

Article

***Divergent* Fan Forums and Political Consciousness Raising**

Lauren Levitt

Department of Communication, Tulane University, USA; llevitt@tulane.edu

Submitted: 16 July 2021 | Accepted: 25 November 2021 | Published: 29 March 2022

Abstract

This article conducts a thematic analysis of 40 threads related to sociopolitical issues on two *Divergent* fan forums, one on Divergent Fans and another on Divergent Wiki, to determine whether these forums raise political consciousness, especially among young people. As scholars of civic imagination show, popular culture narratives may lead to the ability to imagine a better future. Utopian narratives in particular facilitate this process in a dialectical way by presenting us with an impossible world, and dystopian narratives may operate in a similarly dialectical fashion by offering a negative example or warning. Analysis of posts related to utopia and dystopia, the story world versus the real world, historical and contemporary parallels, governmental reform, and non-normative sexuality reveals that participants on *Divergent* fan forums discuss real-world issues and sometimes imagine a better world, but this does not conclusively raise political consciousness. We can account for these civic successes and failures by considering Dahlgren's (2009) six elements of civic cultures: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices/skills, and identities. While fan knowledge, trust, and spaces are strong, and fan identities can be experienced as relatively static, values and practices/skills are important areas for intervention to cultivate political consciousness among young people. Critical civic education at the secondary school level could foster democratic values, and teaching media literacy and political discussion skills could improve students' ability to think critically about entertainment narratives.

Keywords

civic cultures; civic imagination; dystopian narrative; fandom; political consciousness

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Digital Child- and Adulthood: Risks, Opportunities, and Challenges" edited by Claudia Riesmeyer (LMU Munich), Arne Freya Zillich (Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF), and Thorsten Naab (German Youth Institute).

© 2022 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

As a number of scholars have shown, fandom of fictional narratives may lead to engagement with real-world issues and can even result in fan activism (Brough & Shresthova, 2012; Cochran, 2012; Duncombe, 2012; Hinck, 2012, 2016; Jenkins, 2012, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2016, 2020; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2016a, 2016b; Kliger-Vilenchik et al., 2012; Mehta, 2012; Phillips, 2016; Shresthova & Jenkins, 2016; Stein, 2002; Wilkinson, 2012). One of the ways this occurs is through "the civic imagination," or "the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions; one cannot change the world without imagining what a better world might look like" (Jenkins et al., 2020, p. 5; Jenkins et al., 2016). By allowing us to imagine the

world differently, popular culture narratives can be the first step toward changing it. According to Duncombe (2012), the link between fandom and activism is dialectical; utopian stories occur in a "no-place" that invites us to imagine alternatives to both the present and the utopian world. Following Klein (2017), Levitt (2020) posits that dystopian fiction serves a hortatory purpose, acting in a similarly dialectical way to utopian fiction. Hintz and Ostry (2013) and Basu et al. (2013) also point out that dystopian narratives warn us against a course of action to prevent the outcomes that occur in the narrative universe. Dystopian media, like Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy, take place in a world that is not only impossible, but undesirable. By showing us what we do not want to happen, it can help us think about how to prevent the real world from becoming like the story world.

Early scholarship on civic engagement among fans focused on fan-organized campaigns to either prevent shows from being canceled or to lobby for changing representations in entertainment media (Jenkins, 1992, 2006). More recent studies have examined overtly political forms of activism such as petition-signing and letter-writing campaigns, as well as the use of symbols and images from popular culture by traditional activist movements (Jenkins, 2012; Levitt, 2020; Mehta, 2012; Phillips, 2016; Wilkinson, 2012). Others have written about how fans become politically engaged through everyday talk (Hinck, 2012; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2016a, 2016b; Stein, 2002). This article contributes to this literature on political engagement among fans by investigating whether discussion on internet fan forums can raise political consciousness through civic imagination.

Internet fan forums are places where fans of a particular “content world,” what Jenkins (2012, Section 1.9) describes as “the network of characters, settings, situations, and values that forms the basis for the generation of a set of stories,” can come together to discuss these stories online. As a result, *Divergent* fan forums may assist in raising political consciousness, particularly among young fans. Given that fandom of dystopian narratives may lead to civic action through a dialectical and discursive process allowing fans to imagine a better world, this article asks to what extent discussions on *Divergent* Fans and *Divergent* Wiki forums encourage fans to (a) deliberate real-world issues raised in the *Divergent* content world, (b) imagine a better world, and (c) develop political consciousness surrounding these issues?

2. Civic Cultures

In this article, I rely on the theoretical framework of Swedish communication and media studies scholar Dahlgren (2009), who considers civic engagement from a socio-cultural perspective. Dahlgren maintains that everyday talk has the potential to become political under certain conditions. He identifies six elements or factors of civic cultures that allow for political engagement to emerge: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices/skills, and identities.

According to Dahlgren (2009), knowledge refers not only to information but to ways of acquiring information, including various types of literacy. However, as he puts it, “It is in the process of appropriation of information—integrating it in relation to one’s existing frames of reference and thereby making it personally meaningful—that information becomes ‘translated’ into knowledge” (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 109). Nevertheless, Dahlgren warns that although certain epistemologies may be important for the identity and solidarity of marginalized groups, they may not be effective in mainstream politics. For example, ways of knowing drawing on popular culture may be considered inadequately “serious” by mainstream political standards (Jenkins et al., 2020). This may

be the case for fans on *Divergent* fan forums, whose emotional investment in a fictional narrative and informal modes of expression may cause their political talk to be dismissed as frivolous.

When Dahlgren (2009) writes of values, he specifically refers to *democratic* values such as “equality, liberty, justice, solidarity, and tolerance” as well as “openness, reciprocity, discussion, and responsibility/accountability” (p. 111). Sometimes, however, democratic values can come in conflict with one another, which is why the ability to compromise is important. As Dahlgren states, “To be able to thrash out such conflicts without violence, striving for some practical compromise in situations where consensus is elusive, is a key task for a democratic society” (2009, p. 111). According to Kliger-Vilenchik (2016a, p. 112), “[S]hared identity as fans creates an environment where heterogeneous discussion and disagreement can be achieved in a civil manner” and, as we can see in the following study, fans on *Divergent* fan forums demonstrate skill at managing such a lack of consensus in non-violent ways when key values clash, for example when discussing controversial topics like non-normative sexuality.

Dahlgren (2009) also maintains that *thin* trust, “the generalized honesty and expectations of reciprocity that we accord people we don’t know personally but with whom we feel we can have a satisfactory exchange,” is critical for democracy (pp. 112–113). He asserts, “Without a degree of thin trust, collective political action becomes impossible, undercut by suspicion even toward citizens of similar persuasions” (p. 113). As Kliger-Vilenchik (2016a) suggests, such thin trust is characteristic of fan communities, including *Divergent* fan forums where strangers come together to discuss their common interests in an environment with relatively low conflict in comparison to online spaces with wider appeal, such as the comments sections of news articles and YouTube videos, or political discussions on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, Dahlgren (2009) indicates that voluntary group membership builds trust among group members, which is true on *Divergent* fan forums.

Dahlgren (2009) discusses both physical and virtual spaces for civic interaction, and he lauds the internet for offering the opportunity for increased political participation: “[T]he internet offers its users not only vast communicative spaces in which to travel, visit, and participate, it also allows them to collectively construct new spaces, by launching Web sites, news groups, blogs, *discussion forums*, wikis, and so on,” (p. 116, emphasis added). *Divergent* fan forums are one such user-created space with the potential to facilitate civic engagement.

Dahlgren (2009) classifies “communicative competencies,” including digital literacy, as important skills that allow citizens to develop democratic practices, and he maintains that building and using spaces also count as civic practices (p. 117). Although voting is often considered the most important democratic practice, Dahlgren

stresses the significance of civic talk for connecting issues to political ideologies. Participants on *Divergent* fan forums evidence a high degree of digital literacy, which allows them to create these virtual spaces and utilize them for civic ends. This occurs primarily through the discussion of sociopolitical issues, although it does not always lead to the development of a coherent ideology, as Dahlgren suggests it can.

Lastly, group identities allow members to experience civic agency. This includes not only more malleable identities such as political affiliation, but also relatively more stable ones like race and gender. Group identities, Dahlgren (2009) proposes, allow for an affective relationship to politics that can increase political efficacy. However, because civic identity is so marginal for young people today, Dahlgren (2009) recommends expanding our definition of citizenship: “[O]ur definition of the political realm could be defined in broader terms, to accord political significance to [young people’s] personal experiences” (p. 120). Fans on *Divergent* fan forums are actively engaged in broadening the definition of the political from explicitly political acts such as campaigning and voting to more implicitly political ones like discussing political issues, thus strengthening their civic identities through their affective relationship to politics. Group identity provides a feeling of empowerment (that one has an active stake in and influence on politics), but this is not all. As Kliger-Vilenchik (2016a) implies, affinity also helps build trust among group members, and membership in the *Divergent* fan community builds trust among fans, in addition to giving them a sense of civic agency.

3. *Divergent* and Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

The *Divergent* series is an American young adult (YA) dystopian trilogy written by Veronica Roth. The series, comprised of *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), *Insurgent* (Roth, 2012), and *Allegiant* (Roth, 2013), is set in a post-apocalyptic Chicago, where society is divided into five factions based on personality traits: Dauntless (braveness), Amity (kindness), Erudite (intelligence), Abnegation (selflessness), and Candor (honesty). At the age of 16, citizens must choose their faction after taking an aptitude test, which can sort most people easily. However, those who display propensities toward more than one faction are deemed “Divergent,” which is stigmatized because, if one is unable to pass initiation for the faction one has joined, one becomes “factionless” and enters into a state of total societal rejection and abandonment. The plot follows a young Abnegation woman, Beatrice Prior (or Tris), who joins Dauntless after testing Divergent. In *Divergent*, Tris and her love interest Tobias discover a plot by Erudite to use Dauntless to attack Abnegation and take over the city. In *Insurgent*, Tris and Tobias lead a revolt against Erudite, and in *Allegiant*, after escaping from Chicago, Tris and Tobias learn that the city has been isolated from the outside world in a US government experiment to increase the number of “genetically

pure” Divergents after failed attempts at genetic modification led to a civil war between the “genetically pure” and the “genetically damaged.” Tris and Tobias then return to Chicago to prevent a war from breaking out among the factions. In 2014, Lionsgate released a film adaptation of *Divergent* (Fisher et al., 2014), followed by *Insurgent* in 2016 (Fisher et al., 2015). *Allegiant* (Fisher et al., 2016) was to be released in two parts, *Allegiant* and *Ascendant*, but after *Allegiant* did poorly at the box office in 2016, *Ascendant* was scheduled to be released as a made-for-TV movie before being canceled entirely.

As science fiction studies scholar Booker (2013a) points out, Marxist literary theory has long posited science fiction as a genre with the potential to critique politics and challenge the status quo (p. vii). Although continuing with contemporary Marxist scholars such as Frederick Jameson, this tradition of science fiction criticism began with Darko Suvin’s 1979 work *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, which attributes science fiction’s political efficacy to its production of estrangement (as cited in Booker, 2013b, pp. 4–9). Furthermore, Booker (1994) argues that dystopian fiction may be especially powerful as a means of social criticism.

Hintz and Ostry (2013) and Basu et al. (2013) emphasize that dystopia is a subset of utopia in which utopian ideals have gone terribly awry. Moreover, they both note that YA dystopian fiction addresses social and political issues like environmental destruction, inequality, and totalitarianism and that these stories can develop political awareness among young people by introducing them to and/or helping them think about these issues in a new way. Similarly, Blackford (2013) and Connors and Shepard (2013) are both interested in the ways in which YA dystopian fiction may challenge the status quo. Blackford (2013) maintains that it allows young people to reflect on complicated social issues while making operations of power visible. Connors and Shepard (2013), on the other hand, are more cynical. They assert that it is difficult for YA dystopian literature to offer social criticism due to generic restraints such as imperatives to uphold normative values and offer hope, and because of the genre’s didacticism and its status as a commodity. However, they also propose that early 21st century YA literature “may reflect the prevailing sociopolitical climate in the United States,” and show how social and political institutions prevent people from achieving happiness (Connors & Shepard, 2013, p. 119). Ultimately, they conclude that YA literature, including dystopian narratives, “can provide sufficient inroads to explore conflicting ideology” (p. 121).

YA dystopian narratives may facilitate political engagement by encouraging the discussion of sociopolitical issues raised in these stories. Common themes include wealth inequality, governmentality (including surveillance and media manipulation to control citizen behavior), environmentalism, and gender and sexuality (Levitt, 2020). According to Kliger-Vilenchik (2016b), informal discussion is one of the “mechanisms

of translation” that transform cultural into civic participation. Discussing the issues raised by YA dystopian novels or films may allow fans, particularly younger people, to develop political consciousness, often an important step toward political action. As both Hodgin (2016) and James et al. (2016) maintain, online discussion of civic and political issues is essential for young people to move from voice, or self-expression, toward influence in the political process, and for this reason, they both advocate for digital media literacy education. This may be because, as some proponents of the “mobilization thesis” claim, the internet can lead to political mobilization, particularly among young people, through the development of certain political competencies such as rational discussion and respectful listening (Dahlberg, 2001; Hirzalla et al., 2011; Lupia & Philpot, 2005; Stanley & Weare, 2004). Although it is important to note that not all political action leads to progressive ends, *critical* discussion of YA dystopian narratives may be fruitful for fostering social-justice-oriented political engagement.

Previous scholarship on the *Divergent* series has focused on the texts themselves, rather than fan responses. For example, Basu (2013), analyzing the first novel and its associated marketing strategies, argues that *Divergent’s* static conceptualization of identity reflects “YA dystopia’s innate conservatism” (p. 27), while Cochran and Prickett (2014, p. 26) perform a textual analysis of the entire series to frame Tris as a “modern dystopian heroine” who challenges traditional depictions of femininity. Yet, following from Marxist scholars who examine the ability of (dystopian) science fiction to provide social criticism, and from scholars of YA literature who consider the political potential of YA (dystopian) fiction, I am interested in the ways that YA dystopian narratives explore contemporary sociopolitical issues, as well as the ways in which fans take up these issues or fail to take them up.

4. Methods

Because I was interested in whether YA dystopian fiction could raise political consciousness among fans, I conducted a thematic analysis of 40 threads collected from two active *Divergent* fan forums, Divergent Fans and Divergent Wiki, in December 2015. This was close to the height of *Divergent’s* popularity, shortly after the film adaptation of *Insurgent* grossed over \$297 million worldwide, and these were the only active *Divergent* fan forums at the time (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). Because I was interested in political discussion rather than fan socializing or trivia about *Divergent*, I selected posts from the General Discussion and Other Discussions forums in Divergent Fans, which were more likely to include discussion of sociopolitical issues, and I excluded posts from the Welcome forum, specific book forums, and film forums. For the same reason, on Divergent Wiki I selected threads from the general discussion board only. Because I wanted to know how the political themes

of *Divergent* are taken up by fans, I collected threads dealing with sociopolitical issues, topics either explicitly or implicitly related to society and politics, such as government, social structure, and gender. I included even threads that were only tangentially related to social or political issues, such as threads about similar YA dystopian novels, because these threads often contained discussion about the social and/or political aspects of these content worlds. Again, because I was not interested in fan trivia or socializing, on both forums I excluded threads that were not even tangentially political, such as threads about minor plot points or threads soliciting personality information from fans.

Threads consisted of an original post of approximately several sentences to several paragraphs in length, usually asking a question to other fans. These posts were followed by a variable number of comments responding to either the original post or other comments made on the post. Seventeen of these threads came from Divergent Wiki (https://divergent.fandom.com/wiki/Divergent_Wiki), while 23 came from Divergent Fans (<https://divergentfans.net>). This constituted approximately three percent of the threads on each forum. Both forums were public, fully accessible without a password or creating a user account, and all user handles are pseudonyms. Where characteristics of users such as age or gender are given, this information was self-disclosed in the analyzed threads, although such demographic information was scarce. Although this data remains valid for the purposes of studying the impact of fandom on politics, it is important to note that since 2015 there has been a significant rise in young people’s political engagement in North America around issues such as gun control, climate change, and police brutality.

Because of the small sample size, I coded the data by hand, without the use of qualitative data analysis software. The first cycle of coding consisted of sorting these threads into four emergent categories suggested by the data: government and society, genre, gender and sexuality, and posts from other researchers soliciting data about the psychological and political impact of YA dystopian fiction on fans. The content on Divergent Fans and Divergent Wiki were similar, so I removed three posts from Divergent Wiki that closely replicated posts from Divergent Fans and used them to intuitively develop second-cycle coding methods including theming the data, in-vivo coding, magnitude coding, versus coding, and value coding (Saldaña, 2013). These coding methods were selected based on the characteristics of the data rather than dictated by the research question. For magnitude coding, I marked whether the poster had a positive or negative attitude toward a particular aspect of the content world. For versus coding, I noted when posters explicitly compared two different YA dystopian narratives. Finally, for values coding, I attempted to infer from posts what political values posters held. For example, in a post positively comparing “our world” to the faction system, the political values of the poster included

choice, opportunity, and freedom. After analyzing the remaining threads using these coding methods, I conducted axial coding to create a coherent and wholistic coding schema, organizing the prior codes into eleven categories: utopia/dystopia, the story world versus the real world, historical/contemporary parallels, government reform, the factions, moral of the story, conflict of the story, intertextuality, readers, sexuality, and other scholarship. The following analysis of these 37 threads shows how fans discuss sociopolitical issues relating to the content world of *Divergent* focusing on conversations about five topics: utopia/dystopia, the story world versus the real world, historical/contemporary parallels, government reform, and non-normative sexuality.

5. Results

5.1. Did Fans Discuss Real-World Issues?

Fans on both fan forums discussed real-world sociopolitical issues raised in the content world of *Divergent*. This occurred in all analyzed threads. For example, fans discussed sociopolitical issues in their debate over whether *Divergent* is a utopia or a dystopia.

Although generically classified as *dystopian* fiction, fans lacked consensus about whether *Divergent's* narrative world was utopian or dystopian. This may partially stem from some overlap between the terms themselves; while “utopia” indicates any imaginary world, “dystopia,” a subcategory of utopia, is an undesirable imaginary world (Basu et al., 2013; Hintz & Ostry, 2013; Levitt, 2020). Further, as Jenkins et al. (2020) remark:

Most utopian writing contains at least an implicit critique of the current realities that its alternatives hope to displace. By the same token, most dystopian writing contains a utopian alternative—often, in the form of a resistance group struggling to transform the society. (p. 17)

Two posts from *Divergent* Fans specifically asked whether *Divergent* depicted a utopian society or a dystopian nightmare, offering an example of “cultural acupuncture”—what Jenkins (2012, Section 0.1) defines as “the practice of mapping the fictional content world onto real-world concerns”—that can potentially lead to civic engagement and the development of a political identity. Some fans responded that the world of *Divergent* was a dystopia, and they argued that the government is not a true democracy, personal freedom is circumscribed, and categorizing people into groups is negative. One fan wondered about labor conditions in the *Divergent* universe: What were the working conditions like, and were there limits on the number of hours that people could work? On the other hand, some fans saw the world of *Divergent* as a utopia, and these fans emphasized the benefits of being part of a community that the faction system could provide. Others pointed out that

at the beginning of the story there is “peace and happiness.” In discussing whether the world of *Divergent* was utopian or dystopian, fans shared common *knowledge* about the story and about the meanings of “utopia” and “dystopia.” However, different groups of fans expressed different civic *values*. Whereas fans who characterized the story world as a dystopia valued equality, freedom, and choice, those who viewed it as a utopia valued security, stability, and community.

Similarly, fans discussed socio-political issues when comparing the story world to the real world. Three threads on the *Divergent* Fans forum specifically asked what fans thought of the faction system, and one of these directly asked whether it was preferable to “our government,” another example of cultural acupuncture (Jenkins, 2012). Again, fans disagreed on this point.

Regarding the story world, fans said that positives included a sense of community and more freedom to choose your life path. One fan said that even the factionless had a sense of community, “like a big family.” Fans maintained that the faction system would satisfy everyone because you could “change your life” for free rather than by paying for higher education, and one fan employed the discourse of meritocracy to argue that you would not be poor unless you deserved it, unlike in our own world. Others mentioned that the faction system was simpler than ours and “well put together,” and the government was seen as “more open to [people’s] ideas.” Aptitude tests, one fan said, would eliminate “argument between political parties.”

By contrast, some fans saw factionlessness, and the poverty and homelessness associated with it, as one of the main drawbacks of the faction system. Other drawbacks of the story world included a corrupt government and a perceived lack of freedom, and fans held categorizing people to be negative. Some fans viewed the government as totalitarian and thought that people had less personal choice in the story world than in our own. One fan thought that it was “scary” to have to get permission from the government to leave the country, and others pointed out that the government in the story performs experiments on and keeps secrets from its citizens. Finally, one fan pointed out that the world of *Divergent* was extremely violent.

Although some fans saw the real world as offering more choice, including more opportunities and more freedom to “pursue whatever we want,” other fans saw “our government” as corrupt, and they pointed to the wars in our own world as an example. One fan said that the US government was too complicated. Another pointed out that “our government” keeps lots of secrets from us and has even performed experiments on its own citizens. Government debt is high, fans articulated, and politics is divisive. Politicians are power-hungry, elections are “too negative,” and the election process is confusing, fans claimed. Finally, they asserted that, just as in the story world, there is poverty and hatred in the real world, and real-world media is too violent.

The difference in values determining whether one saw *Divergent* as utopian or dystopian also determined whether fans preferred the story world to the real world, but fans surprisingly held many values in common. Both groups of fans valued equal opportunity, freedom, and peace, and they both desired a transparent, honest, and fair government. By contrasting the real world to the story world in these threads, fans were able to identify what was positive and negative about both worlds, implying the potential for political consciousness to develop through cultural acupuncture.

Fans also discussed sociopolitical issues when drawing historical and contemporary parallels between the content world and the real world, representing a third case of cultural acupuncture (Jenkins, 2012). One fan drew on protests against the Vietnam War to argue that in the real world the citizens of Chicago would riot against the oppressive faction system, while others compared the faction system to the caste system in India and the factionless to the untouchables. Furthermore, fans linked the dystopian world of *Divergent* to the contemporary world. For instance, one “acafan”—or researcher identifying as a fan—of YA dystopian literature posted a thread asking a series of questions about fans’ interest in *Divergent* and dystopian novels more generally. She then asked participants a series of follow-up questions about YA dystopian novels. In these online interviews, teenager AmityHeart revealed that dystopian plots make her think, “This could happen if we don’t change how we live/act,” and 25-year-old Heather Amity said, “The settings often have things that remind us of our current lives. We can see how our current world could turn into the new dystopian world.” For both AmityHeart and Heather Amity, YA dystopian narratives help them identify sociopolitical problems in the real world and serve as a warning about what could come to pass if action is not taken.

Moreover, two posts on the *Divergent* Fans forum specifically addressed governmental reform, one relating to the US Constitution and the other to the faction system, yet another example of cultural acupuncture (Jenkins, 2012). In response to a thread asking, “Which government would you prefer [the faction system or the US government]?” SallyCrockerWriter suggested reforming the faction system: “Expand the 50-member council to 60 members, including 10 for each faction and 10 factionless, each elected by their own colleagues.” Additionally, in the Other Discussions section, Paul B. Shriver offered a rather elaborate suggestion for revising the US Constitution by replacing the three branches of government with five “Arms:” a security arm, an education arm, an administrative arm, a legislative arm, and a supreme courts arm.

Finally, readers commented on the sexual politics of *Divergent*, paying attention to the representation of lesbian and gay sexualities. Fans extensively discussed two characters with non-normative sexualities, Lynn and Amar. Lynn is implicitly coded as lesbian, whereas Amar

is explicitly gay. One thread on the *Divergent* Fans forum asks, “Is Lynn a lesbian!???” Most responded yes or probably, but two fans insisted that she is not a lesbian. These fans felt strongly about Lynn’s sexuality, which they expressed through punctuation and capitalization, but the thread surprisingly did not turn into a “flame war.” Although fans held different values about non-normative sexuality, an appeal to civility sufficed to shut down homophobic speech. As Dahlgren (2009) indicates, this ability to discuss an issue about which there is a lack of consensus is a fundamental democratic skill.

Likewise, three separate threads on *Divergent* Wiki concern Amar’s sexuality. The thread “I had no idea Amar was gay” begins with the post:

When I found out Amar was gay, I was just like, whoa. Didn’t see that coming.

Please don’t take this as something saying I am against homosexuals because I am not. I don’t believe in being homosexual, but I have nothing against people who are.

Some fans expressed surprise about Amar’s sexuality, while other fans pointed out the implicit homophobia of the original post and replies expressing “shock.” This thread too remained surprisingly respectful, despite the strong feelings of some of the participants, particularly considering that it was the most contentious thread analyzed on either forum. This confirms Kliger-Vilenchik’s (2016a) assertion that being a member of a fandom provides fans with a safe space for discussing controversial sociopolitical issues, including the ethics and visibility of queer desire. Although fans had varying degrees of knowledge about the text and different values about sexuality, they were able to cultivate the practice of civic discussion because of their shared identity as *Divergent* fans. This shared identity inspired the trust necessary to engage in civil discussion on a controversial topic, an important political skill according to Dahlgren (2009).

5.2. Did Fans Imagine a Better World?

Fans on *Divergent* fan forums were sometimes able to imagine a better world. This occurred in threads debating whether *Divergent* was utopian or dystopian and threads discussing governmental reform. Some fans saw the world of *Divergent* as simultaneously utopian *and* dystopian. One fan described the society as a “false utopia” and another as a “utopia gone bad.” While identifying the *Divergent* series as either utopian *or* dystopian did not lead to imagining a better way of organizing society, characterizing it as both utopian *and* dystopian did facilitate the dialectical process described by Duncombe (2012), by which fans were able to imagine a better world. Fans considered the ways that the world of *Divergent* might be improved, for example by modifying the faction system so that people chose their

faction later in life, or by eliminating factionlessness. They took the positive elements that they saw in the content world such as peace, security, and a sense of belonging and modified the system to eliminate its negative aspects such as premature categorization and severe inequality. This dialectical process allowed fans to imagine a world based in but more perfect than the world of *Divergent*. As mentioned previously, fans characterizing *Divergent* as either a utopia or a dystopia held different values (security, stability, and community versus equality, freedom, and choice), and fans who could synthesize these two sets of values were able to transcend the utopia/dystopia binary and imagine a better alternative to the story world. This ability to listen to alternative viewpoints and come to a compromise is a key political skill according to Dahlgren (2009), and in this case, it emerges out of the fan practice of discussing the content world of *Divergent*.

Suggestions for governmental reform also indicated an ability to imagine a better world. In Paul B. Shriver's recommendation to reorganize the US government into five "Arms," each Arm would have "kill power" over two other Arms and would be "subject to the kill power" of two Arms, effectively expanding the current system of checks and balances. While the connection between this reform and the *Divergent* series remained implicit, it is likely that this fortified system of checks and balances would help prevent or counteract the government corruption that so many fans identified in both the world of *Divergent* and our own world. This demonstrates that Duncombe's (2012) dialectical utopia thesis can apply to dystopia as well. Dystopian narratives can help us imagine a better world through a dialectical process whereby the undesirable elements of the dystopian world serve as a negative example to be avoided (Levitt, 2020). Fans who make suggestions for governmental reform share knowledge about both the content world and the political process. They also hold democratic values and have the intellectual skills required to imagine political alternatives. These skills, values, and knowledge enable them to think dialectically about the dystopian world of *Divergent*. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that although this thread had been posted nearly a year before, no one had replied to it, showing that this type of political engagement with *Divergent* is highly irregular.

5.3. Did Fans Develop Political Consciousness?

Despite the potential for cultural acupuncture to raise political consciousness through civic imagination, there was little concrete evidence this occurred on *Divergent* fan forums. By comparing the real world to the story world, fans were able to identify what was positive and negative about both worlds, but they failed to make connections between the content world and the real world. For instance, fans did not interpret the corruption of the factions as a reflection or allegory of the corruption of "our government," nor did they draw a link between

the secrets that both governments keep from their citizens or the experiments that they perform on them. Similarly, they did not associate the poverty, homelessness, and violence of the story world with these things in the real world. Since fans did not make connections between the content world and the real world, these threads did not appear to raise political consciousness about these issues.

Further, in their online interviews, both AmityHeart and Heather Amity claimed that reading YA dystopian literature had no impact on their political views or how they watched the news. AmityHeart did admit that dystopian novels helped her think about politics:

For me, dystopian novels are there for me to read and to enjoy and, to a certain extent, ponder the politics woven into the storyline. But they don't have any effect on my political views, no, and not on the way I watch the news either.

However, Heather Amity denied that YA dystopian novels impact her political views because she does not follow politics.

In these online interviews, fans exhibited the critical thinking skills necessary to draw comparisons between the world of *Divergent* and the real world. Yet, the identities of these fans might explain why, despite having the skills necessary for political reflection, the *Divergent* series is ultimately not politicizing for them. Dahlgren (2009, p. 94) indicates that the three major components of collective action frames—"patterns of meaning and belief that can legitimate social movement engagement"—are a sense of injustice, identity, and agency. Heather Amity recounted a story about vacationing in Egypt during the start of the Arab Spring. She maintained that the uprisings, like YA dystopian narratives, failed to engage her politically because of her privileged subject position:

I hold no special place in my heart for Egypt, my family does not come from there, I do not have a tie to them, I just happened to be on vacation at the wrong time. I remember coming back to the hotel after spending hours circling the city trying to find ways back from the pyramids. Upon reaching the hotel I saw everyone's panicked faces the worry that set in on them, I didn't know what was going on, and when I asked all I got was "revolution." That night I watched a government building burn to the ground, and heard men marching on the streets. I believe it was two days later when I was free to leave the hotel again, my first place, the embassy. I walked across the bridge of lions facing Taher square and was met with guns to the ready and soldier's surrounded by wire and sand bags [sic]....We were told the embassy was closed and to return to our hotel, as we turned to leave a fully loaded tank turned the corner and followed us through the space between the buildings. As I recall

these memories, the fear that was there isn't present any longer, it more excitement [sic]. In my mind I see it as a TV show, something that wasn't real that didn't really affect my life. It wasn't profound though I know it was, I just don't feel it. I have never had that kind of experience before in real life, (and hope to never have it again) it's now just a story void of anything but entertainment.

Heather Amity's lack of empathy for the Egyptian people precluded a sense of injustice, and her lack of agency in the situation may also have contributed to her political apathy in this case. In the absence of a collective action frame, living through such an event had little impact on Heather Amity, her experience likened to a media spectacle, pure simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994). Although Jenkins' (2016, p. 24) claims that "for some...young activists—especially those who come from privileged backgrounds—the development of the ability to imagine and feel empathy for others who are living under different conditions is a key stage in their political awakening," if witnessing a rebellion against an oppressive regime was not politicizing for Heather Amity because she did not identify with the Egyptian people and was not greatly affected by the protests, then reading about or watching a revolution against an oppressive regime in a fictional narrative is unlikely to raise her political consciousness. Unlike, political skills, which can be developed through fan practices such as discussion, the ability to empathize with those who are different from us may be harder to cultivate through media fandom.

6. Conclusion

A thematic analysis of a selection of threads about sociopolitical issues on the Divergent Fans and Divergent Wiki forums reveals that discussion on these two forums does allow fans to talk about political issues raised in the content world, and it sometimes enables the civic imagination through a dialectical response to the dystopian world. However, it does not conclusively raise political consciousness among fans. How, then, can we account for these civic successes and failures?

Because shared knowledge, trust, and spaces are relatively strong in online fan communities, and fans may experience their identities as relatively fixed, if we want to improve the consciousness-raising potential of YA dystopian fan forums, we should focus on values and skills. Cultivating democratic values in young people and teaching them political skills could empower them to take advantage of the political opportunities offered by YA dystopian texts and fandoms. Although government and civics classes in school allegedly teach democratic values, the true aim of these classes is to produce compliant and obedient citizens (Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011). As opposed to teaching students to follow rules and maintain order, civic education might encourage students to adopt the democratic val-

ues suggested by Dahlgren (2009) such as equality, freedom, justice, solidarity, openness, reciprocity, and responsibility/accountability. However, since both sets of fans had strong democratic *values*, a lack of literacy *skills* could account for the failure to make stronger connections between the content world and the real world. Drawing comparisons between the real world and a narrative world, and making inferences about the former from the latter, requires critical thinking, and fans, particularly young ones, may need to develop these skills for engagement with YA dystopian texts to result in political engagement. Teaching media literacy in schools and equipping students with the analytical skills they need to critically engage with popular culture may be one way to improve the capacity of YA dystopian literature to increase political consciousness among young people. Teaching skills like media literacy and political discussion is equally important for civic education. As Hodgins (2016) indicates, such education might focus on five stages of opportunity for online civic and political dialogue: becoming part of an online dialogic community, analyzing discussion of civic and political issues, engaging in productive online civic and political dialogue, going public with one's civic and political perspectives, and moving from civic voice toward influence. Young people need to practice these skills for their participation in YA dystopian fan forums to lead to civic outcomes.

However, this study has a number of limitations. First, as Hirzalla et al. (2011) point out, studies supporting the mobilization thesis, such as this one, frequently examine specific cases using qualitative methods. Looking at YA fan forums as part of a broader media ecosystem could instead support the "normalization thesis," the idea that the internet maintains existing structures of power. As Hirzalla et al. indicate, these two propositions are not mutually exclusive. Second, it is unclear whether the failure of *Divergent* fan forums to raise political consciousness is related to civic deficiencies in interest-based virtual communities, the conservatism of the (YA) dystopian genre, or the conservatism of the *Divergent* series (Basu, 2013; Connors & Shepard, 2013; Dahlberg, 2001; Duncombe, 2012). Moreover, because this article examines a limited number of threads on two fan forums for a single YA dystopian narrative, these findings may not apply to all other YA dystopian fan forums. Finally, although the forum on Divergent Fans remained active until July 2016 and the forum on Divergent Wiki is still active today, I collected the analyzed threads over six years ago. To strengthen my findings, I could gather more recent threads or conduct interviews with users of the Divergent Wiki forum. Further research could also explore political discussion on other YA dystopian fan forums.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Henry Jenkins for his guidance on this project, as well as the many reviewers and editors who provided feedback.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

- Basu, B. (2013). What faction are you in? The pleasure of being sorted in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. In B. Basu, K. R. Broad, & C. Hintz (Eds.), *Contemporary dystopian fiction for young adults: Brave new teenagers* (pp. 19–33). Routledge.
- Basu, B., Broad, K. R., & Hintz, C. (2013). Introduction. In B. Basu, K. R. Broad, & C. Hintz (Eds.), *Contemporary dystopian fiction for young adults: Brave new teenagers* (pp. 1–15). Routledge.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan Press.
- Blackford, H. (2013). The games people play: Speculative childhood and virtual culture. In M. K. Booker (Ed.), *Critical insights: Contemporary speculative fiction* (pp. 31–50). Salem Press.
- Booker, M. K. (1994). *The dystopian impulse in modern literature: Fiction as social criticism*. Greenwood Press.
- Booker, M. K. (2013a). About this volume. In M. K. Booker (Ed.), *Critical insights: Contemporary speculative fiction* (pp. vii–xiii). Salem Press.
- Booker, M. K. (2013b). The critical reception of speculative fiction. In M. K. Booker (Ed.), *Critical insights: Contemporary speculative fiction* (pp. 3–6). Salem Press.
- Box Office Mojo. (n.d.). *The Divergent series: Insurgent*. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl1012565505>
- Brough, M. M., & Shresthova, S. (2012). Fandom meets activism: Rethinking civic and political participation. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0303>
- Cochran, C., & Prickett, R. (2014). Divergent complexity: Veronica Roth and the new dystopian heroine. *SIGNAL Journal*, 37(1), 26–29.
- Cochran, T. R. (2012). “Past the brink of tacit support”: Fan activism and Whedonverses. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0303>
- Connors, S. P., & Shepard, I. (2013). Who's betting on *The Hunger Games*? A case for young-adult literature. In M. K. Booker (Ed.), *Critical insights: Contemporary speculative fiction* (pp. 115–136). Salem Press.
- Dahlberg, L. (2001). The internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere. *Communication & Society*, 4(4), 615–633.
- Dahlgren, P. (2009). *Media and political engagement: Citizens, communication, and democracy*. Cambridge University Press
- Duncombe, S. (2012). Imagining no-place. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0350>
- Fisher, L., Shabazian, P., Wick, D. (Producers), & Burger, N. (Director). (2014). *Divergent* [Motion picture]. Lionsgate.
- Fisher, L., Shabazian, P., Wick, D. (Producers), & Schwentke, R. (Director). (2015). *Insurgent* [Motion picture]. Lionsgate.
- Fisher, L., Shabazian, P., Wick, D. (Producers), & Schwentke, R. (Director). (2016). *Allegiant* [Motion picture]. Lionsgate.
- Hinck, A. (2012). Theorizing a public engagement keystone: Seeing fandoms integral connection to civic engagement through the case of the Harry Potter Alliance. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0311>
- Hinck, A. (2016). Ethical frameworks and ethical modalities: Theorizing communication and citizenship in a fluid world. *Communication Theory*, 26, 1–20.
- Hintz, C., & Ostry, E. (2013). Introduction. In C. Hintz & E. Ostry (Eds.), *Utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults* (pp. 1–22). Routledge.
- Hirzalla, F., van Zoonen, L., & de Riddler, J. (2011). Internet use and political participation: Reflections on the mobilization/normalization controversy. *The Information Society*, 27(1), 1–15.
- Hodgin, E. (2016). Educating youth for online civic and political dialogue: A conceptual framework for the digital age. *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy*, 4. <https://bit.ly/3ChLOWa>
- James, C., Gruner, D. T., Lee, A., & Mullen, M. (2016). Getting into the fray: Civic youth, online dialogue, and implications for digital literacy education. *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy*, 4. https://digitallife.gse.harvard.edu/files/2016-jodml-getting_into_the_fray_civic_youth_online_dialogue_digital_literacy_education.pdf
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). Out of the closet and into the universe: Queers and *Star Trek*. In H. Jenkins (Ed.), *Fans, bloggers, and gamers* (pp. 237–265). NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2012). “Cultural acupuncture”: Fan activism and the Harry Potter Alliance. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0305>
- Jenkins, H. (2016). Youth voice, media, and political engagement: Introducing the core concepts. In L. Gamber-Thompson, S. Shresthova, N. Kligler-Vilenchik, A. Zimmerman, & H. Jenkins (Eds.), *By any media necessary: The new youth activism* (pp. 1–60). NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H., Peters-Lazaro, F., & Shresthova, S. (2020). Popular culture and the civic imagination: Foundations. In H. Jenkins, G. Peters-Lazaro, S. & Shresthova (Eds.), *Popular culture and the civic imagination: Case studies of creative social change* (pp. 1–30). NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2016). Superpowers to the peo-

- ple! How young activists are tapping the civic imagination. In E. Gordon & P. Mihailidis (Eds.), *Civic media: Technology, design, practice* (pp. 295–320). MIT Press.
- Kennelly, J., & Llewellyn, K. R. (2011). Educating for active compliance: Discursive constructions in citizenship education. *Citizenship Studies*, 15(6/7), 897–914.
- Klein, N. (2017, June 13). Daring to dream in the age of Trump. *Nation*. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/daring-to-dream-in-the-age-of-trump>
- Kliger-Vilenchik, N. (2016a). “Decreasing world suck:” Harnessing popular culture for fan activism. In L. Gamber-Thompson, S. Shresthova, N. Kliger-Vilenchik, A. Zimmerman, & H. Jenkins (Eds.), *By any media necessary: The new youth activism* (pp. 102–148). NYU Press.
- Kliger-Vilenchik, N. (2016b). Mechanisms of translation: From online participatory cultures to participatory politics. *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy*, 4. <https://bit.ly/3hBy8Au>
- Kliger-Vilenchik, N., McVeigh-Schultz, J., Weitbrecht, C., & Tokuhama, C. (2012). Experiencing fan activism: Understanding the power of fan activist organizations through members’ narratives. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0322>
- Levitt, L. (2020). The hunger games and the dystopian imagination. In H. Jenkins, G. Peters-Lazaro, & S. Shresthova (Eds.), *Popular culture and the civic imagination: Case studies of creative social change* (pp. 43–50). NYU Press.
- Lupia, A., & Philpot, T. S. (2005). Views from inside the net: How websites affect young adults’ political interest. *The Journal of Politics*, 67(4), 1122–1142.
- Mehta, R. (2012). Flash activism: How a Bollywood film catalyzed civic justice toward a murder trial. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0345>
- Phillips, J. (2016). The Harry Potter Alliance. *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy*, 4.
- Roth, V. (2011). *Divergent*. HarperCollins.
- Roth, V. (2012). *Insurgent*. HarperCollins.
- Roth, V. (2013). *Allegiant*. HarperCollins.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE.
- Shresthova, S., & Jenkins, H. (2016). From voice to influence: An introduction. *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy*, 4. <https://bit.ly/3Kildjm>
- Stanley, J. W., & Weare, C. (2004). The effects of internet use on political participation: Evidence from an agency online discussion forum. *Administration & Society*, 36(5), 503–527.
- Stein, L. E. (2002). Subject: “Off-topic: Oh my god! US terrorism!”: Roswell fans respond to 11 September. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5, 471–491.
- Wilkinson, L. (2012). Nerdfighters, Paper Towns, and heterotopia. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0374>

About the Author



Lauren Levitt holds a PhD in communication from the University of Southern California. She is a post-doctoral fellow in communication at Tulane University. Her work takes an intersectional approach to gender and sexuality and the relationship between culture and political economy, and she is working on a book about sex workers’ support networks.