

Feminist Jedi and a politically correct empire: Popular culture and transformative bridges in alternative media content

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Abstract

This article explores the role of writing about popular culture in politically motivated alternative media. In our study, we engaged in different forms of textual analysis in order to investigate three kinds of articles about *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* in conservative and liberal alternative media. Specifically, we conducted a close reading of reviews of the film, opinion articles about the film and 'fluff' articles about the film. Essentially, we found that the three types of popular culture articles were necessary for the establishment of strong transformative bridges that allowed for intersections between activist alternative media and mainstream media. In addition, we also found the ideological assumptions embedded within the fluff articles to be the most important aspect of this bridge; these ideologies about culture and consumerism allowed for the strongest intersections to emerge.

Keywords

Alternative media, *The Force Awakens*, popular culture, *Star Wars*, textual analysis, transformative bridges

Introduction

There has been considerable research concerning alternative media over the past 20 years, much of which has focused on those that cover political issues, which often are utilised by social activists and political advocates. For instance, Downing (2001) and Atton (2002) demonstrate the connections between alternative media and social movement actors, while Meikle (2002) examines the role of alternative media production in the formation of political identity. In addition, Atkinson (2010) demonstrates how alternative media content constitutes a backdrop against which activists engage in performances of resistance, and Kenix (2011) illustrates linkages and influences between alternative and mainstream media. Although these studies explore different aspects of alternative media – and in fact started with different assumptions about what makes media alternative – they all have one important thing in

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common. Each examines alternative media articles and web posts that focus on politicised issues. Atton's research explores zines like *SchNEWS*, filled with articles that address environmental issues and homelessness. Conversely, Atkinson's research concerning resistance performance focuses on the alternative media like Indymedia.org, which are often read and used by activists to gain information about war and corporate crime.

Based on this research, it would be easy to conclude that such alternative media feature only political content focusing on issues of war, environment, political policy, elections and taxation. Indeed, such alternative media typically are organised around political philosophies, and often address major news stories and issues from the perspectives grounded in those philosophies. For example, the *Breitbart News* website claims that it is a 'syndicated news and opinion website providing continuously updated headlines to top news and analysis sources', while *The Weekly Standard* Facebook profile states that the magazine is a 'weekly magazine of news and conservative opinion'. However, the matter of alternative media content is not so simple, as many titles such as these regularly offer movie and book reviews to audiences, as well as articles about celebrities and sports. Yet such content about popular culture in alternative media has been associated only with fanzines (e.g. Fiske, 1992; Frith, 1996), and not political alternative media like those noted above. Nevertheless, as we embarked on this research project, we found numerous politically oriented alternative media titles that included articles and discussions about popular culture topics like the release of the film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. We became quite curious about the role played by these articles within the larger context of those alternative media titles. In order to address this issue, we engaged in a textual analysis of alternative media in 2016. In particular, we examined articles in a variety of alternative media titles concerning the December 2015 release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. We chose articles focused on this popular culture artefact because it was covered in almost every alternative media title that we examined, regardless of the political leanings of the producers and audience.

Over a period of three months, we examined 70 articles across four different alternative media titles. Our textual analysis demonstrated that, although discussions about the film conveyed through alternative media coverage varied according to the political leanings of each title, such coverage played an important role for those alternative media titles. In particular, we found that there were three types of popular culture articles found within the alternative media about *The Force Awakens*: (1) 'fluff' articles; (2) reviews of the film; and (3) opinion pieces. Each of these different kinds of articles effectively worked to bridge many of the abstract political philosophies of the alternative media titles to connect with society at large. Essentially, such articles about popular culture were important for the construction of 'transformative alternative media bridges' built upon the ideological intersections between mainstream and alternative media, as described by Kenix (2011). Essentially, the transformative alternative media bridge is a collection of articles within an alternative media title that connects the underlying philosophies and views to entertainment and other aspects of the larger society.

For the most part, we found that the 'fluff' articles were the most crucial to the construction of the transformative bridges, as they gave rise to the ideological intersections. We found that those alternative media titles that fully constructed the transformative bridges with all three article types could effectively extend their political visions beyond traditionally politicised issues into popular culture; furthermore, those alternative media titles were also able to make aspects of popular culture (like *The Force Awakens*) into a metaphor for politicised topics like feminism or political correctness. This article provides insight into past literature concerning alternative media, and explains the methods used in our study.

Alternative media and content

Past research has focused on alternative media from three different perspectives: content (Downing, 2001; Kenix, 2009); production (Atton, 2002; Meikle, 2002); and interpretive strategies of the audience (Rauch, 2007). For this reason, Atkinson (2010) claims that media can be determined to be alternative if they have at least one of the following characteristics: (1) they have content that challenges power structures or advocates for the transformation of social roles; (2) they are produced through organisational practices alternative to those utilised by consumer-oriented media conglomerates; or (3) they are interpreted as alternative by the audience. The different titles that we examined in our textual analysis adhere to at least one of these three characteristics.

Of particular importance to this study are the concepts of content and framing. Past research has illustrated alternative media content in a variety of forms: magazines and radio (Downing, 2001), zines and websites (Atton, 2002), wikis and 'knowledge commons' (Lievrouw, 2011), and blogs (Kenix, 2009). Such research has also demonstrated that underlying meanings about political issues are embedded in those texts. For instance, Atkinson's (2005) research concerning the conceptualisation of power in alternative media shows that different alternative media titles utilise two types of power in their discussions about corporations. Alternative media with more radical leanings (e.g. *Indymedia.org*, *Z Magazine*) utilise resource-oriented notions of power to frame corporate entities, while more reformist media (e.g. *MoveOn.org*, *The Progressive*) utilise hegemonic notions of power. Atkinson (2010) illustrates how these underlying frames serve as a backdrop that informs the ways in which activists perform and coordinate resistance.

The concept of framing is particularly important, with Kenix (2011) illustrating its role in the convergence of mainstream and alternative media. Her research demonstrates that framing has become one of many intersections between mainstream and alternative media. Framing involves the construction of meaningful contexts that influence the discourse concerning political topics; such contexts shape the ways in which those topics are presented to audiences in news stories. According to Kenix, past scholarship has been flawed in conceptualising two different types of media, and should instead shift to a single continuum that ranges from mainstream to alternative. Along this continuum lie intersections that allow for the convergence of both. Essentially, there are several ways in which the two intersect, and most of these intersections entail organisational processes, ownership and modes of production. For instance, Kenix notes that producers of all media often learn from the content and production practices that they observe across the entire continuum; they assimilate and utilise those practices in their own media (alternative or mainstream) as they see fit.

For example, mainstream media producers have started to call regularly on individuals who contribute to alternative media to provide content to mainstream content as well, as they provide cheap content that is readily available at a moment's notice. Contributors to alternative media sources like *Mother Jones* or *The Huffington Post* are regularly called to appear on mainstream sources like CNN to provide opinion on a variety of political topics. Although most of these intersections deal with organisational practices and ownership, some involve the content within both alternative and mainstream media. For the purposes of this article, one of those content-oriented intersections is particularly important: ideology. For the most part, Kenix (2011) notes that ideological assumptions held in society influence what subjects are discussed within media content, as well as the ways in which they are discussed; ideology dictates what is stated and what is left unsaid. Furthermore, ideology stands as an intersection that cuts across the content of both mainstream and alternative media. Ideological assumptions about consumerism or equality often influence how both mainstream newspapers and alternative blogs report stories about war or drone strikes.

As noted earlier, these studies have focused exclusively on alternative media content related to politicised issues. Atkinson (2005) explores content about corporate crime and war, while Kenix (2009, 2011) examines content about war, media power and healthcare. Most of the alternative media titles examined in their research include articles and materials related to popular culture, like movies or music, yet such content is overlooked in their analyses. In order to address the role of such content, we conducted a textual analysis of different articles related to the release of *The Force Awakens*, posted or published in alternative media titles; we paid particular attention to those titles posted in December 2015, as well as the early part of 2016.

Method

The method of textual analysis described by McKee (2003) and Brummett (2009) entails a close reading of a text in order to make interpretations about its role in society or within a particular context. The process of textual analysis entails the collection of evidence in order to demonstrate how reality is represented in content (McKee, 2003). Evidence typically is collected through a process of close reading – that is, a researcher closely examines a text in order to find patterns within the structure or content that may effectively provide insight about the producers' vision of reality (Brummett, 2009).

In order to conduct our analysis, we selected two liberal alternative media titles for examination (*CounterPunch* website, *The Huffington Post*) and two conservative titles (*Breitbart News Network*, *The Weekly Standard* website). *Counterpunch* is a left-leaning monthly magazine started in 1993 to provide news and challenge corporate power; the accompanying website provides additional material free of charge to readers around the world. We consider *CounterPunch* to be alternative media, as it adheres to two of the characteristics noted previously: the content challenges power structures in society (Downing, 2001); and it is produced through alternative practices like the use of reader-writers to generate content (Atton, 2002). *The Huffington Post* is a left-leaning, web-based news site that was founded in 2005 by author Arianna Huffington; the website produces several different editions around the globe. We consider *The Huffington Post* to be alternative media as many liberal activists and readers interpret the forum to be alternative to mainstream news; their interpretive strategies make the content alternative (Rauch, 2007). At the other end of the political spectrum, *Breitbart News Network* is a website created by conservative businessman Andrew Breitbart in 2007 that provides news and political opinion. We consider *Breitbart* to be alternative media as it adheres to two of the characteristics established above: the content challenges institutional and ideological power structures in the United States (Downing, 2001); and it is interpreted by many conservative activists to be alternative (Rauch, 2007). Finally, the *Weekly Standard* is an opinion magazine that was first published in 1995 by conservative icons William Kristol and Fred Barnes. We consider this last source to be alternative as it is frequently read and used by conservative activists in the United States (Rauch, 2007).

Overall, we examined 70 articles across these four different alternative media titles that dealt in some way with *The Force Awakens* or the *Star Wars* franchise more generally.¹ In our initial reading of these primary texts, we found that there were three distinct types of article found within all of the titles: reviews, opinion articles, and 'fluff' articles. The first were discussions about the plot and characters of the film; they were reviews that provided audiences with information about the content of *The Force Awakens*. The second type, opinion articles, entailed discussions about a politicised topic, and the use of the film to make points about that topic. For instance, an article entitled 'STEM Wars: Can the Force Awaken Change for More Women in Science?' (Drinan, 2016), published in *The Huffington Post*, postulated that such a film would help to change gender roles in society:

What's crucial about this blockbuster passing the Bechdel test is the power it holds to influence a whole new generation of pop culture consumers on gender representations. This film gives women – and men – an opportunity to see women as adventurers and leaders in the infinite world of science fiction.

In this case, the article addressed gender roles in society and their connection to popular culture. Drinan uses the film and its Bechdel test score (which assesses how often female characters talk about men or relationships with men) to make her argument about this topic.

Finally, the fluff articles were pieces that addressed the enormous box office success of *The Force Awakens*, or interesting facts about the film, stars or fans. One article in *The Huffington Post* by Hutchinson (2015) explains that a survey conducted by Harris Interactive demonstrated that the film was the most popular of the *Star Wars* franchise months before it was even released. Another *Huffington Post* article by Brooks (2016) showcases fan art of the *Star Wars* franchise in anticipation of the release of the newest film.

In order to engage in our analysis of these texts, we focused our close reading on the following: (1) the construction of subject position; (2) politicisation of concepts or characters in *The Force Awakens*; and (3) underlying ideologies embedded in discussions about the film. First, we read narrative components utilised in articles in order to ascertain the construction of any subject positions, or the shaping of audience persona. Essentially, this approach to close reading entails looking for the ways in which the audience is positioned by the content. Through the close readings, we paid particular attention to the construction of the audience's persona, or a 'sense of Other, a stance or role allotted to "those people over there" in relationship to the text' (Brummett, 2009: 67). Second, we looked to see whether any characters, events or concepts from the film (or other *Star Wars* films) were used as a comparison with, or a metaphor for, politicised issues in contemporary society. This approach to close reading entailed searching for 'elements of texts in which one thing seems to be another' (Brummett, 2009: 73). Finally, we searched for underlying ideologies embedded within articles about *The Force Awakens*. This was accomplished by asking specific questions suggested by Brummett to read closely for ideology; specifically, we asked what the audience should think and assume. The following pages explain the findings from the application of these three close reading methods to the different types of article found throughout the alternative media titles.

Findings

The close readings of alternative media content illustrated that the different kinds of articles effectively helped to bridge abstract political concepts to the 'everyday life' of readers. Essentially, the articles about popular culture relied heavily on the ideological intersections that were embedded within the fluff articles; in the case of the articles about *The Force Awakens*, ideological assumptions about 'consumerism' and 'culture' illustrated the social significance of the film. In addition, the reviews positioned the audience in such a way as to see the film in terms of a political world-view. The opinion articles, then, transformed the film into a political object; the movie became a metaphor for politicised issues like feminism and political correctness. We now lay out these different facets of these popular culture articles in the alternative media that we examined. This is followed by a discussion about the role of these articles in alternative media in general.

Fluff articles

In our reading of the different articles that were classified as 'fluff', we found that writers often relied on dominant ideological assumptions that connect commercialism and emotions to culture; such ideological assumptions about the nature of culture typically have been reflected in mainstream media (Matsumoto et al., 2003). The heavy presence of these ideological assumptions in these alternative media titles framed *The Force Awakens* as socially significant,

and ultimately as worthy of political attention. One example of reliance on ideological assumptions concerning the intersection of consumerism and culture can be seen in an article posted on *Breitbart News* (2015), which states:

The Walt Disney Co. said, *The Force Awakens* crossed the billion-dollar mark Sunday, accomplishing the feat in just 12 days. The previous movie to reach \$1 billion the fastest was Universal's *Jurassic World*, which did it in 13 days in June. *Jurassic World* also had the benefit of record grosses in China. *The Force Awakens* doesn't open in the world's second-largest movie market until Jan. 9.

Similar articles that celebrated the record-breaking 12-day takings by the film could be found throughout one other alternative media title that we examined: *The Huffington Post*. No such articles were identified in *CounterPunch* or *Weekly Standard*. Essentially, such a celebration of the monetary success of *The Force Awakens* adheres to dominant ideologies about culture held within Western society. According to scholars like Hines (2010, 2012) and Hoey (2005), the post-modern middle class in American society is organised around ideals of authenticity. Such authenticity emerges from the choices that people make – particularly their consumer choices. Essentially, these choices come to be seen by people as culturally significant; they understand 'culture' in terms of consumer choices that they (or other people) make to achieve authenticity. In this way, the inclusion of these enormous amounts of money within the articles conveys to audiences that large numbers (even record numbers) of people chose to see the film within that 12-day span. These hard numbers mark *The Force Awakens* as culturally significant, and adhere to the dominant understanding of what does and does not make something culturally significant within the confines of post-industrial middle-class Western society.

Furthermore, many of these fluff articles examined highly emotional behaviour to demonstrate the cultural significance of *The Force Awakens*. These articles were solely about the strange or erratic behaviour that people exhibited in relation to the film. For instance, we found an article in *Breitbart News* entitled 'New Jersey Megachurch Celebrates "Cosmic Christmas" with Live *Star Wars* Nativity Scene' (Jones, 2016). Jones describes how a large church used excitement around the film to draw in new members:

Liquid Church is holding 'Cosmic Christmas' services at all five of its statewide campuses on Christmas Eve. Promising New Jersey's only 'LIVE *Star Wars* Nativity Scene', Liquid offers a nativity scene that includes Princess Leia, Han Solo, R2D2, and Chewbacca.

In another *Breitbart* article, Nussbaum (2015) describes the heightened concerns about security around the release of the film:

Movie theatres across the country are bracing for large holiday crowds this weekend by adding additional security measures – including armed guards and metal detection checks – as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* rolls out on more than 4000 screens nationwide ... Some of the nation's largest theatre chains announced this week that fake 'blasters' or gun-shaped toys would not be allowed in theatres, along with masks and face paint.

In another example from *The Huffington Post*, Jacobs (2015) speculates about emotionally charged fan behaviour around John Boyega, one of the film's stars. Written before the release of the film, Jacobs ponders about whether Boyega is ready for the transition from a modest life to super-stardom:

Here lies John Boyega's Anonymity, 1992–2015. With *The Force Awakens* opening in theatres on Thursday night, the *Star Wars* actor has, at most, 72 hours to relish the possibility that large crowds might not maul him the instant he steps outside. By this weekend, the few bets that remain are off.

Although he does not mean that Boyega would literally be mauled, Jacobs notes that the actor will be forever changed; wherever he goes for the foreseeable future (if not for the rest of his life), ordinary people and curiosity seekers alike will recognise and approach him.

These three examples go beyond commercialism and consumer choice, and utilise emotionally charged behaviour and excitement to demonstrate the significance of *The Force Awakens*. Essentially, the authors have adhered to another important ideological assumption within Western society noted by scholars. Matsumoto and colleagues (2003) explain that people historically have connected emotions to culture, and predominantly define culture in terms of the expression of emotion or excitement. They note that scholars generally understand that culture is much more complex than emotions, but that the two have largely been ideologically intertwined. In this way, those things that elicit strong emotions are generally considered to be culturally significant. The examples noted above fit within the dominant perception that connects emotions and excitement to culture. The movie inspired a church to put on a spectacle-laden performance based on *Star Wars*, and led people to believe that it would be the target of terror attacks. By describing *The Force Awakens* within the constraints of this ideological view of culture, often presented in mainstream media and across society, the producers of these alternative media titles effectively demonstrate the cultural significance of the film to audiences.

Reviews

Our close reading concerning subject position focused on the ways in which narrative elements were utilised to position the audience. Essentially, we found that alternative media producers created a subject position for viewing *The Force Awakens* through reviews of the film. These subject positions were always deeply embedded in conservative or liberal philosophies, depending on the title. In this way, the audience – which might initially have seen *The Force Awakens* as nothing more than action-packed entertainment – was positioned as conservative or liberal pundits when reflecting back on the film. These reviews forced the audience to read a piece of popular culture in terms of a political philosophy.

One example is an article found in *The Huffington Post* entitled ‘A Rey of Sunshine’ (Milne, 2015). In the review, Milne focuses almost entirely on the character of Rey, and her actions throughout the film:

The absolutely compelling character of Rey, played by English actress Daisy Ridley, is the center of the movie. The ‘awakening’ referred to in the title is hers. She is brave, skilled, resourceful, determined, and over the course of the story, as her connection to the Force deepens, grows immensely powerful ... Rey achieves all of these things without descending into sassy or sexualized caricature, or a neon sign flashing above her head reading ‘LOOK AT THIS AUDACIOUS, ENLIGHTENED STATEMENT OF FEMINISM WE MALE FILMMAKERS ARE MAKING.’ Rey is who she is, and frankly, it’s glorious.

Later in the review, Milne discusses his problems with the term ‘empowered woman’, in that the concept conveys the sense that powerful women are anomalies. He is appreciative of the fact that Rey’s actions and power are portrayed as normal within the context of the film, and expresses hope that future filmmakers will also present powerful female characters as normal. He goes on to question why there have been no Marvel movies featuring a female lead:

Your guess is as good as mine, but it seems to stem largely from writers, producers and directors (and executives) unable to arrive at what feels like, in the light of *The Force Awakens*, should be a very obvious conclusion: that women with power and agency won’t, in fact, scare men away from fantasy and science fiction movies. They belong there, as much as the boys do, and audiences will thank you for it.

Ultimately, Milne isolates specific narrative elements within the film, and connects them to contemporary feminist arguments and critiques. In particular, he notes that Rey and her actions make her into a strong and competent protagonist, all the while avoiding the negative stereotypes often associated with such female characters. He then critiques modern film studios by noting their avoidance of strong female characters for fear of driving away male audiences.

Finally, he ends the review by claiming that female characters should be in more films like *The Force Awakens*, and notes that they 'belong there, as much as the boys do'. All Milne's claims and arguments that are secondary to the discussion about the film fit within the notion of liberal feminism described by scholars and writers like Gloria Steinem (1983) and Naomi Wolf (2002), who argue that women have as much right to take part in social institutions as men; those institutions are not inherently problematic, but more representation by women is needed in society. In this way, Milne's review positions the audience to take part in an innovative argument, as described by Stewart, Smith and Denton (2001); such an argument illustrates social problems and calls for 'experimental change'.

Another example of the construction of subject position can be found in a review of the film posted on *Breitbart News* by Nolte (2015). Within this review, he addresses topics of race and gender that are presented in the film; his discussion of gender constitutes the largest part of the article, and has far more depth. He states:

The poster doesn't lie. A woman is now driving the action and something else. This is the only change that felt a bit too precious and programmed for me ... It just seemed like TFA went out of its way to ensure Rey is never put in a position where she is saved by a man. You could feel the movie avoiding that, taking a wider path than necessary. There are also female storm troopers and female rebellion pilots. I know that we now live in a world where the horrors of feminism have morphed into this bizarre era where liberating yourself from men means acting exactly like a man, but does Leia have to dress like a 60-year-old lesbian?

Like the review found in *The Huffington Post*, Nolte selects specific characters and actions throughout the film; he then connects them to conservatives views about feminism. In particular, he looks at the prevalence of female characters throughout the film, and the fact that Rey is never saved by a man. At one point, Nolte claims that 'in a few lines of dialogue Abrams signals early on that the era of the damsel in distress is over'. Overall, Nolte's discussion of characters and actions in the review positions the audience to take part in a reversive argument as described by Stewart, Smith and Denton (2001); such an argument claims that aspects of society have changed too much, and urges a 'return to a previous societal or political condition' (2001: 239). Through the review, audiences are positioned to see feminist and politically correct elements that have crept into the film.

These two reviews, and others like them in *Counterpunch* and *Weekly Standard*, effectively tie narrative components within the film to underlying philosophical foundations underpinning each title. Viewers are positioned in such a way that they no longer see a Hollywood 'tent-pole' movie laden with special effects and action, but rather see a film that has deep connections to political issues within our society, like political correctness or feminism; those audiences take part in a politicised argument as they reflect on the film.

Opinion articles

Through our close reading for politicised characters or concepts, we noted that the opinion articles constructed *The Force Awakens* as a metaphor for some politicised issue. The politicisation that we discovered entailed the authors isolating characters or actions within the film (or other *Star Wars* films), and then associating them directly with cultural influences of a politicised issue. This was different from the construction of subject positions noted above in relation to the reviews. In those cases, the articles focused on the film, while the opinion articles focused on the politicised issue and used the film to demonstrate their point. In the cases of *The Huffington Post* and *Breitbart News*, the film became a metaphorical vehicle for the concepts of feminism and political correctness respectively. In this way, those two alternative media titles took opposing views of *The Force Awakens*. In addition, we found that *Counterpunch* and *Weekly Standard* utilised the film as a metaphor for US militarism in the world.

The article mentioned earlier by Drinan (2016) illustrates one such example of politicisation. In the article, Drinan discusses the lack of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) fields, as well as the lack of interest shown by many young girls in STEM. She contends that movies like *The Force Awakens* can act as a feminist 'spark' that will move women and girls towards STEM fields:

Imagery and role models are so important. I heard this point made over and over at a recent gathering of women scientists and state and national politicians who gathered on our campus to talk about how to get more girls interested in STEM, and to sustain their engagement over time. As you may know, STEM is one of the fastest growing fields of our economy ... yet has a pitiful 26 per cent representation of women. Besides demonstrating that girls can have fun and make a difference in the world, seeing women role models – including those in popular culture – is among the most important ways to spark interest for girls in underrepresented fields, such as STEM.

By the end of this article, *The Force Awakens* does not function as a mere piece of popular culture or a film; instead, it stands as an aspect of modern feminism that holds the power to shape identities and society as a whole. The film and many of its narrative elements (most notably the main character, Rey) become vehicles for observing and understanding modern liberal feminism.

This stands in contrast to Hayward's (2015) article entitled 'May the Stupid Be with You: Political Correctness Meets *Star Wars*', on *Breitbart News*. Hayward connects *The Force Awakens* to a 'rant' by then-MSNBC host Melissa Harris-Perry about the symbolism of Darth Vader in the original trilogy. Harris-Perry had bemoaned the fact that Vader was depicted in black when he did evil deeds, but was revealed to be a white man when he was redeemed at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. Hayward calls such criticism by liberals like Harris-Perry 'weaponized political correctness':

But this is how the weaponized idiocy of political correctness works. ('Weaponized' is *exactly* the right word, not only because PC uses mob tactics to enforce its totalitarian agenda upon others, but because it has unquestionably gotten innocent people killed, most recently in San Bernadino.) The core belief of the Social Justice Warrior is that hidden *intentions* matter more than explicit words and images, and *they alone* have the power to divine those hidden intentions. It doesn't matter what the creators of *Star Wars*, from guru George Lucas to the costume designers, were trying to say. It matters what someone with a black belt in weaponized idiocy decides they 'really meant,' or what messages people as damaged as herself might extract from their artwork, decades later.

For Hayward, the political correctness of liberals has seeped into every aspect of contemporary culture through their critiques of symbolism. He notes that the cleansing of popular culture of anything offensive to liberal social justice warriors leaves American culture 'without any common reference points except those directly controlled by the collectivist Left, a nation with no communication except what they approve, with a populace terrorized out of casual, unregulated speech'. By the end of the article, *The Force Awakens* stands as an object in which one can see the creep of political correctness across society; the film becomes a metaphor for such creep.

In addition to these examples of politicisation, we also noted that the other two alternative media titles connected the film to the US military in some ways. In an article posted on *CounterPunch* entitled 'Why *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is a Parable that Supports US Empire', Burnett (2015) argues that the film can help people to see the prevalence of US militarism in the world today. He notes that the resistance fighters in *Force Awakens* deal with the non-state First Order in the same way that the US military deals with non-state actors like Al Qaeda and ISIS – that is, the film justifies the notion that terrorists should be targeted by large-scale military intervention. Conversely, multiple articles in the *Weekly Standard* draw upon and directly quote an earlier article published in 2002 by Last (2002) about the virtues of the Empire. In that earlier *Weekly Standard* article, Last argues that the militarism of the Empire brought safety and security to the galaxy, and that the rebels were on the wrong side of history. Within those articles, the Empire of the original trilogy is depicted as a benevolent force in the

galaxy, much like the US military and neoconservative policy is for the world. By the end of these titles, *The Force Awakens* and the *Star Wars* universe became metaphors for some aspects of the US military. Overall, then, the films were transformed into malicious and militaristic forms of US Empire in *CounterPunch*, while *Weekly Standard* transformed the Empire into a metaphor for neoconservative stability.

Transformative alternative media bridges

Overall, we found that the three different kinds of popular culture articles throughout the alternative media titles could work together as transformative bridges built primarily upon the ideological interconnections with mainstream media described by Kenix (2011). When these three types of articles were together within an alternative media title, they created a very strong potential to connect the underlying philosophies to entertainment and similar aspects of the larger society. Together, the popular culture articles could: (1) help the audience to see that a popular culture topic (in this case, *The Force Awakens*) was culturally important; (2) position the audience to engage the popular culture topic in terms conservative or liberal political arguments; and (3) transform the popular culture topic into a metaphor for an already politicised subject. The fluff articles accomplished the first of these aims, in that they effectively connected to dominant ideological assumptions about the nature of culture in order to portray *The Force Awakens* as a significant object in society, worthy of examination. The multiple discussions about the financial success of the film, as well as the emotional behaviour and excitement of fans fit within those dominant ideological assumptions that historically have been expressed through mainstream media. The reviews accomplished the second part, as they isolated particular narrative elements in the film in order to create a conservative or liberal subject position for looking at it; audiences of the alternative media titles were positioned so that they could only see the film within the frame of a political argument, and not simply as a piece of entertainment. In this way, the philosophy of the alternative media title was conveyed beyond political matters, but expanded into popular culture. Finally, the opinion articles completed the transformative bridge, as many used *The Force Awakens* or elements from the *Star Wars* franchise as a metaphor to understand a politicised topic; the film was politicised, and thus became an appropriate item for coverage in alternative media.

The use of these three articles by *The Huffington Post* and *Breitbart News* created the greatest possibility for the construction of transformative bridges, while *Weekly Standard* and *CounterPunch* did not demonstrate the same level of potential. The strong presence of all three article types in the first two titles helped to make for operative transformative bridges. For instance, in *Breitbart News*, several articles were posted that demonstrated the monetary success and emotional excitement generated by the film. The presence of those fluff articles is important, because the other article types would stand out and seem odd without them. More importantly, the fluff articles allowed for the interconnection between alternative media and mainstream media described by Kenix (2011). Why would a conservative publication dedicated to reporting about politics take up our time with reviews or opinion articles about mere entertainment? Without the fluff articles to connect to ideological views of culture and convey the notion of cultural significance, the reviews and opinion articles seemed drastically out of place. Such was the problem for *Weekly Standard* and *CounterPunch*: both offered up reviews and opinion articles, but little 'fluff'; those titles did not seem to export their political philosophy into the larger society effectively through reviews of the film, or bring the film into the content as a reasonable politicised object. More importantly, the metaphors about military and war within those titles were less likely to be bridged to larger society. Conversely, the metaphors of feminism and political correctness could potentially ring true for audiences of *The Huffington Post* and *Breitbart News*.

Ultimately, the transformative bridges were important for *The Huffington Post* and *Breitbart News*, as they were built upon an ideological interconnection with mainstream media embedded in the fluff articles. The transformative bridges, when fully established, could potentially connect their political visions beyond traditionally politicised topics like taxes, education or war. These alternative media titles could illustrate to the audience how their political visions of the world extended into the most mundane corners of society – in this case, *The Force Awakens* was just as political as gun control or healthcare reform. Furthermore, the titles that successfully constructed the transformative bridge were able to take a popular culture item – *The Force Awakens* – and make it into a metaphor for a political issue like feminism. This helped to reinforce the extension of political vision, and further politicise that aspect of popular culture for the audiences of that alternative media title. Essentially, transformative alternative media bridges prove to be important as they create the potential for alternative media titles to connect their philosophies and political visions to entertainment or other such aspects of contemporary society. In this way, they can make their philosophy or political vision of particular subject matter more real (or relevant) to audiences.

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Note

¹ The number of articles about *The Force Awakens* or stars of the film: *Huffington Post*: 40; *Breitbart*: 18; *CounterPunch*: 6; *Weekly Standard*: 5.