

THE BEST ORGANIZING STRATEGY

YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

WHY FAN ACTIVISM HAS THE POWER TO
RADICALLY TRANSFORM OUR WORLD



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INTRODUCTION

FANDOM is a human instinct. For as long as people have been telling stories, we've been driven to share those stories with one another: through retelling, reimagining, and remixing. **Fandom happens when media is consumed in community.** You're probably picturing a convention floor, cosplayers, and release parties, but if we travel back in time we'll find oral stories passed down generation to generation: pub-goers demanding a favorite tale from the traveling bard, family stories that get more fantastical with each retelling, the fish bigger and bigger as the years go on. **When we love something, our instinct is to share it.**

As our world became more globally connected, fans with ideas considered “fringe” began to be able to connect – the popularity of imagining Captain Kirk and Spock in a romantic relationship (*shipping*, and in the case of a same-gender relationship, *slash* shipping) during Star Trek's original run is often cited as a beginning of modern fandom culture. Using systems of forwarding addresses and hand-assembled magazines, Kirk/Spock shippers – primarily women – distributed original stories, art, and analysis of the show through the mail.

Kirk/Spock fandom stands out not just because of the ingenuity involved or the fact that it remains a popular ship to this day, but because it represents a shift in core fandom culture: imagining Kirk and Spock together wasn't just retelling the story of Star Trek, **it was retelling it in a way that imagined how that world – how *our* world – could be.**

FAN ACTIVISM is the practice of organizing fans of pop culture for social change. It's a diverse community of practitioners with varying interests, fandoms, and approaches to the work, but a common vision unites the fan activism community: to make the world a more loving, equitable place for all.

During 2021 and 2022, a founding group of fan organizers joined a collaborative effort, led by **Fandom Forward** and **Black Nerds Create** and supported by **Pop Culture Collaborative**, to document the core principles and opportunities of fan activism. We hope this document serves as both an entrypoint to fan activism and a call to action for movement strategists looking for innovative methods to meet the demands of our time.

In our favorite stories there's always a moment when it becomes clear that every person and every tool is needed if the fight is going to be won. As organizers across the globe work to push back a growing rise of fascism, division, and greed, we know fan activism has unique opportunities to build momentum in that work.

As they say in another iconic space opera, *Star Wars*: this is a rebellion, right? Let's rebel.

LANGUAGE

Jargon is tricky even for those within the field of fan activism, so we want to be clear about the definitions we're using throughout this report.

Fandom: a broad, interconnected, self-organized community of people enthusiastically engaging with a piece of media.

Fan activism: drawing parallels between real world issues and popular media to mobilize fans for social change.

Fan activist: a fan who *participates* in fan activism.

Fan organizer: a fan who *organizes* other fans for fan activism.

Fan works: creative work, including prose, visual art, film, music, objects, meta analysis, and otherwise, inspired by fandom. These may also be referred to as *transformative* works, in that they transform the original source material into something new.

Creator: a person who has created or helped to create media; in this context, a creator could refer to someone creating fan works or someone creating the original media that inspired the fandom.

Community: a group of people engaging with one another, united by a common interest or purpose. There are usually many distinct communities within a single fandom. A person may consider themselves part of a fandom (they create fan works or attend conventions, as examples) but not be active in a specific community within that fandom. Fan organizers tend to refer to their followers and/or participants as their community.

Narrative organizing: “the act of building, creating and using narrative to shift power towards justice, equity and democracy.” (Narrative Initiative) Generally, fan organizers would consider fan activism to be a subcategory of narrative organizing.

ORGANIZERS IN THE FIELD

The field of fan activism is populated by diverse and passionate organizers who collectively reach an audience of millions worldwide. Fan organizers begin simply as fans who want to make a difference, and their efforts often start as self-funded, volunteer-driven projects. **Many of the hallmark activities of fandom participation lend themselves to strong organizing skills – fandom is, after all, a form of community organizing in and of itself.** Fans participating in fandom learn how to quickly connect with like minded folks, mobilize for shared goals, communicate ideas, generate evocative content, take advantage of social media, and in many cases even organize large in-person events. This knowledge base can be easily adapted to organizing towards goals of social change.

The fan organizers who participated in creating this report represent a diverse sample of strategies, fandoms, and identities. The goal of this founding coalition group was to identify key needs and opportunities for fan activism. They also collectively documented best practices from their own experiences as fan organizers, creating invaluable resources for budding fan organizers.

The fan organizers here are organizing specifically around narrative-based fandom – think movies, television, books, games, and other media with an inherent story embedded within it. Though they're not represented here, non-narrative fandoms like sports have ample opportunity to build on the work of these organizers.

Fandom Forward is a forerunner of modern fan activism, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded in 2005. Fandom Forward's mission is to turn fans into heroes by making activism more accessible and sustainable for all. For over a decade it's successfully reached an audience of primarily young women and LGBTQIA+ folks ranging in age from elementary schoolers to retirees, most of whom have never participated in activism before becoming involved with Fandom Forward.

Black Nerds Create (formerly Black Girls Create) is a collective that provides content through a lens of critical and creative fandom, in order to advocate for and contribute to meaningful representation in media for Black folks specifically, and systemically marginalized people in general. In the last seven years, BNC has provided content such as the #WizardTeam podcast and the fanfiction project Hogwarts BSU, put on the digital convention for fans and creators, Kuumba Kickback, and published their first anthology *These Bewitching Bonds*. They continue to build and hold safe spaces for Black and otherwise marginalized fans to engage in fandom both critically and creatively.

Alexis Sanchez (she/they) is the founder of [Latinx Geeks](#), focused on advocating for and highlighting positive Latinx representation in media. Alexis currently lives in Northern Virginia and is working at the non-profit United Cerebral Palsy. They are also part of the Bringing the Lessons Home program at USHMM.

Bayana Davis (she/her) is a writer and content creator born and raised in Oakland, California. She is the co-founder of **Black Nerds Create** and cohost of the #WizardTeam podcast and the Things We Imagine series on YouTube. She is a fierce advocate of critical fandom, the increased representation of Black women in media, time travel, dragons, and avoiding the AI apocalypse. You can generally find her fangirling and agonizing about writing on Twitter at @yanawroteit.

Erica Ito (she/they) is originally from Kailua, Hawai'i, currently living in New York City and working as an actor, bookseller, and podcaster. They are a co-creator and co-host of the **Seaweed Brain Podcast**, which takes a critical fandom approach to celebrating the Percy Jackson and the Olympians book series.

Janae Phillips (she/her) is an artist and community organizer with over a decade of experience in youth, fandom, and digital organizing. In her previous role as Fandom Forward's Co-Managing Director, Janae trained thousands of fan activists and was the architect behind the organization's well-known conference and toolkits.

Jay Justice (she/her) is an award-winning editor, consultant, game developer, cosplayer, and advocate from New York City. Her work has been featured by SyFy, BBC America, and Marvel Comics, and she has been the inspiration for new characters in DC Comics and Boom Studios. Since 2009, Jay has crafted over 100 costumes and created inclusive programming at conventions, libraries & schools across the country. As an outspoken POC, LGBTQIA+, and disability advocate, Jay is dedicated to creating lasting change within her community & inspiring others to do the same.

Jeremy Cobb (he/him) is one third of **Three Black Halflings**, a podcast of three nerdy friends exploring diversity in the incredible worlds of D&D and pop culture while doling out DM tips, thought-provoking conversations, a band of guests, and good times

Jessie Blount (she/her) is a writer, a baker, a podcast maker. She is half of **Hashtag Ruthless Productions**, and makes podcasts about Our Flag Means Death (The Gay Pirate Podcast), Harry Potter (The Gayly Prophet), the Simon Snow series (EsGAYpe From Reality), and Buffy the Vampire Slayer (We Are The Gayers). Her favorite things besides yelling about pop culture include collecting bird facts, urban foraging, writing fanfic, and treating her cat like a princess.

Johnnie Jae (she/her) is an Otoe-Missouria and Choctaw journalist, speaker, podcaster, technologist, advocate, community builder and entrepreneur that loves empowering others to follow their passions and create for healing and positive change in the world. She is the founder of **A Tribe Called Geek**, an award-winning media platform for Indigenous Geek Culture and STEM as well as #Indigenerds4Hope, a suicide prevention initiative designed to educate, encourage and empower Native Youth who are or know someone struggling with bullying, mental illness and suicide. Johnnie was born and raised in Oklahoma. She is the daughter of Anna Morris and John Helt. The granddaughter of the late Rev. John and Claudette Morris and Sgt. George and Ann Helt. She is the great-granddaughter of the late Johnnie and Minnie Moore and Nelson and Emaline Morris.

Joy Piedmont (she/her) is a high school teacher at an independent school in NYC. She's the co-producer and co-host of **Reality Bomb: A Doctor Who** podcast, and a frequent panel moderator and interviewer at Gallifrey One. Joy has organized the People of Color meetup at Gallifrey One since 2018, and in 2021 she and Nicole Hill created a virtual quarterly PoC meetup for Doctor Who fans. She's organized Gallifrey Stands fundraisers which have raised money and awareness for issues such as gun violence and educational access, and helped start the #DoctorWhoBlackout in June 2020 to raise awareness and funds for small grassroots organizations devoted to lifting up Black people and communities. She's currently co-editing her first book, *A Doctor Who Archive: Readings Across Space and Time* with co-editors Paul Booth, Tansy Rayner-Roberts, and Matt Hills.

Katie Bowers (she/her) has been leading **Fandom Forward's** campaigns since 2013, first as a volunteer and then as Senior Staff after joining the team in 2015. Katie has played an integral role in some of Fandom Forward's most iconic campaigns, and her commitment to relational organizing and community-centered leadership has played an essential role in shaping the organization into what it is today. An avid reader with a desire to do good, Katie has been integrating her love of pop culture and social justice through youth organizing initiatives and experiential education since 2005. Katie holds a B.S. in Developmental Sociology from Cornell University and an M.S.W. from Hunter College.

Lark Malakai Grey (he/him) is an artist and podcaster. He is one half of **Hashtag Ruthless Productions:** the creators of the podcasts *The Gayly Prophet*, *The Gay Pirate Podcast*, *EsGAYpe From Reality*, and *We Are The Gayers*, and the folks behind the *Guide to Firing JKR While Keeping Harry Potter*. He is also the creator of *Under the Bed Tarot*, a gender-free tarot deck of monsters. Find him on instagram @LarkMalakai

Porshèa Patterson Hurst (she/her) is a storyteller. Data analysis/research, fiction writing, and series co-hosting—*Things We Imagine* on YouTube as well as podcasts @CastleBlackPod & @SafeNegroPod—are her primary devices. Living in Brooklyn, though hailing from Middle Tennessee, her life is full of travel, reading, things that sparkle, and working with organizations she's passionate about: book reviewing, partnership development, and highlighting creative works by BIPOC creators at **Black Nerds Create**; co-hosting and media analysis at *For All Nerds*; and considering the scope of present and future work as a board member of Fandom Forward.

Robyn Jordan (she/they) is a community builder, producer, host, and sometimes cultural critic. A true California girl, born and raised all over Southern California, her favorite things include playing vinyl records in dark rooms, browsing city library shelves, sporadic marathons of *Star Trek*, and preparing for the robot takeover. She is a co-founder of **Black Nerds Create**.

Shawn Taylor (he/him) is the creator and host of the top-rated podcast, "Surviving Creativity." He's a founding author of www.thenerdsofcolor.org, and a founding organizer of *The Black and Brown Comix Arts Festival*. Shawn is a recognized scholar and sought-after speaker and workshop facilitator in the areas of pop culture and participatory culture studies, mythology, folk and netlore, experimental theater

and media studies. He was also a Senior Fellow with the Pop Culture Collaborative focusing on the transformative social power of fandom. Currently he works as a coach and consultant for individual creatives and organizations, and is a university lecturer. Shawn coined the term “Oakanda” to link 2018’s “Black Panther” film and the revolutionary history and spirit of Oakland, CA. His latest project, “Afrofuturism: A Cartography” is a multimedia work that will be released in 2022. He lives in the SF Bay Area with his family.

Tae Phoenix (she/they) is a singer-songwriter, filmmaker, activist, and theatre artist based on the occupied territory of the Coast Salish and Duwamish peoples, colloquially known as Seattle, WA. As a queer, autistic Latine Jew, Tae’s work is shaped by lived experience, ancestral memory, empathy, and common sense. They are the co-founder of **Trek the Vote**, a non-partisan network of Star Trek actors, fans, and creators dedicated to fair and equitable elections and have written for both StarTrek.com and Women at Warp.

SHARED VALUES OF FAN ACTIVISTS

Across these many different strategies of fan organizing, there are a shared set of values and behaviors that fan organizers agree are central to the work. For fan organizers whose work is primarily oriented around creating pluralist communities within their fandom(s), these values are modeled by organizers and expected to be upheld by community members.

INTENTIONALITY

We are intentional in the ways we interact with, engage in, and support each other across fandom spaces. We believe that fan communities are powerful, purposeful, and help to shape the broader world through their influence on mass media and fans. We shape our fan communities to reflect the world we want to live in. As such, our communities intentionally center the experiences of marginalized people and provide space for fans to create, learn, and share. As a coalition, we seek to engage and support one another by sharing resources, knowledge, and opportunities across organizations and fandoms.

ACCOUNTABILITY

We approach this work with the knowledge that we will make mistakes. We are open to learning and understand that our ignorance is not an excuse for perpetuating harm, but an essential opportunity to help ourselves and our communities grow and do better. We are committed to listening to, learning from, and using our platforms to elevate marginalized voices rather than speak over them. We commit to working together to prevent harm, to provide genuine apologies and behavior shifts when harm is done, and to learning in public.

IMAGINATION

Fandom is meant to be fun! We give ourselves permission to play and imagine beyond the original source material. We believe that imagining new worlds and ways of doing things in fandom influences and helps change the broader world. By valuing fan creation and imagination, we model a world where everyone's story matters and can change their community and the world for the better.

COMMUNITY CARE

We practice empathy and generosity, and prioritize accessibility across fandom spaces. We support the work that individual creators and fans must do to care for their health and wellbeing, but we reject the capitalist model of "self-care." Alternatively, we support community care in the form of sharing, confidence-building, activism, learning, and the commitment to be there for one another as we co-create welcoming, long-lasting fan communities.

ESTABLISHING BEST PRACTICES IN FAN ACTIVISM

Fandom is a practice of invitation. It's loving something and immediately asking your friends if they've loved it too. It's no wonder that fan organizers are nearly universally invested in how to support the next generation of organizers. As part of the coalition's initial dialogue, it was immediately clear that documentation of all we'd collectively learned in our time as fan organizers was a major priority – not just for the fan organizers working currently, but so that anyone who wants to begin in the future has this collective knowledge to draw from.

Intentionality	Accountability	Imagination	Community Care
Establish Community Agreements	Build Genuine Relationships	Remixing	Prioritize Accessibility
Take Action with Intention	Apologize Authentically	Claiming the Narrative	Activist Care
Create Thoughtfully	Problematic Faves	Embracing Playfulness	Open Access

Find all our of our best practice resources at fandomforward.org/coalition

WHY FAN ACTIVISM

Of the myriad organizing strategies available to us, why are fan organizers so passionate about fan activism? The most obvious answer might be that it's *fun*, and in a time when almost every organizer

you meet is spending most of their time frustrated and exhausted, finding ways to make organizing fun is a welcome balm. But it's not just that: **fan activism is uniquely equipped to build new inroads across the political spectrum, communicate a vision of tomorrow, and empower the next generation of activists.**

FANDOM IS MADE TO BE DISCUSSED

Our culture is still steeped in that old advice to never discuss politics or religion in polite company. These norms make casual conversations about our collective values and politics fraught. Furthermore, topics like privilege and systemic oppression are more likely to garner a reactive response from those who need to have these discussions the most, a function of white supremacy that is critical to push through.

On the other hand, **fandom is inherently a practice of discussion.** Sharing our favorite or least favorite parts, discussing theories of what will happen next in between installments, debating how we interpreted different scenes and characters: these are all cornerstones of what fandom *is*. Fandom also lends itself to a practice of accepting multiple “correct” answers; you and your friend may have different opinions about the best movie in the franchise, or whether or not Han Solo shot first, but this variation enriches rather than endangers the experience of being in community. **Fandom is a world where thoughtful critique is part of the game.**

So when it comes to tackling complex issues across the political divide, fandom becomes an incredibly effective tool to circumvent knee-jerk reactions. The same person who struggles to discuss racism without becoming defensive can probably have an open conversation about the ways prejudice against people from different backgrounds is explored in Star Trek. By leading with fandom, a shared language and common set of values, moving from the hypothetical (or in this case, imaginary) to reality becomes easier.

In many ways, fandom affiliation acts as a “third space” of identity. In sociology, a third space is somewhere outside of home or work that serves as a more neutral, community-oriented place to gather. **Engaging with people through their fandom identities helps us subvert the cultural norms and white fragility that has functioned as a protective buffer for systemic oppression.** For the same reasons, fandom left unchecked and unexamined can become toxic, a fact that far right organizers use to their advantage.

CREATION, COMMUNICATION, AND DESIRE

In fandom, **changing the story to reflect the world we want is an everyday practice.** Fan artists and fanfiction writers regularly recast characters to better reflect the real world, making them more racially diverse, more queer, more neurodivergent – in short, representative. Alternate Universe (AU) stories are a hallmark of fanfiction, not just putting characters into new scenarios (“AU: Avengers except they run a coffee shop together”), but often rewriting the media that disappointed them (“AU where Dany doesn't go crazy in the end”). Some fan interpretations of media are so ubiquitous that they're known

as “fanon,” fan works that, for the fandom, are practically canon. For example, Harry Potter characters Remus Lupin and Sirius Black are so broadly interpreted as queer that it’s almost more unusual to find a Harry Potter fan who *doesn’t* see them that way. Sometimes fanon even becomes so accepted that it makes its way into canon; fans of the CW show *Supernatural* interpreted the characters of Castiel (originally meant to be a short term guest role) and Dean Winchester in love for over decade before Castiel professed his love for Dean in 2020.

In other words, **fan activists are already well practiced at communicating a vision.** As progressive organizers look to communicate an alternative vision for our future than that of the far right, fan activists are armed with years of experience in both communicating a vision and, perhaps even more critical, engaging in collaborative, distributed relationships to create that vision.

Fandom naturally creates the conditions for new creators to thrive – it’s an environment where creative contributions, no matter prior experience or level of skill, are welcomed and celebrated. Many fans end up creating original works or engaging in other projects because they were given a safe space to explore and develop their skills early on. These democratized opportunities for exploration and positive reinforcement help foster a greater diversity of up and coming creators and organizers to lead the way.

CONNECTION

At its core, fandom is community. A culture of generosity, exchange and barter, promotion of one another’s work, and even mutual aid are all regularly observed in fandom, and in the case of fan activists is intentionally fostered. Fans are also incredibly skilled at rapid mobilization – by using the same tools they rely on every day to build community, fan activists can boost information and gather support quickly. In a time of endless political battles and a struggle to maintain grassroots networks, fandom communities act as strong digital networks that can be quickly activated.

OPPORTUNITIES

Building upon the decades of successful work by fan organizers, we see ample opportunity for fan activism to act as a key tool in the fight for a more equitable, pluralist future for all.

FIGHTING RADICALIZATION

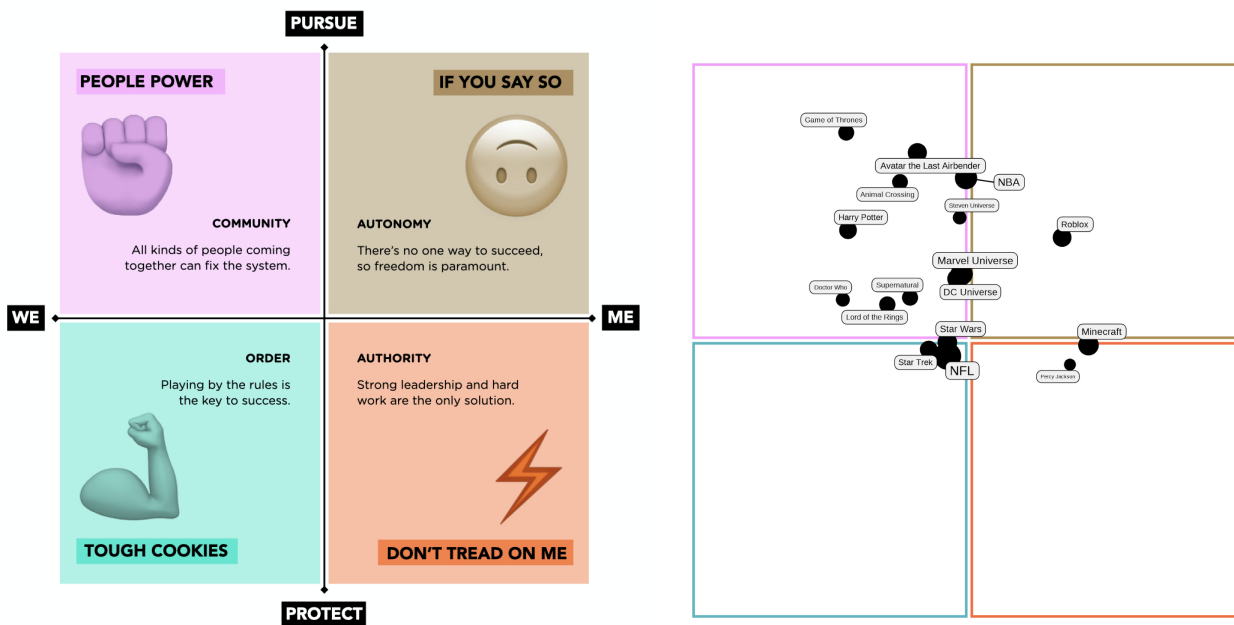
The far right has been incredibly effective at weaponizing the internet, particularly in radicalizing young white men through social media and other online communities. We’ve seen the ways these groups are co-opting not just American imagery, but pop culture imagery and ideas; in just one example, a Captain America shield was on display at the Capitol Insurrection on January 6, 2021. **If fan organizers do not intentionally create counter narratives and pluralist spaces within fandoms like Marvel or Star Wars, we’re essentially leaving these powerful stories and iconography up for grabs – and the far right isn’t hesitating to claim them.** Because fandom communities *are* communities, with shared identities and norms, the potential to radicalize young audiences is high. **Fan activists help to hold the line**

within these spaces, and with further resources and allies they could be an even more potent force to help combat the radicalization of young white men via the internet.

SHIFTING NARRATIVES THROUGH CROSS-FANDOM STRATEGY

Different fandoms generally have different political landscapes; for example, Harry Potter fandom tends to be very progressive, while Star Trek fandom tends to be more centrist. These are obviously broad stroke generalizations – fandoms are composed of millions of individuals – but they are consistent enough that fan organizers can typically tell you what the general landscape of different fandoms looks like.

Through collaboration with Harmony Labs and their [Narrative Observatory](#) project, in [2021 Fandom Forward was able to map key fandoms with data analysis](#). Harmony Labs uses a combination of data from 55k+ Americans (via opt-in internet panels) and review by researchers to discover and track narrative trends — in other words, what kinds of things people are interacting with and how they're interacting with them. They can also group people into audiences based on their values using survey and cultural interactions on platforms like Tumblr, Reddit, and YouTube. Harmony Labs then identified people who look to be in particular fandoms by using frequent search terms (like “hufflepuff,” for example), and mapped them against the four values-based audiences.



Almost no one has *just one* fandom – most fans, including fan activists, participate in multiple fandoms, sometimes for media very different in nature. This means that rather than fandoms acting as distinct circles, you should think of fandoms more like venn diagrams, with overlapping participants in each.

Using these overlapping participants, fan organizers could strategically “pass” a campaign from one fandom to another over several months or years in order to strategically shift the narrative on that issue over time.

For example, using the fandoms mapped above, a campaign on gun control may be best suited to begin within the Avatar: The Last Airbender fandom (who are likely to readily accept that narrative), then be run again within the Marvel fandom, then again in the Star Trek fandom.

Because there is likely to be overlap of fans in each community, those fans serve the role of early adopters and trusted advocates within each new community. Thus, the narrative shift becomes a message coming from *inside* the community, rather than from external organizers with less earned trust.

A CALL TO ACTION

The fan organizers we spoke to expressed a consistent frustration: **that fan activism is not seen as an important organizing movement, if it is known at all.** These organizers are doing incredible work to create cross-generational movements reaching people more traditional organizing hadn't yet connected with. It's our hope that this report helps to share the work of fan activism with the broader community of progressive organizers across the globe. Maybe it even inspires a new fan organizer; after all, everyone is into *something*. What are you a fan of?

If you're a fan organizer, you're not in this alone! The fan activism community is dedicated to supporting fan organizers of all kinds and experience levels. Please let us know what you're working on, and get involved at fandomforward.org/coalition

If you're a movement organizer, consider how fan activism can be a tool in reaching your goals for social change. Fan organizers frequently collaborate with other movement organizers – you bring your expertise, we'll bring ours! If you're not sure who to reach out to first, Fandom Forward is happy to help get you to the right place: reach out to Katie Bowers at katie@fandomforward.org.

If you're a philanthropist, you have the opportunity to bring invaluable support to a high-impact, severely under-resourced area of movement organizing. Most fan organizers have visions that exceed their resources, and with fiscal support could be even more effective. If you are interested in learning more about philanthropic strategies to support fan activism for narrative change, contact Pop Culture Collaborative's Chief Strategy Officer, Tracy Van Slyke (tracy@popcollab.org). Also consider whether any of the organizers and organizations included in this report sound like a match for your philanthropic interests and can reach out to Katie Bowers at katie@fandomforward.org – we'd love to help find the perfect match.