

## The Bureau of Re-Funification

An interview with Andrew Slack, Co-founder, Harry Potter Alliance, Somerville, MA, USA

**Children need opportunities to show civic leadership. Cities lack opportunities for fun. Combining these ideas, Andrew Slack of the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) – which uses fiction and fantasy as a point of entry to encourage civic engagement – describes an experimental ‘Bureau for Re-Funification’ in Washington DC, and developing plans for a global urban ‘Funvolution’.**

‘Children are our future’, you often hear people say, and it always surprises me that they think it’s a positive statement. What does it imply? If children are the future, then grown-ups must be the present and the elderly must be the past. In other words, adults of working age are the centre of existence; the young don’t matter yet, and the old don’t matter any more. Nowhere is this depressing attitude more apparent than in our cities.

Last year I spent a week working with a small group of children in Washington DC, in partnership with the Smithsonian EdLab. We took the kids to Union Station and asked them to observe and make notes. What did they notice? The most common observation was this: Union Station is not a place that is welcoming for either children or the elderly. The EdLab director asked them, ‘Well, who is it welcoming for?’ One of the kids pointed to the adults in the room: ‘You guys! It’s all made for business people. Not us.’

This led to some discussion about how kids and older people have a lot in common. Shel Silverstein sums it up poignantly in his 1981 poem, ‘The Little Boy and the Old Man’:

Said the little boy, ‘Sometimes I drop my spoon.’  
Said the old man, ‘I do that too.’  
The little boy whispered, ‘I wet my pants.’  
‘I do that too,’ laughed the little old man.  
Said the little boy, ‘I often cry.’  
The old man nodded, ‘So do I.’  
‘But worst of all,’ said the boy, ‘it seems  
Grown-ups don’t pay attention to me.’  
And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand.  
‘I know what you mean,’ said the little old man.

It’s not only young and old people who suffer when cities are stripped of opportunities to stop and smile, or to pause and rest in comfort – when cities are reduced to being merely places for business, or busy-ness. Grown-ups suffer, too, from a depletion of spirit, from feelings of depression and anxiety, alienation and angst.

So we began a conversation about how our cities might be made more welcoming for both kids and elderly people, with comfortable places to pass time, and opportunities to have fun. With a nod to the language of DC, we decided that we would spend the rest of our week together being the Bureau of Re-Funification.

### The Harry Potter Alliance

The Bureau of Re-Funification needs to be understood in the broader context of what my organisation, the Harry Potter Alliance, is trying to achieve. My background is in comedy, and I became interested in the power of storytelling to promote social change. An example: in 1988, the Harvard School of Public Health asked for the help of TV networks to popularise the concept of a ‘designated driver’ – the person who commits to stay sober when going out for a drink with friends. Writers of shows such as *Cheers* agreed to weave the phrase into their storylines, and it became part of the cultural mainstream.

More recently, the show *Will and Grace* has been credited with helping to change the zeitgeist on marriage equality. Now that gay and lesbian marriage is not only legal but uncontroversial in many US states, it is remarkable to think that just ten years ago, during the 2004 US elections, the issue was considered to be politically toxic. I think of these as examples of ‘cultural acupuncture’. The theory of acupuncture is that inserting a needle at just the right point can transform the flow of energy in the body. Stories can do the same in culture, sometimes with astonishing power and speed.

However, the storytellers of our society – professionals in creativity, from scriptwriters to comedians and even advertising agencies – tend not to interact much with the professions of compassion (charities, therapies,



**We began a conversation about how our cities might be made more welcoming for both kids and the elderly, with comfortable places to pass time, and opportunities to have fun.** Photo • Courtesy Harry Potter Alliance

spirituality) or with those who dedicate themselves to trying to change the system (professional activists, foundations, elected officials). So how can we break down the walls between those areas of work?

While thinking along these lines, I fell in love with Harry Potter. In my mid-20s, I encountered the world of fandom for the first time: when I'd grown up, in the pre-internet era, fan groups existed but barriers of entry were higher and the groups themselves were considered to be uncool. Now immersion in a fictional or fantasy world is both easy and popular; the Harry Potter fan website Mugglenet, for example, was started by a 12 year old and soon getting over 100,000 visitors a day. As I explored this virtual universe, I realised that young fans of Harry Potter were becoming writers, self-publishing fan fiction; they were becoming broadcasters, putting

out podcasts; they were becoming athletes, devising and holding tournaments in Quidditch, the sport played in the books; they were becoming musicians, composing and singing songs from the perspectives of Harry Potter characters.

But nobody was making connections between the world of Harry Potter and our world, the real world. There are many parallels, from race and sexual equality to habeas corpus. In the book *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling, 2003), Harry's friends create an organisation called Dumbledore's Army, to fight for justice. I started saying to my fellow online Harry Potter fans: if Harry lived in our world, do you think he'd be content just to talk about how cool it was being Harry Potter? Wouldn't he take up a cause – say, climate change, or Darfur?

Those conversations struck a chord and led to the Harry Potter Alliance, which I co-founded with my comedy partner Seth Soulstein and Paul DeGeorge from the punk rock band Harry and the Potters. The HPA now has 300 chapters on six continents, through which Harry Potter fans have donated 120,000 books to libraries around the world, sent five cargo planes of emergency supplies to Haiti, and much else.

### Education and urban design

These are examples of what happens when you nurture what media scholar Henry Jenkins calls the ‘civic imagination’<sup>1</sup> – the capacity to imagine beyond the status quo. Naturally, it is not just the Harry Potter stories that present an opportunity to use fiction and fantasy as entry points into engaging with the world, rather than as a means to escape from it. *The Hunger Games Trilogy* (Collins, 2008–10) can be used to inspire action on economic inequality. We can point out that Superman, who embodies the American ideal of fighting for truth and justice, arrived in the USA as an undocumented immigrant. And so on.

Indeed, the Bureau of Re-Funification idea was conceived by kids wearing superhero capes. We had been analysing the movie *Batman Begins*, and talking about what problems the kids would want to fix if they had superhero powers.

On the last day of the week, the kids – in superhero costumes – decided to draw in chalk on the sidewalk outside Union Station, to brighten the place up for a day at least. As they did so, something wonderful happened. A group of older children from around the world, who were in DC for an educational camp, asked what was happening and decided to join in. Soon, the sidewalks around Union Station were brightly decorated with the word ‘love’ in many different languages. Passing adults stopped and smiled. Our kids were giddy with excitement, because they saw that they had opened up a space that positively changed others.

We soon learned that the Bureau of Re-Funification idea commanded support among a remarkably diverse

range of groups – from leftist progressive activists to civic media wonks and regular people, our social media feed rapidly filled up with ideas about making cities more fun. We heard about playgrounds for older people; musical trash cans; bus stops where people can wait on swings; fountains where you’re not only allowed but encouraged to paddle and splash; elevators with two moving handrails, the lower one at child height; public tree-houses; community gardens; pedestrian skywalks; and countless others. I recalled the ‘art cafes’ of my own student days: spontaneous acts of creativity and kindness, such as peeling and juicing oranges on the sidewalk, and giving away the juice to passers-by while making designs out of the peel.

We have now accumulated many such innovative ideas which could be championed by children, photographed and posted online to inspire others; in many cases they would elicit media coverage, which begins a virtuous circle. We are currently looking for backers to develop the Bureau of Re-Funification into a global urban Funvolution movement, an online network curated by kids, with local cells swapping experiences and ideas for actions in their own cities. Having fun is an idea all kids can get behind; it can give them opportunities to show civic leadership and improve the urban experience for everyone.

### References

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Silverstein, S. (1981). The Little Boy and the Old Man. In: *A Light in the Attic*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> ‘From cultural jamming to cultural acupuncture: fan activism and the civic imagination’ was a talk given by media theorist Henry Jenkins at Stanford University Humanities Center on 27 May 2014 (available online at <https://thecontemporary.stanford.edu/henry-jenkins-fan-activism-and-civic-imagination>).