

# Fans (Part 2)

**Steve Lambert:** All right, Andrew, how do you define fan activism?

**Andrew Slack:** I think you'll get different, give very unique answer. So, I graduated from college in 2002 with a real passion for activism and movements but also for theater and storytelling. I wanted to find a way to merge those things. I was an, a comedy troop performing all over the US at that time, and I ended up falling in love with Harry Potter, which was something I never anticipated.

I thought the idea of Harry Potter sounded very stupid to me. Yes, and then when I read the book, on Halloween of 2002, [00:03:00] something just shot through me. I just felt like this, my whole life had just changed and, I can get into why it's a much longer story to that, but I became addicted to these books, and I became addicted to the childlike wonder that started coming over me as I was reading them.

Yet as I read the books and fell in love with them, I began to grow frustrated. You had fan websites that were talking about, Daniel Redcliff actors in the Harry Potter fan community. You had podcasts, you had fanfiction, you had those types of things, conferences, and then you had Wizard Rock with fans like Harry and the Potters punk rock band that sang from Harry's perspective.

And they had an enemy band called Draco and the Mouth who sang from the perspective of Draco mouth. You had so many different interesting things that were happening, the beginnings of Acquit League, but what was very strange and annoying to me was that if, so this is where I was frustrated. [00:04:00]

If Harry Potter wrote our world, he would do more than simply celebrate how fun it is to be Harry Potter. He would fight for justice in our world, the way he fought for justice in the books. He starts a student activist group called Army. And so, I just began just thinking about the idea of what if, what if there were a Dumbledore for our world and we called it A Harry Potter Alliance. The word alliance from me came from just this feeling of World War II, anti-fascist ideas, the allied forces that, that kind of idea. And I ended up meeting Harry and the Potters and then other big-name fans and just sort of gently persuading them on this idea. And they were so receptive that I began writing action alerts—I would write

about something happening in Harry Potter and then use that as a way to talk about something happening in our world. So, an example of that would be Voldemort returns and the Ministry of Magic is denying that he returned and [00:05:00] the consolidated media in the wizarding world is denying that he returns and it's up to Dumbledore's army to wake the world, up to the fact that this has happened. So then that's a great analogy for our parallel for so many different forms of activism, whether it's fighting media consolidation or fighting a human rights crisis. In this case it was genocide and working against the climate crisis, things where sort of, corporate owned media structure is preventing people from seeing the reality of what's taking place.

So out of this, leaders of the Harry Potter fan community began having campaigns. We're very media savvy. So, we would, we would make those campaigns happen along with the rituals going on in the Harry Potter world. When the last book came up, came out and a new movie was coming out, we always connected it back those rituals. And then that got a lot of media attention, which then increased morale in the fan community, which then brings in more partner [00:06:00] organizations. And with time we began seeing real concrete victories. For instance, you know, it was very strange in the beginning. I was 25 when I started this with a couple of friends and telling people that you're working for the Harry Potter Alliance at that time was, was really weird. It's weird and awesome, but it was hard to be taken seriously in the very beginning. But the feeling of that was just so deep—that this could work and the enthusiasm and innovation I was seeing from fans was so extraordinary.

You were working with people who are some of the most artistically interesting people. And they're all convening on the internet. And we began to, as we were building these concrete victories, giving opportunities to volunteer for us and our, our scrappy volunteer team, with me, started a chapter's program. By the time I left the Harry Potter Alliance, which is now called Fandom Forward, in 2015 [00:07:00] 2016, there were hundreds of active chapters. These are active chapters—I'm not even counting the chapters that had formed and fizzled over time. Hundreds of active chapters in over 30 countries on six continents.

At that point we had donated enough books to shelf libraries all over the world from, an orphanage and Rwanda, to a learning center in the Mississippi Delta. And just different parts of the world. We won a six-year campaign to convince Warner Brothers to make all Harry Potter chocolate ethically sourced.

We did a lot of advocacy on everything from LGBTQ equality. To economic rights. And I mean, it just sort of goes on and on and on—the list of accomplishments. But in all of that, as we were being taken seriously, what I think (there was stuff on civilian protection—sending five cargo planes to Haiti full of lifesaving medical supplies.)

And [00:08:00] yet those planes, for instance—every one of those planes is more than just a plane. Every one of those planes was winning an argument that fantasy is not an escape from our world. It is an invitation to go deeper into it. And we dream at night, but it is our books, our TV shows, our movies, our musicals, our comics, our video games. That is our culture dreaming. And when we're doing cultural acupuncture and I want to talk about cultural acupuncture in a minute cause that's a certain key term for me with fan activism. Do you mind if I just cut right into that? So cultural acupuncture is about finding where the energy is in the culture and moving that energy authentically to create a healthier body for our world.

And the proverbial needles of cultural acupuncture are myth or big story, like what is that big story? [00:09:00] Ritual and community. And I would put things like symbol into ritual, myth is an underlying story that motivates the whole piece. But ritual is where a myth is enacted as Joseph Campbell wisely put it.

And if want to change the myth of a society, the big story of a society, you have to change the ritual. But you also need a community that is vibrant and that is practicing and enacting those rituals and that myth. So, working with a fandom or being in a fandom, being a fan activist is about activating those three things. And one of those things is good, but all three of those things together, history of social movements, shows us that those three things I call it MRC: myth, ritual, community.

That is the good stuff. That's the gold of a social movement. That's when you know that you're going create a seismic change. I'd love to discuss that with you further, including the dark underbelly of what is activism, you know one of the things that we love celebrating with fan activism so much. But it's also something to [00:10:00] remember that a great example of harnessing popular culture through fan activism was, Birth of A Nation and Woodrow Wilson, and uh, and that re-popularized the KKK and I would argue that fans of Birth of A Nation were inspired to become part of the KKK after watching that movie were totally fan activists.

But that kind of loosens and widens our definition of fan activism to understand that fandom is really connecting to this myth, ritual, community structure. And so, when you see Donald Trump as an example, he has a very strong MRC, Hitler had a very strong MRC. And if the good guys do not have a strong MRC they're going to lose, they're going to lose to the bad guys. Because fascism tends to work with a very strong MRC. MRC is a very amoral concept. It's magic in Harry Potter. You want to use it in any direction.

**Steve Lambert:** When you were talking [00:11:00] about that, it reminded me of how I saw people that did graffiti in the late nineties. It was just like; this is so amazing. It's like all over the place, but why are you just writing your name? You have basically billboards across the whole city. Why just a name? And there's reasons for that. I don't know if you know Justin Krebs, but he started this group called Drinking Liberally. And it's like people are going to bars—we're hanging out in bars anyway. Might as well turn it into something that could become action, but it's got to require some sort of other education. Right. How do you do that? How do you, I mean, if it's literally maybe tools, like here's how you make a video online and post it. Here's how you organize a group, or the education on the issue to say: this is worthwhile and something you can actually win. How did you guys...

**Andrew Slack:** Do that part? There is a version of this question where I can talk about what I did, [00:12:00] and there's a version of this question around tactic where it's like, what are we all doing? How do we look around and see ourselves as alchemists and see that the lead can be transformed to gold, Justin Krebs with Drinking Liberal is a prime example of that.

Where are people doing things? Where are they having fun? Simply activism is very luxury. So, there's different versions of this too.

With the Harry Potter fan community, it involved the fact that I was so much an authentic Harry Potter fan and I started to live and breathe in that community. So, I think that part of it does require that truly authentic relationship. And it's impossible to replicate that kind of thing. because there's grassroots, pulling up your sleeves component to this. That out of those human relationships, you collaborate and develop new projects based on the creativity of other people. It's an ensemble.

**Steve Lambert:** I mean, that's kind of the education [00:13:00] part for you right? You needed to learn the books, you needed to learn the fan community. You can't come in as like a dilettante or you know, seem like someone from the outside that's trying to like, “Hey, I want to instrumentalize all of you.”

**Andrew Slack:** I mean at first, I was seen in that way by several people. And I think maybe that was true on some level and I don't think it was on another one because I genuinely wanted to make Harry Potter real for myself. It's almost a kind of LARPing, but without wearing the costumes—live action roleplay when people dress up in, in wizard outfits and that, I wasn't even wearing those, but I was still like living the part I would imagine myself as Harry or Dumbledore and in other work doing the same thing, as part of the Rebel Alliance.

So, there's that piece of it. Of really allowing this to be theater and allowing this to be a kind of theater where it's not fake theater, it's good acting. It means you are taking this very seriously. And I think that's, that's a crucial piece of [00:14:00] this. But I think also one of the beautiful things about creating a space that is the Harry Potter Alliance is that it allowed partners who were not Harry Potter, just normal nonprofits or activist groups to be able to plug in. So, I think it can be more practical for organizations and activists who are not living and breathing, whatever the fandom piece is to connect with the influencers who are living and breathing it to give them that voice, to give them something to say with their voice and that they want those things to be said.

**Steve Lambert:** I think we've talked about this with a lot of folks that are pretty experienced, and I'm always surprised when they're like, “Oh, right.” You know, you're not going to that person or this group like asking them a favor or asking them to do something for you. You're giving them a gift, right?

Like, “Hey, you already care about this. That's how you should feel about it, right.” It's like “you care about this. We can support you; I can give you some information. I can connect you with this other group. And [00:15:00] then you can actually achieve what you're hoping to achieve. I'm here to help basically.”

Right? That should be the approach. But let me go back to the education question, right? Because when you have fans that maybe don't think of themselves as political or don't make that connection, you're making that

connection. How do you do that? How do you do that education piece, both with the tools and the issue?

**Andrew Slack:** Well one advantage now in 2023 is that I think it's easier to find people who are interested and don't know what to do than it was 2005. We're in a much less politically apathetic moment, but there's still plenty of apath. So how do you do that education? I think there's different tactics.

So, let's say you're at a fan conference and you apply to be a speaker at a panel for a fan conference, and you get it, and the panel discussion is around: [00:16:00] how do we make the thing that we love real? So, an example of a fandom that's pretty active is *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

And that's an extraordinary theory, and that's not even Avatar—the James Cameron films, which is also a whole other discussion. But how do we take what Aang, the hero of Avatar did and put that into the world? Because we have an ecological crisis, and you describe what happened in Avatar in an emotional way.

And then you connect it to what is happening in our world on an ecological level and how are people being affected by it and how is that like what happened in Avatar Glass Air and what can we do that is similar to Aang and his friends to take down the Fire Lord? And that would be the panel discussion.

And then after the panel discussion, don't just go for the panel. You know, obviously do all the normal organizing tactics of collecting emails and having [00:17:00] conversations afterwards and attending other panels and meeting those panelists and saying, “I'm doing a thing. We're trying to make *Avatar: The Last Airbender*—the message of it—real and in the world and on Twitter, message the creator and let them know about this.

I think also this is one of the magical things about the Harry Potter lines. And I think it often gets forgotten by me actually. I came in with a wish to get these fans, mostly the young people, to become more advocacy [minded], to become more strategic and thinking about social change from a structural standpoint—not thinking about community service.

But anytime we mentioned literacy, people were getting more excited. So, I realized that we should be doing book drives, even though a book

drive was [00:18:00] something that uninspired me. Even though I was so uninspired by that compared to getting people to do advocacy against some big media company that's just trying to consolidate blah, blah, blah—

**Steve Lambert:** Yeah. There's no system change element. It's band aid...

**Andrew Slack:** Yeah, exactly. But the band aid stuff is what provided, not just candy. It also made me realize as an organizer and activist, that I was given short shrift to the band aid stuff. The band aid stuff is the stuff of heart. Also, when we're doing advocacy, we don't know...even in the, the unlikely event that we win, we don't even know normally what part we played. But when we're doing charitable work, we have a feeling of impact. Nothing can take away that impact. And I think why that's so crucial is that it helps us as activists keep the oxygen that we're remembering we're in this for goodness. We're not just in this to stick to the man. Yes, you want to do that. Absolutely. But you merge those [00:19:00] two things together, you start to have a more wholesome picture. You also still have the badass picture. And I think that's important too because it also allows people who are uncomfortable with the activist aesthetic, but who want to do good and believe in the values of activism to enter and then to go up that ladder of engagement.

And one of the things I admire so much about Fandom Forward, which is now the name of the former Harry Potter Alliance, is how they've taken young people's passion for literacy, this sort of band aid solution, and then tied it into advocacy for public libraries, in partnership with the American Library Association. And there's always a way to get those, those charitable pieces to become stronger.

But I think when we're dealing with people who have never experienced those activist muscles, but they want to do good in the world and they want to fight bad, I think starting them on those band aid solutions is actually a really great way to teach them how to do the whole thing.

[00:20:00]

**Steve Lambert:** That's really great. I mean I will admit I have been very dismissive of that kind of thing; you know? Although also understanding at the same time that you need to build people's confidence as they're starting even if they're experience. If you get a new group going, the first thing you do has to be successful and it can be very small, but just so

there's some momentum, right? And it connects back to the education, right? It's like, "Hey, we can do this, and we can win." That's part of the education. And by making it something that's purely charitable, or something you're entirely in control of, right. Like the mayor's not going to stop you from donating the books. Right.

**Andrew Slack:** So, we had a former Republican that was put on the news because he was part of a group that was rewarding us [00:21:00] with something and he didn't realize he was a prominent former Republican senator, I can't remember his name right now. And he was asked what he likes about the group, about us. He didn't like anything about us, but he said, "I like that they encourage reading." And it was really interesting. Now we have this weird (I don't want to be pushing this sort of bipartisanship, like everyone should get along,) but I do think there is something really disarming where it becomes really hard for people to dismiss you.

We had young people that were against marriage equality that were part of the group early on. We didn't kick them out. We said, you can't advocate against marriage equality. You can do any of our other programming. I'm willing to bet that a lot of them ended up becoming activists for marriage equality over time. Yeah, and I think this also gets into another piece, which is reflecting about how our personalities are a little more excited [00:22:00] by the combative pieces and other, other people are not as excited.

There are people that don't want the battle, they don't get off on it, but they want to do good. And I think we get them by giving an opportunity to do something, wholesome, but then also help them say all the things that you love are getting ruined by this company. And you can do something about it too.

Simply continuing to join. It's that ladder of engagement. You know talking about MRC, one of the strongest we've ever seen in the history of this country, in the US. is the civil rights movement. And what was the underlying community in the myth-ritual-community? It was the Black Baptist Church. And the Black Baptist Church doesn't recruit based on activism.

It recruits based on giving people existential, cosmic grounding, and they also do things that are charitable and from that community, when it is ready to stand for systemic change, it can from a multitude of [00:23:00]



personalities. So, I think it's a real weakness we have as activists, and we only think about how do we get more people to have our combative personalities instead of how can we learn?

From people who have less combative personalities and how do we genuinely bring them in?

**Steve Lambert:** Yeah, I think for me it takes a different form. Like I don't like battling, I like winning and the feeling of "Hey, we did it!" And that's what some of that charitable stuff does but it takes out all the risk, right—of failure, because you can do it. But the other thing that I really like is like sort of the clever problem-solving stuff. I mean, it's the creativity, right? Of like people think we've tried all these things, and it doesn't work. But you have to teach people like they don't know that feeling. Right?

It takes time to accumulate the wins and realize that every once in a while, it can be done. And the confidence. I was going to ask about you early on, you [00:24:00] said, you know, coming in as someone working for the Harry Potter Alliance, especially at that point, you worried about being taken seriously and you know I have that too sometimes.

Like I'll come in with a project idea that I know either they're going to love it or they're going to be like, you're insane. You know? And some of that is like self-consciousness and some of it is legitimate. It's always a mix. But how did you manage that? What would you say to people who are sort of dismissive of fan culture and fan activism?

**Andrew Slack:** I developed a very silly theorem that I find a lot of pleasure in called the three, the 'three P's.' The 'three P's' to success and achieving any purpose are patience, persistence, and pizzaz. And most of us have a lot of two of those things. Most of us do not have all three of those things. For me, I normally have a lot of persistence and a lot of [00:25:00] pizzaz. I don't have a lot of patience. Like when you look at like Hillary Clinton, she has a lot of patience, a lot of persistence, and almost zero pizzaz, at least in public. You look at Donald Trump, he's all persistence and pizzaz. There's no patience at all.

So, I think that patience, persistence, and pizzaz are essential to our success and really nurturing, if you lack patience—how do you build that patience?

Other activists have really been skeptical of the work that I've done. And then over time it's been so strange to have some of the people talk about me as though I'm some kind of genius when you know, just a couple years before they thought I was not worth talking to. And nothing changed except their perception, which [00:26:00] shows that, you know, over time, this is part of social change.

If your fellow activists don't enjoy something, it doesn't mean it's wrong. It just might mean that you might be a little early and that's awesome. That's disruptive. There's one example when I was organizing around *The Hunger Games*, and I was meeting with union organizers and the union I was working with was really into this campaign that I was leading around the three-finger salute from the Hunger Games as connective tissue to protest economic inequality. So, we were working with—I think it might have been the fight for 15—I can't remember now. And one of the union organizers was very enthused, but there were a couple that weren't for different reasons.

And one of them actually started crying, which made me feel humbled because she felt that this was such a cheap way to exploit these, [00:27:00] people that are suffering and being exploited so much. And I felt a little taken aback because I didn't know how to treat this person's tears.

I wanted to respect where she was coming from while still advocating for the efficacy. At the same time, wonder, am I doing what she was afraid of? Am I exploiting—

**Steve Lambert:** Even sort of minimizing or not honoring the reality—

**Andrew Slack:** Exactly. Minimizing it. And I am sure that argument could go on for 10,000 years and we can never figure out who's right and who's not. But then I had the experience of actually being with the workers. And just how excited they were to use the 'three fingers' and how excited they were to see themselves as part of a bigger story that everyone's paying attention to, how excited they were [00:28:00] to say like that their kids are into the Hunger Games, and this will make their kids proud of them.

To see them as people who are part of district 13 fighting the capitol in Panem fighting President. This gives the rhetoric and the language for their kids. And the irony to me of this was this person who was crying,

truly coming from an amazing place, and a place that I hope to come from as much as I possibly can, but also, I think was wrong.

And I think dangerously so, because there is a kind of fetishization that we have of humans. Oh, we don't want to minimize, but you're minimizing the fact that these are human beings who love fantasy because they're human beings. They love popular culture because they're people. Not all people love popular culture, not all people love fantasy.

But when you have kids, generally you're going to be into it. And generally, it feels like there's a lack of appreciation for the [00:29:00] fact that life is full of humor and weirdness, and mythology and if you don't respect that, you are minimizing something. You literally are minimizing humanity.

And the people that you're organizing, which is how we have a lot of workers, going for the far right. They have a more compelling story sometimes, and they respect the tools of storytelling more than a lot of people on the left who don't.

A lot of us in the left are so concerned and end up minimizing people.

**Steve Lambert:** You know it's important to be coming from a very sincere place and if it's not sincere, then you're in trouble. But there is something that activists do, which is to treat people like just another body that [00:30:00] will make a number, right?

Like “We have this many signatures, we have this many people,” but who those people are, and the richness of their lives is not really included. And that's a way of minimizing them. If you say, “Hey, we're going to do this with a Hunger Games,” or “We're going to do this three-finger salute,” you're giving some structure that then they can work within, right?

I've seen, I think probably all the Star Wars movies, but there's definitely people that are probably in that union that have seen them and, and know them better than I do, and they're able to build on that, right?

An example we used to use, which is now pretty old is Billionaires for Bush. And it was people that dress up like billionaires and campaign for George Bush as cartoon billionaires—

**Steve Lambert:** So, once you understand the premise, anyone can step into it and play the game, right? And what a fandom does is like help define the field, right—this is the field we're playing on. You know, some of the rules because you know the story. But on the field, you get to come up with your own name, you get to come up with your own moves, and it gives them agency that they don't have, as one of 600 that marched on city hall.

**Andrew Slack:** I have to dwell on this just for a second. The irony of not wanting to minimize someone by not having them compared to a pop culture story minimizes them. There's forgetting the fact that they actually care about those things. And I think Billionaires for Bush is a great example of something that allows you to have fun and enjoy.

But I do think that when we think about organizing workers, just remembering that many workers have children, or grandchildren and how do we get their children and grandchildren to be proud of the work and think they want to go to the public events as well. In a way that they can see their dad or their mom not as this victim but as this hero who is owning their power and fighting the bad guys, which is what these stories are almost always about. So, the idea of my dad is in the Rebel Alliance, that gives the worker a feeling of empowerment that's going to make them want to keep coming back anyway. To win the fight, to get others converted. Where my brain has been lately has been thinking a lot about the core of these stories and if we can understand the core of them. One of the [00:33:00] problems that we're in right now is, I think we've lost the thread on what the story even is.

And part of the problem is that so much is happening so fast and has been happening for a while so fast. I don't really think we know how to link issues of corporate accountability, reforming corporations, all of the economic pieces along with the fact that Silicon Valley is completely nuts with the fact that we've got a fixed mass extinction that is worse than the extinction that killed the dinosaurs coupled with a climate crisis. And those are two different things that are overlapped. We have a democracy crisis. We have an opioid crisis; we have an ongoing never-ending structural racism crisis. It's hard to know what we're doing and why.

And one of the pieces that I think when I was doing the core stuff with the Harry Potter Alliance, giving people a connection to Harry Potter or Star Wars [00:34:00] helps create some order to the narrative for people.

What I've been thinking about lately is what if all these stories have some common threads that can help us understand the big story. And the common thread I keep coming back at you is they're almost always about orphans and empires trying to kill them, and it is uncanny when we have Dorothy an orphan up against the Wicked Witch of the West. Luke Skywalker is an orphan up against the empire. I mean, Santa Claus is technically an orphan. It goes on and on and on. Harry Potter. Almost every single hero in Endgame Avengers is an orphan. Lord of the Rings [00:35:00]

**Steve Lambert:** Superman. Batman, right?

**Andrew Slack:** Well Superman was developed by these Jewish immigrants. Yeah, the children of Jewish immigrants who made a story to be modeled after an immigrant experience. And immigration is being orphaned from your fatherland or motherland. And orphanhood starts to become a metaphor for any experience of loss and aloneness that we experience individually or collectively.

And so that journey, the hero is journey of going from orphanhood and separateness to wholeness, and what is crazy is that the empire is normally in all these stories run by an orphan as well, who is sort of the dark side of the hero. And they're trying to solve for their feeling of separation and aloneness, but they lose in the stories because the orphan hero finds something bigger than the empire they're fighting.

Something that is connected like the Gaia energy, the Fawkes the Phoenix song, in Harry [00:36:00] Potter. It goes on, on and on. And there is a cohesive narrative in this pattern that I'm seeing, I've been writing about it. I'm calling it The Orphan in the Empire because I think it's going to be crucial for us to really get ahold of the bigger story, we're all in, and seeing how the story is connected and how when it comes to a fight of orphans, up against empires [inaudible]...but in order for us to do that, we need to understand the story that we are in as we are fighting these big empires of corporations or Silicon Valley...