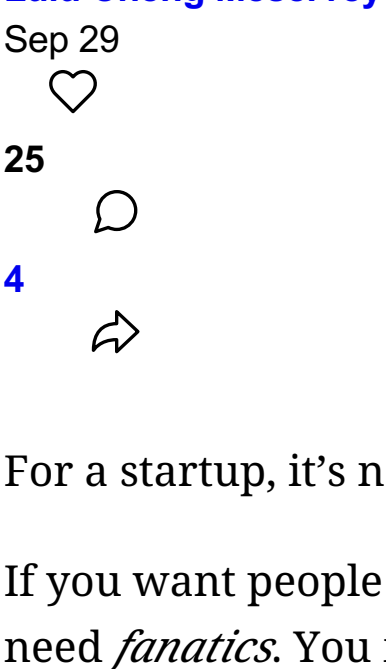


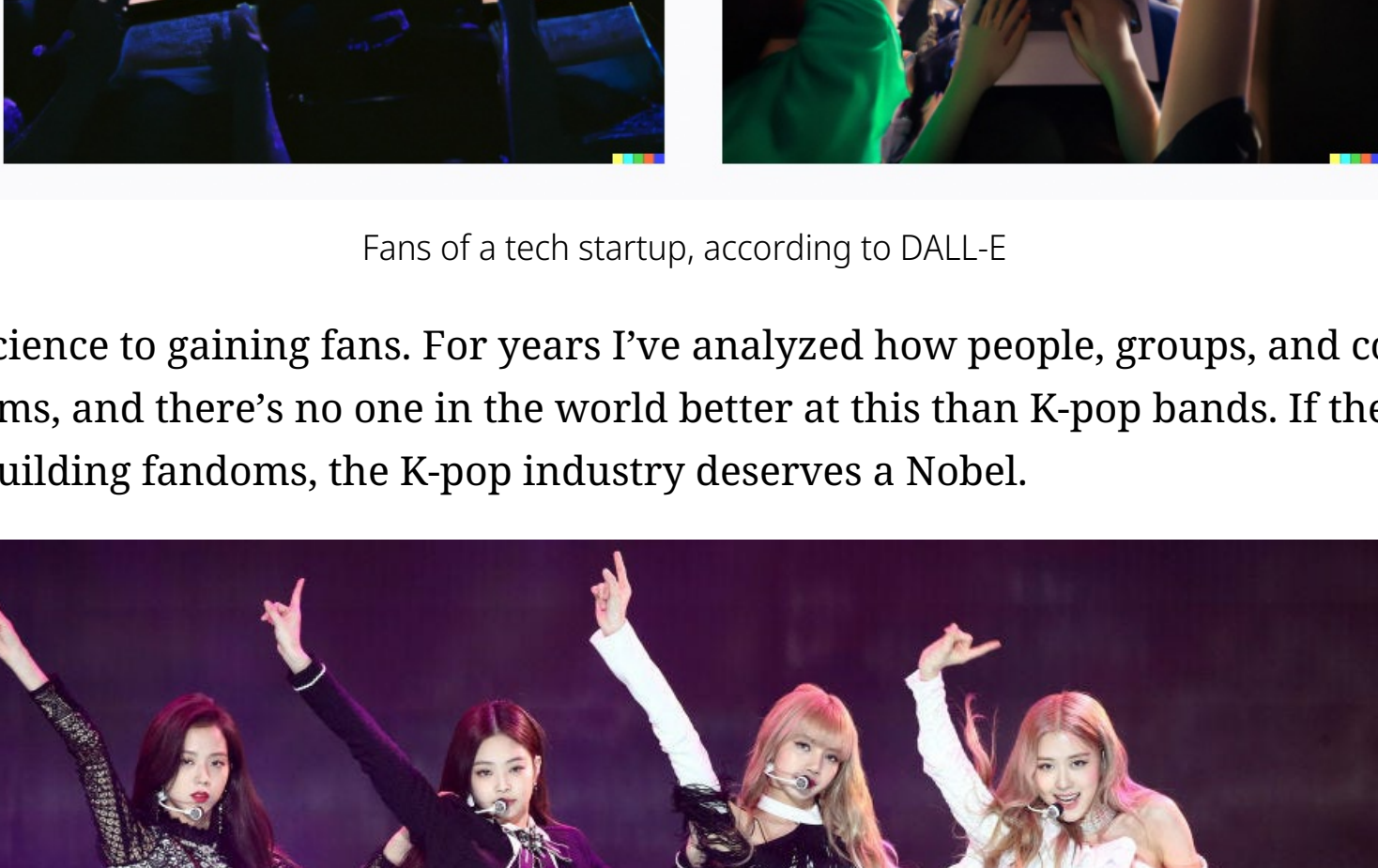
Build your fanbase using the K-pop method

Every startup needs true fans. To get them, learn from the masters.



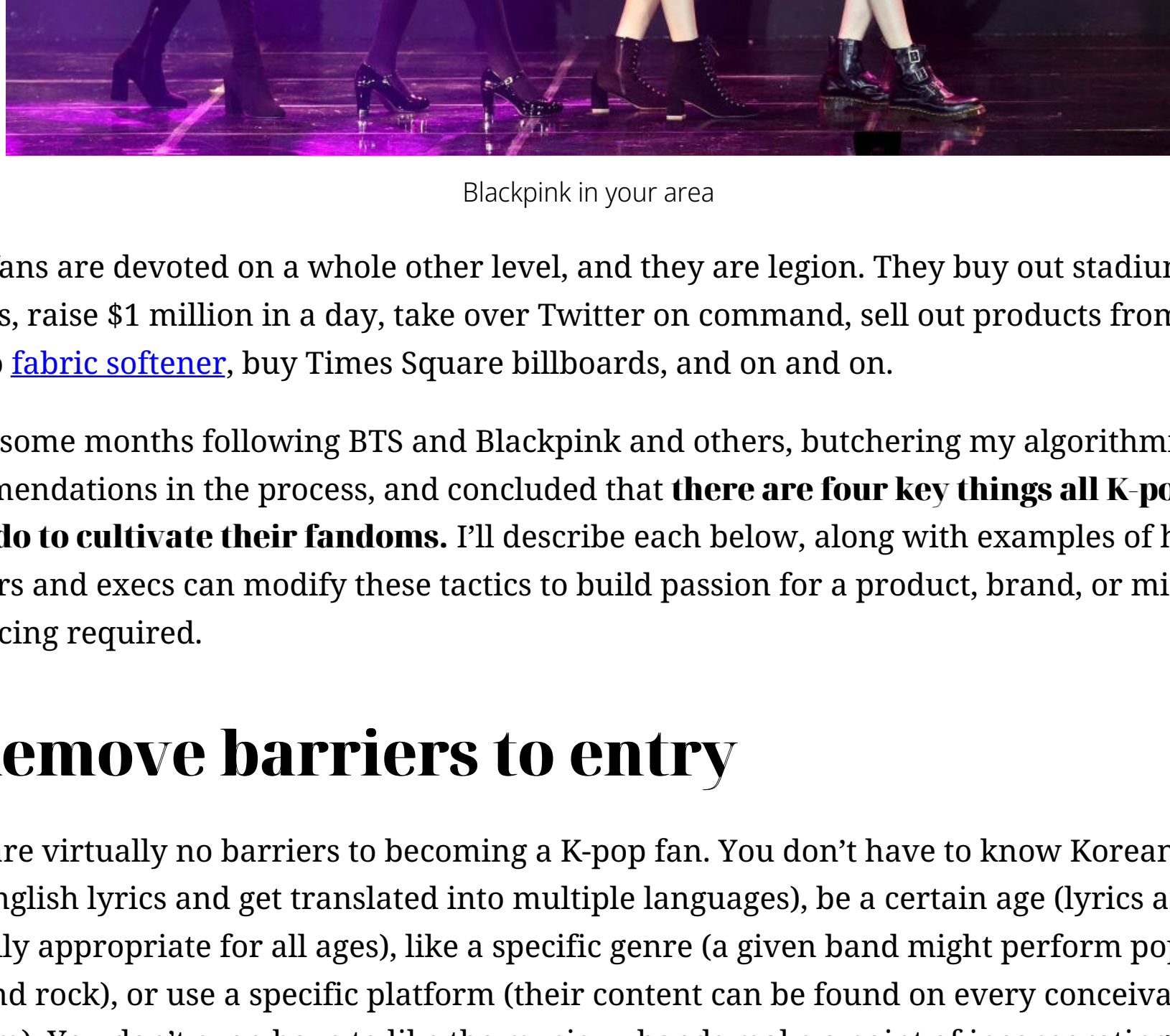
For a startup, it's not enough to have followers.

If you want people to evangelize for you, stand up for you, and stick with you long term, you need *fanatics*. You might have a different preferred term (diehards, zealots, tribe?) but for this piece let's go with fans.



Fans of a tech startup, according to DALL-E

There is a science to gaining fans. For years I've analyzed how people, groups, and companies build fandoms, and there's no one in the world better at this than K-pop bands. If there is a science to building fandoms, the K-pop industry deserves a Nobel.



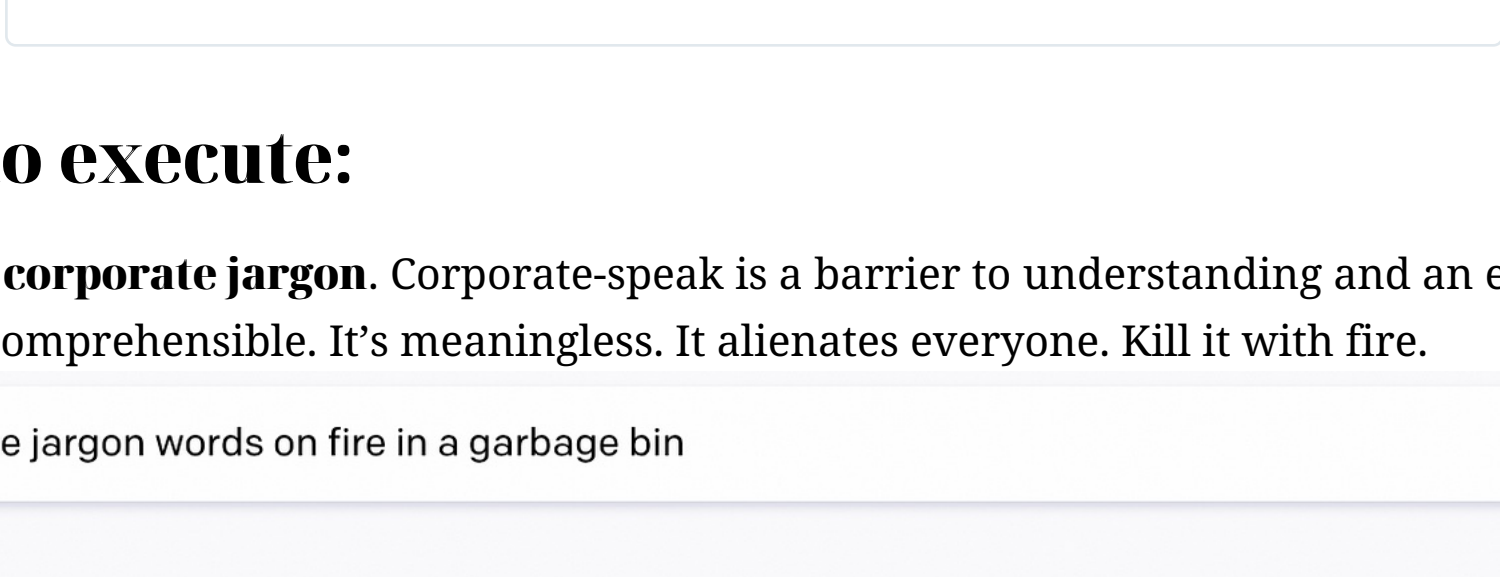
Blackpink in your area

K-pop fans are devoted on a whole other level, and they are legion. They buy out stadiums in minutes, raise \$1 million in a day, take over Twitter on command, sell out products from lip balm to [fabrics softer](#), buy Times Square billboards, and on and on.

I spent some months following BTS and Blackpink and others, butchering my algorithmic recommendations in the process, and concluded that **there are four key things all K-pop bands do to cultivate their fandoms**. I'll describe each below, along with examples of how founders and execs can modify these tactics to build passion for a product, brand, or mission. No dancing required.

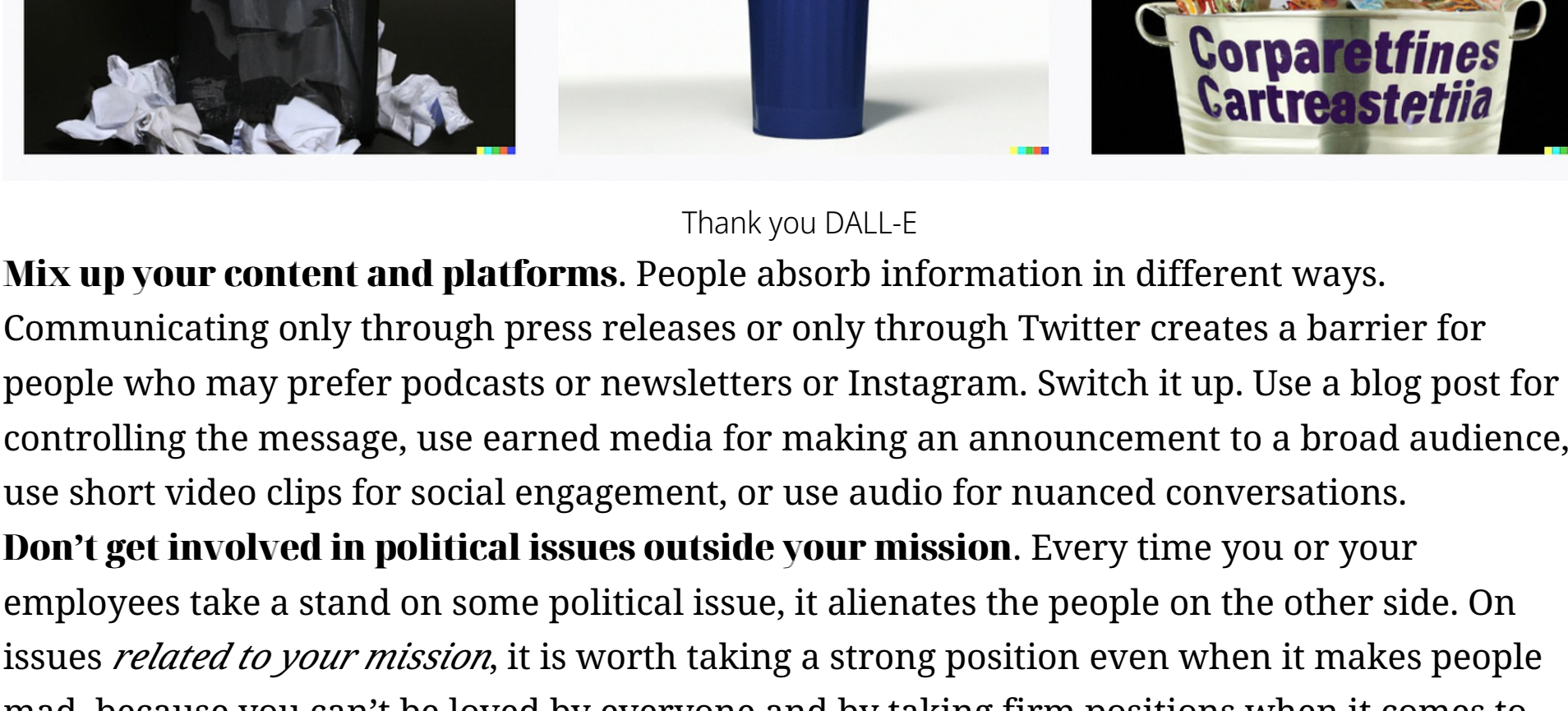
1. Remove barriers to entry

There are virtually no barriers to becoming a K-pop fan. You don't have to know Korean (songs have English lyrics and get translated into multiple languages), be a certain age (lyrics are generally appropriate for all ages), like a specific genre (a given band might perform pop, rap, R&B, and rock), or use a specific platform (their content can be found on every conceivable platform). You don't even have to like the music — bands make a point of incorporating dance, visual spectacle, memes and comedy.



How to execute:

Eliminate corporate jargon. Corporate-speak is a barrier to understanding and an enemy of joy. It's incomprehensible. It's meaningless. It alienates everyone. Kill it with fire.



Thank you DALL-E

Mix up your content and platforms. People absorb information in different ways. Communicating only through press releases or only through Twitter creates a barrier for people who may prefer podcasts or newsletters or Instagram. Switch it up. Use a blog post, use short video clips for social engagement, or use audio for nuanced conversations.

Don't get involved in political issues outside your mission. Every time you or your employees take a stand on some political issue, it alienates the people on the other side. On issues *related to your mission*, it is worth taking a strong position even when it makes people mad, because you can't be loved by everyone and by taking firm positions when it comes to your mission, you're sending a beacon to the right supporters. But activism on unrelated issues, even important ones, puts up barriers for no good reason.

2. Spotlight individuals, not just the group

Quiz: Fans of different K-pop have their own [fanchants](#). What is the BTS chant?

A: You may think it's "BTS! BTS!" and you would be wrong. It's the names of the individual members. Each member of a K-pop group has their own public persona and plays a distinct role within the group. A given member is associated with their skills (dancing, vocals, rap, or *"visuals"*), their relative age in the group (*older members* vs. younger members), other roles in the group (like "center" which is...the person who usually stands in the center?), and personal quirks (hobbies, fashion sense, personality, etc.).

This is huge for turning casual fans into diehards: *people may like groups, but people fall in love with individuals*.

How to execute:

Speak as a person, not as a corporate entity. It's a turnoff when someone is delivering lines as A Company Representative. If there's a crisis, let your genuine devastation show. Don't mumble something about "regretting the circumstances." If you've been falsely accused of something, you're allowed to be pissed. Because that's how a human being would feel (especially an innocent one). If you're celebrating a big moment, you're allowed to sputter with excitement or tear up with pride. People don't form emotional connections with robots (yet!) so don't be one.

Spotlight multiple executives. Even if the company has one key exec, like a visionary founder, companies shouldn't put the spotlight all on a single person. It's a lot of pressure for them and it's risky for the company – if that person screws up, then the whole company goes to PR jail. Plus, investors like to see a deep bench of talent and employees like to hear from a range of different leaders, so show off more of your team.

Make spokespersons nonfungible. When you show off more of your team, don't roll out five executives who all look the same, sound the same, and recite the same talking points. Let each person have a distinct role and persona, and let their individual personalities show. This kind of differentiation is especially crucial if you have co-CEOs or multiple co-founders.

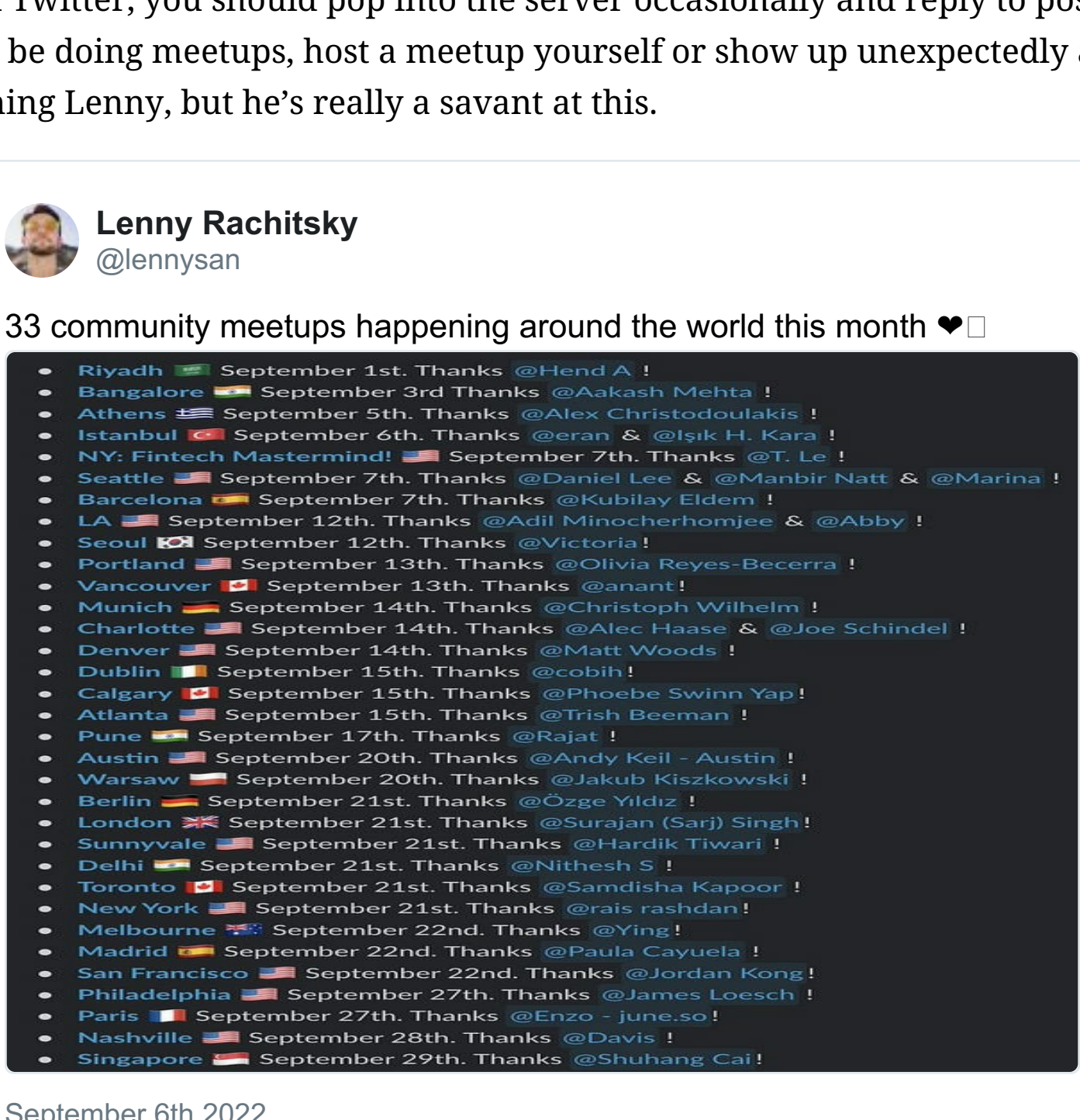


3. Connect fandom to community and identity

What's true of cults and political revolutions is also true of fandoms: members' commitment grows as they find community in the group and as membership becomes part of their identity.



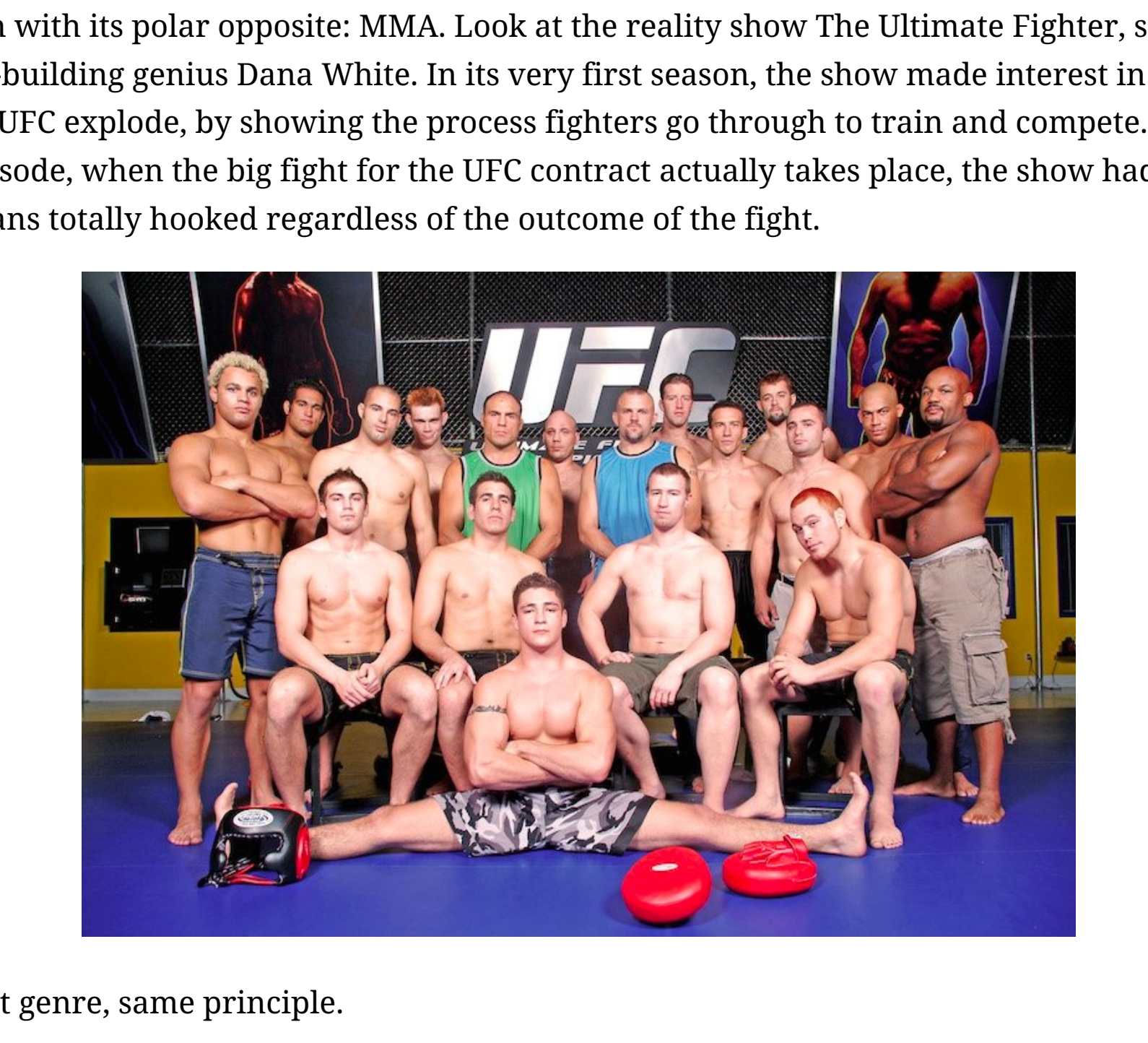
K-pop bands are very intentional about fostering a sense of community and collective identity for their fandoms. Each fandom has a name (Blackpink fans are Blinks, BTS fans are ARMY, TXT fans are MOA, etc.), and it's a big moment when a new band gives its fans their collective name.



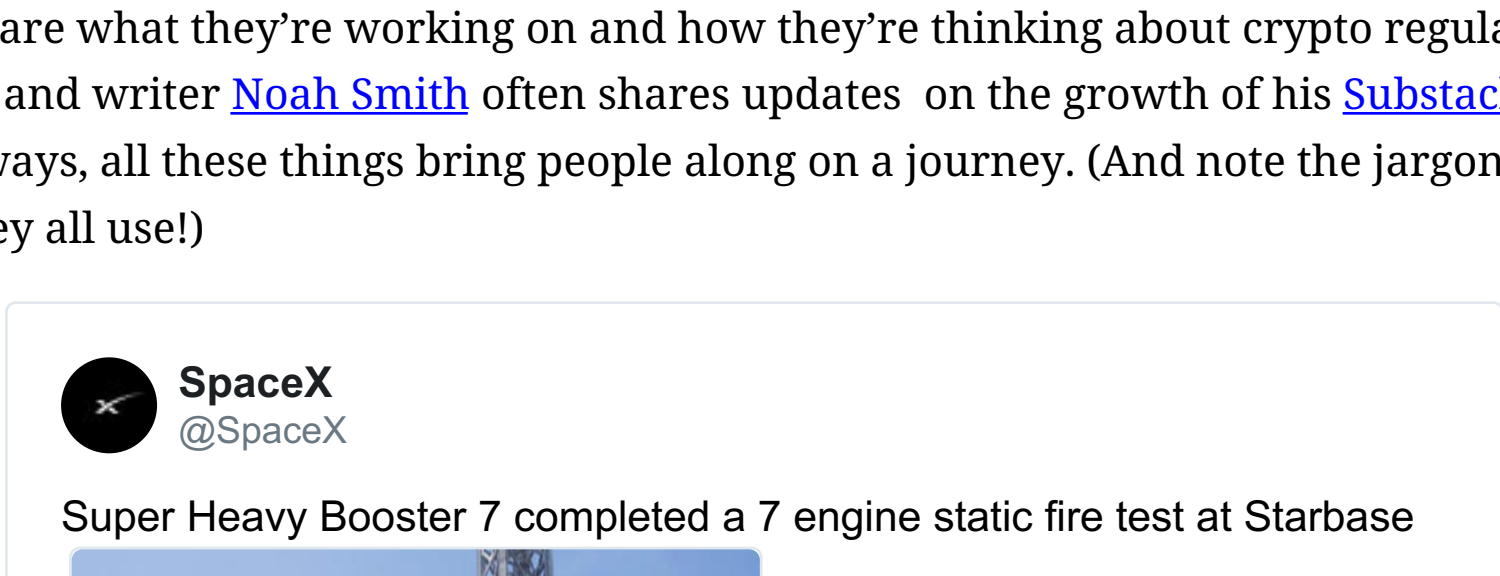
Like religions, fandoms also have symbols, rituals, shibboleths, and their own vernacular. They even enter into rivalries with other fandoms, which further deepens their sense of identity, connection to each other, and commitment to their favored band.

How to execute:

Embrace inside jokes and memes. If your community is coming up with good jokes, run with it, even if they're joking about you. It's a sign of affection. A great example of this is the iconic [Palmer Luckey TIME cover](#) and ensuing photoshops, many of which were created by Palmer fans. He was unfazed and responded with good humor, gaining even more fans in the process.



Get your community to interact with each other. As the leader of your community, you should be modeling the kind of engagement, enthusiasm, and behavior that you want members of the fandom to have toward each other. For instance, if you want them to be active in the Discord or on Twitter, you should pop into the server occasionally and reply to posts. If you want them to be doing meetups, host a meetup yourself or show up unexpectedly at theirs. I keep mentioning Lenny, but he's really a savant at this.

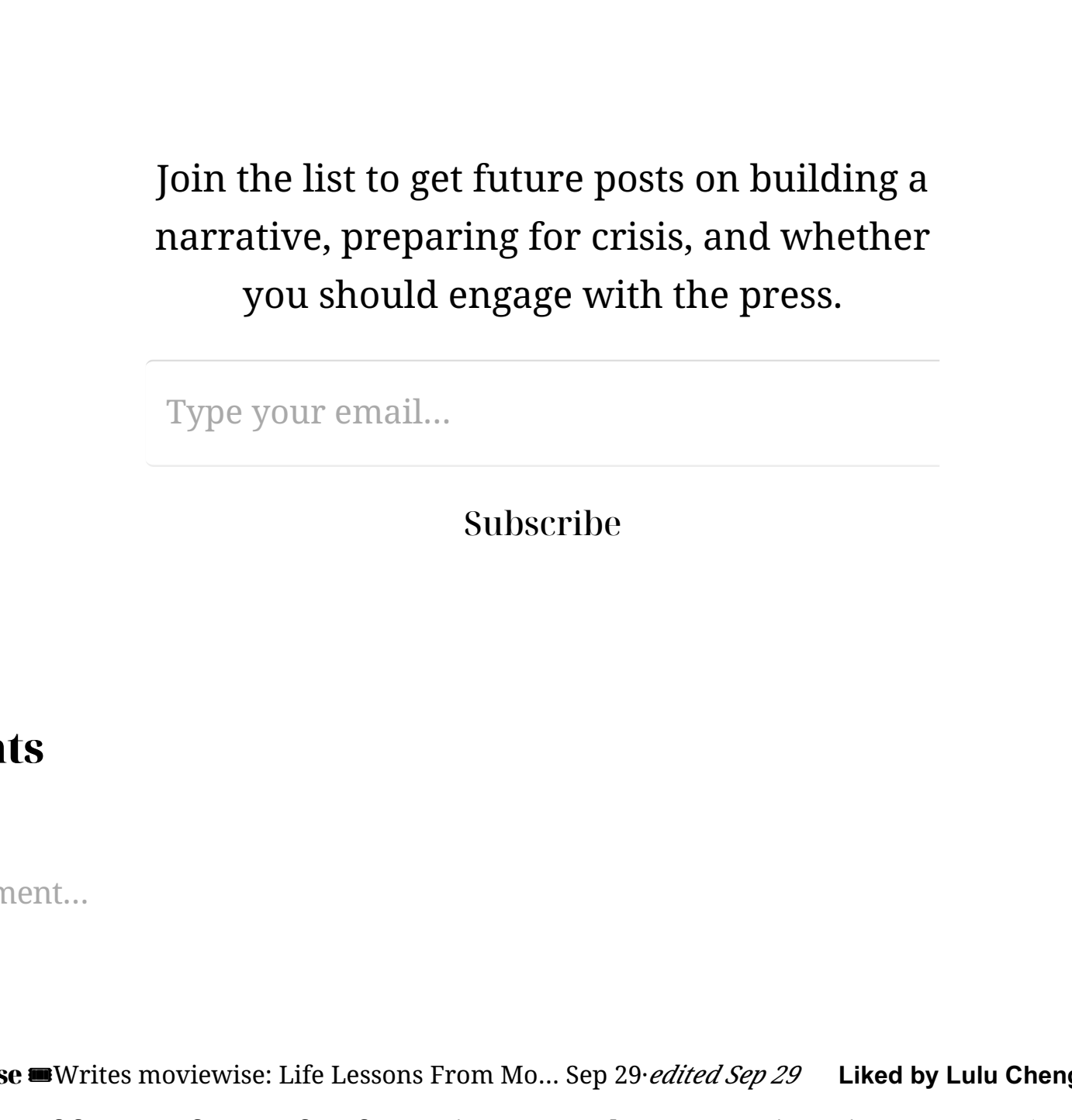


Make strategic swag. Design an iconic item that's your equivalent of the New Yorker tote or the Boring Company [flamethrower](#), and give it to your top fans. The pinnacle of strategic swag is the red MAGA hat — love it or hate it, but it worked. Pro tip: for the virality, I suggest making something that can be worn by dogs or babies. Everyone's always looking for an excuse to publicly share photos of their dogs and babies.

4. Bring people into the process

K-pop bands don't just release completed songs. They share an endless stream of behind the scenes updates, from footage of dance practice to videos of members just hanging out. There are shows that document the process of bands getting formed, recording their first single, or going on vacation. By the time of the next album drop or tour kickoff, fans feel like they've been on the journey with that band and are deeply invested in their success.

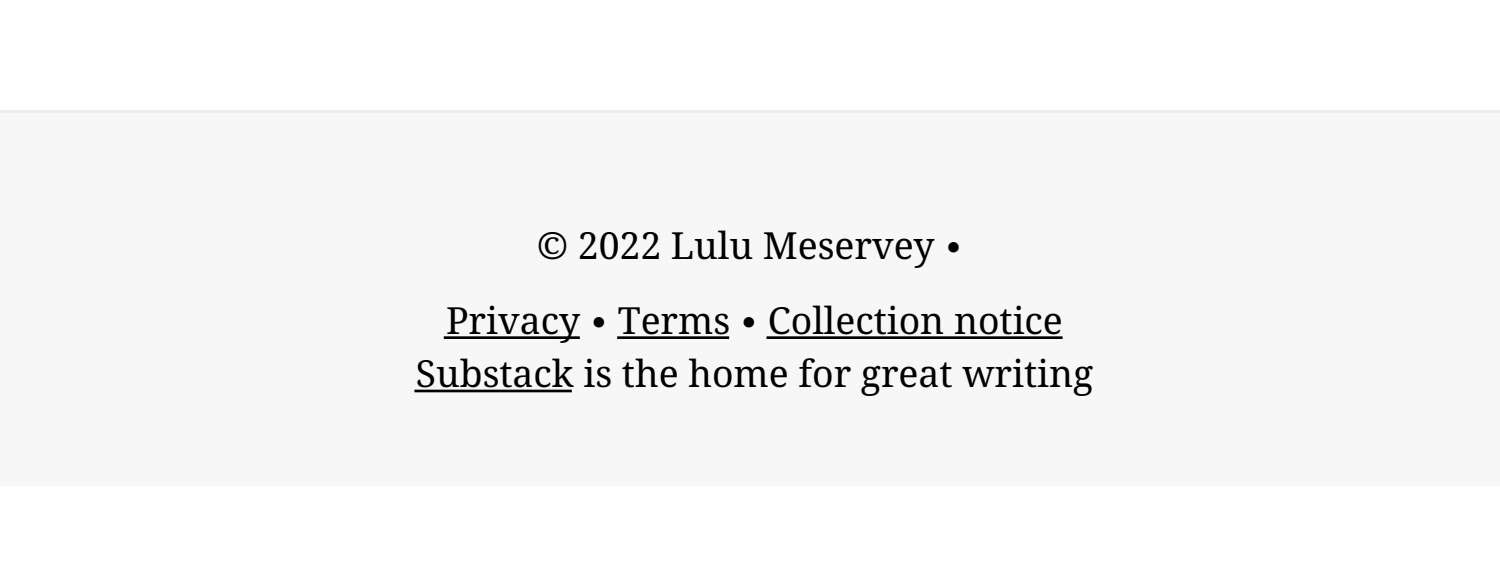
The ability to snowball fandom by bringing people on a journey is something K-pop has in common with its polar opposite: MMA. Look at the reality show The Ultimate Fighter, starring fandom-building genius Dana White. In its very first season, the show made interest in MMA and the UFC explode, by showing the process fighters go through to train and compete. By the final episode, when the big fight for the UFC contract actually takes place, the show had already gotten fans totally hooked regardless of the outcome of the fight.



Different genre, same principle.

How to execute:

Build in public. Show people the process, not just the outcome. [SpaceX](#) gives a play-by-play of everything that goes into preparing for a launch, marking frequent milestones throughout a long process. [Faryar Shirzad](#) and [Paul Grewal](#), who lead policy and legal at Coinbase, make a point to share what they're working on and how they're thinking about crypto regulations. The economist and writer [Noah Smith](#) often shares updates on the growth of his [Substack](#). In different ways, all these things bring people along on a journey. (And note the jargon-free plain English they all use!)



Make your milestones their milestones. Hitting 1M followers, selling 1000 units, winning an award, having a successful IPO, etc. — these are all occasions to thank the fans that helped get you there. Give them credit for shared accomplishments and make them feel like insiders. For example, you can invite your biggest evangelists to a company retreat, have them be special guests at an employee all-hands, give them the first look at a new product, or send them (better yet, their dogs and babies!) some special swag that can't be purchased.

Talk to your audience when you don't have a reason. Sometimes founders and CEOs only show up when they have to, like for a big announcement or an apology. While senior execs shouldn't be *too* accessible, it's a mistake only to show up when you have to. First, it conditions people to think that if you're talking to them, something must be up. Second, it causes people to disengage when they don't hear from you for long spells. Third, fostering your fandom is a skill and you can get rusty.

These tactics are simple but powerful ways to foster fanatics with the kind of loyalty and passion that mere followers can't replicate.

Now go forth and build your own ARMY.

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Speaking of fans, or fun, or fun fans: I just started a gag comic strip, "It's ALL (owl) Good Times" that I'd like to build a fan base for:

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Anyone here want to read something funny with funny pictures?

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