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PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

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Imagine how Donald Trump would fit into the bloodthirsty world of Westeros as depicted on HBO's cult fantasy series *Game of Thrones*.¹ In an anonymously circulated video posted in February 2016, Trump rejects Daenerys and her army of refugees in the name of drawing the line against "radical Islam," solicits the Night Watch in his efforts to build a massive wall to keep out "illegal aliens," and discusses his plans to waterboard and torture terrorist suspects with "Littlefinger," Tyrion Lannister, and Lord Varys.² "Game of Trump" not only remixes footage, but also digitally inserts Trump into iconic sequences to comic effect (Figure 20.1). But the video is good for more than just a few laughs, offering a concise summary of Trump's "medieval" positions at a time when he was the front-runner for the Republican nomination. Seen through this lens, electing Trump seems about as desirable as getting an invitation to the "Red Wedding."³

This chapter considers remix as a form of participation at a time when the infrastructures and skills associated with participatory culture are inspiring new kinds of civic engagement and political participation. We might define a participatory culture as one with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.⁴ In an ideal participatory culture, members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another. A participatory culture provides a context in which people can find their voice, acquire skills at media production and circulation, forge community ties, develop shared reference points and meanings, and build a repertoire of common practices, all of which may be, and increasingly are being, deployed towards political ends. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* predicted such a shift:



FIGURE 20.1 Screenshot from “Winter is Trumping.”

These forces [towards digital democracy] are apt to emerge first in cultural forms—a changed sense of community, a greater sense of participation, less dependence on official expertise, and a greater trust in collaborative problem-solving . . . Yet these forms of popular culture [among them political remix videos] also have political effects, representing hybrid spaces where we can lower the political stakes (and change the language of politics) enough so that we can master skills we need to be participants in the democratic process.⁵

Over the past decade, participatory practices, such as appropriation and remix, have moved from the periphery to become increasingly central to the ways that American politics operate. What once seemed strange becomes progressively less so, and with this shift, more and more people, especially young people, are finding ways to contribute to movements for social change. We could illustrate these processes through any number of examples, from the DREAMer movement to Occupy Wall Street to #BlackLivesMatter to the Arab Spring, but we are going to focus this discussion around the role of remix practices in U.S. presidential campaigns. Here, we can see the intersection between participatory politics and more institutionalized forms of civic engagement.

Convergence Culture cited a 2004 video, released by the political action group True Majority, which remixed news footage with shots from the reality television series *The Apprentice* to depict Donald Trump taking George W. Bush into the boardroom to fire him for being a “failed” president. This example was striking for the use of political remix by an organization with more than 300,000 members. Four years later, parody videos were introduced into the YouTube-CNN debate between the Democratic candidates. The leading Republican

nominee, Mitt Romney, was so flustered by this cartoonish spectacle that he refused to participate in a debate utilizing the same format.⁶ During this period, scholars⁷ sought to better understand the terms of our participation—in culture and in politics—and more recently,⁸ to understand what kinds of mechanisms of translation might bridge between the two.

From Participatory Culture to Participatory Politics

All cultures are participatory, but different cultures invite or facilitate different degrees of participation. For example, in a traditional folk culture, many are invited to participate (e.g., through crafts or folk dance), skills are passed along informally, and individual authorship is favored less than cooperative engagement. By contrast, in mass culture, the means of production are highly concentrated and most people are consumers but not producers. A networked society offers more opportunities to produce and share culture than within mass culture. Early writing on participatory culture highlighted fandom as a space where significant numbers of people deployed popular fiction resources for their own storytelling and media-making practices.⁹ Fandom might be described as a mode of participatory culture in which people apply folk culture logics to mass culture contents. However, over the past two decades, more people have expanded their communication capacities, acquired skills within a range of online and offline communities, used new media platforms and practices to find their voice, and gained greater access to the means of media production and circulation. These skills and opportunities are not evenly distributed so we need to speak of a *more participatory* culture or of participatory *subcultures*, but they are impacting the ways significant numbers of youth are introduced into the political process.

Building on this framework, the MacArthur Foundation launched the Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) research network, a multidisciplinary group of researchers who have been working together for the better part of a decade mapping the political lives of American youth. YPP tells us that participatory politics practices,

are focused on expression and are peer based, interactive, and non-hierarchical, and they are not guided by deference to elite institutions . . .

The participatory skills, norms, and networks that develop when social media is used to socialize with friends or to engage with those who share one's interests can and are being transferred to the political realm.¹⁰

YPP researchers found that a high percentage of American youth (41 percent according to their 2012 survey) have engaged in some form of participatory politics, and that this percentage has continued to grow over time. Practices such as making memes, commenting on blog posts, or circulating remix videos are becoming a widespread element in the political repertoire of this generation. Moreover, the

research suggests that 43 percent of white, 41 percent of black, 38 percent of Latino, and 36 percent of Asian-American youth have engaged in participatory politics practices, showing much greater parity across race than more institutional forms of politics, such as voting.

Not surprisingly, young people are choosing to engage with politics through platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, or Instagram, where they spend much of their social time, and are seeking to conduct politics through different mechanisms than their parents' generation. These findings are consistent with other data on social media usage, such as that from the Pew Center for the Internet & American Life,¹¹ showing that 61 percent of millennial youth get political news from Facebook in any given week, a much larger percentage than turn to any other news source (37 percent, for example, watch local television news). Remix videos circulate, alongside news clippings and blog posts, as one means among many for gaining insight into contemporary political debates, all of which provide springboards for discussion within shared friendship or interest-based networks.¹²

Whether or not political discourse enters into friendship-based networks, such as those characteristic of Facebook, for example, depends on the social dynamics of the peer culture: people of all ages often protect their most important support networks—close friends or family—from political disputes, avoiding political conversations where they know there are strong disagreements.¹³ Youth seek to more actively mask their political commitments on social media for many of the same reasons¹⁴ and there are anecdotal reports of people opting out of social media to avoid negative comments from those with whom they disagree as the 2016 campaign hit its lowest points. By contrast, interest-based communities often offer more supportive environments for political exchanges and the mechanisms encouraging cultural participation also foster greater civic engagement. YPP found that young people involved in interest-driven networks, such as fandom or gamer communities, are five times as likely as those who aren't involved to engage in participatory politics, and nearly four times as likely to participate in institutional politics.¹⁵

The Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics (MAPP) group at the University of Southern California has developed ethnographic case studies of groups, organizations, and networks that have been particularly effective at getting youth involved in the political process. MAPP interviewed more than 200 young activists for *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*.¹⁶ More recently, MAPP members have been collecting examples of political remix from a range of different online communities, trying to better understand the roles that practices of participatory politics have played in the 2016 campaign. For example, Samantha Close explored forms of political expression within crafting communities. She finds many crafters mix folk and digital techniques, for instance Photoshopping the faces of political candidates onto traditional prayer candles to demonstrate their affective investment in candidates. In a cynical political climate, such objects might at first seem camp or ironic. However, reading the crafters'

words and considering the time-intensive labor, more often than not political crafts express earnest, deeply felt support that will last far beyond an election cycle.

As politics enters this participatory culture space, it often does so in terms defined by more everyday and recreational activities. If crafters are expressing their commitments as citizens, they may do so through the objects they knit or, in the case of the candles, mold. If fans are going to speak out politically, they do so in images and situations borrowed from their preferred media franchise. When MAPP interviewed young activists, they heard repeatedly that the rhetoric of American politics was broken—both because it was exclusive (in so far as one has to already know a lot about the existing discourse to be able to understand what is being said, and young people are not invited into the process) and repulsive (in so far as partisan rhetoric often overrides the search for consensus or “commonsense” solutions to shared problems). The use of remix as a means of political participation addresses both issues: political issues are reframed in languages that are already part of the shared culture of young participants and, while remixes may be as sharply partisan as other political speech, there is also a sense of playfulness that can allow emotional distance from their messages.

Humor certainly entertains, but it also challenges our perceptions, inviting us to reconsider our assumptions, bringing about cognitive dissonance. It does so without necessarily incurring our resistance, but rather clandestinely encouraging us to laugh at ourselves in the company of others. Trump’s offensive remarks regarding immigrants and minorities inspired critiques from media pundits and comedians alike. However, most made fun of Trump’s bullying and blustering postures without removing him from the presidential podium. As Yomna Elsayed has explored, “Your Drunk Neighbor: Donald Trump” juxtaposes Trump’s statements over the image of a drunk middle-aged white man sitting at the front

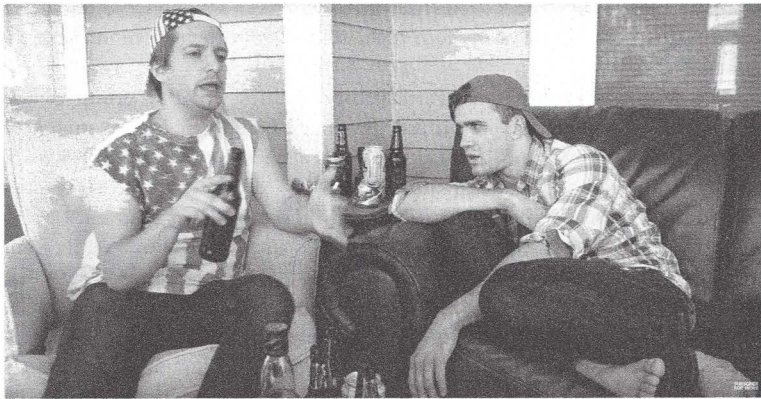


FIGURE 20.2 Screenshot from “Drunk Trump 1: Your Drunk Neighbor: Donald Trump.”

porch of his house, suggesting that his unsubstantiated statements are just as likely to come from your next door neighbor (Figure 20.2).¹⁷ Through humor, what is taken for granted is scrutinized and defamiliarized. Humorous remix serves a double function, on the one hand breaking down the sanctity of our political figures, while exposing the public's own failure to see beyond the pomp and circumstances of official politics.

Mechanisms of Translation

Remix is an example of what Neta Kligler-Vilenchik has described as “mechanisms of translation”¹⁸ as social connections, cultural capital, and media literacies acquired through involvement in a participatory culture community are deployed for civic discourse and political mobilization. Kligler-Vilenchik traces a process that goes from linking real-world concerns to fictional content worlds (often in the form of analogy or allegory), using those shared cultural references as inspiration for creative production, and deploying the resulting products as the basis for discussion within and beyond the interest-based community.

Some of these remixes make extensive use of knowledge and cultural references specific to a particular community, depending on forms of subcultural capital. Rogelio Lopez, for example, has looked at a practice known as “no-nosing”, which according to the popular Internet meme wiki “Know Your Meme,” is part of a meme tradition dating back to 2013.¹⁹ “No-Nose” remixes edit out noses in popular media. The primary purpose of no-nosing has been “for the lulz,” with the most notable examples commonly juxtaposing otherwise serious situations or scenes in creative works with the absurdity and oddity of a noseless character. However, Trump’s outlandish performance can often serve as self-parody, with no-nosing converting an already comical moment into one that reveals his alien presence in the political arena (Figure 20.3).



FIGURE 20.3 No-nosed Trump meme.



FIGURE 20.4 Screenshot of “Donald Trump in *Mean Girls*.”

While the general public may not understand the reference, such materials may provoke an intense response from a particular invested viewership. Such shared cultural practices perform bonding functions, strengthening ties amongst those in the know, and in the process, strengthening the community’s shared ideological commitments. By contrast, other remixes depend on only loose associations more widely shared across a generational cohort—for example, situating Trump within the teen comedy, *Mean Girls* (Figure 20.4).²⁰ As such videos are more likely to go viral, these practices serve bridging functions between multiple audiences.

Genres of Participation

Just as mechanisms of translation make it easier for participants to deploy what they know as fans to make sense of the political process, there are also mechanisms, or genres, of participation that provide simple templates that model that next step into civic participation. For Marie Dufresne and Geoffroy Patriarche, genres of participation refer to “a type of communicative action recognized by a community . . . as appropriate to attain a specific objective.”²¹ Genres of participation delineate particular sets of actions (in this case, communicative practices) that can be performed by diverse participants. These genres provide those who join these actions with a sense of shared purpose and practice, increasing their collective civic agency.

Consider, for example, the Bernie or Hillary meme generated during the Democratic primary season, traced by Michelle C. Forelle. A baseball-card-like format is designed to contrast Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton (and, at other times, Donald Trump): Sanders is often depicted as deeply knowledgeable about popular culture and Clinton as disconnected and clueless. This meme is easily



FIGURE 20.5 Sample Bernie vs. Trump meme.

passed from one public to another because participants understand its underlying logic and the pattern is flexible enough to be adapted to different cultural references or extended to other candidates. For example, one popular card (Figure 20.5) uses *Lord of the Rings* as its basic frame, contrasting Bernie's imagined fannish response ("I love the rich imagery and fascinating characters. The thought put into the history of the world and details of the mythos is nothing short of brilliant!") and Trump's less cerebral reaction ("Too long. Too boring. Not enough guns!").²² Anyone can play this game, and the demand on any given participant is relatively simple: add a few sentences to the mix.

From Culture Jamming to Cultural Acupuncture

A decade ago, we might have read such political remix practices as culture jamming, a grassroots movement to disrupt or destabilize corporate signs. Culture

jamming recognizes the power of mass media to colonize the imagination and uses remix as a tool of critique. Certainly, some contemporary activists such as the Anonymous movement or Occupy Wall Street for example, keep culture jamming alive, but others observe a different logic, such as the Harry Potter Alliance's "cultural acupuncture."²³ At its most basic level, cultural acupuncturists tap cultural pressure points to reroute circulation. This model recognizes fan investments in popular narratives as resources for their own fantasies of social change and political empowerment. Here, the goal is to deploy rather than destroy mass culture symbols. Linking their causes to these cultural reference points means their activist efforts are more apt to be pulled into discussions around these trending topics and their videos more likely to be spread by those who share their passions and interests.

Engaging the Civic Imagination

MAPP also understands such remixes as part of the civic imagination.²⁴ Stephen Duncombe stresses that political movements need to go beyond a "just the facts" approach if they are going to "manufacture dissent" against the powerful;²⁵ remix practices often tap popular myths in order to generate a stronger affective relationship to the candidate or cause. Imagination plays an important role in the political process, helping participants to imagine a better world and the mechanisms through which it might be achieved, to see themselves as political agents capable of making a change in the world and as parts of larger imagined communities that can act collectively on behalf of shared interests, and to develop empathy for others whose experiences may be different from their own. Around the world, young activists deploy images from popular culture—for example, superhero iconography,²⁶ the Three-Finger Salute from *Hunger Games*,²⁷ the Guy Fawkes mask from *V for Vendetta*²⁸—to spark civic imagination.

While political memes are often discussed in terms of their snarky or satirical dimensions, other memes and remixes construct political heroes. For example, filmmaker Tabitha Holbert cast young singers and actors in "Sanders," which takes its inspiration from Lin-Manuel Miranda's multicultural Broadway musical, *Hamilton*, bridging two phenomena popular with millennial youth in early 2016 (Figure 20.6).²⁹ This ironic remix used songs designed to tell the story of the man who established the American banking system to narrate the life of one of Wall Street's sharpest critics. In some cases, these remixes may also deploy fictional protagonists as champions for grassroots communities: in one meme, a Spanish-speaking Birdman (drawn from the Oscar-winning film of the same title) slaps Donald Trump for his anti-Mexican comments (Figure 20.7).³⁰

Not surprisingly, as campaigns court millennial voters, they mimic political remix and fan activism in hopes that their official videos will also be circulated through social media. For example, a video aired at the Democratic National Convention plays on the popular perception that Donald Trump is a bully,

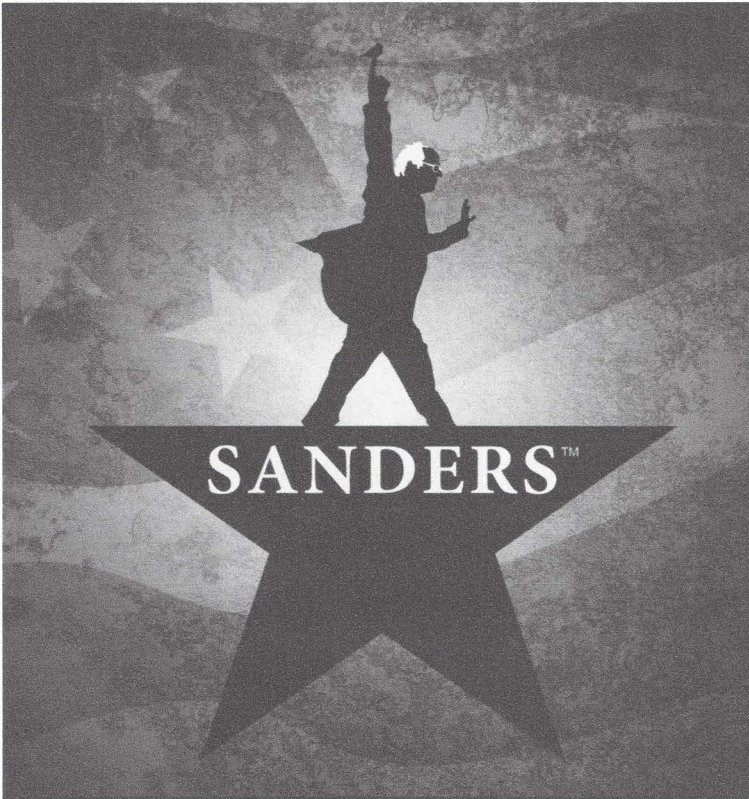


FIGURE 20.6 Screenshot of the title image from “Sanders (Bernie Sanders + Hamilton).”

juxtaposing footage of famous instances where the Republican nominee was abusive of women, people with disabilities, and minorities, with scenes depicting stereotypical bullies from 1980s movies, such as *Back to the Future*, *A Christmas Story*, *Weird Science*, and *Home Alone*. The culture jammer frame reads remix as a tactic of the powerless, the marginal, and the dispossessed, but these same techniques can be deployed as a strategy from a top-down persuasion model.

Remix as a Civic Literacy

As more people have acquired the capacity to produce and circulate media, communities have developed mechanisms for translating politics into pop culture content worlds and created templates for their members to insert their own content



FIGURE 20.7 Birdman slaps Trump.

into the meme stream. Thomas J Billard has written that memetic activities using graphic design represent a new form of citizen participation in political campaigns, citing the example of how such participation is enabled by the relative technological ease of typographic manipulation.³¹ Consider the online response to the initial Trump/Pence campaign logo. This early logo design, first distributed in a fundraising email, depicted the letters T and P interlocked in such a way that the T appeared to “penetrate” the P.³² This design feature was immediately critiqued and parodied. Congressman Alan Grayson, for example, tweeted, “This logo accurately represents what Trump Pence will do to America.”³³ Matt Negrin of Bloomberg News pixelated the image, a comedic referenced to television censorship of nudity and sexual material (Figure 20.8).³⁴ Another Twitter user, known by the handle @darth, animated the logo to make the T truly penetrate the P, with motion.³⁵



FIGURE 20.8 Censored Trump and Pence logo.

While these manipulations can be seen as juvenile humor, understanding the policy positions of the candidates adds depth to one's reading. Mike Pence, during his tenure as governor of Indiana, signed a controversial "religious freedom" bill that legalized discrimination against LGBT individuals. Thus, to make Pence the recipient of Trump's penetration in their readings and manipulations of the logo is to satirize Pence's homophobic policy position. Similar commentaries were made without sexual innuendo, and with more sophisticated design manipulation. For example, one submission to a design crowdsourcing website replaced the red and white stripes extending from the interlocked T and P with a rainbow flag and replaced the tagline "Make America Great Again!" with "Make America Great Sweetiepie!"³⁶ Yet other policy commentaries were made through design parody,



FIGURE 20.9 Trump/Putin logo.

for instance by redesigning the ticket to read “Trump/Putin” with the tagline “Make Russia Great Again!” (Figure 20.9).³⁷ As such, these graphic remixes critiqued both the professionalism (where quality graphic design indicates a professional campaign) and policy positions of the Trump/Pence collaboration, ultimately pushing the Trump campaign to redesign its logo without such easily parodied features.³⁸

In such a context, activism will more likely take the form of groups working together to reframe political issues and generate new cultural symbols. Emilia Yang, for example, invited activists at the 2015 West Coast Organizing Conference to discuss Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric using what she calls a “participatory media art” methodology.³⁹ In this project, titled “To Trump Trump’s Wall,” she installed a mock-up wall and asked activists to respond to it by imagining the immigrant experience and using an animation booth to create and project live remixed messages they would like to inscribe on the wall. The media they remixed were a combination of newspapers, magazines, found objects, and other materials. For her, the collaborative and public creation of media activates new spaces for political debate and possibilities of expression, tapping into practices associated with participatory culture, tactical media, and adversarial design.⁴⁰

Civic education may take the form of giving young people the tools and training to critically remix and recode political advertisements. For example, the New York-based Learning About Multimedia Project (LAMP) has developed a curriculum around its Mediabreaker toolkit, with which students and teachers were encouraged to disrupt and critique the advertisements produced by the candidates and their political action committees. Such educational efforts are intended to ensure that the power to participate in the process of remixing and recirculating political content is part of the repertoire of every young citizen,

suggesting that political remix will become an even more central aspect of public debates in future election cycles.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we've drawn on examples of remixed media deployed in relation to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign to illustrate the ways that new forms of civic expression have emerged from the realm of participatory culture and become increasingly central to political debates. Looking at an event like a presidential campaign that occurs every four years allows us to trace what's changed in remix culture and also what has shifted in our understanding of the nature of participatory culture. We conclude with a summary of what we understand now that was not clear eight years ago when Barack Obama was running for the presidency.

Remixes, which may take the form of video mashups, memes, even parodies of design choices and typefaces, are now being deployed at all levels from non-profit organizations and even the campaigns themselves to various subcultural communities, especially those organized around shared interests (fandoms, crafters, no-nosers), where these forms of political speech can be seen as extensions of their routine practices and subcultural capital. Political remixes in a campaign context constitute the point of contact between participatory and institutional modes of politics. Remix often represents a mechanism of translation as people bridge between the content worlds of popular culture and real-world concerns, and the use of this comic or playful set of references reflects a desire to revitalize the language of American politics to make it more inclusive and inviting. In some cases, these remix practices intensify bonds within subcultural communities by tapping what amount to inside jokes, but in other cases, the use of widely recognized references perform a bridging function as memes circulate across diverse contexts.

The practices of participatory politics have proven most effective when they offer clear templates for what a desired contribution might look like while also remaining open-ended enough for many different groups and individuals to insert their own voice in the process. Remixes that draw on popular culture for points of comparison also tap into the civic imagination, allowing movement participants to imagine alternatives to current conditions and provide empowering models for what it might mean to change the world. As appropriation and remixing have become important literacy skills in participatory culture, more and more people have used these new communication capacities to seek to insert their own voices into core political debates. To this end, various civic education efforts have taught remix processes as a core tactic for social change. In short, remix represents one of the primary mechanisms by which young people have been able to transition from involvement within participatory culture to engagement with participatory politics.

Notes

- 1 This chapter has been expanded from a collective blog post: Henry Jenkins et al., "Civic Paths Hotspot: Remixing the U.S. Presidential Campaign," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, May 10, 2016, <http://henryjenkins.org/2016/05/civic-paths-hotspot-remixing-the-u-s-presidential-campaign.html>.
- 2 "Winter is Trumping," YouTube video, 2:40, posted by "huw parkinson," February 20, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0tE6T-ecmg.
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- 4 Henry Jenkins, with Katie Clinton, Ravi Purushotma, Alice J. Robinson, and Margaret Weigel, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
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- 7 Nico Carpentier, *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011); Chris Kely, Aaron Panofsky, Morgan Currie, Roderic Crooks, Seth Erickson, Patricia Garcia, Michael Wartenbe, and Stacy Wood, "Seven Dimensions of Contemporary Participation Disentangled," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 66, no. 3 (2015).
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- 15 Cohen and Kahne, *Participatory Politics*, ix.
- 16 Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, and Arely Zimmerman, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
- 17 "Drunk Trump 1: Your Drunk Neighbor: Donald Trump," YouTube video, 2:04, posted by "Friend Dog Studios," October 3, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRly-0wwl_g.
- 18 Kligler-Vilenchik, "Mechanisms of Translation."

- 19 "Noseless GIFs," *Know Your Meme*, April 2016, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/noseless-gifs>.
- 20 "Donald Trump in *Mean Girls*," YouTube video, 1:17, posted by "TheCrazyGorilla," April 3, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgxzQVGkTHk.
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