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# Mechanisms of Translation: From Online Participatory Cultures to Participatory Politics

by **Neta Kligler-Vilenchik** on June 27, 2016 in **Article**

Abstract

This article focuses on ways that participants in online participatory cultures can come to engage civically, developing their voice into meaningful social change. I propose the notion of "mechanisms of translation" as an explanatory mechanism linking the cultural and the political realm. Through mechanisms of translation, groups can leverage the same spaces, practices, and language that are honed in the context of online participatory cultures and are employed by participants for sociability and enjoyment to extend participatory politics and achieve civic goals. Using the case study of the Nerdfighters, an informal fan community encouraging civic action, I argue for the importance of out-of-school, youth-driven participatory spaces, exemplify how mechanisms of translation build on cultural skills, and consider why the "translation process" may be smoother toward some forms of influence (particularly consensual civics) than others (contentious politics).

Introduction

Young people today have access to a variety of ways to express their voices through digital media. One avenue to do so is through online participatory cultures, in which young people gather around shared interests, find a community of like-minded others, and can embark in collective processes of creative production—classic examples include fan fiction writers, cosplayers, vidders, and more. Such youth-driven spaces are important for young people to practice and hone their voice around topics that interest them and matter to them, often outside the purview and control of parents, teachers, and authoritative adults. Researchers have acknowledged the role of such spaces for a host of outcomes such as collaborative learning, creative cultural expression, and identity formation.[1] This paper considers an additional value of participatory culture spaces—their role as a space where civic learning can happen and where youth voice can be translated into influence.

Empirical research has identified a diverse range of cases in which young people's expressive voices online can develop into influence and lead to meaningful social change.[2] Yet, not all participatory culture groups achieve civic outcomes, even when this is the intent of some of the groups' participants or leaders. While we acknowledge the value of participatory culture for its own sake, not just as an instrumental step towards civic goals, this variability prompts the question: What accounts for stronger or weaker connections between the cultural and the political, between voice and influence?

This article contributes to theory-building on the connection between the cultural and the political by identifying "mechanisms of translation" linking those two realms. Mechanisms of translation refer to the ways that groups can

leverage the same spaces, practices, and language that are honed in the context of online participatory cultures and are employed by participants for sociability and enjoyment to extend participatory politics. Following Cohen and Kahne, I refer to participatory politics as "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern."[3] I argue that while online participatory cultures have the capability to engage young people civically and politically, this transition is not automatic or seamless and depends on the successful employment of translation mechanisms.

The article examines one online participatory culture—the Nerdfighters, an informal fan community encouraging civic action—to exemplify what translation mechanisms between cultural and political participation may look like. The article identifies three mechanisms of translation employed by this group: (1) tapping content worlds and communities, (2) creative production, and (3) forming opinions and discussion. Through a description of these mechanisms, I discuss the broader implications and applications of mechanisms of translation, and question why the "translation process" may be smoother toward some forms of influence (particularly consensual civics) than others (contentious politics).

*From Participatory Culture to Participatory Politics*

The term participatory culture originally grew out of Henry Jenkins's research with fan communities. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins discusses fandom as "a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community."[4] This use of the phrase participatory culture contrasted participation with spectatorship, seeing fans not only as consumers of mass media but also as a creative social community that uses popular culture as a raw material, which they re-appropriate for their own goals.[5]

The rise of digital media has shifted the ability and ease in which participants, not just within fan communities, can take an active role in the co-production of culture. Building on these extended possibilities for cultural participation, Jenkins et al. position participatory culture as referring to a wider cultural trend.[6] In a participatory culture context, all participants are seen as potential producers who can contribute creatively to the group—though this may be an ideal to strive to rather than the lived reality of most groups.[7] Youth-driven participatory culture spaces are extremely valuable to young people, as they provide young people with the opportunity to explore their identity, connect with like-minded others, and develop skills necessary for full participation in a democratic society.[8]

As discussed in the introduction to this special issue, in the past years our University of Southern California-based research team has conducted empirical qualitative work with a range of groups that link participatory cultural participation towards the promotion of civic and political goals, successfully translating voice into influence.[9] These diverse groups have all found ways to leverage their participants' passions and cultural connections towards real-world change. In this research project we found that at a time when many young people feel disenchanted with the political process,[10] harnessing participatory cultures is an important way to connect young people with the political realm in ways that are powerfully resonant for them.

Yet how is the connection between cultural participation and civic and political engagement achieved? The literature lacks a mechanism explaining why participatory culture can be translated into civic influence in some cases, while in others it remains on the level of voice.[11] Pinpointing such mechanisms is crucial if we want to identify what accounts for more and less successful connections, and to be able to scaffold and encourage these linkages.

*Mechanisms of Translation*

The idea behind "mechanisms of translation" is simple. In online participatory cultures, participants engage with a range of practices for fun and sociability. In the "translation" process, these same practices can be leveraged

towards participatory political goals. This process is one of translation, in that ideas, terms, and practices that are legible in one context (e.g., participation in the group for fun) are used to support the comprehension of another, less familiar context (in our case, participatory politics).

The mechanisms of translation diagram (fig. 1) will guide our discussion. The diagram begins with "networked individuals,"[12] young people who interact with other individuals and groups in multiple ways but are *not* (or, perhaps, not yet) members of participatory culture groups. Including networked individuals in the chart reminds us that the majority of youth are not involved in participatory cultures and that many networked individuals engage in participatory politics without belonging to such groups. The groups this article focuses on are ones rooted in participatory culture, the blue area. The orange realm visualizes participatory politics outcomes. These are the behaviors many scholars of democracy would like to see young people engaging in, such as (1) developing civic identities, wherein young people come to see themselves as civic actors with an independent opinion and a sense of agency; (2) exerting voice through political expression, for example through blogs, videos, or creation of humorous memes, (3) engaging in political discussion with peers, off-line or online; and (4) being mobilized (or mobilizing others) to take civic or political action, e.g., signing a petition, voting, or creating a video promoting donation to a non-profit organization.

The green area, representing mechanisms of translation, is at the center of this article. Mechanisms of translation connect the worlds of participatory culture and participatory politics. The three mechanisms described here are the ones that emerged empirically from the case study group; however, this theoretical mechanism has wider applicability as will be further discussed. Importantly, mechanisms of translation do not represent a one-directional transition from participatory culture to participatory politics. Rather, group members actively participate in the cultural realm as they are also seeking political outcomes. While the concept of mechanisms of translation elucidates points of connection between the worlds of popular culture and politics, it also point to challenges and barriers in the translation process.
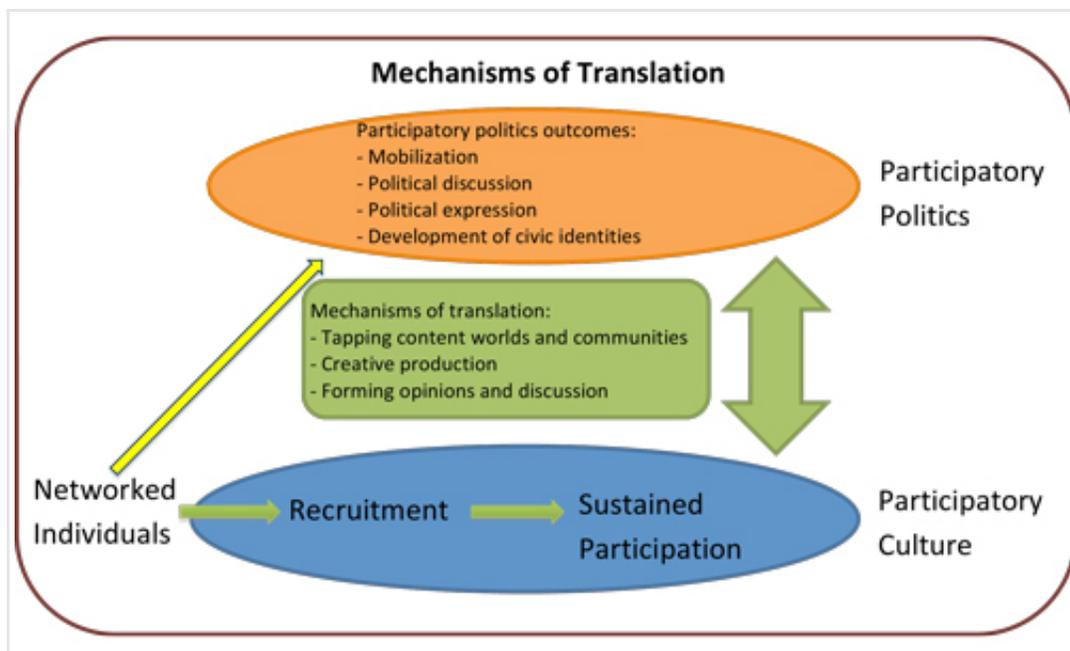


Figure 1. Mechanisms of translation (diagram)

Case Study: The Nerdfighters

The concept of mechanisms of translation emerged from work on three case studies, encompassing more than three years of research and more than forty interviews with participants.[13] In this paper, I focus on one of the three case

studies—the Nerdfighters, an informal group revolving around the YouTube channel of the "VlogBrothers," John and Hank Green. The data for this article is based on in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation, and data analysis. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen American self-identifying Nerdfighters, ages 15–25. In tandem, I conducted participant observation at local and national Nerdfighter events, including monthly meet-ups of a local Nerdfighter group. Online, I followed multiple Nerdfighter forums and Facebook groups on both local and national levels.

The Nerdfighter community is a large one—VlogBrother videos receive hundreds of thousands of views weekly. The "barriers of entry" to being a Nerdfighter are kept intentionally low. As the VlogBrothers explain: "If you want to be a Nerdfighter, you *are* a Nerdfighter."[14]

The pronounced goal of Nerdfighters is to "decrease world suck." When interviewed, John Green explained that, to him, this goal is

> very much at the center of Nerdfighteria, and I don't think that there really is a community without that commitment to decreasing world suck or, as Hank likes to say, "increasing world awesome." I don't think there's a community without its values.[15]

The broad definition of "world suck" leaves much space for individual Nerdfighters to interpret what decreasing it means to them. Sometimes decreasing world suck means being a good person or cheering up a friend. But as a group, Nerdfighters also engage in collective acts of "decreasing world suck" that make them a successful case of translating cultural participation into real-world influence. A few examples include the following:

- Project for Awesome (P4A) is an annual event in which members create videos about their favorite charities and non-profit organizations and post those on YouTube to encourage individual donations for them. In 2013, this endeavor raised more than $870,000 in two days.
- The Nerdfighter community is one of the most prominent communities of lenders on Kiva (https://www.kiva.org), a non-profit organization enabling loans to people without access to traditional banking systems.

In what follows I describe the three mechanisms of translation that enabled scaffolding cultural practices towards civic and political participation in the Nerdfighter case study. The description of each mechanism is divided into two sections. First, I chart how the practice occurs in the group on a cultural level. Next, I consider how the same practice is employed towards participatory politics.

Three Mechanisms of Translation in the Nerdfighter Case

*Tapping Content Worlds and Communities—as a Cultural Practice*

This first section focuses on the ties that bind Nerdfighters—ties that can later be mobilized into civic action. Specifically, the Nerdfighter community is tied through the *content world* of the Vlogbrothers, as well as a wider affiliation as a *community* with shared taste and affinities.

A content world is a "network of characters, settings, situations, and values"[16] that serve as a basis for communal ties and for a collective generation of stories and meanings. For the Nerdfighters, the main content world is the YouTube channel "VlogBrothers," the video blog of John and Hank Green, which currently features two new vlogs a week with topics ranging widely from "How to Make Friends"[17] to "Revolution in Egypt: A 4-minute introduction."[18] Nerdfighters are attracted to this vlog because they appreciate the VlogBrothers' intellect, their smart ways of engaging with topics and encouraging viewers to ponder issues. Nerdfighters feel like the Greens speak to them as equals, respecting their intellectual abilities and maturity while at the same time creating content that is humorous

and relatable. To show their devotion to this content world, Nerdfighters share the ritual of watching all the vlogs dating from 2007, comprising around ninety hours of video.

While the vlogs are the centerpiece, there is a much wider universe of content that Nerdfighters share. They see themselves as being interested in the same things, liking the same popular culture content, and being "nerds":

> That's the reason why we're there. We're all Nerdfighters who have some shared interests, with Doctor Who and Harry Potter, Star Wars and whatever other things. But also like we're all nerds, we've always been nerds who just like to think a lot. I mean, I don't know, it's like you can have honestly intellectual conversations. (Julie, 17)

Nerdfighters are thus connected not only through a specific content world but also as part of a wider "taste community."[19] Daniel Dayan discusses "taste publics," which are "generally focused on works, texts, or programmes; the performance of these publics is generally 'verdictive' (evaluative)."[20] Dayan also describes such groups as "identity publics" because of the ways they forge common identities around shared interests.

The sense of belonging in a community[21] is central for many Nerdfighters. Nerdfighters are mostly in their formative youth years, when peer relationships are a central preoccupation,[22] and for them Nerdfighteria combines an interest-driven group with a friendship-driven one in which the main goal is socializing with peers.[23] This is an especially important goal for Nerdfighters, who often admit to being somewhat introverted, shy, or, in their words, "socially awkward." Discovering the Nerdfighter community online, and for some also in-person, often feels like a safe haven, a place where they can be themselves and make friends with likeminded others.

*Tapping Content Worlds and Communities—Translating Voice into Influence*

Nerdfighters build on the infrastructures of the "taste community" they've constructed toward civic goals. The community has an impressively large reach. At the time of writing, the VlogBrothers' YouTube channel has over 2.7 million subscribers. When the Greens attempt to inform or rally this community, their message has a wide reach and usually a large impact.

Informing the community occurs through the VlogBrothers' many videos which explicitly educate about political issues (e.g., "North Korea: Explained" with almost 2,000,000 views or "Understanding the Refugee Crisis" with over 800,000 views). I've already mentioned how Nerdfighters promote charities and non-profits, including raising over $870,000 in the two days of the Project for Awesome campaign through small individual donations and loaning almost $2,000,000 to small business owners in developing countries through the non-profit Kiva.

The successful translation of Nerdfighters' participation into civic influence cannot be attributed simply to the size of the VlogBrothers' following—if that were the case, we would have expected to see much larger mobilization successes by fans of, say, Katy Perry, who currently holds the record for the most Twitter followers. Even if Perry were to attempt to mobilize her fans, as Jenkins and Shresthova argue,[24] there is a difference between the efforts of celebrities to mobilize fans around their "pet causes" and the more grassroots work of fans who pull on popular culture resources and interpersonal connections to energize their social change efforts.

The Nerdfighters example straddles this line. The "celebrity status" of John and Hank Green is central in their ability to mobilize fans, no doubt about it, but it differs from a model of celebrity activism in which the celebrity's influence is derived mostly from the attention they command.[25] Lucy Bennett[26] explains that the use of social media by celebrities to communicate with fans "directly"—even if it is a performed intimacy[27] that is purposeful and strategic—creates a sense of closeness that enables artists in the digital age to mobilize their fan-base in ways not possible before. This definitely rings true for the Vlogbrothers, who, since their initial daily vlog in 2007, have invested

tremendous efforts in maintaining ongoing communication with the community of Nerdfighters. This occurs not only through regular videoblogging but also through direct interaction with individual Nerdfighters through Twitter, Tumblr, and local gatherings.

Moreover, promoting civic agency is baked into the content world the Vlogbrothers produce. Describing fans of Joss Whedon, Tanya Cochran[28] claims that his ability to promote social issues within his fan base—notably feminism—is rooted in the salient role that strong women play in this television writer's universe. Similarly, Vlogbrother videos very often revolve around civic and political issues, promoting Nerdfighters to consider their own role as civic agents.

Thus, the ability of the Nerdfighter community to mobilize participants toward civic campaigns builds on their feelings of belonging to the taste community, as well as on the work the Green brothers have done to increase participants' sense of civic agency. Based on their sense of agency and their real-world engagement, Nerdfighters go beyond being a mere "audience" to the VlogBrothers and can instead be conceptualized as a "public."[29] When the Vlogbrothers vlog about social issues, they not only raise these issues to the awareness of their community but also prompt a further discussion about them and often offer specific ways to become involved and translate voice into influence, be it through supporting a cause, donating to an organization, or voting in elections.

*Creative Production—as a Cultural Practice*

As Patricia Lange and Mimi Ito[30] note, young people today produce digital music, images, and videos to create meaning "contextualized in their everyday life-worlds." But creative production is not an easy endeavor and requires structural supports. Lange and Ito talk about "trajectories of participation" that scaffold creative production, including stages that move from tinkering and playing with video to acquiring more advanced skills.

Being embedded in the Nerdfighter community can help participants move along these "trajectories." As Inez, a Nerdfighter, explained, the initial step in her own trajectory towards becoming a video blogger was creating a YouTube channel. But she only engaged in the higher bar of creating original content after becoming part of the Nerdfighter community:

> I have my own channel, which I started before I got into VlogBrothers, and I never, I just got it for favoriting videos and liking stuff, commenting and stuff like that. I subscribed to a couple of people, but after I got into VlogBrothers, it's when I started making content. What I do is just vlog about things I guess. (Inez, 16)

Inez's impulse to "just vlog about things" is actually closely inspired by the VlogBrothers' creative production. Inez, like many Nerdfighters, uses the VlogBrothers videos as a role model, for example by keeping vlogs to no longer than four minutes or using some of the VlogBrothers' recurring genres (e.g. "Thoughts from Places," a pensive vlog from away-from-home).

Another notable influence is using the format of the "collab channel," a YouTube channel that is shared by several people. Collab channels help Nerdfighters overcome some of the challenges of video production and decrease barriers to participation. Creating a video involves multiple stages of planning, scripting, filming, editing, posting and tagging. Members of collab channels often set a theme for the week (e.g., "the Oscars" or "your first kiss") that solves the problem of deciding what to talk about. Being assigned a regular day to vlog means you have a responsibility to the other group members and don't want to disappoint them. Some collab channels even impose playful "punishments" for not creating a video on your assigned day, often consisting of dare-like tasks. In this manner, Nerdfighters create a supportive environment for young people to engage in creative production as a way to exert their voice and connect to others in the community.

*Creative Production—Translating Voice into Influence*

If Nerdfighters' production takes its cue from the VlogBrothers videos, they have a good role model for the ways in which informal vlogging can be linked to wider civic and political issues. Many VlogBrother videos discuss public concerns, ranging from social issues pertinent to young people (e.g. environmentalism or LGBTQ rights) to American electoral politics to lesser-known global issues. The VlogBrothers' more politically oriented videos usually start with placing a current event in a broader historical or political context and are often grounded in substantial research. While their vlogs started out quite informally, the VlogBrothers are now assisted by behind-the-scenes research and production work.

To what extent do the Nerdfighters offer this kind of political discussion in their own video production? The structures the Nerdfighter community creates for creative production, including an appreciative audience and norms of spectatorship, has the potential to serve civic purposes as well. Yet examining Nerdfighter community videos shows that political expression (with politics widely defined) is the exception rather than the norm. Most of the Nerdfighters' creative production is *not* conducted around political topics, and political expression is much less common than in the VlogBrothers' videos. As we will see, producing political content within an entertainment context introduces its own challenges.

An interesting example is seventeen-year-old Ruth. At her school, Ruth is active in several clubs and associations, and in her interview she voiced strong opinions, for example about the need for separation of church and state, which in her experience (as a young Jewish-American) is sometimes lacking in US public schools. Ruth is also an active Nerdfighter vlogger, sharing a collab channel with other Nerdfighters. Yet her YouTube channel reveals none of the political interests Ruth expressed in her interview.

When prodded on this absence, Ruth first hesitated and then provided several explanations. Talking about political issues in videos, she explained, is intimidating. Creating a political video necessitates much research and self-confidence, beyond that necessary for "everyday vlogging." Ruth explained:

> I want to make sure that I have the facts, that I was educated on what I was talking about, and that I had really fleshed out what my opinion was before I went to make a video about it.

Moreover, Ruth voiced a sense that YouTube just "isn't the right place" for controversial issues. For her, YouTube is an entertainment medium and using it for political purposes would feel "out of place."

The challenge of translation across contexts Ruth points at is exacerbated in the example of Inez. Inez, a sixteen-year old Mexican-American Nerdfighter, decided to use YouTube for passionate political expression, but the mode of expression she chose clashed with her intended message. In a video on her YouTube channel leading up to the 2012 US election, Inez is exasperated:

> Actually, talking about Catholic schools, oh my god, the elections. Everybody at my school practically hates Obama because they're all Catholic what-evs, and they're all like voting for Republican candidates, and I'm just sitting there saying, are you crazy? Have you actually heard what they're saying?

She discusses conversations she had with a classmate about gays serving in the military, recalls trying to convince her dad to vote for Obama, and saying they should move to Canada if Rick Santorum is elected for president. Yet all throughout this impassioned speech, Inez is engaging in a puzzling act: she is smearing peanut butter all over her face.

On its surface, Inez's video displays the kind of political voice that scholars studying informal political conversation desire in young people's expression. Inez is knowledgeable and passionate about politics, and is willing to voice her opinion. At the same time, the act of smearing peanut butter on her face makes the situation bizarre, if not

laughable. While this action is undecipherable to an outside observer, those in the Nerdfighter community would know that this gesture is an homage to the VlogBrothers. In several videos, John discusses serious topics (the war between Russia and Georgia or the civil war in Sri Lanka) while smearing peanut butter on his face, explaining, "Everyone knows, Hank, the only way to get the internet to pay attention to news is via peanut butter face."[31]

Knowing this context may help make Inez's video somewhat more legible—at least for Nerdfighter viewers—though her reasoning for using the peanut butter was different from John's. In the interview, Inez recalled that a week before, she had watched a Nerdfighter video on another, more well-known channel, where one of the girls talked about her dislike of Santorum and received very harsh comments. "She was just talking about it and she was saying a lot of his quotes. It started a lot of controversy in the comments, and if I'm not mistaken, they lost a bit of subscribers because of that video." Inez felt that using the peanut butter could protect her from such backlash:

> I know that if I talk about it without doing something like putting peanut butter on my face, obviously the same reaction will happen to me because there are a lot of people that are against and for Rick Santorum.…Well, like what Jade did [the girl who did the Santorum video], she tried to do it in her video and tried to get people to see what things he said. Well, I try to do it in my American political situation video with peanut butter. I try to do it in a very funny way; though I was very distressed about how I didn't want him to win and I wanted to move out of the country. Those are means right now that I have found to express things I want other people to see what I think about.

For Inez, smearing peanut butter on her face while discussing serious politics thus served two important purposes. First, as a homage to the VlogBrothers, it is a way to depict an affiliation to the community in a way that is recognized to those in the know. Moreover, Inez used it in order to diffuse the political weight of her speech through humor, aiming to protect herself from harsh criticism often aimed at direct political expression. At the same time, the very mechanisms that made it easier for Inez to express herself within her community are also ones that make her political expression illegible to participants outside of the community, thus denying her political voice the influence it sought.

In this manner, we can see the Nerdfighter community as successful in encouraging creative production on the cultural level by offering support in climbing the ladder of cultural participation and expression. However, when Nerdfighters attempt to translate these skills toward political expression they are often inhibited, as the context and language used for entertainment purposes feel inappropriate or do not properly convey the political message they would like to express to audiences outside the community.

*Forming Opinions and Discussion—as a Cultural Practice*

In online participatory cultures, a lot of the interaction occurs through online discussion of a wide range of issues. For most participants, the Nerdfighter community is first and foremost a social space where they're comfortable expressing their "true selves" amongst friends. Interviewees often described it as a "safe space" (Lucy, 20). Nerdfighters mentioned talking to others in the group about their most intimate problems, such as their parents' divorce, battling depression, or uncertainties around their sexual identities. Such norms of openness and intimacy could also be conducive for vibrant political discussion, but ethnographic research shows that this is not always the case. As Nina Eliasoph explains, in some groups the attempt to create a sense of community makes publicly spirited conversation seem out of place, as something that might disrupt the harmony.[32] Nerdfighters generally are able to create a structure in which norms of openness and friendliness are also conducive as spaces for political discussion, though some factors like the sheltering of participants from harsh reactions and the reliance on commercial platforms may hinder the translation of norms of discussion into vibrant and sustainable political talk.

*Forming Opinions and Discussion—from Voice into Influence*

As Nerdfighters explained to me in interview, there are many potential barriers for young Americans to engage in political discussion. They may feel overwhelmed by the range of issues they are "supposed to know about" and the many viewpoints there are to comprehend. Moreover, they are turned off by political discussion when they feel there is a one-sided attempt at persuasion. Yet for Nerdfighters, being embedded in a context in which political issues are regularly discussed helps overcome such resistances. Collectively, the group identifies specific issues deemed important, and members work together to become more informed about those topics—a more manageable task than knowing "all there is to know." Issues that are raised in Vlogbrother videos, such as LGBTQ rights, voting in both national and local elections, or even the elimination of the wasteful penny, often come to be issues of personal importance to individual Nerdfighters.

Moreover, as a community Nerdfighters have embraced norms of civil discourse. Julie contrasts the ways Nerdfighters hold discussions to the mean-spirited comments often made in the broader YouTube environment:

> I mean, there's obviously still a lot of arguing and things like that. People's viewpoints are so different, but there's definitely a lot more discussion that's civil. (Julie, 17)

When discussions are held on commercial online platforms that are open to all, the diverse audiences may not always abide to such norms of civil discourse. John Green explains how the VlogBrothers take active steps, like deleting comments and banning offensive participants, to maintain a safe space for Nerdfighter conversations:

> The other thing is to make the comment section of the website, of wherever you are, to make it safe, as safe as you can. Obviously, you can't make anything completely safe but you know, we just don't allow racism and we just don't allow homophobia or attacks on trans-people or any of that stuff.[33]

Feeling safe is important as these youth express themselves politically, especially around sensitive issues such as sexual identity. Yet previous research on participatory culture groups argued that the ability to anticipate and rebut counter arguments is a crucial civic practice.[34] As they encourage civil exchanges and shelter their participants from harsh reactions, groups characterized by participatory culture practices may also avoid more contentious moments that would prepare members for broader political discussions among people who do not share their views.

In addition, the reliance on commercial online platforms as a space for discussion leaves participants vulnerable as such platforms alter the rules of participation based on business considerations. The Nerdfighters faced a recent challenge as Ning, a small online service for the creation of social networks that has been in use as a gathering space since the community's early years, abruptly raised its usage fee. As the Nerdfighter community has largely migrated away from this website towards newer platforms such as Tumblr or Facebook, the Green brothers opted to close the Nerdfighter Ning, which also meant an erasure of the content on Nerdfighters' Ning pages. This space would be dearly missed by some Nerdfighters, as this Nerdfighter and volunteer Ning administrator shared in an open letter to Hank Green:

> When we received the death sentence, as I've come to call it, I was heartbroken. While I don't necessarily need this place as much as I once did, it's important to me. Talking to people, comforting people. Discussing everything from politics to languages… We see the importance of our little internet nest, we know what's being taken away.[35]

Nerdfighters thus offer participants safe spaces for discussion, in which civil discussion and politeness are the norm. Due to the challenges of political conversation, creating such an atmosphere is important as these youth take first steps to express themselves politically, especially around sensitive issues. At the same time, sheltering participants from harsh reactions may leave members feeling less equipped to engage in contentious political discussions with diverse others.[36] Moreover, the reliance on commercial platforms for online discussion may leave the community

vulnerable to abrupt changes and closures, which may have noticeable effects on the community's ability to discuss personal, cultural, and political issues.

## Discussion

Participatory culture spaces provide young people with opportunities to develop their identity, connect to like-minded others, and develop key skills for participation in today's society.[37] Whereas formal education efforts often have clear civic goals but do not always succeed in catching the attention or interest of young people, participatory culture presents a space where youth are active, engaged participants.

Increasingly, scholars are also interested in ways that engagement with popular and participatory culture can promote political goals.[38] However, the transition from the cultural to the civic and political realms isn't automatic or seamless. Mechanisms of translation alert us to the ways that the spaces, practices, and language that young people use on the cultural level for sociability and enjoyment can be harnessed toward participatory politics.

The Nerdfighter community exemplifies successful translation of cultural participation to achieve real-world influence—though it also helps us recognize moments where the translation breaks down. Specifically, the translation process seems easier for purposes of consensual civics. Nerdfighters feel comfortable using their spaces, practices and language to support consensual charities and non-profits, but employing these towards politics—often perceived as contentious, risky, or "dirty"—is a higher bar that requires further, more active support.

Considering these mechanisms contributes to wider theory building on the relation between culture and politics. We would expect to find mechanisms of translation in play across a wide range of groups that seek to connect spheres in which young people are active and passionate to the civic and political realm. Yet we'd expect to find differences in the precise mechanisms from group to group, based on the social and cultural practices prevalent in that group. Identifying mechanisms of translation may help educators and organizers attempting to mobilize group participants toward civic goals. Moreover, identifying "translation gaps" points us at the areas where more work is required in order to successfully translate voice into influence.

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## About Neta Kligler-Vilenchik

Neta Kligler-Vilenchik is Assistant Professor of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her work focuses on civic and political engagement in the context of the changing media environment, especially among young people. For several years, she was a member of the Media, Activism & Participatory Politics (MAPP) project, based at the University of Southern California (USC). Her Ph.D. (USC, 2015) examined intersections between popular culture, and civic engagement, and the concept of alternative citizenship models. Neta has published work in leading communication journals, including New Media & Society, International Journal of Communication, Social Media + Society, and Computers in Human Behavior. She is an author on the book "By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism," published by NYU Press.

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