personal quote; nothing in the photograph directly reveals the identity of the speaker, leaving the fans to hunt for clues and speculate. By coming together to fill in the gaps in the narrative, the fan community collectively takes over the performance and eliminates the gap between storyteller and audience.

The process of communal storytelling on HONY operates in many different ways. For instance, when Stanton posted a photo-story depicting two 16-year-old boys coming home from prom (where they had been each other’s dates) the comment section virtually exploded with admiration and encouragement for the two teenagers. The subjects requested Stanton to tag them in the photograph, and the comments included supportive messages from the boys’ family and close friends, who were also lavished with praise by the effusive HONY community. The photo was later used by the Facebook page “Gay Marriage USA” as part of a (now successful) campaign to legalize gay marriage in Montana. At other times, the HONY community engages in a playful display of witticisms, which transforms support and solidarity into a fun game. Stanton recently posted a photo of a girl called Beyoncé, whose embarrassment and self-consciousness about her name led to a mood of general hilarity in the comment section, as other unfortunately-named HONY fans shared their personal stories, and consoled each other.

⁴¹ Bill Murphy Jr., “How Humans of New York Went Viral on Facebook”, *Inc.*, <http://www.inc.com/bill-murphy-jr/how-humans-of-new-york-got-nearly-1-million-facebook-likes.html>, accessed March 24th 2015

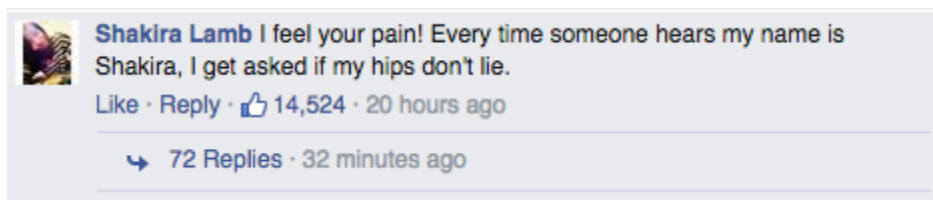


Figure 1

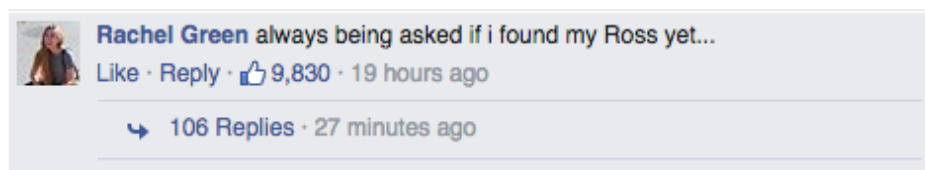


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

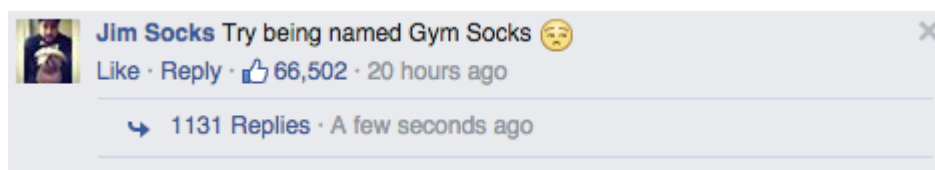


Figure 5

Although the tone of this particular thread is amusing self-derogation, the community's practice of solidarity through shared stories is replicated in other, more serious discussions. For instance, Stanton once posted a series of three photos featuring a 21-year-old girl who came to New York all by herself to meet a stranger. She went on to confess—"He's...55. I met him on the internet. It's a BDSM thing. Sort of a

daddy/daughter thing. He's at work now. He's actually got a wife and two kids. I think I'm using this relationship to try to pull myself out of a dark, dark hole. At the very least, it's the ultimate support system." In the subsequent captions, she described how her interest in BDSM had started in elementary school, when she discovered that she enjoyed tying up her stuffed animals and beating them. Her hyper-conservative parents had put her on anti-depressants since she was in the fourth-grade and regularly searched her room, confiscating anything they thought might contribute to her 'deviant' sexuality.

This post appeared in early March 2015, right in the middle of the BDSM community's backlash against the recently-released film version of *Fifty Shades of Gray*, and their attempt to raise empathy and awareness about their own practices. The support and empathy offered in the comment section was accompanied by discussions about the misrepresentation of BDSM in the E.L. James trilogy. Picking up on her sense of loneliness and alienation, HONY fans who were former or current members of the BDSM community started sharing personal stories to help the subject understand that she was not alone, and that her sexual choices were not signs of mental trauma. One of the members, who is also a professional dominatrix, posted a deeply-sorrowful message about her family's poor parenting choices, and offered to help her understand that safe and consensual BDSM is never an isolating experience.

The figure of the storyteller on HONY is an ambiguous construct, because the position is collaboratively owned by the photographer, the subject and the top commenter (the comment with the highest number of 'likes'). These are the three contributors who set the tone and framework of the story because, at first glance, the photo, the caption and the top comments are what any subsequent viewer will see. Every subsequent comment

constitutes what Harvey Sacks calls the ‘second stories’ of a narrative arc. They generate involvement and social solidarity within a community by confirming the ‘tellability’ of the original story, even as they establish a common ground of shared experiences.⁴²

Conversely, second stories can be used to challenge or dissociate oneself from the original poster. Since Facebook’s ‘reply’ system allows users to respond directly to each other’s comments, second stories can create an effective chain of dissociation. If a user posts a particularly insensitive or aggressive comment, this chain of dissociation can become an effective way to berate the belligerent posters.

The chain of dissociation can also function as an effective learning opportunity. On April 18th 2014, Stanton posted a photograph of a fashionably-dressed elderly man with the following caption—“What's a time that you didn't keep your word that you now regret?" "When I was younger, I told a friend that I'd go with her to get an abortion. And I never showed up." Within seconds, the comment thread erupted with riotous outrage from the community, admonishing the subject for impregnating a woman and leaving her to go through the traumatic process of abortion by herself. Others accused the subject of being pro-life, conservative and Republican. Nothing about the photo or the caption had indicated that the subject was responsible for the young woman’s predicament. After the discussion had run its gamut of belligerence, more observant voices stepped to the fore. With one decisive comment, Amanda Carlisle clearly defined the structural limits of the narrative—“He never said he was the father. He never said he did not go because he is

⁴² David Silverman, “Conversation Analysis”, *Harvey Sacks: Social Science and Conversation Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 117.

pro-life and he never said she did not get the abortion because he did not show up. He simply regrets telling a friend he would be there and he did not go”.

The system of ‘top comments’ on Facebook is an invaluable tool for a researcher trying to identify the idioculture of the HONY community. Amanda Carlisle’s comment is the top comment on the post, currently with 4200 ‘likes’. Another photograph depicted a man with a wry smile and a lit cigarette between his lips, captioned “Everything is up in the air right now. My dog just died. My car just got hit. And I might get evicted. All I've got is my health”. The post is rife with comments on the subject’s obliviousness to the irony and the inevitability of his failing health. However, the top comment is from Allan Bowling, who quietly pointed out—“Pretty sure it's dark humour on his part, not blissful irony”. This is no coincidence. In an overwhelming majority of HONY posts, the comments pushed to the top of the thread by the HONY fan community are expressions of support, and solidarity, which serve as reminders to the community to retain a sense of empathy and avoid becoming belligerent or judgemental.

This is not to say that the aggressive commenters go away or refrain from commenting in subsequent posts. But on HONY, these expressions of intolerance and insensitivity eventually become part of the unfolding narrative. For instance, when a subject admitted that the saddest moment of his life was “sitting at the kitchen table with my dad, an hour after my mother died, realizing we had to figure out what we were going to do for lunch”, his response was tragically misunderstood. He was severely upbraided for valuing his mother only in terms of her domestic service to the family. Once again, the top comments put up a passionate defence. “My mother died a few years ago, and I understand exactly what he means. It's not like "oh well, she died. Wanna toss some ribs

on the bbq?", or "oh no, our chef died, what are we gonna do for food now?" It's the, for lack of a better word, absurd feeling of going back to "normal" life, doing everyday things such as having lunch, knowing that nothing is ever going to be "normal" ever again," said one. Other commenters joined in, sharing stories about coming to terms with a loved one's death and transforming the thread into a participatory performance of grief, which was both comforting and cathartic. As one HONY follower put it astutely, "My favourite part of following HONY is that if you wait long enough, the mean comments are pushed to the bottom and the uplifting comments are voted to the top!" This proves that the HONY community recognizes and acknowledges this recurring pattern in the flow of the narrative—a ritual of tolerance, from antagonism to acceptance. The successful enactment of the ritual encourages others to contribute to the narration by drawing on their own personal memories and experiences.

From Discussion to Social Activism

Stanton has a policy of actively eschewing any explicit political overtones in his work. As he proudly claimed in a video interview, "I went to Boston after the marathon bombings last year. The media from all over the country was in Boston. I'm the only dude who spent a week there and didn't ask a single person about the bombings...Media naturally gravitates towards drama...I just try to show normalcy."⁴³ However, as Stanton is undoubtedly aware, an isolated picture of normalcy in the midst of a tumultuous national crisis is, in itself, a powerful political statement. Moreover, Stanton relies on a

⁴³ "In Taking Photographs in Iran | Humans of New York Creator Brandon Stanton", *Youtube*, posted by "UCD—University College Dublin", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nW4YJew1pl0>, accessed March 25th 2015

method of relaying activist impulses through his photography, by the careful use of captions to enhance or affirm the effect of the *studium* and the *punctum*. This is a strategy popular amongst social reform photographers. In 1909, Lewis Hine—a photographer and social reformer who tried to use his art to abolish child labour laws in America—published an essay called “Social Photography”, where he claimed that it was possible to reinforce the pathetic poignancy of a photograph of a child worker by adding a “social pen picture”, such as a quotation from Victor Hugo. Hine believed that the caption could thereby transform the photograph into a lever for social uplift.⁴⁴

Stanton’s photo captions form the focal point of the discussions that take place on HONY. Sometimes the captions tell a story which invites encouragement and expressions of support from the community. At other times, the captions allow the fans to go beyond the limitations of social media in their show of solidarity. Once, Stanton photographed a woman who runs a small bakery in Queens and was having trouble paying her medical bills. Along with the usual quote from his subject, the caption included the name and address of the bakery. HONY fans from all over New York flocked to the bakery to meet the woman and buy her cakes. When Stanton posted a photo of a teenager trying to support his pregnant girlfriend, HONY follower Skip Gilbert offered to help him find a job. Since Facebook comments are designed such that the top comments on a thread are the ones with the highest number of ‘likes’, the rest of the HONY community pitched in by bumping Gilbert’s comment to the top slot, so that the boy could see the offer if he looked up the post on HONY. Stanton is also fond of using the captions to spread word

⁴⁴ Lewis W. Hine, “Social Photography: How the Camera May Help in Social Uplift”, ed. Alexander Johnson (Fort Wayne: Press of Fort Wayne, 1909) pp. 355-359

about new technical start-ups, artists and filmmakers looking for sponsorship, and retirees and disabled people seeking work.

It was the DKNY dispute of 2012 which really proved to Stanton how the affective ties that his fans had to the community could translate into tangible political action through networked communication and fundraising. In August 2012, a representative of the global fashion label DKNY approached Stanton about buying 300 HONY photos, which would be displayed in store windows around the world. Stanton was offered a \$15,000 commission for his work, but he turned down their offer. A few weeks later, one of his fans alerted him to the fact that a DKNY store in Bangkok was using 300 unlicensed HONY photos in a New York-themed window display. Instead of filing a lawsuit, Stanton asked DKNY to donate \$100,000 to the YMCA in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, to help underprivileged children attend summer camp. DKNY representative Aliza Licht responded with a Facebook post apologizing for the mistake, and offered to make a donation of \$25,000 to YMCA on Stanton's behalf.⁴⁵ At this point, Stanton turned to the HONY fan community, and asked for help in raising the remaining \$75,000. Over the next 4 days, more than 3000 HONY fans visited Stanton's Indiegogo page, collectively raising \$103,710.⁴⁶ Stanton updated his original Facebook post, requesting DKNY to compensate for their blunder by matching the funds raised by the HONY community. When DKNY refused to respond, the indignant HONY fans started using the HONY fan page, as well as their personal Facebook and Twitter pages to organize a boycott on all DKNY products. The incident showed how digital media is an

⁴⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/DKNY/posts/10151518755690135>, accessed March 25th 2015

⁴⁶ <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/let-s-send-kids-to-ymca-summer-camp>, accessed March 25th 2015

important aspect of political activism through affective politics and connective action. The global popularity of the HONY Facebook page made it possible for a fan in Thailand to notice the window display, and immediately contact Stanton about it. The fan community used the tools of social media to make Stanton's post go viral, resulting in a multimillion dollar fashion mogul accepting public accountability for its actions. Finally, Stanton used social media to channel the public outrage about copyright theft into a fundraising campaign, thereby allowing the remainder of the money to be raised in less than 4 days by his powerfully-engaged fan community.

Following the DKNY dispute, Stanton and the HONY community successfully raised money for a plethora of charitable causes. Each participatory project would start with a deeply-emotive photograph on HONY, which effectively touched on the *punctum* of his fan community, and spurred them to action. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, HONY and Tumblr teamed up to raise \$100,000 in donations. The Indiegogo page for the cause offered donators perks which explicitly used the culture of HONY as a base for fan activism, and included personalized portraits, signed prints, the opportunity to shadow Stanton for a day, or (the grand prize for a single \$30,000 donation) Stanton's personal Canon EOS 7D—the camera used to shoot the first 4000 pictures on HONY—a veritable Holy Grail of a collectible for a dedicated HONY fan.⁴⁷ While his fans were busy donating, Stanton made his way to some of the worst-affected neighbourhoods of New York, to photograph the survivors as they painstakingly re-built their houses and neighbourhoods. As with the Boston bombing, Stanton chose to focus on their resilience

⁴⁷ "HONY and Tumble Hurricane Sandy Fundraiser", *Indiegogo*, <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/hony-tumblr-hurricane-sandy-fundraiser>, accessed March 28th 2015

and their attempts to re-establish normalcy, instead of their status as helpless victims. Stanton's photos were taken shortly after Halloween, and one of his most popular photos featured a little girl with candy bucket, framed against the branches of a giant birch uprooted by the storm. The caption was a quote from the girl's father, saying "She's an optimist." Playful photos like these not only kept up morale in the time of a national crisis, but it made his fans laugh and allowed them to see their relief project as a fun, communal activity, while also working in tandem with Stanton himself.

Other crowd funded projects are more personal, and often include helping random strangers whom Stanton met while on his rounds. In the "Let's Bring Richard Home" campaign, HONY fans helped the Watkins family adopt a little boy from Ethiopia.⁴⁸ The original Indiegogo goal was for \$26,000, to pay for processing fees and travel to and from Ethiopia, but Stanton, who was aware of the speed and efficiency at which his enthusiastic fanbase could respond, added that any subsequent donations would go towards funding the Watkins children's education.⁴⁹ The original goal was met in less than one hour. By the next day, 4569 HONY fans had collectively raised close to \$84,000 (mostly in \$10 increments).⁵⁰ When Stanton met a little boy who was trying to sell cowboy supplies to raise money to buy his own horse, he created a fund to raise \$7000 to send the little boy on an all-expenses-paid trip to the Drowsy Water Ranch in Colorado. This time, the original goal was met in 15 minutes. The additional \$27,000 raised by the

⁴⁸ Dorrine Mendoza, "Bringing Richard Home, the Story of a Crowd-Funded Adoption", *CNN*, November 1st 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/11/01/living/lets-bring-richard-home/>, accessed March 28th 2015

⁴⁹ "Let's Bring Richard Home", *Indiegogo*, <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/let-s-bring-richard-home>, accessed March 29th 2015

⁵⁰ "Humans of New York Project Magically Crowdfunds Ethiopian Boy's Adoption, *The Huffington Post*, October 30th 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/30/hony-boy-from-ethiopia_n_4177784.html, accessed March 28th 2015

community over the next day was donated to Equestria—an organization which provides riding lessons to children with disabilities. The variety and playfulness of Stanton’s causes allow the HONY fan community to participate in each fresh project with unmitigated enthusiasm, while continuing to feel like part of a large activist initiative.⁵¹

As the HONY community grows, the fundraising projects become larger and gather more widespread attention and national press. In January 2015, Stanton posted a photograph of a 14-year-old boy he met in Brownsville, Brooklyn, who said that the greatest influence of his life was his school principal, Ms. Lopez—“When we get in trouble, she doesn’t suspend us. She calls us to her office and explains to us how society was built down around us. And she tells us that each time somebody fails out of school, a new jail cell gets built. And one time she made every student stand up, one at a time, and she told each one of us that we matter.” The HONY community eagerly pitched in, eager for a follow-up on the story. A few days later, Stanton made his way to Mott Hall Bridges Academy to meet Nadia Lopez, who told Stanton about the high expectations she had of the students of her school—“We don’t call the children ‘students,’ we call them ‘scholars’...When you tell people you’re from Brownsville, their face cringes up. But there are children here that need to know that they are expected to succeed.”

In his next post, Stanton outlined his plan for a fundraiser which would allow three successive batches of sixth-graders to attend a summer school programme in Harvard University. The HONY Facebook page transformed into a discussion section for other educational and cultural organizations, who posted message offering donations, and

⁵¹ “Let’s Send Rumi on a Wild West Adventure!”, *Indiegogo*, <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/let-s-send-rumi-on-a-wild-west-adventure>, accessed March 29th 2015

started brainstorming for further aid for the students. Teachers offered mentorship programs. An event coordinator from the Turkish Cultural Centre in Connecticut offered a tour of Yale University and the Yale-New Haven Hospital. The World Literacy Foundation offered to include the students in a story-writing project, which connects them with schools in America and abroad. Researchers at the MIT Media lab offered students a tour of their facilities while they were in Cambridge visiting Harvard. Harvard University simply posted a comment saying, “Let’s make it happen!”

During the next three weeks of the “Let’s Send Kids to Harvard” Indiegogo campaign, Stanton made sure that the students of MHBA remained in the public eye. He posted a series of photo-interviews of the faculty and student body, and conducted a muckraking-style investigation into the ways the lack of equipment and funds were preventing the students of MBHA from reaching their true potential. The fundraiser set out to raise \$100,000 but over the next three weeks, the community collectively raised over \$1.4 million.⁵² Stanton announced that the money would fund ten annual trips to Harvard, and that all funds over \$700,000 would be used to start a scholarship fund for the students of MHBA. The fund was named the Vidal Scholarship Fund after the boy whose photograph had started the entire project, and the first recipient would be Vidal himself. The project was covered extensively by the press, and Vidal, Stanton and Ms. Lopez were invited to interviews, talk shows, and even a meeting with President Obama in the White House. As the HONY fandom expanded to include some considerably influential individuals and corporations, the praxis intervention increased considerably.

⁵² “Let’s Send Kids to Harvard”, *Indiegogo*, <https://life.indiegogo.com/fundraisers/let-s-send-kids-to-harvard>, accessed March 29th 2015

When the trio appeared on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, Ellen announced that Target had donated computers and tablets to MHBA, as well as other schools in the community.

Activism on HONY does not follow a single political agenda, and the idioculture of the community is non-linear, interactive and without closure. The fans use their affective ties to HONY to create an image of political activism as a fun and empowering communal activity, and modulate their methods to meet the needs of each new situation, sharing stories, providing emotional (or even legal) support, or fundraising. Therefore, the political ideology of the community is framed in terms of what Bennett and Segerberg termed “connective action”—activist initiatives with low barriers of participation, participatory political strategies and deeply personalized narratives, which gain mass popularity by travelling over social media and other online coordinating platforms.⁵³ Moreover, the community’s efforts transform activism on HONY into what Duncombe calls the participatory, active, open-ended and transparent “ethical spectacle”, or the enactment of progressive political action through participation and theatricality. In his article on *Beautiful Trouble*, Duncombe describes how what he rather cryptically calls “the truth” can be revealed through stories, works of art, “flights of fancy and new mythologies”, which collaboratively constitute the ethical spectacle⁵⁴. Even though Stanton and the HONY fans have been known to have divergent notions of “the truth”, they stage the political spectacle such that each activist initiative plays out in a certain ritualistic manner—the initial *punctum* is created by a deeply-emotive photograph posted by Stanton, leading to engaging discussions around the socio-political discourses of the

⁵³ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, “The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics”, *Information, Communication & Society* 15(2012): 739-768

⁵⁴ Stephen Duncombe, “Ethical Spectacle”, *Beautiful Trouble*, <http://beautifultrouble.org/theory/ethical-spectacle/>, accessed April 2nd 2015

issue, which in turn lead to the sharing of personal stories and a show of solidarity. Then, if the issue creates a strong impact, the community comes together to brainstorm solutions. This is followed by the specific call to action, the frenetic activity around the fundraising effort, and to conclude, a sense of communal triumph. This triumph allows for a flight of fancy (or what Duncombe calls the “dream”), as the HONY fandom roleplays as invincible superheroes who can collectively make anything possible. In fact, there is an almost childish exuberance about their confidence in their participatory capabilities. Even though not each HONY initiative is an unmitigated success, there is always a general air of fervent optimism, because the community seems to believe that “There has to be someone out there that reads this that has SOME connection to someone who can help.”⁵⁵ As one commenter put it in a post about finding an international student a job before his visa expired, “For the love of God people, we raised over a million dollars in 0.6 seconds, we can't find this man a job??”

In her essay on the visual culture of humanitarianism, Melissa M. Brough says—
 “Popular participation is a key component of Stephen Duncombe’s conceptualization of the *ethical spectacle* as an activist tactic: the collective, Carnavalesque, self-reflexive enactment of a social change “dream”, performed as a spectacle, but ties to real material goals and actions.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the material benefits of HONY’s fundraising efforts (through the money that they raise, and the media attention that they draw to social issues) are as central to the enactment of the ethical spectacle as their practice of

⁵⁵ This is an actual fan comment on a HONY post.

<https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/938203236253777/?type=1&theater>, accessed April 7th 2015

⁵⁶ Melissa M. Brough, “Fair Vanity: The Visual Culture of Humanitarianism in the Age of Commodity Activism”, *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, ed. Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Wesier (New York: New York University Press, 2012)

supportive storytelling. The impression of HONY's activist efforts as a political spectacle is only heightened by the vast media attention that it has begun to attract. However, Brough also believes that one of the biggest strengths of the participatory model is that "the conscious experience of performing spectacle could cultivate a more self-reflexive, critical practice of visual production and consumption." Significantly, the HONY community shows signs of a contemplative attitude to social reform in a way Stanton often fails to do. Although they are thrilled at the success of each new philanthropic endeavour, many members have a far more critical attitude towards the long-term benefits of these projects than Stanton himself. For instance, during the media frenzy created by the MHBA fundraising effort, the HONY community was the first to acknowledge that this frenzy needed to be channelled into larger discussions and campaigns around public schools in some of the most economically-challenged neighbourhoods in America. They are aware of the fact that despite his success as an activist, Stanton is averse to outlining a larger political focus for his work. He prefers to see his projects as individual stories, each celebrating tolerance and liberalism in some way, but he refuses to engage with the complex socio-political discourses that the issues are rooted in. This makes his philanthropic endeavours limited in scope and vision—despite its many merits, the MHBA project will have no lasting effects if it is limited to one school, or even one neighbourhood. As one member pointed out in a blog post, "The lives of Vidal, Ms. Lopez and the entire school community will forever be changed. But it remains to be seen if this story will encourage more attention to be paid to other underserved schools in Brooklyn, and underserved schools all over the country."⁵⁷ Thus,

⁵⁷ Dana Sorkin, "Humans of New York: The Humanity in Us All", *The College Voice*, February 18th 2015, <http://thecollegevoice.org/2015/02/18/humans-of-new-york-the-humanity-in-us-all/>, March 29th 2015

despite the fact that both Brandon and the HONY community are committed to an idioculture of increased inclusivity and tolerance, their attitudes towards activist methods and ideologies often diverge, creating tensions within the community.

The Pedagogy of Discomfort: Regulating Communication on HONY

The spirit of goodwill and fellowship fostered within the HONY community does have a certain price—freedom of speech. In May 2012, Stanton posted a long message about how HONY was in danger of losing its way, because “the comment section is out of control”. Although Stanton claimed that he would never demean someone for judging him or his work, he could not allow the community to judge the subjects of his photos based on the minimal information provided. He concluded by saying—“Unfortunately, the ‘right to free speech’ does not apply here. This is not the place to further an ideology at the expense of an individual. Despite how it may seem—we do not know the people in these portraits. We are in no position to judge them. Anyone doing so will be banned. Banned users will still be able to look the photos, but they will be unable to comment.”⁵⁸ Stanton goes on to make a rather problematic distinction between “good-natured ribbing” and “mean-spirited slander”, adding that his assistants would delete mean comments, even at the price of “some of the interesting discussions we’ve been having.” In fact, Stanton’s assistants seem to have got to work on the comment thread following this post itself. Some of the comments are addressed to Boots Mallomar, who seemed to have raised concerns about free speech. However, Mallomar’s original comment does not exist

⁵⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/posts/315137931893647>, accessed March 25th 2015

on the thread. This may be because of a changed Facebook name, or a deleted account. However, it is also possible that the HONY regulators found and deleted the comment. Other users raised polite voices of protest, pointing out that the idioculture of HONY presupposed the idea of unrestrained expressions.

Stanton's decision to moderate the comment threads is a manifestation of his own considerable dislike for anonymous, non-regulated, online communication. In an interview with *ForaTV* on anonymous comments in online discussion forums, Stanton said, "Anonymity is the scourge of the internet...you live in America...if you're using anonymity in America, most of the time it is to say something nasty on the internet."⁵⁹ Although his comments reveal a certain naiveté about surveillance cultures and the digital divide in America (and an apparent obliviousness about his considerable transnational fandom), Stanton's paternalistic attitude stems from an eagerness to protect the HONY community (his subjects and fans) from inflammatory comments and cyberbullying. In a lecture at the University of Dublin, Stanton said that he was trying to negotiate a deal with Facebook, by which the mobile version of Facebook, like the browser version, would organize comments in tiers instead of in chronological order. This way, the upvoted comments could be right at the top of the post (Facebook has, in fact, fixed this in their smartphone app).⁶⁰ This allows the community to maintain an appearance of positivity, because in the HONY community, the most liked comments are almost inevitably the most tolerant and supportive ones.

⁵⁹ "Brandon Stanton: The Scourge of Internet Anonymity", *Youtube*, posted by "ForaTV", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4nAWqKYBdk>, accessed March 25th 2015

⁶⁰ "On the Quirks of the Comment Section | Humans of New York Creator Brandon Stanton", *Youtube*, posted by "UCD—University College Dublin", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOfp9gTfNiY>, accessed March 25th 2015

Stanton admitted that his biggest challenge as photographer and moderator is “maintaining that culture of positivity, as HONY just gets gigantic.”⁶¹ However, that culture of positivity occasionally comes at the expense of the discomfort essential to a change in perspective.⁶² According to Michalinos Zembylas and Megan Boler, “A pedagogy of discomfort invites students to leave behind learned beliefs and habits, and enter the risky areas of contradictory and ambiguous ethical and moral differences.”⁶³ Diversity training exercises, such as Jane Elliott’s infamous ‘blue-eyes/brown-eyes’ experiment, use arbitrary physical markers like eye colour to simulate ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ cultural groups, and rely on uncomfortable interactions between the members of these groups to teach ideas about prejudice and social difference. Within the virtual classroom of online communities, the pedagogy of discomfort can be particularly potent, especially in unregulated online threads and discussion forums. In fact, media scholars studying political mobilization in online communities have been engaging with the idea that discomfort in unregulated communities can provoke intrigue and increase engagement, by allowing members to experience “normative and legal universes different from those they experienced previously.”⁶⁴ However, in online communities where speech is controlled, individuals gravitate towards people who share their belief systems, and who are unlikely to challenge or subvert their expectations in any way. Therefore, despite its celebrated culture of tolerance, it is possible for the positivity and

⁶¹, “On Maintaining a Positive Online Community | Humans of New York Creator Brandon Stanton”, *Youtube*, posted by “UCD—University College Dublin”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBnN3_gYXS8, accessed March 25th 2015

⁶² Tracie Stewart, Jacqueline Laduke, Charlotte Bracht, Brooke Sweet and Kristine Gamarel, “Do the ‘Eyes’ Have It? A Program Evaluation of Jane Elliott’s ‘Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes’ Diversity Training Exercise”, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 33 (2006): 1898-1921

⁶³ Michalinos Zembylas & Megan Boler, “On the Spirit of Patriotism: Challenges of a ‘Pedagogy of Discomfort’”, *Teachers College Record*, August 12th 2002

⁶⁴ Jessica L. Beyer, *Expect Us: Online Communities and Political Mobilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) p. 17

egalitarianism that characterize HONY to limit political discussions to a socially-acceptable degree of liberalism.

For instance, on April 11th 2014, HONY posted a photo of a man who teaches fourth grade at a school in Harlem. The caption said, “I worry a lot about the kids...who aren’t on the ‘college track’. Many of them just don't have a culture of expectation at home, and it's hard work to lift yourself out of an underprivileged situation.” In spite of the general atmosphere of goodwill and support for the speaker, the fact that he was a white man speaking about the “culture of expectation” surrounding the students of colour of the school in Harlem should have led to an intense pedagogy of discomfort around race, privilege, the White Saviour Complex and the American education system. Sure enough, Brianna Cox posted an incisive comment saying, “A ‘culture of expectation’ is hard when you are in a ‘culture of I work 16 hours a day.’” She also mentioned that although the subject’s heart was in the right place, his ideology was implicitly racist, and would “fall under the umbrella of cultural racism”. Several members immediately accused her of “playing the race card” by assuming that there were no poor Caucasian children in Harlem. Brianna put up a well-articulated defence, citing demographics and critical race theory to show that “to be white and poor and to be black and poor, in this country, are two very different things”. At this point, the HONY regulation team stepped in, and her comments were deleted from the post. Brianna, who happens to run a blog about the difficulties of talking about race in America, was furious. She wrote a detailed post explaining why she would no longer follow HONY, and concluded by saying, “I can only hope that in the future, they do not silence educated, non-hateful voices in lieu of uneducated and hateful conjecture, or worse, blind acceptance of a situation without

thinking critically about it.”⁶⁵ Back on the HONY forum, other fans tried to speak up on Brianna’s behalf, by criticizing comment regulation on the HONY discussion threads. One said, “Critical discussion about race and racism should not be silenced. I hope you will reconsider your choice to ban a person for their attempt to address racism in all of its forms, even the seemingly-subtle forms that can be difficult to discuss without people feeling hurt...If you are going to ban people for discussing race, then you must ban all discussion of race, not just the ones that make some white people uncomfortable.”⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, this comment was also deleted.

Zembylas and Boler talk about the pedagogy of discomfort with respect to nationalism in the post-9/11 era in distinctly similar terms. Their essay charts their struggle to find an ethical way to answer one overwhelming question—“What is the role of education in engaging students to think about the historically repeated connection between “the ‘swell of patriotism’ and the justification of military aggression and consequent suffering?” Boler argues that within this culture of inquiry, educators must recognize how emotions (such as feelings about patriotism, or race) “define how or what one chooses to see, or conversely not to see.” She labels her discursive educational style “the pedagogy of discomfort”, because the process is fraught with “emotional landmines”, as individuals dismantle their preconceived notions and engage in a process of re-education.⁶⁷ Brianna’s post and the comments which backed her up make some

⁶⁵ Brianna Cox, “Outrage: Why I Will No Longer Follow Humans of New York”, *Chocolate, Pomp and Circumstance*, April 11th 2014, <https://chocolatepompanandcircumstance.wordpress.com/2014/04/11/outrage-why-i-will-no-longer-follow-humans-of-new-york/comment-page-1/>, accessed March 27th 2015

⁶⁶ Brianna Cox, “From Outrage to Disgust: How HONY Exposes Our Continuing Racism”, *Culture Club*, <https://medium.com/culture-club/from-outrage-to-disgust-how-hony-exposes-our-continuing-racism-420201d6e0b7>, March 27th 2015

⁶⁷ Zembylas and Boler, 2002

biting observations about coded language structures, guilt transference and institutionalized inequality—uncomfortable but relevant comments which could have started a dynamic discussion about colour-blindness in the ostensibly post-racial world, and perhaps even challenged Brianna’s own assumptions about the culture of expectation. However, by stepping in as the voice of authority behind the community, Stanton established that there were certain discussions that he would not allow in the comment section, because they harmed the equitable atmosphere of HONY—a sentiment which was debilitating to the pedagogy of discomfort necessary for a change in perspective.

In fact, there have been occasions when the HONY fan community was deeply disappointed with the way Stanton capitulated to external forces in order to preserve the spirit of goodwill. On May 7th 2012, Stanton posted a photo of an Orthodox Jewish rabbi, standing next to a striking-looking Sudanese woman. However, the caption underneath told a different story— “...As I examined the photos on my camera, the man started whispering to the girl. She answered him in a loud voice: “I told you! I’m not that kind of girl.” She seemed agitated now...When the man left, the girl’s demeanour changed completely. She seemed shaken. Her eyes were tearing up. “He just offered me five hundred dollars to go out with him,” she said. “And then when I said ‘no,’ he offered me one thousand. Why does this always happen to me?” “It happens a lot?” I asked. “All the time,” she said...“Do you mind if I tell this story?” I asked. “Please,” she said. “Tell it.” Let’s hope this man, and all men, realize the emotional damage they are inflicting on the women they try to buy. In the meantime, feel free to SHARE.”

The post went viral almost immediately. However, the next day, Stanton removed the post, apparently in response to the uproar from the Orthodox Jewish community. He

replaced it with a photograph of a male Orthodox student of Yeshiva University, saying that “There’s deviance in ever religion.” He also posted a letter from another member of the Orthodox Jewish community, which said, “You have a microphone that now reaches beyond the humans of New York. You can speak to the humans of the world, using your art as a medium for good, for awareness, for change. It’s a task that requires nuance...often, in our quest to do justice, we rush to false judgment...It’s a foundational imperative in the Jewish tradition of *dan lekaf zechut*—judging another favourably—or refraining from judging another unfavourably in the absence of proper evidence.” Stanton concluded with a comment saying that he believed that the discussion had run its course, and he had removed the original post out of respect for the man’s family.

This incident proved that although Stanton was trying to use his page as a platform for socio-political change, he was likely to cave to pressure quite easily. Moreover, he was afraid to commit to a specific cause, and preferred to limit content to a safe degree of progressivism and tolerance. However, there was an immediate and powerful backlash from the indignant HONY community. The normally adoring comments from his fans were replaced with scathing criticism for prolonging an act of sexual harassment out of respect for the *perpetrator’s* family, while deliberately erasing all traces of a story that a subject had specifically requested Stanton to tell. Despite his attempt to conceal the story on Facebook, the community posted about it on their personal blogs and Tumblr accounts, complete with the original photograph and screenshots of the comments that followed. They wanted to know why the victim’s account of the story, as well as the testimony of a reliable eye-witness (Stanton himself) did not count as “proper evidence”. They also expressed their disappointment with

Stanton for the way he mishandled the situation, and requested other members to reblog the story, so that it remained a part of the collective (albeit shameful) mythology of HONY.⁶⁸ Their reaction clearly indicates that a considerable part of the HONY community continues to be more passionate about participatory politics and civic engagement than Stanton himself, and they would undoubtedly prefer to have Stanton use his online clout to campaign for political issues in a more explicit and unapologetic way.

The Millennium Development Project: HONY's World Tour

In August 2014, Stanton was invited to go on a 50-day world tour in order to raise awareness for the UN's Millennium Development Goals—an eight-point global developmental agenda, which every UN nation wants to implement by 2015. According to Gabo Arora, Senior Advisor for Policy and Partnerships at the UN and organiser of the trip, “We’ve made a lot of progress on the millennium goals, but what we’ve never really done is try and get the emotive element and stories from people.” He added that the UN has “always worked with big celebrities like George Clooney or Angelina Jolie, but we really wanted to work with new media ambassadors—ordinary people with extraordinary followers.”⁶⁹ With a fan-base of over 12 million and a constant stream of Facebook likes, comments, tags and reposts, the viral spreadability of HONY served as the perfect medium for the mission's message of global humanitarianism, and as Arora put it, “from

⁶⁸“Street Harassment and Facebook and Orthodox Religion”, *Tumblr*, posted by “Feminist Media”, May 8th 2012, <http://feministmedia.tumblr.com/post/22676599205/street-harassment-and-facebook-and-orthodox>, accessed March 27th 2015

⁶⁹ Natasha Culzac, “Humans of New York: Photographic Blog Partners with UN for Dispatches from Iraq”, *The Independent*, August 11th 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/humans-of-new-york-photographic-blog-partners-with-un-for-dispatches-from-iraq-9662226.html>, accessed March 24th 2015

a behavioural science perspective, [social media] could have more effect on people because they're actually interacting with it."⁷⁰

However, as Melissa Smyth noted in her incisive critique of the UN tour, Stanton's constant reiteration of the universal humanity of people all over the world, and their desire for security, education and family, but "no avenues through which to obtain these things" come dangerously close to advocating a form of ethical neo-colonialism meant to "convince the viewing public that liberal interventionist policies provide the solutions to the gulfs of privilege that prevent these people from obtaining these things."⁷¹ She goes on to criticize Stanton's adoption of a godlike demeanour, which justifies his attempt to control the discourses around the constitution of humanity, and initiate the seamless transition of inhabitants of the war-torn Middle East from nonhuman to human. Stanton's problematic god-complex was clearly evident in the rhetoric he used to describe the purpose of his tour. He wanted to visit Ecuador to "highlight the plight of the indigenous people" and Iraq because it was a "misunderstood place" where his work had "the potential to make the most impact."⁷² According to Arora, Stanton was "caught off-guard" by the fighting in Iraq, but he still wanted to show the country as more than a place of war, with "people trying to develop, people with hopes and dreams."⁷³ This impulse to humanize misunderstood groups and redeem them in the eyes of the viewers is an integral part of Stanton's political vision. He once claimed that he "values" portraits from the rougher neighbourhoods of NYC more than those of the artistic and high-

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Melissa Smyth, "On Sentimentality: A Critique of Humans of New York", *Warscapes*, January 16th 2015, <http://www.warscapes.com/opinion/sentimentality-critique-humans-new-york>, accessed April 8th 2015

⁷² Culzac, 2014

⁷³ Ibid

fashion denizens of East Village, because they are “harder to obtain, and rarer”.⁷⁴ However, what Stanton did not appear to realize was that his mission to humanize the war-torn landscapes of Iraq and Syria played right into the complicated relationship that photojournalism has always had with the colonial gaze. In 1878, Francis Galton’s work with what he called “composite photography” contributed to his theory of racial degeneration, and provided a visual impetus to the study of eugenics. J.T. Zealy’s daguerreotypes featuring slaves from the southern plantations were used to justify slavery on ethical terms. For Occidental anthropologists, the documentation and classification of the Other has always served as a constant reminder and reaffirmation of their power.

Stanton’s photographs of Iraq coincided perfectly with the US military intervention of 2014. He visited Dohuk only days after the Pentagon had authorized a mission to airdrop food and water to the Yazidi people (who had been forced to flee to the mountains, following the attacks of the ISIS militia). His photos of smiling children building cars out of scraps of metal contrasted sharply with photos of refugees bemoaning the loss of their homes and cattle, creating a composite image of innocence and suffering—of a people in desperate need of military intervention. On August 8th 2014, the US military launched a series of airstrikes in Iraq, to halt the progression of Sunni militants towards Erbil. Two days later, Stanton posted a picture of a little Iraqi girl sitting on a bench, next to her anxious-looking father. The caption underneath read, “She always dreams about the bombs.” The picture was taken in Erbil, Iraq. In spite of the heightened political tension of the moment, Stanton displayed no attempt to engage with

⁷⁴ “Humans of New York”, *Ev Grieve*, March 2nd 2011, <http://evgrieve.com/2011/03/humans-of-new-york.html>, accessed April 9th 2015

the cause of her fear of bombs, or turn it into a socio-political critique of US foreign policy. A photograph of a woman in a *burqa* standing next to her husband was captioned, “We just want to be together and not be afraid.” Once again, Stanton attempted to universalize the fears and desires of a persecuted people, without engaging with the immediate, political reasons that applied to this specific group. Despite the generally positive reactions to these photos, there were some members of the HONY community who realized that the UN project was a dubious enterprise. The tour was aimed at generating empathy for less-privileged communities by allowing subaltern voices to express themselves, but as one commenter put it, “Giving a voice to who [sic]? People who are just going about their daily lives? There's only one story in Iraq that's even relevant to the current conflict. It seems people are amazed that everyone around the world is essentially the same and we're not so different from one another.” Therefore, there members of the HONY community who were frustrated with Stanton’s contrived attempts to define a universal humanity, and wanted him to use this space to engage more explicitly with problematic political issues.

Stanton’s widely-publicized UN tour was perhaps the least successful of all his political endeavours. Unlike the other participatory projects with their loose agendas and networked communication, the UN tour had a specific political agenda and it tried to portray complex global issues through an oversimplistic lens of universal humanity. More importantly, the UN project limited the participatory contributions and potential for connective action which are the most powerful weapons of Stanton’s fan community to expressions of support and solidarity. What made the project even more problematic is the fact that the world tour, with its humanitarian interventionist connotations, was

conducted by a lone American photojournalist, who had very limited contact with the indigenous people and culture of the countries he visited. The solitary Western gaze of the UN tour gave this project deeply-problematic neocolonial overtones. According an article in the *Columbia Spectator*, “These “portraits and stories,” in Stanton’s words, are dripping with the bias of a privileged American. They are one-dimensional depictions of people who have had little choice in how they are represented. The HONY story, in true Western tradition, echoes the exoticized presentation of the native by the white, male mediator. And sadly, these photographs become our only point of access into the “remote” lives of these people.”⁷⁵ However, the transnational HONY fandom has taken steps to ensure that Stanton’s photographs do not remain the “only points of access” into the lives of their communities. As Stanton’s aversion to an active engagement with contentious political issues became widely-known in the HONY fan community, certain groups within the fandom began to realize that Stanton would never really articulate a clear political vision for HONY. Subsequently, these groups started modulating the familiar format of HONY to create their own political endeavours, in order to address local issues through unregulated discussion and grassroots activism.

The Meme-ification of *Humans of New York*

In their book *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins et al. make an important distinction between the “stickiness” of viral content and media spreadability, by defining

⁷⁵ Noeleen Advani and Olivia Woldemikael, “Remove the Western Lens: A Response to HONY’s World Tour”, *Columbia Spectator*, September 11th 2014, <http://columbiaspectator.com/eye/2014/09/11/remove-western-lens>, accessed April 9th 2014

spreadability as a participatory logic which leads audiences to “retrofit material to the contours of their particular community”.⁷⁶ They claim that spreadability depends on the degree to which the content stimulates audience engagement in an environment of participation, thereby increasing value through cultural appraisal. Similarly, Limor Shifman points to the importance of memes in digital connective action—the spreadability of memes lies in the fact that they “do not propagate in a single mode”. Instead, they can be personalized and adapted by individuals and movements to suit their own agendas, and therefore reinforce the networked individualism of participatory politics.⁷⁷ The spreadability of HONY as a meme, or a template for affective political engagement and connective action, allows certain groups to retrofit the idioculture to suit the needs of their particular community, and imbue it with their local political inflections.

HONY has been enthusiastically imitated by fan groups spanning transnational boundaries, and includes *Humans of Paris*, *Humans of Tel Aviv*, *Portraits of Boston*, *Souls of San Francisco* and *Faces of Andover*. Several high schools and universities have their own ‘Humans of’ pages, featuring stories on students and faculty, along with news about student politics, campus controversies and fundraising opportunities. There is also a project called *Humans of Planet Earth* (HOPE), which aims to unite 100 photographers from 100 different parts of the world, in order to counter stereotypical media portrayals of cultures. The format has also been widely parodied—there is a *Humans of Westeros* page for George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, and *Humans of Springfield* for the *Simpsons* characters. Most of these groups use Facebook to share their content,

⁷⁶ *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green (New York: NYU Press, 2013)

⁷⁷ Limor Shifman, “May the Excessive Force be with You: Memes as Political Participation”, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014) p. 128

and use the familiar HONY format of a photograph, followed by a personal, decontextualized quote. However, unlike HONY's recent move towards global philanthropy, the moderators of these pages seem to understand that the derivation of an image of a homologous global humanity is an exercise in futility. Therefore, although these groups use photographs to showcase their own cultures and indigenous traditions, they also involved in grassroots activism through their affective engagement with local issues and political conditions.

For instance, even though Facebook is banned in Iran, the *Humans of Tehran* Facebook page is an active community, with more than a hundred and sixty thousand followers. Many of them access the page through VPN technology, or other proxy servers. Shirin Barghi, the founder of the page, claims that their mission is to present “on-the-ground narratives to build a new visual vocabulary through which the world can communicate and connect with Iranians, who have been politically, and in many other ways, isolated in recent years.”⁷⁸ Barghi explains that the page offers Iranian photojournalists the opportunity to change Orientalist perceptions of their culture as being repressive and homogenous—“One thing that never sat well for me was that Western journalists and photographers frequently describe their work as “giving voice to the voiceless.” This approach invariably privileges outside representations of Iranians and ignores a vibrant tradition of Iranians representing themselves...Our project decentralizes the “voiceless” approach and we strive to take foreign intermediaries out of the creative

⁷⁸ Sara Afzal, “Facebook Spreads Global ‘Humans of’ Photography Movement”, *Mashable*, November 10th 2013, <http://mashable.com/2013/11/10/humans-of-facebook/>, accessed March 25th 2015

process as much as possible. We give a unique opportunity for viewers to both look at the everyday Iranian and experience a small part of the Iranian culture.”⁷⁹

Barghi’s comment is especially interesting because Stanton himself went on a photographic tour of Iran in December 2013. To use his own words, the trip was his attempt to use the “humanizing aspect” of his work to foster discussion around a country which is almost universally “demonized”, “misunderstood” and “feared”.⁸⁰ He posted an account of his trip on his blog, where he said, “Americans are especially loved [in Iran]. This was noted in every travel account that I read, and I can confirm the fact. You will be smiled at, waved at, invited to meals, and asked to deliver personal messages to Jennifer Lopez. American music, movies, and media are thoroughly consumed by the people of Iran. Like all countries, there are many different viewpoints, but the vast majority of people will associate you with a culture they admire and respect.”⁸¹ In spite of his desire to represent a diverse culture in a non-politicized way, Stanton’s remark comes across, perhaps inadvertently, as a privileged outsider’s contrivance to derive a culture of normalcy in terms of a homogenous expression of fellowship and humanity—an opinion with distinct overtones of neo-colonialism and the White Saviour Complex.

In an article on Western photojournalism in Iran, Iranian-American journalist Alex Shams said, “It seems that just about every other week another Western journalist “discovers” Iran and its “manically welcoming” people (actual quote), explaining to the

⁷⁹ “Kodachrome Tehran”, *AslanMedia*, September 27th 2013, <http://www.aslanmedia.com/arts-culture/mideast-art/21517-kodachrome-tehran>, accessed March 25th 2015

⁸⁰ “In Taking Photographs in Iran | Humans of New York Creator Brandon Stanton”, *Youtube*, posted by “UCD—University College Dublin”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nW4YJew1pI0>, accessed March 25th 2015

⁸¹ Brandon Stanton, “On Travel to Iran”, December 23rd 2012, <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/post/38682208638/on-travel-to-iran-the-us-government-has-a>, accessed March 25th 2015

world for the fifty-millionth time that contrary to the audience's assumptions, Iran is a pretty nice place to visit." Shams goes on to express his "utter annoyance and disgust...at the ridiculousness of needing to prove our humanity to anyone. These projects often reek of an almost 19th century colonial obsession with discovering the "real Iran" and reducing a nation of 70-some-million people to a backpacker's week-long vacation. These projects are primarily undertaken by Westerners for Westerners, bestowing upon the white [and generally male] gaze a certain universality and objectivity that the narratives of the "natives" never achieve. These photographers privilege, over and over again, Western visions of Iran, while Iranian photographers themselves are rarely if ever predominantly featured in the same way."⁸²

The spreadability of the HONY meme allows Barghi to use *Humans of Tehran* to address these concerns, yet retrofit the content of the page to reflect a more localized and contradictory perspective of Iran. Her page actively engages with the pedagogy of discomfort in a way Stanton shies away from doing. For instance, she posted a picture of two Islamic clerics, with the caption "Contrary to what many would think, not all clerics are into politics and power. There are some who steer clear of state affairs and are rather openminded on religious and theological questions." The comments, posted in both Farsi and English, were both encouraging and inflammatory, but they resulted in a dynamic debate about the roles played by religious figures in Iran's political life. Unlike Stanton, Barghi did not try to regulate the discussion in any way; instead, she claimed to enjoy how the controversial photograph spurred conversation within that particular online

⁸² Alex Shams, "Picturing the Iranian Everyday: An Interview with the Photographers Behind "Humans of Tehran", *Ajam Media Collective*, August 10th 2013, <http://ajammc.com/2013/08/10/picturing-the-iranian-everyday-an-interview-with-the-photographers-behind-humans-of-tehran/>, accessed March 25th 2015

community. Another photograph features what looks like an ordinary news-stand, but the cryptic caption underneath says, “Newsstands in Tehran are absolutely awesome—you can find anything in them, lock, stock and barrel.” The comments reveal that news-stands in Iran covertly sell alcohol and marijuana, even though alcohol presumption is prohibited by the government, and drug-dealing is punishable by death. The page also posts pictures of the persecuted Afghan immigrants in Iran, with captions describing the ethnic discrimination faced by this community, and the “We are all Afghans” social media campaign in support of Afghan rights. Therefore, Barghi’s page engages with explicitly Iranian political issues directly and unapologetically, and shows that Stanton’s Orientalist view of Iran, although benevolent, needs to be countered with a participatory representation of Iran by photographers and commenters from Iran and the global Iranian diaspora. Even though Barghi now lives in the US (she’s a graduate student at NYU), she continues to receive contributions from photographers in Tehran, with captions in Persian which she translates into English.⁸³

Other HONY spinoff groups engage with grassroots politics by documenting local political issues and activist movements. *Humans of Berkeley* covered the Ferguson demonstrations of December 2014 through photos of armed policemen prowling around Berkeley’s Telegraph Avenue, arresting and herding off student protestors. *Humans of Vanuatu* teamed up with the UNICEF Pacific communications team, and extensively covered the aftermath of Cyclone Pam. This included photographs of the extensive damage, updates about reconstruction initiatives, and calls for financial aid. Their images

⁸³ Paul Mutter, “Humans of Tehran”, *Souciant*, <http://souciant.com/2013/03/humans-of-tehran/>, accessed March 25th 2015

were later used by the Pacific Institute of Public Policy to create a photo essay to raise public awareness about the cyclone. *Humans of CSB/SJU* (College of Saint Benedict & Saint John's University) collaborated with students of a course called 'Communication in an Online Era' to run a series of photographs on the effects of cyberbullying. These subjects were photographed holding signs quoting the people who had bullied them. Their faces were obscured by the signs, in order to symbolize the dehumanization that occurs through cyberbullying. When Hannah Graham, a second-year student at the University of Virginia went missing, *Humans of UVa* photographed the candlelight vigils that were held for her, and used the hashtag #BringHannahHome to spread word about her disappearance. A month later, when it was determined that Graham had been murdered, the page posted a deeply-moving tribute, along with a photograph of her memorial and details about campus counselling services.

Unlike most of the other spinoff pages, *Humans of Kolkata* does not have a dedicated team of photographers running the page. Instead, the page invites people to email photographs and captions to the admin, thereby making the whole process even more participatory. They frequently photograph activists, or members of NGOs and other welfare organizations, and include details about the organizations (along with the usual quote) in the photo captions. They showed their support for the Kolkata LGBTQ community by attending and photographing the 13th Annual Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk. The page is particularly sympathetic towards the Bangladeshi immigrant community of Kolkata, many of whom live in squalid conditions, unable to either get legal residency or return to Bangladesh. They recently wrote a story critiquing the inhumane practices of the Gadhimai festival, which is notorious for conducting the

world's second largest ritual of animal sacrifices. The accompanying photo (which was reposted from a different page) featured a group of wild-eyed men holding up blunted knives, which they use to massacre the sacrificial animals. The page also has an entire album devoted to the Jadavpur University 'Hok Kolorob' movement of 2014—a student activist movement regarding the mishandling of a campus molestation case by the authorities of Kolkata's Jadavpur University. As Hok Kolorob swelled to epic proportions over the latter half of 2014, *Humans of Kolkata* faithfully documented live updates, news articles and photographs of the protests.

Political activists have been known to use participatory photography projects for humanitarian community-building exercises. The Centre for Digital Storytelling conducts a media production project called Silence Speaks, where groups of eight to ten people conduct "Story Circles" to share personal experiences, gather photographs or video clips and learn to edit these materials into complete stories. Participatory photography also includes the process of encouraging people (often amateurs, or neophyte photographers) to encourage them to document their own reality in photos, thereby providing an opportunity to subaltern or silenced voices.⁸⁴ These stories are then shared with other community members, activists, researchers and policy-makers, in order to channel public concern into tangible social reform.

For the various 'Humans of' spinoff groups, HONY functions in the same way as a participatory photography initiative. In fact, it functions in the same way an ur-text in print culture. Book historians regard the ur-text as the earliest version of an extant text,

⁸⁴ Arvind Singhal, "Participatory Photography as Theory, Method and Praxis: Analyzing an Entertainment-Education Project in India", *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 21(2007): 212-227

which represents the author's original intent as closely as possible. HONY can be regarded as an ur-text, because it is the original manifestation of Stanton's intent to create a photoblog, which inspires empathy, tolerance and, gradually, social reform. HONY as a format to be emulated establishes a metanarrative of tolerance and storytelling, and then places the camera in the hands of members of the HONY community, thereby encouraging subaltern voices to resist dominant Occidental narratives and craft their own counterhegemonic spaces. The spinoff groups have affective ties to the HONY community as well as their own individual cultural spaces. This allows for the development of hybrid, non-linear and flexible idiocultures, which can be adapted to suit the needs of different political movements. The stories that they create help them roleplay as neophyte activists, street-photographers, and even as Stanton himself. Thus, as fan-generated texts which engage in participatory grassroots politics and use the rhetoric of the ur-text to further their roleplaying, these pages are perfect examples of fan activism.

Like HONY, these spinoff communities depend on social media for publicity and networking opportunities. According to Barghi, "Facebook has made the process of content creation and distribution a great deal more manageable, and has brought users inside and outside Iran into the same space. It's exciting to see Tehran interact with other cities across the world."⁸⁵ Even though the comment sections of these posts do not always generate as much debate and discussion as the HONY posts, Facebook allows these groups to maintain affective ties with the original fan community, as well as each other—the various 'Humans of' pages often contact and collaborate with each other, and share each other's content in order to create a larger, more diverse and yet more inclusive

⁸⁵ Afzal, 2013

fan network. The owners of the spinoff pages themselves acknowledge the participatory, connective network that they have created—“These projects become a kind of potential network for peace. The idea, at its core, is that we should explain our cities and our countries to each other. In this there is the sense of a conversation, of a conversation of images between all of us. We are all using the language of photography to say what we want and to show our own countries. It has become a kind of international conversation of people who on one hand are interested in discussing their own countries and also want to understand other countries.”⁸⁶ Therefore, although these spinoff groups do not always have perceptible offline effects like HONY, the mere existence of this vast, interconnected network of nodes—each with its own political idioculture, but working in tandem with each other and also with the original HONY community—creates a powerful and participatory political spectacle, with plenty of opportunities for praxis intervention and transformative action. Therefore, the spinoff groups contribute to the ethical spectacle by creating an unregulated online space for discussion, developing a nuanced attitude towards political issues, and cultivating Brough’s idea of “a more self-reflexive, critical practice of visual production and consumption”.

Conclusion

HONY is frequently lampooned for its lack of engagement with diverse and problematic political discourses. In an article titled “The Problem with Humans of New York”, Daniel D’Addario muses—“It appears that Stanton sees people not as people but as vectors of

⁸⁶ Shams, 2013

how young, white New Yorkers see them.”⁸⁷ Similarly, in a scathing op-ed piece in *Warscapes*, Melissa Smyth says—

“HONY aggressively promotes a wholly sentimentalized experience of New York City...espousing an idea of inclusivity through a project of enforced uniformity. While the blog purposes to embrace diversity and celebrate each individual’s unique qualities, its effect is not to expand the rhetorical human category or challenge notions of conformity, but to accumulate and contain a more colourful array of faces, neatly framed, within its restrictive scope. Beyond the exclusion inherent in a selective determination of what it takes to be counted among the “humans” of New York, the language of sameness it promotes carries a very alarming import.”⁸⁸

If political activism on HONY was limited to the efforts of Stanton and his dubious attempt to derive a universal image of the indefatigable spirit of humanity, these criticisms of HONY would have undoubtedly held true. In a letter posted in defence of his regulation policy on HONY, Stanton said, “I’m sure we actually have the same worldview. No doubt we are walking arm-in-arm toward the bright dawn of a new day.” This comment was immediately seized upon by his detractors, who declared that “Beyond the flagrant disregard for equity exhibited in these petty altercations, this statement, subsuming dissent in the sappy notion of shared worldviews and collective human progress, signals his participation in a vaster ideological project.”⁸⁹ However, these critics do not always acknowledge that the real political activist on HONY is not

⁸⁷ Daniel D’Addario, “The Problem with Humans of New York”, *Gawker*, August 13th 2014, <http://gawker.com/the-problem-with-humans-of-new-york-1617812880>, accessed April 8th 2015

⁸⁸ Smyth, 2015

⁸⁹ *Ibid*

Stanton, but the HONY community. The members are a politically-diverse group of individuals who maintain an affective engagement with the ur-text, but are also willing to express their divergent notions of the ideas of tolerance and humanity (on their own blogs and status updates, if not on the HONY comment sections), and create spinoff projects to implement these discourses in their own political endeavours.

Political engagement on HONY has also been criticized for encouraging “hollow sentimentality in lieu of substantive activism.”⁹⁰ As one irate BuzzFeed writer put it, “Everyone who comments on its posts gets to feel morally accomplished by doing essentially nothing, as if feigned recognition of a societal issue would invoke any real change. A simple comment makes followers feel like they were a part of the struggle even if they hadn’t lived it or anything similar themselves — even if they would otherwise do nothing to support an end to that struggle or others like it.” However, HONY (and its offshoots) are spaces where online political discussion often leads to unexpected consequences, ranging from coming to terms with one’s sexuality, to making a defiant stand against federal censorship practices. This allows for the creation of a template for DIY citizenship, with divergent discourses of tolerance, but an underlying agenda of social reform. More importantly, these fan-made discourses often prove to be more progressive and engaged than Stanton’s own interventionist ideology, thereby proving that a community’s political policy need not be circumscribed by its creator.

Therefore, the HONY Facebook page is a virtual classroom where conceptions of social reform and political intervention are discursively examined through participation

⁹⁰ JustinRTSmith, “The Slippery Slope of Sentimentality: When HONY Met Social Activism”, *Buzzfeed*, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/justinrtsmith/the-slippery-slope-of-sentimentality-when-hony-me-18axb>, accessed April 8th 2015

and collaboration between Stanton, his fans, and the larger HONY community comprising the spinoff groups. Within this classroom, social presence is created through the affective ties that the community has with Stanton's photography, the HONY community and the process of enacting social change through communal solidarity and storytelling. Cognitive presence is created by the discussion sections, as well as the blogs and Tumblr posts which critique Stanton's political policy. These discussions offer discursive perspectives on the practice of humanist intervention and the ethical position occupied by the political activist with respect to his cause. The teaching presence is occupied by Stanton himself as far as the regulation policy on HONY is concerned, but the HONY community constantly challenges that position of power, through their vociferous comments, and their spinoff groups.

As a virtual classroom for non-violent activism, HONY offers a "catalyst for change"⁹¹ which lowers the barriers of participation and provides potential fan-activists with a template for participatory politics, and a range of tools and tactics. Despite Stanton's regulation policy, the photographs and threaded comments are archived on the HONY Facebook page, and are therefore preserved for posterity. Even when Stanton removes unwelcome content, users like Brianna Cox use their personal blogs to document contentious incidents, allowing future researchers to locate and analyse censored material. These Facebook archives make up what Tilly termed the "digital repertoire of contention"—a vast and constantly-expanding archive of resources for non-violent political activism, which can be modulated to meet the needs of specific political

⁹¹ Sorkin, 2015

scenarios.⁹² Tilly also believed that the performance of protest is not a social impulse, but a carefully-honed acquired skill. HONY's regular social media presence allows this performance to become a constant ritual, whose cumulative effect is greater than the sum of its parts. The "simple comments" of the HONY community allow the fans to roleplay as activists, and examine the consequences of both successful and failed activist initiatives, and the new modules that they come up with become valuable contributions to social reform's digital repertoire of contention.

⁹² Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977)

The Divine Comedy:

Improving and Improvising Godliness on New Media

The Facebook God is one of many internet comedians who derive humour from irreverent religious satire. As such, he is one of a host of similar online religious parodists, such as the Landover Baptist Church, the Church of the SubGenius, the Pastafarians of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Invisible Pink Unicorn, who argues with irreproachable logic that because she is invisible, no one can prove she doesn't exist (or that she isn't pink). What makes this particular performance unique and memorable is his unwavering insistence that he is the real Judeo-Christian God, come to save humanity from imminent doom. The Facebook God is both a comedian and a social vigilante. He once stated in an interview that "Ignorance is a pernicious plague... The Stupid threatens to engulf this world... I and others stand against the forces of fear and hatred that bring naught but misery to you all. You are most welcome."⁹³ When he was questioned about his decision to reach out to his believers through social media, God said, "I'm sick and tired of people saying evil things in My Name. The name of God carries a lot of power. For too long, it's been abused by evil and mean people for various nefarious purposes. Also, I finally figured out how to Internet."⁹⁴

True to his claim of authenticity, God always stays in character. He has successfully carved out a very distinct persona for himself—he is openly pro-gay and pro-choice. He is possibly a Democrat (He replied to accusations of political liberalism

⁹³ Matt Silverman, "Holy Satire: God's Irreverent Facebook Strategy", *Mashable*, March 18 2003, <http://mashable.com/2013/03/18/facebook-god/>, accessed April 22nd 2014.

⁹⁴ "I am the Facebook God. AMA!", *Reddit*, http://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/xngr3/i_am_the_facebook_god_ama/, accessed April 22nd 2014.33.

saying “I am the Lord. I chose Obama to be the next President. I understand you are all butt-hurt about it. Please accept it and move on”). He is vociferous in his condemnation of rape culture, victim blaming and body-shaming. Temperamentally, he is much like the vengeful Jehovah of the Old Testament, and is ready to ‘smite’ those who incur his wrath. He is a pop culture enthusiast who recently passed a much-applauded commandment banning *Game of Thrones* spoilers on Facebook. Most intriguingly, he claims to be “a raging atheist” because atheism is the lack of belief in a higher power and he is already the highest power; he can believe in no power higher than himself. At the same time, God is a canny political performer, with impeccable comic timing and an ability to play to the crowd. He relies on a style of ribald, religious parody that mocks fundamentalism and the Judeo-Christian theological vocabulary. He enjoys lively debate and many of his Facebook posts consist of a compelling meme, with the injunction “Discuss”, thus opening the floor to his followers. These discussions are largely unmoderated, although God has been known to pipe in with the occasional witticism.

Over the past two years, God has carved out a considerable social media presence for himself, including Facebook and Twitter fan pages with almost 1.5 million fans each, a Youtube channel, an email newsletter, *Ask Me Anything* threads on Reddit and interviews on *Mashable*. However, like *Humans of New York*, it is God’s Facebook page which always garners the highest amount of attention and controversy, primarily because of the comment sections and private messaging opportunities offered by Facebook. These interactive opportunities for communication dismantle the boundaries between audience and performer, allowing God’s fan community to roleplay along with him, and enable his performance to become a participatory, communal endeavour. Much like Steve Mann’s

Macktivist project (discussed in my introduction), the focus of the God group has changed several times over this period. It started out as the social media page of an internet comedian who made fun of religious fundamentalism and conservative politics. His fan community originally came together out of their shared appreciation for a figure who delighted in using the image of God to make inappropriate jokes and outrageous claims, such as “When I need to unwind, I just kick back with some drugs and alcohol and forget about the world. This happens quite a bit.” However, as God became more involved in socio-political issues such as cyberbullying, homophobia, net neutrality and the abortion debate, the fan community started getting more deeply invested in their shared fantasy. Eventually, they started looking up to him as a counsellor figure, who would listen to their troubles and offer advice and help. The started posting a variety of questions on God’s Facebook page, ranging from “Why does my girlfriend call out your name during sex?” to “Do you think my being gay is a sin?” These questions, along with God’s replies were posted as memes on God’s Facebook page, thereby allowing the fan community to participate, by chiming in with their own responses. As with HONY, the God group responded with an overwhelming show of support, solidarity, and personal storytelling, thereby transforming the comment sections into support groups for people dealing with similar issues. Gradually, the performance of ‘godliness’ on God’s Facebook page turned into a commentary on the intolerance and bigotry of fundamentalist right-wing public figures. At the same time, the God group attracts a constant stream of hatred and abuse from Christian conservatives, who send private messages threatening the moderator with everything from Facebook complaints to fire and brimstone. This has given God the opportunity to channel the contributions of his

haters into his ludic, interactive performance, which provides an endless stream of amusing material for his fans, while allowing him to deliver an extended commentary on the intolerant vitriol espoused by religious fundamentalists.

The Facebook God is a political trickster and mischief-maker whose online persona is premised on substituting humour, critical inquiry, and anti-discriminatory humanitarianism for the restrictive tenets of organized religion. Unlike HONY, the idioculture of the God community is completely dependent on fan participation, because the community must collectively play into the shared God fantasy for the satire to have its desired effect. The eponymous moderator of the God page actively encourages the community to contribute to the performance through discussions, weekly interactive segments and the creation of memes. Through the participatory contributions of God, his fans and his anti-fans, theological satire is channelled into a didactic ethical spectacle which transforms the Facebook fan page into a virtual classroom which allows the members to bond together as a community, and develop an affective interest in the causes espoused by the page. This does not necessarily translate into an extended interest in voting or organizational politics, but it encourages the community to cultivate a model of DIY citizenship by thinking critically about topical socio-political issues, and participating in social reform programs through volunteering, fundraising and raising awareness. Their personal investment in the political pranks and culture-jamming projects conducted by God prevent them from seeing political activism as aggressive or alienating, or feeling cynical about its potential benefits. Instead, each successful project allows the community to experience a surge of confidence in the potential of affective political action and networked communication in improving public affairs.

Therefore, the God group demonstrates how a social media activist group can combine pop culture, political satire and social reform into a playful activist idioculture, which serves as a gateway towards civic engagement for people who might feel intimidated or alienated by organizational political mobilization. There are no divisions or hierarchies within this group, and communication is mostly unregulated. This prevents the members from gravitating towards people who share their own views, and allows for open communication within the “virtual classroom” environment of the page. Moreover, the lack of hierarchies gives the God group an atmosphere of egalitarianism which is often missing from *Humans of New York*. Unlike Stanton, God does not try to establish himself as the undisputed moderator of the group, even though he created the page, and continues to post most of the content. Instead, he creates an atmosphere of open participation, where God and his fan community are mutually dependent on each other for support and solidarity, and where the political idioculture of the group is constantly being shaped and altered by the members of the community.

Performing Authenticity: “I am the realest God you’ll ever know”

The participatory nature of social media is crucial to the creation and maintenance of online micro-celebrity status. In her book *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, Theresa Senft defines micro-celebrity as “a new style of online performance”⁹⁵ which enables people (most of whom have no previous celebrity status) to use myriad media formats and outlets to transform their identity into a recognizable

⁹⁵ Theresa M. Senft, “Toward a Theory of Micro-Celebrity”, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) p. 25

personal brand. Moreover, the direct personal interactions that fans enjoy with micro-celebrities contribute to what Alice Marwick calls “closeness and accountability”.⁹⁶ According to Marwick, social media celebrities are expected to be more authentic than their offline counterparts, because they can continually alter their personas to match the participatory contributions of their fan communities. The creation of authenticity is incorporated into the performance as an integral part of ascribed celebrity status.

In many ways, the Facebook God is similar to other popular social media celebrities whose online personas are meant to make a political statement. Two popular examples are Feminist Hulk on Twitter and the gay rights page “Oh Myyy” on Facebook. “Oh Myyy” is run by actor and gay-rights activist George Takei and his husband Brad Altman, and the name of the group is a catchphrase associated with Takei’s character in the sitcom *Cory in the House*. As an extravagant theatrical gesture and a mischievous sexual innuendo, the phrase blends seamlessly with Takei’s own larger-than-life personality and strong commitment to LGBT rights. Moreover, “Oh Myyy” and Takei’s own immensely-popular fan page on Facebook often work in close collaboration, sharing each other’s content and building up a mutual fan base. There isn’t the slightest doubt about the fact that Takei is behind the creation of the page. Feminist Hulk started out as an anonymous, patriarchy-smashing, all-caps-typing phenomenon, whose aggression and argot was always perfectly in character with the Marvel Comics superhero. However, in August 2011, the real identity of Feminist Hulk was revealed in an interview with *Ms. Blog*. It turned out that Feminist Hulk is Jessica Lawson, a 28-year-old graduate student

⁹⁶ Alice E. Marwick, “The Fabulous Lives of Micro-Celebrities”, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 118

from the University of Iowa, who identifies herself as a “white, vegan, queer, woman-identified female”.⁹⁷ The revelation of her identity did not detract from her message or her political activism in any way, but her performance was interrupted, however briefly, when she stepped out of character.

The popularity of the God page, on the other hand, is centred on speculation about its mysterious admin(s). The Facebook God has staunchly denied being anything less than the true Judeo-Christian deity—a stance which ensures that he gets a regular supply of hate mail from indignant (and extremely belligerent) Christians. However, God holds fast to his divine claim, arguing that if God can speak to Moses through a burning bush, why is it so unbelievable for him to have a Facebook page? In fact, when a fan asked him for the honour of being a co-moderator for his page, God was outraged—“You want to...pretend...to be the LORD??! Do you have any idea how blasphemous that sounds?” His persona is singularly consistent across the various social media platforms he uses to communicate with his fan community, from his attitude of benevolent superiority to his insistence that he really is the omnipotent, omniscient and omnisequal divinity who personally ordained everything from the creation of the world to the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI. However, God also claims to be a misunderstood entity who was not responsible for the centuries of hate crimes committed in his name. In fact, he frequently claims that it was organized religion which had made him out to be a judgemental and vengeful God, when he really was a loving and merciful God. In an interview with the *Huffington Post*, he claimed—“The LORD had absolutely nothing to do with the writing

⁹⁷ Audrey Bilger, “Who’s Behind the Mask of Feminist Hulk? Only the Ms. Blog Knows!”, *Ms. Blog*, August 22nd 2011, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/08/22/whos-behind-the-mask-of-feminist-hulk-only-the-ms-blog-knows/>, accessed April 22nd 2014.

of the book known as *The Bible*, or any other religious text for that matter...How could I? I wasn't even awake! When Jesus got back to Heaven from being crucified, we had a huge party to celebrate. I drank an ocean of ale and passed out for a couple hundred years or so. Humans call this time period 'The Dark Ages'...[Religious texts] were all written by confidence artists and therefore should be disregarded as rubbish."⁹⁸ He added that he was particularly resentful of the *Book of Leviticus*, which dares to make unsavoury comments about two of the Lord's favourite creations—gay people and shellfish. Finally, he admitted that his decision to reach out directly to his fan community is an attempt to do away with the entire priestly class of mediators, who regularly misconstrue everything that he tells them, as well as an attempt at redemption in order to convince humans that he really is a pretty nice sort.

God's ludic identity continued to grow and transform in response to the participatory contributions of his fan community. As he established himself as a comedic figure who dealt with topical socio-political issues in a supportive and non-judgemental way, his fans started treating the space of performance as a confessional where they could share their personal troubles and ask for help. In response, God's usual tone of hyperbolic indignation softened to one of sympathetic concern and he started offering comfort and advice to people who were the targets of bullying, trying to come to terms with their sexuality or coping with illness or depression. When a fan who was suffering from Lyme Disease sent God a message admitting that he often felt like killing himself, God responded with a quote from the Dylan Thomas poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That

⁹⁸ Ariane Sherine, "My Interview with God", *The Huffington Post*, January 29th 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ariane-sherine/my-interview-with-god_b_4679820.html, accessed April 9th 2015

Good Night”. Then he posted the message on his wall, asking his followers to weigh in with words of love and encouragement. If a situation seemed particularly serious, God directed the original posters towards professional help, or requested them to call the National Suicide Hotline, assuring them all the while that there was no shame or stigma in seeking help. He also used his God persona and his considerable comic skills to create a mood of playful solidarity, which often proved to be surprisingly effective. For instance, he once got a message from a man called Sean Napier, who was suffering from depression, alcoholism and a crippling lack of self-worth. The message read, “God, I hate myself. I hate what has become of my life. Please end my suffering and bring me home.” God immediately picked up on the fact that despite the seriousness of the situation, Sean had chosen to play into the participatory roleplaying process that made up the God fantasy, and his reply was both comforting and perfectly in keeping with his adopted persona. He said, “No, Sean, sorry. Your paperwork hasn’t been processed, you’ll have to tough it out for a while. Remember, you don’t have to do a brilliant job with your life...just aim for manageable.” Like HONY, the members of the God group responded with warm support and solidarity, together with personal stories from community members who had also experienced thoughts of self-harm in the past. Their experiences gave them a degree of empathy unusual for a community which does not deal specifically with problems relating to depression and suicide. Amidst the expressions of support and solidarity from the God fan community, Sean himself posted a touching reply—“This saved my life. I was seriously on the verge of suicide. When I received the reply saying ‘your paperwork hasn’t been processed’, I laughed so hard and realized that life is worth living. I’m going to my doctor tomorrow to begin the process of detox and rehab. This

God saved my life.” Gradually, the page began to fill up with expressions of affection and gratitude from the fans God had helped. At no point, however, did God step out of character. He retained his status as a sarcastic, wisecracking political satirist, even as he gracefully accepted his new role as a wise, therapeutic, counsellor figure.

Satire and the Comic Frame: God as a Contemporary Political Trickster

In his book on tricksters in folklore and mythology, Lewis Hyde claims that “the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be a space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on”. Therefore, according to Hyde, the mythological force of the trickster serves to “disturb the established categories of truth and property” and thereby usher in a cultural renaissance.⁹⁹ However, Hyde seems to believe that there are no tricksters in the contemporary American mythological landscape—the trickster “needs a relationship to other powers, to people, to instructions, and traditions that can manage the odd double attitude of both insisting that boundaries be respected and recognizing that in the long run their liveliness depends on having those boundaries regularly distributed.”¹⁰⁰ In her work on Anonymous, Gabriella Coleman extends Hyde’s analogy of the trickster to telephone phreaks and internet hackers by arguing that like mythical tricksters, these entities are “provocateurs and saboteurs who dismantle convention while occupying a liminal zone”.¹⁰¹ According to Coleman, the hacker, the political prankster and the internet troll

⁹⁹ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art* (New York: MacMillan, 2010)

¹⁰⁰ Hyde, 2010

¹⁰¹ Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (New York: Verso, 2014)

are postmodern tricksters, because they reside in myth, “upset ideas of propriety and property” and engage with political issues through humour and mischief-making.¹⁰²

The trickster’s status as a disruptor and a provocateur is closely associated with the relationship that humour and satire have always had to political reform. Bakhtin considered laughter to be central to the power dynamics of the political Carnavalesque, because it prevented social norms from becoming “wholly acceptable and beyond rebuke”.¹⁰³ The didactic role of political satire makes it an effective weapon for critique and social reform. Northrop Frye called satire a form of militant irony, which engages with reform through the creation of a shared fantasy, the articulation of a standpoint based on moral terms and the identification of an object of attack.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Charles E. Schutz believed that the goal of satire is to effect positive change—“The satire humorously prods or tickles its audience into an awareness of absurdity or abnormality. They have become more rational, but they aren’t aware of their education, and their subsequent political action is their own.”¹⁰⁵ In her book on satire and activism in America, Angelique Haugerud explains why satire is a natural choice for cultural jammers who want to use their art to campaign for social reform—“Comedy reassures. Restoration of harmony and reconciliation of conflict are hallmarks of comedy as plot type...Satire on the other hand, upends such tales and assumes that the pleasing resolutions of comedic narratives are inadequate. Satire amuses but at the same time

¹⁰² Gabriella Coleman, “Hacker and Troll as Trickster”, <http://gabriellacoleman.org/blog/?p=1902>, accessed March 1st 2015.

¹⁰³ In *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jeffrey P. Jones, Jonathan Gray and Ethan Thompson (New York: NYU Press, 2009)

¹⁰⁴ “Political Satire”, *Encyclopaedia of Activism and Social Justice*, ed. Gary L. Anderson and Kathryn G. Herr (New York: SAGE Publications, 2007)

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jeffrey P. Jones, Jonathan Gray and Ethan Thompson (New York: NYU Press, 2009)

criticizes or attacks thorough techniques such as ridicule, parody or caricature.”¹⁰⁶ This makes satire makes the perfect *modus operandi* of the political trickster. It allows the trickster to avoid any form of activism which would be perceived as boring and alienating by his fan community. Instead, the trickster creates a new template for activism as a fun and mischievous political activity, with a loose and flexible political agenda and a vast social media network for connective action. In this template, humour and mischief-making combine with critical inquiry and political engagement to create what Kenneth Burke called the “comic frame”, or “the methodic view of human antics as a comedy, albeit as a comedy on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy.”¹⁰⁷ The aim of a comic frame is “challenge the status quo by a corrective ideology”, which raises a “maximum consciousness” within man, enabling him to recognize and correct “his own foibles”.¹⁰⁸

For instance, in 1999, media activist Andrew Boyd started a grassroots political campaign called ‘Billionaires for Bush’ to raise awareness about the way the Republican government propagated economic inequality and corporate greed. The entire campaign was designed to be participatory, theatrical and fun. Activists would adopt personas of the rich and famous, together with names and costumes, and hold public gatherings, where they chanted slogans like “Corporations Are People Too”, “Taxes Are Not for Everyone” and “Leave No Billionaire Behind”. The joke gained traction when some Republican politicians unwittingly adopted these slogans for their own political

¹⁰⁶ Angelique Haugerud, *No Billionaire Left Behind: Satire and Activism in America* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013)

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes towards History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984)

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

campaigns. Much to Boyd's delight, Mitt Romney once responded to a heckler at the Iowa State Fair with the statement, "Corporations are people too, my friend".

On the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal gas tragedy (a gas leak at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, which resulted in the deaths of more than 15,000 people, and is regarded as one of the worst industrial disasters of the world), Jacques Servin of the culture-jamming group the Yes Men appeared on *BBC World*, pretending to be a spokesperson of Dow Chemicals, the owners of Union Carbide. Servin announced that Dow had accepted full responsibility for the disaster, and had offered to pay \$12 million in reparations. In the next hour before the hoax was revealed, Dow stock fell by billions of dollars. At the same time, the massive coverage provided to the event helped the story of the gas disaster become public knowledge, and let the people know that Dow needed to be held accountable.¹⁰⁹

For tricksters like Boyd and Servin, the comic frame is an effective medium for raising awareness and inspiring a form of progressive ironic activism, even as it engages in political mischief-making and the spirit of fun politics. Moreover, satire has been known have tangible offline effects, such as the time television show host and political satirist Jon Stewart helped pass legislation to provide health benefits for the firefighters and other emergency workers who responded to the 9/11 attacks, and who subsequently developed severe respiratory problems.¹¹⁰ Political satirists and cultural jammers construct their activist idiocultures in response to what Mary Douglas calls "the joke in the social structure", or the formal relationship between a joke and the structures of

¹⁰⁹ Mike Bonanno, "Dow Chemical Apologizes for Bhopal", *Beautiful Trouble*, <http://beautifultrouble.org/case/dow-chemical-apologizes-for-bhopal/>, accessed April 11th 2015

¹¹⁰ Haugerud, 2013

power that surround its socio-political and historical setting. According to Douglas, “if there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear”, because a joke is premised on one dominant pattern of relations being challenged by another.¹¹¹ As an activist in the Billionaires for Bush campaign put it, the joke in the social structure “arises when the real world starts to resemble a Theatre of the Absurd...when the things that have become normal under Bush are so mind-blowingly imbalanced.”¹¹²

Similarly, the satire of the God group is premised on the absurd opinions articulated by conservative Christian groups. In America, homosexuality and abortion rights are still strongly opposed by denominations such as the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Methodist churches, the American Baptist churches, the Evangelical Alliance and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Although the Roman Catholic Church does not view same-sex attraction as sinful, they consider homosexual orientation to be an ‘objective disorder’ tending towards an intrinsic moral evil, and insist that homosexual couples practice lifelong chastity. Christian denominations which oppose same-sex marriage use literalist interpretations of Biblical passages such as *Leviticus 18:22* (“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”) or the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the *Genesis* to support their condemnation of gay rights. In 1977, Jeannine Grammick and Friar Robert Nugent established the New Ways Ministry in Maryland in order to extend acceptance to the LGBT community within the Catholic Church. However, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith accused them of causing “confusion amongst the Catholic people” and imposed a lifelong ban on any pastoral work involving the gay

¹¹¹ Mary Douglas, “The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception”, *Man* 3 (1968): 361-376

¹¹² Haugerud, 2013

community.¹¹³ The Westboro Baptist Church has issued statements claiming that incidents such as the Boston bombing, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings and the Moore tornado were the actions of a vengeful God against a nation where gay marriage was gaining legal ground. In April 2015, shortly after Indiana passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, authorizing business owners to deny services to members of the LGBT community, James Dobson, anti-gay activist and founder of the fundamentalist Christian group Focus on the Family publicly declared that marriage equality could lead to “a full-blown civil war”.¹¹⁴ Pat Robertson, Chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network, frequently waxes nostalgic about the olden days when gay people would be stoned to death, and has claimed that homosexuality is akin to abortion, because both practices “deny the reproduction of the human species”.¹¹⁵ In 2012, Senate candidate Richard Mourdock said that rape survivors should be forced to bear their assailants’ children, because these children are a “gift from God”, and “even when life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that it is something that God intended to happen”.¹¹⁶ Mexican archbishop Fabio Martinez Castilla has even claimed that “Qualitatively, abortion is much more serious than the rape of children by priests.”¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “NOTIFICATION REGARDING SISTER JEANNINE GRAMICK, SSND, AND FATHER ROBERT NUGENT, SDS”,

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19990531_gramick-nugent-notification_en.html, accessed April 12th 2015

¹¹⁴ Colin Gorenstein, “Gay Marriage Could Lead to ‘Civil War’: The Christian Right’s Latest Bigoted Theory”, *Salon*, http://www.salon.com/2015/04/10/gay_marriage_could_lead_to_civil_war_the_christian_rights_latest_bigoted_theory/, accessed April 12th 2015

¹¹⁵ “Pat Robertson Compares Gay Relationships To Abortion, Recalls Days When LGBT People Would Be Stoned”, *The Huffington Post*, March 26th 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/26/pat-robertson-gays-abortion_n_5036491.html, accessed April 12th 2015

¹¹⁶ Annie Groer, “Indiana GOP Hopeful Richard Mourdock Says God ‘Intended’ Rape Pregnancies”, *The Washington Post*, October 24th 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2012/10/24/indiana-gop-senate-hopeful-richard-murdock-says-god-intended-rape-pregnancies/>, accessed April 13th 2015

¹¹⁷ “Mexican Archbishop Calls Abortion Worse than Sexual Abuse by Priests”, *Fox News Latino*, May 1st 2013, <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2013/05/01/mexican-archbishop-calls-abortion-worse-than-sexual-abuse-by-priests/>, accessed April 13th 2015

Therefore, the comic frame of groups like the Facebook God is the natural counterpart to the absurdity of the views held by Christian right-wing anti-gay or pro-life activists. Groups like the Landover Baptist Church and Objective: Ministries satirize the literalist rhetoric of fundamentalist Christianity through a method of *reductio ad absurdum*, by pushing right-wing arguments to their logical extremes. God has always made it very clear that he strongly supports gay rights and pro-choice rights—his email address is godlovesgays@gmail.com. Like the Landover Baptist Church, the political satire of the Facebook God is often premised on literalist parody. For instance, he often posts status updates with quotes from the Bible (in the style of the daily online sermons conducted by social media Christian groups), together with wry little addendums of his own, such as “Jesus is arisen! Soon he will have brunch! Then he will go back to sleep.”

When a Christian evangelist wrote an article about the many evils of vaccinating children, God added—“I am your shepherd; you shall not want. You just gotta be a sheep.” The satirical humour came from his literalist interpretation of *Psalms 23*, along with a trenchant condemnation of uncritical religious faith. Similarly, God posted a meme quoting *Mark 12:31* “Love thy neighbour” where he added “Thy Homeless Neighbour, Thy Muslim Neighbour, Thy Jewish Neighbour, Thy Black Neighbour, Thy Gay Neighbour, Thy Immigrant Neighbour, Thy Atheist Neighbour, Thy Disabled Neighbour and Thy Addicted Neighbour”. Therefore, through the satirical appropriation of the familiar Biblical quote, God critiqued fundamentalist Christianity’s tendency to marginalize and even vilify certain demographics, and made a striking political point about tolerance and non-discriminatory humanitarianism.

God is also fond of using religious images as memes—a practice which exemplifies Limor Shifman’s conception of the political meme as “an interplay between the frontstage and backstage of political performances”.¹¹⁸ Paraphrasing Erwin Goffman, Shifman says that the “frontstage” of a performative space is the main political arena where public figures manipulate their desired impression management activities, whereas the “backstage” is the private area where intimacy, familiarity and authenticity govern. According to Shifman, the political meme is usually premised on the strategic manipulation of images such that the political backstage is presented as frontstage, thereby making politicians seem inauthentic and flawed. Similarly, God makes canny use of religious pictures as political memes in a comically exaggerated attempt to expose the gap between the backstage and frontstage of his political ideology, and demonstrate how his loving, humanitarian dictums were manipulated to serve the selfish needs of organized religion. One of the best examples of this strategy is God’s Moses meme. The meme uses a familiar shot from Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 epic film *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston as Moses. In the meme, Moses is leaving Mount Sinai clutching the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, except in God’s meme, the tablets simply read “Be cool” and “Don’t be an asshole”. In the caption which accompanies the picture, God said, “These were the actual commandments I gave Moses.” The satirical humour of the meme arises from God’s tone of righteous indignation at the way his harmless injunctions had been misinterpreted and used to incite intolerance for other cultures.

¹¹⁸ Limor Shifman, “May the Excessive Force be with You: Memes as Political Participation”, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014) p. 127

The participatory fan community of the God page partakes of this satirical roleplaying process with gusto. God runs a series of weekly segments where his fans can interact with him on the comment sections of his posts, and directly influence the nature of his performance. For instance, there is ‘Ask God Day’, where the fan community can ask him a variety of questions, ranging from the comic (“Can you make my dog stop hogging the bed?”) to the truly poignant (“Can you turn back time to Valentine’s Day so that I can save my wife?”). God’s replies are sometimes tinged with playful mockery and at other times with gentle sympathy, but they are always in character with his idioculture of empirical humanitarianism. In one ‘Ask God Day’ session, when a fan posted a question about the dichotomy between science and religion, God redirected her to an article where cosmologist Neil deGrasse Tyson claimed that he values the title ‘scientist’ above all other ‘ists’ (including ‘aethist’). “I want you to think critically about your beliefs, no matter what they may be,” God added.

God also hosts a weekly event called ‘Smite Tuesday’, where the fan community collectively nominates a hated public figure for divine chastisement. At first, the most common nominations were unpopular celebrities such as John Travolta, Kim Kardashian and Justin Bieber, but as God’s personal dislike for bigotry and right-wing elitism became clear to the fan community, they started nominating Republican politicians, Christian conservatives, or even public figures who were in the news for making intolerant comments. For instance, the winner of Smite Tuesday in January 2012 was the fan who had nominated hip-hop artist CeeLo Green. Green had recently upset legions of John Lennon fans when he sang “Imagine” at a New Year’s Eve concert in Times Square, but changed the lyrics from “no religion too” to “and all religion’s true”, thereby ruining

the strong anti-establishment vibe of the song. Along with a status update smiting Green with his divine wrath, God included a news article which explained the nature of Green's transgressions. These links to contemporary socio-political issues serve as a source of information for the God community, and educate fans about issues relating to bigotry and intolerance in the name of religion. Thus, when noted homophobe Vladimir Putin was nominated for 'Smite Tuesday', the link posted by God led to a lively discussion about Occupy Paedophilia—a Russian vigilante group which films its members beating and humiliating gay men, and posting the films online. 'Smite Tuesday' is premised entirely on the participatory contributions of the God community, and the winner is the nomination with the highest number of 'likes' from the fan community. By getting the community to research topical political issues and participate in the ensuing discussion by sharing links or related personal stories, this event aids in the creation of an attitude of critical inquiry about issues relating to race, religion and socio-political reform.

Another popular segment is New Commandment Day, where fans get to vote on a new commandment, which is then officially passed by God in the form of a meme. Popular commandments include the facetious ("Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wif"), the fanciful ("From now on, all student loans are forgiven and education shall be free. The LORD has spoken") and the scathingly critical ("Thou shalt not watch *Fox News*", "Thou shalt not cherry-pick parts of the Bible to suit thy own ideology" and "Thou shalt not pass judgement on body parts thou dost not have"). These commandments are usually issued in the form of memes with God's profile picture on top, and the text of the commandment in bold white letters below. As Shifman points out, memes have great potential for grassroots activism and connective action, because they

“do not propagate in a single mode”. Instead, they are “shared slogans that travel easily across large and diverse populations” and reinforce the networked individualism of participatory politics.¹¹⁹ After Robin Williams’ suicide, *Fox News* anchor Shephard Smith ran a story on Williams’ apparently blissful personal life, where he concluded by saying, “And yet, something inside you is so horrible or you’re such a coward or whatever the reason that you decide that you have to end it. Robin Williams, at 63, did that today.” The next day, God posted two new commandments saying “Thou shalt understand mental illness is a real thing” and “Thou shalt not call those who commit suicide cowardly”, in order to raise awareness about public insensitivity to mental health issues. The Commandment meme was appropriated by the fan community, who continued the discussion by posting new meme-Commandments, such as “Before you start pointing fingers, make sure your hands are clean” and “Thou shalt not judge others for their human weaknesses and be a big a-hole about it”. Since the memes continued to use God’s familiar profile picture, they contributed to the shared roleplaying fantasy and making it seem like each member of the God community had imbibed a little bit of his divine authority, even if only in the space of the meme.

Together, the literalist parody, memes and participatory segments that make up the satirical humour of God’s ludic performance establish his status as an effective political trickster, as described by Hyde and Coleman. By shrouding his identity in mystery, the moderator of the God page creates and perpetuates the sense of mythos. He disturbs the established categories of truth and property by pretending to be the living embodiment of the largest shared fantasy in recorded history—God himself. The sharp

¹¹⁹ Shifman, 2014

political satire of the performance is derived from turning the generally uneven power dynamics between man and God into a participatory, communal ritual, while removing all traces of the traditional mediators of this relationship—organized religion. The comic frame also functions as a form of militant irony, as described by Frye. The shared fantasy is the literal God-complex of the anonymous moderator, which is created through the participatory, affective engagement of the fan community. The identified object of attack is political and religious bigotry, which is contrasted with God's preferred method of spreading tolerance and public-spiritedness through humour, empathy and communal storytelling. Interactive social media is crucial to God's ludic performance. His performance is conducted primarily on Facebook, where the comment sections allow his fans to participate in the communal roleplaying. The discussions increase awareness of socio-political issues, but the process of engaging with politics is made fun and engaging by God's comedic performance and the participatory roleplaying of the fan community.

Performing the Carnavalesque through Tactical Frivolity

The non-violent political protest advocated by God engages with the political Carnavalesque through satire and tactical frivolity. Tactical frivolity is a popular strategy used by non-violent activists and culture-jammers such as Billionaires for Bush, to oppose political injustice through humour, mockery and exaggerated theatricality. The members of the British anti-authoritarian activist group who called themselves the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army dressed up in military camouflage clothing, supplemented with neon trimmings, tutus and face-paint, to stage protests against

American military interference in Iraq. The clown make-up brought an element of Carnavalesque into the political proceedings, pointed to the absurdity of war and helped to preserve the anonymity of the members. The Orange Alternative Movement in Poland in the 1980s took up mythical woodland creatures as their official mascots. They spray-painted pictures of dwarves on walls and staged interventions with members dressed up as elves, gnomes and pixies and singing children's songs. Broadcast footage of the protests showed hapless policemen trying to arrest the protesters, who were dancing, kissing police officers and throwing candy out of the windows of police vans, as the surrounding crowd chanted "Elves are real!"¹²⁰ The movement began as a surreal, Carnavalesque protest initiative, but it had greater political and cultural ramifications, such as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. In the US, tactical frivolity has been used in guerrilla activist movements such as 'glitterbombing', where protestors throw rainbow glitter at public figures who are vociferously opposed to same-sex marriage.

Much like the HONY community, the Facebook God eschews a singular and definite socio-political mission in favour of a flexible, liberal humanist agenda—he wants to make humans more tolerant as a species. Or, as he put it in his inimitable way, "I have returned to provide guidance to you idiots in your hour of need". His performance, from his incessant swearing to his validation of God's social media presence, can be considered a modified Menippean satire, with its seamless interplay of the sacred and the profane in the spirit of the Carnavalesque. According to Stallybrass and White's theories of political transgression, the Bakhtinian Carnival is characterized by "a potent, populist, critical inversion of all official words and hierarchies", whereby the usual ranks,

¹²⁰ Bruner, p. 145

privileges and social norms are replaced with an attitude of “creative disrespect” that exposes the “fictive foundations” of society.¹²¹ They also claim that the transgressive potential of the Roman Saturnalia was dubious at best, for the temporary suspension of rules and hierarchies allowed state officials to reinstate them with renewed vigour afterwards. However, recent scholarship in the Carnavalesque has concluded that it is possible for these official motives to be subverted, allowing the carnival to become a laboratory for testing the effects of political change.

According to Le Roy Ladurie, a carnival is “a satirical, lyrical epic-learning experience for highly diversified groups. It is a way to action, perhaps modifying society as a whole in the direction of social change and possible progress.”¹²² Edmund Leach believes that the Carnival has three features which offer “temporary windows of opportunity for freedom from political subjection”—masquerades, role reversals and closing formalities.¹²³ The authenticity of the Facebook God is a crucial part of his Carnavalesque performance, because it serves as the perfect *masquerade* for the political satirist to enter the space of the absurd, where biting observations can be made without serious repercussions. The performance allows *role reversal* by transforming the traditional relationship between God and Man into a counterhegemonic, liminal zone, where restrictions on behaviour are removed, so that the “fictive foundations” of religion may be re-examined. He creates a new discourse of democracy and social empathy, governed by commandments chosen by his participatory fan community and endorsed by

¹²¹ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression* (Cornell University Press, 1986)

¹²² In Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre: Plebian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Routledge, 1989) p. 50

¹²³ M. Lane Bruner, “Carnavalesque Protest and the Humorless State”, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25 (2005): 136-155

the Lord. The *closing formalities* of a Carnival, according to Bruner, signify “a return to the normal world of humourless repression” where “political consequential humour is no longer tolerated or welcome”. This, of course, is provided by the medium itself. God’s performance is confined mostly to the internet, where his fans can post on his wall, watch his Youtube videos, subscribe to his newsletter and even email him, but his performance does not have any direct, perceptible impact on the offline lives of his fan community.

However, the public-spiritedness which he advocates through his engagement with the political Carnavalesque does have lasting effects. Although Umberto Eco acknowledged that the Carnival can become a zone of critique, he criticized Carnavalesque protest for operating in a zone separated from social reality, thereby ensuring that critique and reflection stay vacuum-sealed within the comic realm.¹²⁴ However, satirical activism on social media can be incorporated almost seamlessly into the lives of the fan community through a constant stream of status updates, memes, re-posts, ‘likes’ and comments. Moreover, the Facebook algorithm is designed such that the more a fan interacts with the content posted by a particular page, the greater the likelihood of more content from that page showing up on the fan’s personal Facebook newsfeed. Like the multiple discourses of tolerance on HONY, the God page is characterized by a constant stream of messages advocating goodwill and critical thinking, which can have an effect that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The God community’s affective engagement with God’s performance and idioculture transform the political satire of the page into the “ethical spectacle” of

¹²⁴ Umberto Eco, “The Frames of Comic Freedom”, *Carnival*, ed. Thomas A. Sebok (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1984)

participatory political activism. In his book *Dream*, Duncombe contrasts the ethical spectacle with what Guy Debord termed “the society of the spectacle”. According to Debord and the French Situationists, the capitalist state enforced authority through the creation of the spectacle as a site of non-intervention, where “passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity”.¹²⁵ Debord believed that the antithesis to the spectacle was the “situation”, which would “create ‘collective ambiances’ which encouraged participants to break out of the soporific routine of the society of the spectacle and participate in the situation unfolding around them...and thereby alter people’s relationship to their material and media environment”.¹²⁶ It is this potential for transformative action which informs Duncombe’s own conception of the ethical spectacle, which is rooted in its capacity for affective engagement and participatory political reform—“The people who participate in the performance of the spectacle must also contribute to its construction...the public in an ethical spectacle is not considered a stage prop, but a co-producer and co-director.”¹²⁷ However, like the Yippies and the Marxist Humanists of the 60s, Duncombe was aware that the spectacle needed to avoid ideology and militant rhetoric (or what he called “Enlightenment notions of self-evident reality”) in favour of flexible political agenda, a playful and theatrical strategy of protest and a non-hierarchical and humanist method of organizing activism.

On the God page, the participatory ethical spectacle is staged through satirical activism and culture-jamming. Culture-jamming borrows from the Situationist concept of

¹²⁵ Guy Debord, “Society of the Spectacle”, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>, accessed April 15th 2015

¹²⁶ Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Reimagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: The New Press, 2007), p. 130

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 127

détournement, which means to overturn or derail, and it refers to the process of appropriating and altering a media artefact that the audience is already familiar with, in order to give it a new, subversive meaning. God’s comic interpolation of the traditional expectations of religion by redefining it as a space for affirmative action and critical discussion is a form of discursive culture-jamming. However, God has also taken steps to stage the spectacle in more perceptible ways, such as the ‘God Loves Gays’ Billboard Project. In response to the bigotry and intolerance of the Westboro Baptist Church and their use of ‘God hates fags’ signs, God organized a fundraiser to put up a ‘God Loves Gays’ billboard in Topeka, Kansas—headquarters of the Westboro Baptist Church. In fact, the idea for the billboard was suggested by the fan community itself, in one of God’s “What would you like the LORD to do in the real world?” segments on Facebook. “The top suggestion (with over 1,000 ‘likes’) was to put up a billboard in Topeka, Kansas that says ‘God Loves Gays.’ I shared this idea and asked them if I should do it, and the resounding answer was, ‘Yes please, for the love of all that is holy, yes.’”¹²⁸ God designed the layout of the billboard himself, and it features the face of the Lord peeking out mischievously from behind a mass of clouds, together with the slogan ‘God Loves Gays’ and a massive, sparkling Pride rainbow. Finally, in August 2014, God started an Indiegogo campaign hoping to raise \$50,000 within two months.

Interestingly enough, the Indiegogo page for this campaign was designed such that the process of donating also played into the shared fantasy between God and his fan community. The amount of each donation corresponded to a religious-sounding title

¹²⁸ Matt Silverman, “God Just Trolled the Westboro Baptist Church So Hard”, *Mashable*, September 8th 2014, <http://mashable.com/2014/09/08/god-loves-gays/>, accessed April 15th 2015

officially sanctioned by God himself. By donating \$1, fans could become certified “disciples”, \$25 granted fans the title of “saviour” (which came with a free ‘God Loves Gays’ bumper sticker), \$50 made them “saints” (who received a bumper sticker and a limited-edition campaign t-shirt), and \$75 guaranteed fans “the divine package”, which included the sticker, the t-shirt and a signed poster.¹²⁹ Two days after the campaign started, 4465 fans succeeded in raising \$101,223. The viral social media attention garnered by the campaign attracted the notice of an LGBT-rights activist group called Planting Peace, who own a rainbow-coloured establishment called The Equality House right opposite the Westboro headquarters in Topeka. They reached out to God, and helped him find an appropriate location for the billboard. God used another \$10,000 from the Indiegogo fund to buy ad-space for more ‘God Loves Gays’ ads in bus-stations in Topeka, and \$10,000 to erect a second billboard in Salt Lake City, Utah—heartland of the Mormons. The remaining money was donated to The Trevor Project, which works to provide crisis intervention and prevent suicides amongst the LGBT youth.

The Billboard fundraiser was a compelling culture-jamming project, which prolonged the roleplaying game of the God community by making the donators pretend to be a part of the divine inner circle of the Lord, and making their political activist project a fun and entertaining communal activity. In her book *Dancing in the Streets*, Barbara Ehrenreich describes how the elements of the Carnavalesque allow members of a protest movement to come together in an affective celebration of “collective joy”—“People must find, in their movement, the immediate joy of solidarity, if only, because in

¹²⁹ “GOD LOVES GAYS Billboard Project”, *Indiegogo*, <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/god-loves-gays-billboard-project>, accessed April 15th 2015

the face of overwhelming state or corporate power, solidarity is their sole source of strength.”¹³⁰ Similarly, the Billboard project allowed the God community to come together in a show of solidarity against the debilitating intolerance of the Westboro Baptists (and by extension, other homophobic state and corporate institutions). The overwhelming success of the project, the media attention, and the community’s personal triumph at having got away with a bold political prank in such a public way reinforced their collective joy, and allowed them to feel like part of a larger activist movement.

Strategies of tactical frivolity can also be channelled into what Boler and Zembylas call “the pedagogy of discomfort” necessary for a change in perspective. Unlike HONY, the God page seems to hold anonymity in a higher esteem, and the moderator of the page does not seem to believe in comment regulation. He once said that his moderation policy followed a fairly casual template of free speech—“Atheists can disagree with Christianity, and Christians can disrespect atheism. Christians can tell atheists they’re going to burn in hell. Atheists can tell Christians they’re dumb. They’re both ok. People are free to speak their minds.” When I questioned God about his regulation policy in more detail, he admitted that if his fans send him private messages complaining about cyberbullying or mistreatment on the God page, he looks through the thread and deletes the hurtful comments. However, he does not believe in regulating comments to maintain a contrived spirit of equanimity. On the contrary, God thrives on subverting expectations and generating discussions through his performance of divinity. One of his favourite shock-tactics is changing his Facebook profile picture. Originally,

¹³⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich, “The Possibility of Revival”, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2007) p. 259

God's profile picture was a doodle of an old, white man with a flowing beard, whose expressions ranged from frowning disapproval to cheeky grin, depending on God's current mood. However, in June 2012, God unexpectedly altered the skintone of his profile picture to an indeterminate milky-brown. This immediately led to speculations about his presumed race, with fans wondering whether his new avatar was meant to be Middle-Eastern, African-American, or even South Asian. It even led to serious, erudite conversations about critical race theory and the position of ethnicity in religious rhetoric. Significantly, the usually loquacious Lord himself deigned to resolve the ambiguity, allowing the lack of closure to become part of his ludic identity.

Since then, there has been an African-American God, a Chinese God, a drag queen God, a Klingon God, a Pikachu God and a 'V' God, complete with Guy Fawkes mask. God has consistently resisted being identified through markers of race, sexuality, heteronormativity, species or pop culture universe, allowing his unpredictable form to be a silent commentary on his fans' surprise and veiled discomfort. His use of tactical frivolity is evidently a success, for amongst much good-natured laughter about African-American God's "ravishing tan" and his "failed attempt to become Morgan Freeman", is one community member's sheepish admission—"God, you just made me realize how racist I am!" In his next series of profile pictures, God started experimenting with gender stereotypes, and changed his profile picture to that of a snowy-haired, rosy-cheeked woman. The fan community, who were used to his divine transformations by this time, raised a solitary note of protest—they had no problem with God being a woman, but they did have a problem with God not having a beard. God gracefully acquiesced to their demands, and his beard reappeared in subsequent profile pictures.

On November 20th 2012, a post appeared on God’s page saying that there would be no ‘Smite’ or ‘Ask God’ segments for the rest of the week, because God’s mother had tragically passed away—“The sweet woman who taught God everything he knows about unconditional love is gone. You don’t know her, you can’t know her. Just know that whatever light I bring to this world from this point forward is dedicated to her memory.” Within seconds, thousands of messages flooded in, expressing love and condolences, in an effort to support God in his moment of sorrow. A week later, God was contacted by the insurance company, and told that his mother had cancelled her policy just a few months before her death. God firmly instructed his fan community that this was not the insurance company’s fault, and they were not to bombard their Facebook page with threats or hate-mail. Instead, in what was an extraordinary, Carnavalesque reversal of roles, God’s fan community rallied around to help, offering to donate money to help God’s father, a retired minister, get through the emotional and financial crisis. An Indiegogo account was set up with the intention of raising \$5000, but within 24 hours, more than \$20,000 had been donated and a month later, 2210 members of the ‘God community had collectively raised almost \$37,000 (739% of the original amount). God was repeatedly assured that his fans were simply trying to repay his own kindness and support, for he had stood by them when they were going through some terrible times.¹³¹

This incident proved that God’s fans were well-aware that there was a very human comedian running the God page, whose authenticity represented much more than the dedication to a comic performance. He was a social reformer who was trying to

¹³¹ Daylan Pearce, “Facebook God: A Masterclass in Human Connection via Social Media”, *DaylanDoes*, <http://daylandoes.com/facebook-god/>, accessed April 28 2014.

counteract bigotry and religious intolerance through satire, humour and communal empathy. As a token of their appreciation, the fans were doing what they could to help an anonymous stranger get through a financial and emotional crisis and even through their contributions, they were continuing to roleplay into the shared God fantasy—the Indiegogo page was created to represent a Christian indulgence, where fans could pay \$10 to “go to Heaven”, \$20 to email God or \$100 to talk to him on the phone. Through this incident, the Carnavalesque inversion of the roles of God and Man took its most radical turn yet. In the strange, egalitarian domain of the Facebook God group, the Lord and his fans worked in tandem to create a support group operating through the affective bonds of a shared fantasy, large-scale connective action and mutual support.

Anti-Fans and the Culture of Mockery

In his paper on television and antifandom, Jonathan Gray describes what it means to participate in textual discourse through dislike and disengagement—“Hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and “effects” or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture”.¹³² Through his analysis of the antifan website *Television Without Pity*, Gray describes how the moral, aesthetic and intellectual expectations of certain viewers create competitive discourses for ‘appropriate’ programming and viewing. Therefore, Gray argues that the anti-fan can be just affectively involved in the text as the fan, except that this engagement is expressed

¹³² Jonathan Gray, “Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television without Pity and Textual Dislike”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 48(2005): 840-858

through active dislike, contempt or even hatred for the text. In *Understanding Fandom*, Mark Duffett interprets the anti-fan's dislike in terms of a "rhetoric of superiority", which implies the existence of an elite status and points to the moral and ideological stance taken by certain anti-fans against the object of their dislike. Duffett also describes how certain cultural forms are constructed such that a certain kind of anti-fandom or critical distance is written into the contract that the audience has with the performer. He uses the example of punk rock, which "linked a sense of social nihilism to an attack on the institution of music stardom." Audiences who really understood the DIY ethos of punk music were expected to "spit and heckle at live events as part of the ritual."¹³³ In fact, groups like the Stranglers actively invited expressions of dislike from the audience by engaging in outrageous acts of sexism or racism, such as bringing strippers out on stage during a rendition of their song "Nice and Sleazy".¹³⁴

In her discussion of contemporary tricksters in the American mythological tradition, Coleman states that a characteristic feature of the trickster is his ability to manipulate unfavourable external circumstances to his own benefit.¹³⁵ The Facebook God's seamless incorporation of the participatory contributions of his virulent anti-fans into his ludic performance clearly indicates his status as a political trickster. When God first started his Facebook page in September 2011, it quickly became a target of mass cyberbullying. The page received hundreds of messages from haters who accused God of charlatanism and posturing, alternately beg, threaten and order him to stop pretending to

¹³³ Mark Duffett, "Fan Stereotypes and Representations", *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury 2013)

¹³⁴ Mark Duffett, "'We Are Interrupted by Your Noise': Heckling and the Symbolic Economy of Popular Music Stardom", *Popular Music and Society* 32(2009): 37-57

¹³⁵ Gabriella Coleman, "Hacker and Troll as Trickster", <http://gabriellacoleman.org/blog/?p=1902>, accessed March 1st 2015.

be God. However, instead of ignoring his hate mail, God came up with an excellent way to use cyberbullying to his advantage. He started taking screenshots of the vitriolic accusations directed at him by his haters, together with his replies to them, and posting these screenshots in a special album on Facebook. His performance is a masterpiece of improvisational theatre. When religious zealots quote the Bible at him, he smoothly directs their attention to explicit references to rape and slavery in the Good Book. When a Christian pastor questioned him about his opinion on *Leviticus 20:13* (“If a man also lie with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination”) God retorted with—“Yes, that verse is about lies and lying. Men should not lie to other men in the same way as they lie to women. For example, if a woman asks if she looks fat in these jeans, it is ok to lie to her and say no. If a man asks you if he looks fat in these jeans, tell him he’s a fat piece of shit, even if he’s not. Then make fun of him for the rest of his life.” When a gay-basher accused him of encouraging fags, he insisted that he had been tragically misunderstood—God loves fags; it’s *figs* that he cannot stand! When someone accused him of promoting hate, he said—“Tell you what...let’s play a game. In 5 minutes: You point out a single thing I’ve published on this page that has ever promoted hate. And in that same time I’ll find 100 things representatives of your religion have done that promote hate. I’m willing to bet that I’ll win.”

Like the punk rock bands that Duffett describes, God’s pretence of authentic divinity, along with his dirty jokes and mischievous innuendoes, actively invite expressions of dislike and resentment from religious fundamentalists. Their response, in the form of rancorous hate-mail, is subsequently incorporated into God’s ludic performance in a very interesting way. The fact that the religious right-wing can be so

acrimonious towards a Facebook page clearly classified as ‘humour’ indicates not only the complete absence of a sense of humour, but a disturbingly high level of intolerance for an internet comedian who rejects the tenets of organized religion in favour of a non-discriminatory humanitarianism. If God’s satirical performance is premised on the assumption that fundamentalists are capable of doing the most vindictive things in the name of religion, then the anti-fans are the most persuasive participants. They make it unnecessary for God to scourge the internet for examples of religious intolerance to prove his point—the Christian conservatives come to his page by themselves, and their vitriolic hate-mail makes their uncharitable motives abundantly clear. The hate-mail plays right into the culture of mockery of the God page, enabling the fan community to read the messages and make fun of them in public.

For instance, when someone sent God an invective-filled message which concluded with, “Delete this page now, or you will know a very very terrible Christian”, God conceded, “You’re right. You are a very very terrible Christian.” The humour comes from the use of the word ‘terrible’, which can mean either ‘that which inspires terror’, or, as in this instance, simply ‘very unpleasant’. Every time an anti-fan tries to call God out on his incessant swearing and dirty jokes, God replies with, “So who died and made YOU God?” These exchanges are one of the highlights of the God page, and greatly-loved by the fan community, but they are also a satirical commentary on fundamentalist Christianity’s draconian expectations about what constitutes appropriate religious behaviour—even for God himself. In other words, as God once pointed out to an angry Christian hater, “The God you worship is entirely of your own making.”

In order to contrast the fundamental nastiness of his anti-fans with his own idioculture of solidarity and satirical humour, God's most belligerent haters are treated to a comically-overblown display of sweetness and benevolence, all in the name of good Christianity. For instance, when an anti-fan named Brandon posted a message saying "God is real...I hope you go to hell" and "Get raped by a llama", God decided to use this opportunity to stage an exaggerated display of the spirit of Christian forgiveness. His response said, "How very Christian of you, Brandon, thank you for the kind words! You make me glad I gave humans free will. Keep on being awesome, Brandon. You're one of my favourites, you adorable little guy!" Naturally, every outraged message that Brandon sent after that only added fuel to the entirely one-sided comedy of the exchange. Another favourite tactic used by God is to reply to absolutist statements such as "You cannot be the real God" with equally absurd counterarguments, such as "If I'm not real, how can I have a Facebook page?" or "If I'm just impersonating God, why doesn't God stop me?", or even "If you do not believe in Me, you must be an atheist." The point is not to engage in reasonable, rational debate with the anti-fans, but to demonstrate to his larger audience that religious fundamentalism is little more than the puerile and irrational schoolyard bickering that transpires through these exchanges. Or, in the words of Yippie member Aron Kay, "Humour breaks barriers...Sometimes you gotta use silliness to open people's eyes, because these people are dangerous but they are also silly. These people are very silly."¹³⁶ The humour is not lost on God's fan community, who gleefully join in the mockery and merriment in the Facebook comment sections, and collectively make fun of intolerant fundamentalists who seemingly have nothing better to do than to fight an

¹³⁶ Benjamin Shepard, "Play as Prank: From the Yippies to the Young Lords", *Play, Creativity and Social Movements: If I Can't Dance, It's Not My Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2011) p. 43

internet comedian with empty threats and poor grammar. However, in order to prevent these exchanges with the anti-fans from leading to reverse-cyberbullying on Facebook, God conscientiously conceals the last names and profile pictures of his haters. Of course, he is aware that the battle is won as soon as he makes the conversations public. Thousands of eager minions stand armed with the tools of social media to guarantee that the posts go viral, thereby contributing to and extending the performance.

Conclusion

In the tradition of participatory activist groups like the Racebenders and the Harry Potter Alliance, the God group is involved in the creation of a model of DIY citizenship, which infuses political action with personal narratives and an affective investment in socio-political reform, and therefore presents low barriers of participation for political activism. Rosa Reitsamer and Elke Zobl refer to this type of non-obligatory, non-hierarchical political engagement as “daily life activism”, or a form of activism where members “cut out the middlemen of politicians, corporations and policy makers”, and engage with politics by creating their own culture instead of consuming what is on offer.¹³⁷ By extension, DIY citizenship is premised on a participatory mode of political engagement, which operates through affective ties and connective action and lowers the barriers of participation for neophyte activists. The God group abandons the organizational philanthropy of institutionalized religion in favour of a fun, mischievous community of political satirists, which also doubles as a support group where members can find

¹³⁷ Rosa Reitsamer and Elke Zobl, “Alternative Media Production, Feminism, and Citizenship Practices”, *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*, ed. Matt Ratto and Megan Boler (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014)

comfort, solidarity, and empathy through stories and communal roleplaying. Their shared fantasy is involved in the literal removal of religious middlemen, by opening up direct communication channels between God and his followers, and endorsing a form of DIY citizenship where members are free to believe whatever they want, and engage with their faith in any way they wish, as long as they abide by the basic standards of tolerance, empathy and critical inquiry. God's own involvement with political activism in the form of satire and culture-jamming allows the fan community to experiment with activism through humour and mischief-making, and therefore lowers the barriers of participation.

The participatory performance of the God community also makes deft use of the social media tools offered by Facebook. Social media is a double-edged sword as far as the God page is concerned. The Facebook settings make it possible for people to report the God page for posting material which is offensive to religious sentiments, resulting in a temporary ban for the moderator, or even a permanent restriction of access imposed by countries with conservative, right-wing governments. However, in his capacity as a political trickster, God is skilled at overturning these unfavourable circumstances to his own benefit. Therefore, when he found out that his page had been banned in several countries, he simply created a Facebook mirror-page called "God is back" which reposts all the content from the original page. The bumbling attempts to censor political satire are therefore revealed to be both intolerant and ineffectual, and they only serve to reinforce the omnipotence of the mighty Facebook God. At the same time, God's ludic, interactive performance (and especially the participatory segments he conducts) would not be quite as effective without the interactive opportunities afforded by the Facebook comment sections. On April 17th 2014, God tentatively broached the topic of deleting his Facebook

page in order to devote most of his attention and resources to his newsletter. However, as soon as he made the message public, expressions of protest poured in from thousands of followers, begging him to reconsider. “With the amount of good you do and the people you have helped, it would leave a great void here for those who need the guidance of a God who actually answers,” said one. Another fan created a Commandment meme which read, “New commandment: Thou shalt not end this page!” 7 hours and over 15,000 messages later, God declared that he had changed his mind; he wasn’t going anywhere.

This incident proved that the community realized that their participatory contributions were integral to the shared communal roleplaying of the God page. While God’s comic act could be continued over a newsletter, there would be no interactivity, no feedback and no support group for the fan community. Finally, as with the HONY page, the Facebook updates, photos, memes and status updates of the God page provide archival services for the communal performance, which make up a repertoire of contention for yet another form non-violent, theatrical, Carnavalesque performance. If the performance of protest is an acquired skill like Tilly believes, then the God page functions as a potent training arena for potential activists. God’s ludic performance allows familiar tactics of political activism, such as satire, tactical frivolity and culture-jamming, to be scrambled and re-assembled in new and innovative ways, thereby creating new modules for the evolving digital repertoire.

Therefore, the God page is a virtual classroom where conceptions of religion, tolerance and social reform are challenged and subverted through the didactic effects of political satire and the comic frame. Social presence is created through the affective ties that members have with God, with each other, and with the spirit of humour and goodwill

that characterizes by the community. Cognitive presence is created by the discussion sections and the participatory segments, which also define the idioculture of the community as an amalgamation of the personal and the political. The group is characterized by a shared contempt of religion and conservative politics, along with an endearing belief in the possibility of social reformation. Even though the teaching presence is established by the anonymous moderator of the God page, the participatory contributions of his fans and his anti-fans enable him to sustain the performance, and enable didactic socio-political comments to be made through the medium of political satire. Unlike Stanton, God does not attempt to establish his teaching presence by regulating discussions within the community, or limit the socio-political idioculture of the community to his own political vision. More importantly, God does not contrive to create a spirit of universal humanity within the community. He is artful enough to realize that deviant behaviour (such as the hate-mail from his anti-fans) does not need to be censored in order to create a space of liberal humanism; instead, hate-mail can be incorporated into the idioculture of the community, and the sharp contrast it presents to God's own reformative methods is conducive to critique and discussion.

The crucial difference between Stanton and the Facebook God is that the political idioculture of the God page is not subsumed by his own personality. Despite its similar culture of participation and tolerance, *Humans of New York* (at least without the added presence of the private blogs and the spinoff groups) is very definitely about Stanton and his art. The blog chronicles his activist endeavours, and it is a testimony to his journey from unassuming street-photographer to global philanthropist, bestselling author and UN peace mediator. However, the Facebook God is characterized by his anonymity. His

entire political presence is a performance—and a performance which is deeply-indebted to the participatory contributions of his fan community. Although the basic idioculture of political satire and tolerance was initially established by God himself, the page is much more responsive to the participatory contributions of the fan community. The members decided that they wanted God to be not just a political satirist, but a mentor and counsellor. The members decide what each new commandment is going to be, or which conservative politician must be ‘smote’. Even the ‘God Loves Gays’ Billboard Project—God’s most well-known political endeavour to date—was suggested to him by the fan community. Stanton’s recent projects are indicative of his gradual turn towards a more individualistic form of philanthropy, but the performance of Godliness on Facebook would completely fall apart without the community’s affective investment in the God fantasy. The participatory ‘ethical spectacle’ of the political Carnavalesque is integral to this form of activism, because it enables God to appropriate familiar traditions from organized religion and infuse them with cheerful irreverence for the rules and rituals of organized religion, and yet maintain a genuine social conscience. The willing suspension of disbelief with which the fans accept God’s authenticity is both a parody of blind religious faith and the affective engagement with a post-Christian humanitarianism, rooted in camaraderie, fellowship and mutual support. As one of God’s fans once said to him, “If there is a real God, I hope he’s just like you!”

Conclusion:

Social Media and a New Civic Vernacular

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam describes how political engagement has always provided members with tangential private benefits, which encourage them to cultivate personal relationships and become more affectively involved in the cause. He uses the example of the book clubs which sprung up in the post-Civil War era. These communities were based on an idioculture of literary discussion and intellectual self-improvement, but at the same time, these groups encouraged members (predominantly women) to cultivate close personal relationships, practise self-expression and “what a later generation would call ‘consciousness raising’”. As a result, the focus of these groups “gradually widened from literary pursuits to encompass community service and civic betterment, as part of a quickening movement for social and political reform.”¹³⁸

Contemporary counterparts of these literary groups are fan activist organizations like the Racebenders, the Harry Potter Alliance, and the Nerdfighters—an online fan community centred around vloggers John and Hank Green, which tries to promote social media activism around a general reformative mission of “increasing the level of awesome in the world, and decreasing the level of suckiness”. According to their mission statement, “Nerdfighters are about raising money and awareness for important causes. Nerdfighters are about building a supportive community of friends...Nerdfighters are

¹³⁸ Robert D. Putnam, “Against the Tide? Small Groups, Social Movements and the Net”, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) pp. 236-240

about stupid beautiful projects and making each other laugh and think with T-shirts and pocket protectors and rants about the situation in Pakistan which sucks right now.”¹³⁹

The rhetoric of political participation in Green’s statement is evocative of what Zizi Papacharissi calls the “new civic vernacular” of participatory politics. In her discussion of the role of the internet in creating a new public sphere, Papacharissi describes how the Habermasian concept of the public sphere was criticized for not taking into account the strict and non-negotiable boundaries of political participation— “Inclusion in the public sphere is a privilege that most citizens of past democracies did not enjoy. In the Greek and Roman republics, participation in the public sphere was not afforded to those who were not considered citizens, and women, slaves, and non-property-owners were excluded. Similarly, later incarnations of the public sphere were structured around privilege, special interests, or the elite.”¹⁴⁰ Poststructuralist theorists such as Lyotard and Derrida thought that Habermas had overemphasized the value of rational accord in the workings of a healthy democracy. They believed that “it is anarchy, individuality, and disagreement that have had and can lead, to genuine democratic emancipation”, and supported a deconstructivist approach to civic engagement which regarded undecidability and dissent to be essential to any form of public deliberation.¹⁴¹

Although Papacharissi does not consider digital media to be responsible for transforming online forums into egalitarian public spheres in the Habermasian sense, she acknowledges that “they provide hybrid economies of space where individuals can engage in interaction that is civic, among other things”. These fan communities are not

¹³⁹ <http://everything2.com/title/Nerdfighter>, accessed April 21st 2015

¹⁴⁰ Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Malden: Polity Press, 2010)

¹⁴¹ Ibid

always explicitly political, but they allow members to come together through the shared appreciation for a cultural artefact, and subsequently “serve as a gateway to participation in important aspects of civic and, at times, political life ranging from volunteer activity, to engagement in community problem solving, to protest activities, to political voice.”¹⁴² HONY and the God page are a hybrid of the public and the private, as members combine storytelling, political mockery and communal roleplaying with direct calls to political action. The discussion and dissent that occur in these forums create a new civic vernacular which uses affective ties to mobilize its members, and reimagines activism as an enjoyable communal activity, and offers low barriers of entry to neophyte political activists. Bennett claims that this model of DIY citizenship results in the creation of the “self-actualizing citizen”, whose motivation for political participation is prompted by self-expression and trusted peer-to-peer networks, and who engages in activism not through voting or political campaigns, but through fundraisers, consumer boycotts, volunteering, and an affective investment in a wide range of causes, ranging from environmental activism to immigrant reform. The self-actualizing citizen operates tangentially to conventional political organization, and favours a “loosely-networked model of activism to address issues that reflect personal values.”¹⁴³

The political engagement of the self-actualizing citizen corresponds to a new kind of learning environment—one which is “interactive, project-based, horizontally networked and participatory, as learners participate in creating content and assessing its

¹⁴² Joseph Kahne, Nam-Jin Lee and Jessica Timpany Feezell, “The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures among Youth Transitioning to Adulthood”, *Youth and Participatory Politics* (2011)

¹⁴³ W. Lance Bennett, “Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age”, *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth* 1 (2008): 1-24.

credibility.”¹⁴⁴ This environment is provided by the ‘virtual classroom’ model of participatory online communities. In their paper on the Harry Potter Alliance and Invisible Children, Neta Kliger-Vilenchik and Sangita Shresthova group participatory civic practices into four main clusters—Create (build communities, tell stories, produce media), Inform (learn about issues, spread the word), Connect (connect within the group, network outside the group) and Mobilize (organize political action).¹⁴⁵ The Facebook God page and *Humans of New York* meet the criteria for each of these four clusters, thereby qualifying as what Shresthova and the Civic Paths research group call “participatory culture civic organizations”, or interest-based communities which use new media and communal participation for explicitly civic purposes.

Both HONY and the Facebook God group are based on fans’ interest in new media cultural artefacts—the HONY community shares a communal interest in Stanton’s social media photoblog, and the God group is united by their interest and participation in God’s online comic routine. Both communities are engaged in a form of participatory content creation—forming communities through shared affective interests, building relationships through storytelling, and creating their own media through interactive performances, memes and spinoff groups. Both communities are involved in sharing knowledge, information and awareness about topical socio-political issues. Stanton’s photo comments often reveal deeply-personal stories about marginalized groups such as the transgender community, and their struggle to find acceptance within the larger LGBT

¹⁴⁴ Neta Kliger-Vilenchik and Sangita Shresthova, “Learning through Practice: Participatory Culture Civics”, *Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network* (2012)

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

movement. God often shares links to newspaper articles, videos and op-ed pieces which discuss issues like the exploitation of immigrant labour.

Moreover, both groups are based on social media platforms with comment sections, which enables the communities to share stories and anecdotes which can provide a drastic change in perspective. For instance, Stanton's photo of the girl trying to come to terms with her interest in bondage enabled the HONY community to have an engaging conversation about BDSM's strong focus on community and solidarity—a perspective which is often underplayed by media representations of BDSM, and which may well have been alien to many HONY members. The God page recently shared an article about how history textbooks in Texas were being re-written to include Moses as one of the founding fathers of America. This article prompted a discussion where the God community tried to brainstorm methods to start summer school reading programs in Texas to introduce elementary school children to a more empirical version of American history. Content creation and spreading information naturally leads to increased networking, as the community members come into contact with groups who share their beliefs and values, as well as those with diametrically opposite perspectives. Sometimes these exchanges lead to heated arguments, which contribute to the pedagogy of discomfort of a virtual classroom, and provide training arenas for some potential activists to channel their thoughts into convincing and coherent arguments.

Finally, these groups mobilize through their affective political ties, and a networked system of connective action, structured around a flexible political agenda. Sometimes this mobilization leads to activist initiatives such as fundraising programs or culture-jamming projects. At other times, it creates a digital repertoire of contention,

where potential tactics and methods are tested and archived, for the benefit of future activists. Garrison's theory of the 'Community of Enquiry' is therefore a relevant model for studying these communities as examples of virtual classrooms for the self-actualizing citizen, whose civic engagement is governed by empathy, communal solidarity, and an affective interest in the reformatory cause as well as the method of political participation.

However, as I have shown in my discussion, there are some interesting differences in the political idiocultures of the two groups, which owe much to the extents to which the moderators encourage participatory political contributions from their communities. Stanton sees himself as the moderator of the Facebook page for *Humans of New York*, in a fairly literal sense of the word. He moderates discussions through his comment regulation policy, he deletes posts which raise uncomfortable questions, and he personally chooses the activist causes which are taken up by HONY. Stanton encourages the larger HONY community to contribute by spreading awareness, sharing personal narratives, and raising funds. Together, the community has been part of some remarkably successful campaigns and garnered a lot of media attention. However, the success of HONY's activist endeavours has propelled Stanton towards a more institutionalized and interventionist form of philanthropy, as evidenced by his collaboration with Harvard University and the principal of Mott Hall Bridges Academy, and his widely-publicized international UN tour. By moving away from the participatory activism of the HONY community, and displaying signs of a problematic white saviour-complex, Stanton has alienated several members of the HONY community. Therefore, the legacy of the participatory civic vernacular established by *Humans of New York* has now been passed

on to the global network of ‘Humans of’ spinoff groups, and their engagement with local, grassroots political activism through an idioculture of open participation.

The anonymity of the Facebook God precludes his involvement with any form of institutional philanthropy, but it also makes it possible for him to disrupt the established categories of propriety in the tradition of a mythological trickster, and stage his mischievous culture-jamming projects. These projects are fun and participatory, and they provide an unprecedented opportunity for community members who are not interested in organized politics to experiment with political activism, without fear of repercussion. In fact, the collective God fantasy is, in itself, a process of reformative activism, because it transforms satire into a participatory performance art, which simultaneously highlights and critiques the absurdity of social intolerance. The God community is only a fraction of the size of the HONY community, and its political endeavours have not attracted as much viral media attention. This actually works to their advantage, by allowing the members to reimagine the space as a subversive, underground, activist organization, headed by a mysterious moderator whose identity is yet to be uncovered, operating through satire, culture-jamming and political hi-jinks. The increased community-participation encouraged by God plays into the anti-establishment ethos of the page, and its mockery of right-wing, conservative religious and governmental institutions.

My thesis does not aim to compare the efficacy of the two communities in terms of their political engagement, or the success of their activist endeavours. Instead, I have tried to show how the fan communities of HONY and the Facebook God exemplify two different models of participatory citizenship, each using affective political engagement and connective action to formulate its own version of the new civic vernacular. The

spreadability of the ‘Humans of’ format and the participatory satire of the Facebook God are the particular strengths of each community, and they influence and structure their political idiocultures. Their tactics and principles are archived on Facebook, and become part of the growing digital repertoire of contention. The many successful endeavours of the two communities point to the validity of Facebook activism as a form of non-organizational political engagement, which transforms perceptions of activism as a laborious, boring and ultimately alienating enterprise.

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