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# How Harry Potter is inspiring muggles to help from Haiti to Darfur

The magical Harry Potter movie franchise enters its concluding phase this week, but its impact is still growing. Its legacy: young activists motivated to find solutions to real-world problems.



Actors Robbie Coltrane (l.) and Daniel Radcliffe are shown in a scene from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1. The Harry Potter movie is motivating young activists to find solutions to real-world problems. (Jaap Buitendijk/Warner Bros. Pictures/AP)

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By Gloria Goodale, Staff writer / November 15, 2010 at 8:58 pm EST

Los Angeles

“The boy who lived,” Hermione, Ron, Dobby, Dumbledore and the rest of J. K. Rowling’s magical characters launch their final film chapter this Friday with “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 1.”

But even as the Potter franchise begins its big screen fade to black, the impact of this alternately charming and cautionary wizarding world only grows. And not just in the customary fan sites spawned by many a great read.

Taking the moral lessons and emotional themes off the pages and into the real world, lovers of the gentle Albus Dumbledore’s wisdom and the hard-earned social awakenings of Hermione Granger have been inspired to address human needs, providing relief planes for Haiti and art supplies for orphans.

Henry Jenkins, a media scholar and cultural expert at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, says the phenomenon represents a new and more potent brand of online-enabled, participatory culture. He cites the Boston-based Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) as the most prominent organization to translate the moral lessons of the seven-part literary series into real world remedies.

“We are working to make the real world a little more magical and lot more just,” says Andrew Slack, executive director of HPA, a movement that boasts some 100,000 members around the world. A comedian and performer by trade, Mr. Slack founded HPA in 2005 as a means to channel the deep, emotional connection he saw in the generation that was coming-of-age with the Potter stories.

Young people are traditionally the hardest to motivate into real-world action, Slack says. But the boys and girls who cheered for Hermione when she stood up for the rights of tiny house elves, he adds, understand the stern warning from Hogwarts headmaster Dumbledore that the wizarding world will come to rue the indifference and neglect it has heaped upon the magical creatures, which are made to perform the lowest and dirtiest household chores, essentially as slaves.

“It’s not hard to make the leap into the real world from there,” says Slack, because the Potter generation is one that already cares about the environment and understands warnings about paying a future price for “the neglectful and indifferent behavior of today.”

## Partners in the real world

HPA has done everything from helping to bring out the vote in 2008 to raising awareness about human rights violations in Darfur. The group partnered with existing charitable groups working in Haiti to ferry in medical and food supplies after the earthquake.

The most recent undertaking takes its cue from the final Potter book, using the seven horcruxes – magical soul-containing objects that Harry and his friends must destroy to vanquish the evil Lord Voldemort – as vehicles for the seven biggest political issues of the day. In a campaign that just launched, the group wants to put a monthly spotlight on such hot button issues as world hunger, economic and racial inequality, and literacy. The drive will culminate next summer when the second and concluding part of the Deathly Hallows film arrives.

In 2009, Mr. Jenkins embarked on a Macarthur Foundation-funded, three-year study of online participatory culture and its implications for political organizing among youth. The HPA is one of only two groups he is studying in the initial phase, he says, because of its robust growth and ability to effect action. (The other group is Invisible Children, which combats the abduction of children for use as child soldiers in Uganda.)

HPA builds on what Jenkins calls the “proto-activism” of fan groups that have moved TV networks to extend the life of a favorite show or character through massive grassroots online activism. But, he says, what HPA is doing takes this

kind of activism to a more fully realized scale.

By speaking the emotional language of this cohort, Jenkins says, Slack and his group bypass the alienation most young people feel from the “policy wonk” rhetoric that permeates most normal politics.

## **From fiction to reality**

Tapping into beloved figures from pop fiction is nothing new, Jenkins says, adding that he himself, as a young TV viewer, was moved to a greater appreciation of real-world problems through his passion for the original 1960s Star Trek series. As a young man growing up in the segregated South, he says, “I appreciated seeing the multiracial cast.”

Jenkins says the biggest challenge the HPA faces as it moves from its passionate base into partnering with existing organizations to effect real change, “is being taken seriously when you are named for a children’s book.”

However, he says, the fact that HPA took home this year’s second annual Chase Bank Community Giving Contest on Facebook, which awarded a \$250,000 prize, is a sign that the group is gaining the more adult traction that it seeks.

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