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Editorial

Fandom and politics

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[0.1] Abstract—Editorial for guest-edited issue, "Fandom and Politics," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 32 (March 15, 2020).

[0.2] Keywords—Activism; Civic identity; Fan cultures

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1. Introduction

[1.1] This special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* explores the increasingly intersecting worlds of fandom and politics. We have entered an historical moment in which political communication is filled with fandom. Grassroots fan communities mobilize to influence elections. Political candidates perform fandom on the campaign trail. And of course rallies on both sides of the aisle are filled with bursts of fannish excitement. Examples include the Princess Leia "We are the resistance" posters used during the 2017 Women's March and Elizabeth Warren's Harry Potter references to the strong attachment Trump fans felt for their candidate.

[1.2] While fandom has never been an apolitical activity, research in fan studies has mostly focused on political activities that take place outside of what one traditionally thinks of as political communication. Indeed, fan studies scholars have examined fan activism, including letter-writing campaigns and boycotts that sought to influence media decisions like cancellation and casting calls (Jenkins 1992; Lopez 2012), fan activism that affected public issues deploying charity fund raisers, boycotts, and protests (Hinck 2019; Jenkins and Shresthova 2012), and political fandom around public figures (Davisson 2016; De Kosnik 2008). This special issue specifically expands the academic conversation about the role of fandom in political discourse, both in terms of political organizations attempting to reach out to fans and fans attempting to mobilize to participate in political discussion.

[1.3] The essays in this issue contribute not only to fan studies but also to our understanding of the current political-communication climate. The affective nature of fandom is often treated as being at odds with the rational discourse of the political sphere, and the relationship between fandom and politics is often dismissed or ignored. The articles in this special issue build on fan studies' strong foundation to rebut that claim. They offer extensive evidence that fandom and politics are compatible—indeed, perhaps even natural fits. The essays suggest the wide variety of ways fandom and politics come together, be it across election campaigns, via activist resistance, around voter registration, and by charity work.

[1.4] The essays in this special issue persuasively demonstrate that the intersection of fandom and politics is not an unusual exception that happens only in a handful of fandoms and in a handful of cases. Rather, fan-citizens are doing politics across all kinds of fan communities, including One Direction, Taylor Swift, *Supernatural*, Harry Potter, Doctor Who, the *Wolfenstein II* video game, and the *Humans of New York* Facebook group. Doubtless fan studies will be essential to understanding civic practices in the coming years.

2. Theory and Praxis

[2.1] In the Theory section, Tibor Dessewffy and Mikes Mezei's "Fans and Politics in an Illiberal State" uses the case study of Hungarian fans of Harry Potter (1997–) on Facebook to demonstrate the impact that the values of a fandom can have on a citizen's political allegiances. The research shows that fans of Harry Potter in a country with a staunchly right-wing government espouse views that are far to the left of other Hungarian citizens. Their analysis indicates that this is the result of a combination of the extreme popularity of Harry Potter creating an active community where people feel engaged, and a translation of the values of the text into the activities of day-to-day life. Fandom can be used in politics to activate fans' civic identities; this study demonstrates that the simple act of being a fan affects civic life.

[2.2] In "The Role of Popular Media in 2016 US Presidential Election Memes," Kyra Osten Hunting shows how fan culture affects meme culture, making fan studies essential to understanding how memes are deployed in election season. She examines face-swap memes, in which popular culture characters are merged with real-life politicians like Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump. Examining memes that invoke Harry Potter, Star Wars (1977–), and Disney princesses and witches, among others, Hunting argues that these popular culture texts offer a limited lexicon for talking about politics. These media texts offer numerous male characters that may be deployed to make arguments for favored candidates (Bernie as Dumbledore), but they offer far fewer older woman characters with which to make similar arguments (Clinton as Leia). Hunting points out how gender operates across political framing and popular culture media texts through the creation and circulation of memes.

[2.3] Viktor Chagas and Vivian Luiz Fonseca's study of sports fan activism during the Rio 2016 Olympic Games highlights the political protests against then-acting Brazilian president Michel Temer. The International Olympic Committee has a directive prohibiting political and religious demonstrations during the games, and protesters were arrested. The essay

highlights media treatment of activists, as sports media outlets have tried to avoid or downplay the politicization of major sporting events. Chagas and Fonseca's work expands the conversation in fan studies to include rooters, the spectators at sporting events who engage in a variety of fan activities such as waving signs, dressing up, or painting their bodies. Political activists take the traditional activity of rooting for a player or team and expand it to incorporate social and political commentary. Fans thus have been able to get around efforts by official organizations and sports media outlets to stop the politicization of events through demonstrations.

[2.4] In the Praxis section, in a study of Brexit, Trump, and Doctor Who (1963–89, 1996, 2005–) on social media, Hannah Carilyn Gunderman explains how Doctor Who fans use the television show as a tool to deal with emotionally taxing geopolitical events. Fans use particular plot lines from the show to share their anguish with an online community and find support. Gunderman uses the lens of fan geographies to address the way that the global Doctor Who community was able to address similar political situations in geographically disparate locations. Typically, events like Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election might have been discussed globally but were primarily experienced locally. The Doctor Who fan community provides a way to experience these things together. Gunderman's work highlights the way fan communities might create political communities that transcend traditional geopolitical boundaries.

[2.5] Lucy Miller's essay on "*Wolfenstein II* and MAGA as Fandom" considers fans' reactions to the marketing around *Wolfenstein II* (2017; MachineGames and Bethesda Softworks), a video game that tasks the player with battling Nazis in an alternate future in which Nazi Germany won World War II. The marketing around the video game calls on players to "Make America Nazi-free again," invoking Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan and drawing connections between the video game and the current political context. Some fans of the game criticized the game developers and their marketing choices. Yet Miller asserts that partisanship alone cannot explain the political discourse that emerged around *Wolfenstein II*'s marketing. She argues that what emerges is a MAGA fandom that enacts a MAGA ethical framework and matching ethical modalities that demand defense of Trump, video games, and the nation. Ultimately, Miller argues that this is a case of "fans looking to emulate their object of interest rather than" a case of "partisans committed to working to improve the nation from different perspectives" (§ 3.24).

[2.6] In "Fanon Bernie Sanders," Rachel Winter argues that real-person fan fiction functions as one avenue through which candidate branding occurs outside of official PR firms and political campaigns. By examining sixty-nine fan fictions on the Archive of Our Own (<https://archiveofourown.org/>) featuring Bernie Sanders as a main character, Winter finds that fic authors incorporate aspects of Sanders's persona detailed by journalistic coverage and further build out his persona through description of Sanders, Sanders's actions, and Sanders's dialogue. Winter's article demonstrates how candidate images are built through an interplay among campaign officials, journalists, and fans.

[2.7] The values inherent in a fan community have often become the basis for political action. Paromita Sengupta, in an analysis of the *Humans of New York* photography project,

explores a case where the creator and the fans disagree about what those values look like in action. Sengupta begins by analyzing the value of positivity espoused by *Humans of New York* creator Brandon Stanton. Stanton has often used the value as a basis for policing activities on the social media accounts where he distributes his photos and interviews. Fan communities have actively critiqued both the value of positivity in the project and the way Stanton has applied it. Sengupta's work demonstrates the political power of communities as they take the text into their own hands and make work that is inspired by and responds to the original.

[2.8] Alyson Gross examines fan activism emerging around Harry Styles. By drawing on fourteen interviews with Harry Styles fans, Gross argues that Styles functions as an empty signifier defined by vagueness. This emptiness opens up opportunities for fans to project their own values onto Styles—a significant and interesting departure from typical strategies used in fan activism. Gross focuses on the case of fans' waving Black Lives Matter flags at Harry Styles concerts, arguing that "by bringing BLM signs and flags to concerts, fans not only are attempting to mobilize—reshape, adapt, use—Harry Styles's image for their own representation but are playing a direct role in developing his political meaning" (§ 5.8). Gross identifies important implications for research on identification, star texts, and celebrity and fan activism.

3. Symposium, Interview, and Review

[3.1] The Symposium section of the issue takes up a wide variety of questions, from large fan activist campaigns to fandom's function in the preparation of citizens. Kate Elizabeth McManus explores how fan fiction helped her (as well as other fans) process the 2016 US presidential election. Rachel O'Leary Carmona argues that One Direction's fandom functions as a decentralized network, preparing fans to engage in politics in similarly decentralized political activities. Alex Xanthoudakis takes up the case of *Supernatural* (CW, 2005–), examining how Misha Collins encourages fans to participate in Minion Stimulus through framings of family enacted using social media. Simone Driessen explores the tension around Taylor Swift's political transition from a conservative country singer to a progressive pop star, pointing to the limitations and opportunities her celebrity image provides. Mary Ingram-Waters also explores Swift's politics, analyzing how she recruited her fans to register to vote in 2018. Sabrina McMillin examines the cases of the Notorious RBG Tumblr and an urbanist meme Facebook group to explore how fandomization functions as a process. And Michael Reinhard considers the role of social bots in fandom, exploring questions of manufactured and contested popularity as well as attacks on social media.

[3.2] The book reviews in this issue examine how affect, imagination, and politics interact in fandom. Caitlin McCann reviews Nicolle Lamerich's 2018 book *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, which examines fan engagement as a process. Lamerich emphasizes affect and bodies by taking up transmediality across case studies like fan fiction and cosplay. Michelle Cho reviews Jungmin Kwon's 2019 book *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies*. Cho finds Kwon's book offers a glimpse into how "young women's imaginative projections" have impacted and shaped "the national mediascape in contemporary South Korea" (§ 1), anchoring her analysis in careful

social, historical, and cultural contextualization of fan activity in South Korea during the 2000s, with important implications for South Korean media today. Maria Alberto reviews Ashley Hinck's 2019 book *Politics for the Love of Fandom: Fan-Based Citizenship in a Digital World*. Hinck's book theorizes fan-based citizenship (public engagement that emerges from and is anchored in fandom) and examines the rhetorical strategies used to persuade fans to take up these kinds of actions.

[3.3] In their interview, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Joan Miller model a dialogue between two scholars that aims to uncover theoretical assumptions and new paths for research. They demonstrate the power and necessity of engaging in nontraditional forms of scholarship—or, perhaps more accurately, reenvisioning traditional forms of scholarship (dialogue)—for a digital age (conducted over social media). Through their dialogue, they map out a possible answer to the question this entire issue of TWC aims to address: Why study fandom and politics?

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Theory

Fans and politics in an illiberal state

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Mikes Mezei

Datalyze Research

[0.1] Abstract—Certain extremely successful popular culture contents may convey democratic values that can have an impact on the political views of readers and fans. The differences in the values of Harry Potter fans and average Facebook users using social data about public Facebook activity are examined. Even though currently only a minority share the values that the Harry Potter stories embody, they are still an important segment of society that one might not even be aware of if one only follows the state-controlled media and make up a significant majority of the Hungarian media market. Understanding this culturally constructed fan network is thus academically and socially relevant.

[0.2] Keywords—Democracy; Facebook; Harry Potter; Hungary; Social media data; Social movements

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1. Introduction

[1.1] The cover of the book *Cultural Backlash*, written jointly by Ronald Inglehart, one of the founding fathers of comparative values research, and Pippa Norris, a highly respected empirical sociologist, features three profiles, as a Mount Rushmore of sorts of self-proclaimed illiberal leaders: the US president Donald Trump, the leading French opposition politician Marine Le Pen, and the prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán (2019). To many in the West, the choice of the latter might seem surprising. After all, Hungary is a small Eastern European country that hardly ever plays a major role in world politics. Still, the selection of Orbán was neither random nor coincidental: He is the most successful of the trio; he is the one who has given rise to a model of an entirely new type of politics, not only because he won three successive elections with a two-thirds majority but also because he has gone the furthest thus far in dismantling liberal democracy, in scaling back the rule of law, and in eliminating the system of checks and balances. Le Pen has never been in government, and Trump—although he clearly has far greater impact on global events—has not been able to eliminate opposition media, has no direct influence on law enforcement, and has been unable to totally relegate the political opposition to the background. Hungary is not a dictatorship yet, but what is unprecedented about the Orbán government is that it

has used EU subsidies to build an authoritarian regime within the European Union while formally complying with democratic procedural rules. Trump can only dream of such total political dominance, of Orbán's exclusive control over resources or his hegemonic position in the political arena, but he does not have the faintest hope of emulating it. Put in a somewhat simplified manner, the reason is that while most of the world has only realized the massive political ramifications of populism once Donald Trump was elected to the US presidency, Hungary has been dominated by such a political force for a long time now. In Steve Bannon's words, Orbán was "Trump before Trump" (quoted in Pop and Hinshaw 2018).

[1.2] There are several reasons for this success, and we do not have the space here to elaborate in great detail. At the same time, even a superficial glance at the current situation in Hungary reveals that the opposition parties are divided and fragmented, and the Fidesz party led by Viktor Orbán towers over them while the overwhelming majority of society looks at the ubiquitous corruption scandals of the governing party apathetically and appears to be supportive of Orbán's anti-refugee ideology, which posits that culture must be ineluctably homogeneous.

[1.3] After taking office in 2010, Orbán had a new constitution adopted, called the Fundamental Law of Hungary, and completely revamped the legal institutional framework in the country. Upon his reelection in 2014, he used the slogan of creating a so-called "national bourgeois class" to accelerate corruption, using front men to ensure that he and his immediate circle emerge as the most important centers of economic power in Hungary. His next reelection, in 2018, saw his announcement of an offensive in the realm of culture. CEU, branded as the "Soros university," was hounded out of Hungary, forcing the university to open a campus in Vienna, where newly enrolled students will begin their studies. With a slight delay, the government has also set its sights on the research network and the assets of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), and its ban on gender studies at Hungarian institutions of higher education and the decision to strip independent theaters of their subsidies are some of the most visible steps along this road. At the same time, the organic, bottom-up processes of digital convergence in culture are more difficult to control politically.

[1.4] A glance at the Hungarian fan fiction site, Merengő (<https://www.fanfic.hu/merengo/categories.php?catid=239&parentcatid=239>), underscores this. Merengő was established in 2004 and fifteen years later it contains 17,341 works of fan fiction by 4,462 authors (Kerekes 2018). The single biggest category is books, with 7,486 works, where fans wrote further chapters and books related to their beloved bestsellers. What we find here is that the conservative authors who best embody the values of the governing party that seeks to establish a cultural hegemony hardly exist at all. On the contrary, the list of the books that top the rankings of novels that have inspired the most efforts to further develop the original storyline looks as follows: Game of Thrones 63; Twilight 370; and Harry Potter 6,923 pieces of original works.

[1.5] This stunning level of activity can be explained in part by the fact that Harry Potter is not only popular among active and creative fans in Hungary—the series has a vast social base. According to a survey of reading habits, J. K. Rowling is the most popular author among Hungarian teenagers today, who tend to cite Harry Potter as their favorite book (Toth 2017). That is why it is no exaggeration for Toth to claim that "it appears that as of 2017 there is not a single novel or work of fiction that is capable of generating a reading fever on par with that unleashed by Harry Potter, which has emerged as the shared experience of an entire generation" (27).

[1.6] Thus, we can assert that even under the conditions of illiberal democracy, the popularity of

Harry Potter is undiminished. Hence, the starting question that our research centers on is the following: Might there be some additional reserves left that democratic politics in Hungary could mobilize by drawing on the potential inherent in mass culture? Put differently, could certain mass culture contents lead to a revitalization of democratic political activism, could they inspire and motivate large numbers of individuals to exert themselves in the interest of the public good—even in Hungary, where the structural and institutional dominance of the authoritarian government is unprecedented within the EU?

[1.7] To investigate these questions, we look at a global mass culture phenomenon, namely the possible effects of the Harry Potter universe. With respect to Harry Potter, the political values that are implicated may not be obvious at first sight, but they have nevertheless given rise to political activism all around the world (Hinck 2012; Jenkins 2009). In Hungary, the elements of the Harry Potter universe are also immensely popular, but so far, they have not been articulated in the political arena. But we believe that, in a Gramscian sense, if the cultural values are embedded in a given community, sooner or later political activism along those lines will emerge.

[1.8] We are pursuing a dual objective in our research. For one, we explore whether popular culture may also provide a resource to understand political behavior and activism in an illiberal regime that is nevertheless also supported by an electorally dominant plurality of the voting public. At the same time, we also use an innovative methodology that is based on a non-invasive collection and categorization of publicly available social media data. In an article titled "Desperately Seeking the Methods—New Directions in Fan Studies Research," Evans and Stasi call for the development of new, innovative methods that are better able to capture the changes in the technoscape of fandom (2014). We do not argue here that we can provide the definite methodological solution sought by the authors, but our own efforts were inspired by this challenge. The methodology we offer here has already yielded some promising results and may also be useful in answering further questions, while at the same time it offers a potential path forward—although a rather unruly one—for fandom research (Dessewffy and Váry 2017). In a broader sense, our goal is to use social media data from public Facebook pages to see where there might be an opening for reinvigorating political engagement in a political climate that has tended to successfully forestall public discourse on politics.

[1.9] Starting from this dual—methodological and substantial—objective, we identified a hitherto underrepresented terrain in the literature analyzing the relationship between culture and politics.

[1.10] In the following, we briefly review the relevant academic literature. Moving on, we sketch the Harry Potter phenomenon as it pertains to our research topic, that is with a view toward its potential implications in terms of political values. Finally, we present the research methodology, which is followed by the research results and the discussion thereof.

2. Theoretical considerations

[2.1] In the following section we review the relevant literature on the booming fandom literature. To highlight just how complex this literature has become, the UC Davis library recently created a selected bibliography that contains over eighty pages of titles devoted to the subject ("Harry Potter Turns 21" 2018).

[2.2] Thus, we only wish to clarify two questions that seem methodologically, politically, and intellectually unavoidable to us: what do we consider as fandom in this research and how do we

assess the relationship between fandom and activism?

3. What is fandom—What does the concept encompass?

[3.1] Scientific interest in fandom culture began to increase by drawing on the groundwork provided by the research on subcultures in the 1970s (Hills 2002; Click and Scott 2018). In the early periods of this research, both public opinion and the relevant academic literature tended to look at fandom audiences as either biased fanatics or as the victims of the mechanisms that assert the interests of the cultural institutional structure—the latter notion owed in particular to an interpretation of the relevant theories of Adorno (1991). Owing to the impact of writings by Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) and Henry Jenkins (1992), starting in the mid-1990s the field of fandom research emerged not only as a popular research topic but also as a domain of academic discourse that questions established ideas and preconceptions.

[3.2] Although the dominant narratives have become increasingly refined and sophisticated over time, the scientific examinations of the activities of fans still tend to identify and emphasize markers of religious fanaticism when discussing fans, which has over time become nuanced by more gradualist understandings of the intensity of fandom. The focus in this field has shifted toward various modes and intensities of attention (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) as well as the intensity of participation in fandom culture (Jenkins quoted in Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007), and this trend has tended to render the overall picture more nuanced. In his work, Jenkins also speaks about fans and followers as participants who consume, enjoy, produce, use, and reshape contents (2017).

[3.3] In this sense, the fan is more than a mere bedazzled follower or an "ideal consumer" (Hills 2002, 44). On the one hand—in terms of their actual activity—they are an active prosumer, while at the same time they are also an entity that (re)present themselves through their fandom (Janissary Collective 2014) whose relationship with the entity they follow is primarily affective (Baym 2010). Fan motivations can thus not be reduced to an interest in a given type of content (film, series, comics, etc.). Involvement in community work and the recognition thereof also play an important role, as does establishing and maintaining contacts between fans (Bury 2018).

4. Toward the notion of interactive fandom

[4.1] There are several critics who believe this notion of fandom to be idealized. Even though active creative participation undoubtedly mobilizes massive emotional energies, it is at the same time also obvious that not all fans become actively engaged (Hay and Couldry 2011). The academic literature distinguishes between various degrees of fandom based on the intensity of fandom and the decisive role it plays in individual identity formation (Coppa, 2014; Dessewffy, Nagy, and Váry 2017).

[4.2] This is also important because in the following we will present the results of a research project that draws on the underlying data from users' social media footprints. We examine fan activities on public pages rather than the usual creative practices (creation, curation, remix, etc.) associated with fandom. In this context, it is worth recalling the distinction drawn by Nico Carpentier, who distinguishes between the two modes of behavior—"participation in media creation" and the "interaction with media text"—where the focus is on the audience's polysemic reaction to the given text (2011, 521). For our research, the introduction of the term "interactive

fandom" is vital because in our classification of social media activity, which we will outline below, we assume that following a given page or post, or posting likes on these platforms, indicates a stronger bond than what would be implied by a passive interest or consumption (Salganik 2017).

[4.3] Based on the aforementioned, what we can say about the affinity that can be captured through Facebook likes is that it is an intermediate form of interaction: the reactions on public pages denote a type of commitment to the underlying issue, but in their intensity they nevertheless lag behind the activities of fan fiction authors, who might be called the diehard fans. In this sense, when capturing the particular universe of reactions, we move away from and expand the horizon of the traditional approach of fandom research that is primarily focused on texts and active participation.

[4.4] In reality, we feel that instead of trying to gauge the level of fandom and the fans' (presumed) internal motivations, it is more appropriate to use an approach that looks at the variety of fan practices as a complex system. Thus, instead of examining the level of involvement or the creative practices of the fans in the Harry Potter universe, we propose to reconstruct and interpret the complex patterns of public affairs-related activities among them. To put this more simply, what motivates our research is not a desire to separate the simple spectator, the lurker, from the fanatical fans, but to look instead at the variety of follower (fan) practices and how they overlap and intersect with an interest in public affairs. These considerably more mundane, everyday reactions tend to be delimited by the preset options that Facebook provides its users with. These mundane online activities, reactions, and digital footprints are substantial not only in terms of their sheer numbers but also in providing a more comprehensive overview of the characteristics of a decisive portion of the audience, thereby giving the observer a more accurate picture of the fanbase.

5. Fandom activism—A dormant beast?

[5.1] We need to distinguish between two periods in the brief history of fan activism: the period of shielding/preserving and shaping contents and the period of public/political participation. As Brough and Shresthova also stress in their study, early research on the subject tended to focus on fans who lobby for their favorite series, asking that these shows not be cancelled or demanding that racial or sexual minorities be properly represented in the given show (2012). The definition of fan activism proposed by Earl and Kimport (2009), which argues that such activism is "not about the mix between political concerns and culture but rather action that looks like political activism but is used toward nonpolitical ends" (221), provides a good way of capturing this period. In the second approach to understanding fan activism, by contrast, we are looking at activism that involves public affairs and politics-related activities organized around the value system and worldview propounded by the underlying content. These activities often draw on the structures, groups, events, and networks that have emerged along the lines of fan interest in the given content. For the purposes of the present study, the most prominent example cited in the academic literature is the Harry Potter Alliance, which will be discussed below (Jenkins 2012; Hinck 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012). The Harry Potter Alliance is an excellent example of second-generation fan activism, since it organizes a broad array of social activities that orient themselves along the values delineated by the Harry Potter novels.

[5.2] From our perspective, too, the second approach is more relevant. At the same time, however, it is not sufficient.

[5.3] Steven Duncombe (2012) begins his essay on digital activism by stating the following:

"Scratch an activist and you're apt to find a fan. It's no mystery why: fandom provides a space to explore fabricated worlds that operate according to different norms, laws, and structures than those we experience in our 'real' lives." Even if that is the case, it is not clear if the reverse is true as well, whether every fan can be assumed to be an activist. Our investigation is also aimed at examining such a situation; that is, we are looking at a community that does not articulate political preferences, and in the process, we seek to ascertain whether we find any indications of a dormant activism that may be ready to be converted into actual activism (figure 1).

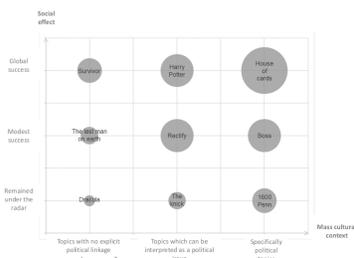


Figure 1. Matrix showing the relative impact of different works of mass culture.

[5.4] In our study we wish to explore whether the Harry Potter mass cultural phenomenon, which is presented in the matrix above as an example of contents that had a global impact, has also exerted a discernible effect in terms of changing attitudes toward public life. In so doing, we will combine various phenomena affiliated with different periods of media history—because these are in fact connected in reality. What this means specifically is that we will explore the digital and social media footprint that the Harry Potter films and books have engendered because the fan status that is at the forefront of this research project, as well as the values that the latter reflect, can be best examined and analyzed on these platforms.

6. Harry Potter—Global impact

[6.1] The Harry Potter universe was launched in 1997 with a book by J. K. Rowling. The first movie adaptation was released in 2001, and like the written version, it enjoys great popularity worldwide. At the center of the story is a little boy who learns that something that we might call a magical world exists and that he is one of the wizards in this world. Thereafter he embarks on his adventurous journey and gets to know this previously unknown world, the fascinating wizard school at Hogwarts, where he spends most of his time. He repeatedly engages the evil wizard, Lord Voldemort, Harry's nemesis—who not only threatens the magical universe but the entire world population and who uses unethical and evil instruments to subdue his enemies and take control of the world.

[6.2] The first volume in the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997), was translated into eighty languages ("Harry Potter to Be Translated" 2017), and 120 million copies were sold worldwide (Lee et al. 2018). The concluding volume, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), sold some 15 million copies within 24 hours of its publication ("Celebrity 100" 2008). As we mentioned before, this wave of global success did not elude Hungary, either.

[6.3] In fact, as recent research has shown, the books in the Harry Potter series are the most

popular and most widely read works of fiction among Hungarians aged fourteen to eighteen, with 56 percent in this cohort saying that they have read them. The next in the ranking of most popular novels are the books in the vampire romance series *Twilight* (2005–2008), which have been read by 42 percent (Gombos, Hevérné, and Kiss 2015).

[6.4] Actually, Hungarian government policy evinces an awareness of Harry Potter's popularity and has reacted to it: The state secretary for education, Rózsa Hoffmann, justified the introduction of a new uniform and centrally mandated elementary school curriculum by arguing that "significant changes can be expected, since national literacy has become disrupted and "Harry Potter is gradually taking the place of János vitéz [one of the classic pieces of Hungarian literature]" ("Hoffmann Rózsa" 2010).

[6.5] Thus, we observe an interesting contradiction between research on the sociology of reading and political processes. Even while Harry Potter's popularity in Hungary remains overwhelming, for the time being illiberal-authoritarianism seems to be similarly muscular in its own realm of politics. Therefore in examining the impact of the Harry Potter series, we were interested in the fans' value systems of both the novel and the movie versions.

7. Harry Potter as a vehicle of political values

[7.1] Analyses on the consumption of popular culture and the values implicitly embedded in the latter may provide information and narratives that could be vital in shaping and framing public action. These implicit cultural values could work as dormant variables, value settings that may be activated if certain political conditions prevail. This dormant potential renders their proper understanding relevant even if they have not been converted into direct political action yet.

[7.2] From a psychological perspective, Vezzali and his colleagues have shown through experiments, for example, that the messages emanating from the Harry Potter universe—which are of preeminent importance for the present study as well—have increased individuals' tolerance toward refugees and gays. As part of this research, the authors specifically also looked at instances when individuals identified with Voldemort, the arch-villain of the Harry Potter novels, rather than only with the positive characters. Their results showed that this kind of attachment did not result in increased levels of tolerance (2015).

[7.3] The examination of the impact of the Harry Potter universe on personality formation is not without precedent. In her study titled "Harry Potter and the Deathly Donald," Diana Mutz looked at the values of Harry Potter fans with respect to their assessments of Donald Trump (2016). She emphasizes three key considerations, drawing a parallel between the message and values conveyed by the Harry Potter stories on the one hand, and the behavior and value commitments embodied by Donald Trump (who was only an intensely campaigning candidate at the time when the study was written) on the other. The three considerations are the following: the importance of tolerance and the acceptance of and respect for other values and other people; nonviolence; and the dangers of autocracy.

[7.4] The main messages of the Harry Potter series align with the ideas listed above, while Trump's political communication and personal statements, by contrast, represent values that are antithetical to these and convey those values to his supporters. Mutz showed that the readers of Harry Potter novels were less likely to be Trump supporters than individuals who were not among the fans of the magic world inhabited by Harry Potter (2016). The worldview that the Harry Potter

universe exudes is unequivocally a socially open, welcoming and accepting vision of the world, which eschews a closed mindset that rejects differences and minorities (McEvoy-Levy 2018).

[7.5] The subtle hints and parallels that connect this fictional story to real world problems are readily apparent. The main theoretical thesis advanced by the present study is that because of these parallels it is impossible to separate the impact on character formation of this globally immensely successful fairytale, which was launched as fictional entertainment, from abstract political notions in the everyday consciousness of individuals.

[7.6] In Hungary, a staunchly right-wing government that enjoys broad social support has just commenced its third consecutive term in office with a massive electoral mandate. It is led by a political figure who is authoritarian and steers the country toward greater centralization (Magyar 2016). The process of enemy construction in the sense proposed by Carl Schmitt, which has consistently characterized the practices of the Orbán government since 2010, has identified an ideal topos in the past four years: migration into Europe (Dessewffy, Nagy, and Váry 2017). As a result, Hungary has been characterized by intense political communication and marked anti-immigration rhetoric over the past four years. This political strategy entered a whole new dimension with the anti-refugee campaign that was launched in 2015. Using all tools of mass communication, the government actively sustained this rhetoric until the parliamentary election of 2018.

[7.7] The third definitional element mentioned above, the legitimation of violent means, is a more difficult issue because various aspects of the present situation could be captured by the concept of violent governance. According to critical voices and a segment of the opposition media, this could include the military and policing measures taken toward resolving the refugee crisis or the way in which the humanitarian disaster that resulted from the interaction of mass migration and the physical barrier erected on Hungary's southern border was handled (Sanderson 2018). Anti-immigration communication has thus emerged as one of the main instruments of governance, and it is used to set the political agenda and to bolster the government's legitimacy (Dessewffy, Nagy, and Váry 2017).

8. Harry Potter fandom

[8.1] Henry Jenkins argues that "Fandom is the future" because developments in social media and digital technology will make it easier for likeminded people to interact with one another, and more kinds of platforms will emerge that will allow them to discuss the subject of their mutual fandom and to help each other maintain their interest in the subject matter (quoted in Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 361). Although the fan is not a product of the digital age, new forms of fandom have emerged in this new age, and new possibilities have opened up to fandom in terms of allowing for the active involvement of fans in generating contents and disseminating them (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Jenkins describes fandom as an element that defines collective consciousness and also as a constituent component of social organization. He argues that those who share a status as fans of the same media contents often also exhibit similar interests in unrelated areas (quoted in Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007).

[8.2] Based on the above, it is therefore worthwhile to investigate whether being a fan of a work of fiction with a political message correlates with political activism or a higher sense of social responsibility.

9. Harry Potter activism

[9.1] In addition, there is the emergence of organic political activity as a result of Harry Potter fandom (Jenkins 2012; Hinck 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012). Fandoms may become mobilized in the pursuit of public goals through the extension of mutual values across the fan community. A case in point is the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) founded by Andrew Slack in 2005. The HPA is a civil nonprofit organization operated by Harry Potter fans. The members of the group are united in their commitment to the values and convictions that the Harry Potter stories embody, and their goal is to engage in political life as a civic organization, to mobilize others, and to include them in spreading the values they mutually espouse (Jenkins 2012).

[9.2] Today, there are 138 chapters of the Harry Potter Alliance in forty-four federal states of the United States, and the organization is also present in twenty-six countries across five continents. Their activities include a wide variety of areas, from helping the victims of the Haiti earthquake to campaigns for net neutrality. Rowling herself has endorsed the HPA, while Jenkins identifies it as a new type of civic organization: "The HP Alliance has created a new form of civic engagement which allows participants to reconcile their activist identities with the pleasurable fantasies that brought the fan community together in the first place" (2009).

[9.3] In other words, the HPA is the prototype of a political network organized along values of popular culture phenomena. What matters from our perspective is that the example of HPA illustrates persuasively that Harry Potter-based fandom is not merely a theoretical possibility. In part because of the impact of the global reach of the Potterverse and in part because of the impact on the audience of the values articulated therein, the Harry Potter phenomenon has given rise to genuine and broad political/public affairs activism in the United States and many other countries around the world (Hinck 2012).

10. The lack of a movement—Dormant values

[10.1] By contrast, the HPA is not even present in Hungary as an organization. Since we have already shown that Harry Potter is not simply present but is in fact extraordinarily successful in Hungary and has a major impact, this leads us to the question of whether it is maybe the absence of an institutional organization that could explain why the existing Hungarian fandom has pursued a different value trajectory, why it deduces different values from Harry Potter. This question can only be answered if we examine the values and—based on our particular research methodology—the value-based online behaviors that characterize this fandom.

[10.2] It is important to stress that in the prevailing Hungarian situation, the values exuded by the Harry Potter universe, and the networks and online communities that organize along the lines of these values, can be of substantial interest. What is relevant for our argument is that the country is characterized by substantial fragmentation. People with similar outlooks and interests tend to cluster into increasingly homogeneous groups while those who hold opposing views are more likely to become further removed from them. One large segment of the public supports keeping a government in power that is based on conservative, nationalistic values, while others belong to various smaller groups with liberal, left-wing, and/or social democratic values. To put this more succinctly, what we fundamentally seek to explore is how the Harry Potter series, which openly espouses the values of tolerance, acceptance, and social openness, can be so successful in a social context where right-wing political attitudes, national pride, and anti-migration views (Székely and

Szabó 2017) continue to be typical of young people—who are at the same time also broadly characterized by political apathy and a basic commitment to democracy (Dessewffy, Nagy, and Váry 2017).

[10.3] Below we will investigate how this value disposition correlates with other political/public affairs affinities. We researched interests, affinities, and consumption patterns as they can be reconstructed from Facebook activities. A huge advantage of this method as compared to the standard survey methodologies is that through its use of digital footprints it provides the analysis with data taken from real life (Salganik 2017). It is also indicated by the novelty of Big Data-based social media analysis in sociological research. Even though it holds out the prospect of legions of new research opportunities, as of yet this type of analysis does not have an established and standard methodology and benchmarks associated with it, which means that our paper is at the same time also a methodological experiment.

11. Methodology

[11.1] It is possible to reconstruct preferences involving tastes and interests based on an individual's Facebook activity. These activities are the digital imprints of our lives. Liking a Facebook post on a certain issue or commenting on a post that concerns public affairs allow for certain conclusions concerning the user's tastes, values, and consumption patterns (Salganik 2017). For instance, those who are regularly active on the pages of online bookshops are more than likely individuals who read, while those who are active on the platforms of gas stations are likely to be motor vehicle owners, etc.

[11.2] While we consider digital footprint analysis to be an extremely exciting direction for social science, obviously this method, like all methods, has its limitations. One of the most obvious is that it is an observation-based method that uncovers correlations and does not present causation. However, these correlations and intersections may, ideally, shed light on a new phenomenon.

[11.3] In our research we used public Facebook data to identify Harry Potter fans. The data that we relied on to design our target group stem from the Hungarian Facebook pages affiliated with the Harry Potter novels, movies, or games.

[11.4] Facebook enables us to collect public activity through Facebook's Graph API—our analysis of the target groups is based on an anonymous database created through such an API. Before performing the research, we categorized the Facebook pages qualitatively and created segments based on areas of interest, preferences, and consumption patterns. In this research, we used those among segments that appear to indicate an interest in public affairs and society. Ours could be described as a mixed-method methodology in that the data (reactions, users, and platforms) collection and storage, as well as the analysis of their intersections and overlaps, are performed quantitatively using computer science methods, while the categorization of the various platforms is performed as part of a qualitative process. We present the process of data collection and data categorization in figure 2.

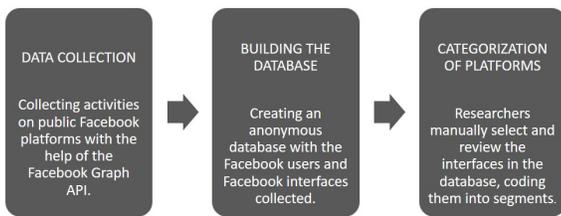


Figure 2. Flowchart showing the process of data collection and data categorization.

[11.5] Before the analysis, we manually collected all the Hungarian Harry Potter-related Facebook pages, groups, and events with user activity between 2014 and 2018. We identified thirty-five platforms based on this collection (See Table S1).

[11.6] Our research sample is made up of users who performed activity on the platforms in Table S1 between January 1, 2014, and June 1, 2018. During the period, the number of active users on the thirty-five Harry Potter platforms was 14,200 persons.

[11.7] In the case of Facebook pages, we did not use page likes for our analysis but instead looked at activities performed on the given platforms. By activity we mean any likes, reactions, or comments on any content shared by the public Facebook pages, a membership in a Facebook group, or attending a Facebook event, as well as an indication of potential attendance (*maybe attending, unsure*). To examine the users' areas of interest, we looked at the target group's Facebook activities with respect to the contents disseminated by the public platforms and juxtaposed these with the activities of 5,521,872 Hungarian Facebook users. The total number of observations, that is the activities performed by the target group, add up to 14,095,856 data points. In the context of the Facebook pages, we did not use page likes to draw up the target group profiles (as we pointed out above) but instead considered activities (likes, reactions, and comments) related to contents disseminated on the public pages. The reason is that we believe that liking a Facebook page does not in and of itself imply that the user will like the content that appears there, while such a preference is far more likely to be implied in an activity reacting to a specific content. We did not use demographic data in analyzing the data because of Facebook's business policies; we can only make inferences about these based on the trends and characteristics that emerge from the target group's activities. Figure 3 presents the process of identifying the target group and performing the data analysis.

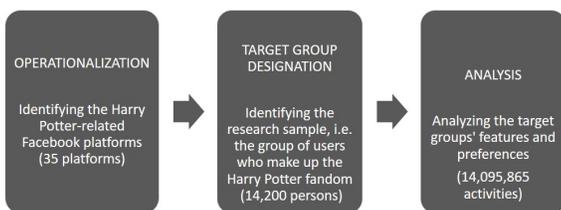


Figure 3. Flowchart identifying the target group and the process of analysis.

[11.8] For our research, we used the following of the Facebook platforms that we had previously hand-coded and categorized into segments according to areas of interests, preferences, and attitudes: Public affairs; Political party; Civic organization, NGO movement; Charity and social issues; Environmentalism and sustainable development. To perform the analysis, we drew up

tables that feature the preferences of Harry Potter fan groups. The figures that we generated based on Facebook data contain the following information: the above-listed segments, the total number of Facebook users in the given segment, and the overlap between the target group and the given segments (ratio of activity). The final figure shows how many active users there were in the given segments (See Table S2).

12. Results

[12.1] In the following, we present the preferences and attitudes of the 14,200 Facebook users with a Harry Potter affinity who were included in the sample we generated for our social media analysis. For this purpose, we looked at the digital footprint that these users generated on public affairs, political, and social issues (see Tables S3, S4, and S5).

[12.2] One observation about the users with an affinity for Harry Potter is that (despite their young age) ([note 1](#)) they exhibit a high level of political activity, as 85 percent of them were active in the category of platforms that we defined as making up the public affairs segment, that is on some Facebook page, group, or event involving a public affairs issue. This ratio was high compared to the average Hungarian Facebook users (the overrepresentation value was 26; in other words the 85 percent rate of activity is far above average as compared to Facebook users overall) ([note 2](#)). Half of the users with Harry Potter affinity (50 percent) were active on the platforms of political parties, which is also higher than the Hungarian average (the overrepresentation score was 15).

[12.3] In addition to a general interest in public affairs, we also examined how active Harry Potter fans were on the pages of civic organizations, NGOs, and social movements, as well as charity and welfare organizations. The analysis reveals that based on their Facebook footprints, 40 percent of Harry Potter fans are active on charity-related Facebook pages, which is also rather high compared to the often-mentioned general apathy of Hungarian society. (The overrepresentation value was 4). We also observed that 35 percent of them are interested in civic organizations, NGOs, or some type of social movement. (The overrepresentation score for this segment was 7).

13. Discussion

[13.1] In addition to analyzing the activities in the broader context of public affairs contents and political parties, we also zoomed in to explore what type of contents users engaged with most actively at the level of individual Facebook pages. The analysis of user activities on various Facebook pages revealed the dominance of major left-wing/liberal news sites (Index.hu, HVG, 24.hu) and the major left-wing political blogs (444, Mércse, Fideszfigyelő) among different media pages. We also observed higher than average levels of activity on the Facebook pages of these media outlets. However, blogs and newspapers heavily influenced by the Orbán government (Pesti Srácok, Magyar Idők, Mandiner) did not score well; the overlap between the target group's online activity and these sites is 1 percent. The media consumption patterns of the Harry Potter group clearly demonstrate an openness to left-wing/liberal media and a lack of interest in progovernment news outlets.

[13.2] With respect to political parties, the overall picture was mixed. What we can assert is that the group of persons with Harry Potter affinity cannot be clearly assigned to any political camp or the other; in fact, they exhibit manifold and often opposing party preferences. Harry Potter fans were most active on the pages of the Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party (Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya

Párt, 26 percent), a satirical political party, the Jobbik Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom, 9 percent) and Momentum (5 percent). In this context it is important to note, for one, that the aforementioned parties are overrepresented among youths: a representative survey (Szabolcs 2018) of 2,400 persons performed by one of the most reputable Hungarian public opinion research companies in December 2018 revealed that Momentum has 31 percent support among eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds, while Jobbik has 11 percent (which is still higher than in the population at large, where it stands at 9 percent) ([note 3](#)). Nevertheless, with a 36 percent level of support among the youngest cohort of voters, Fidesz-KDNP enjoys the highest level of support, which makes it all the more striking that we did not see any activities on the part of Harry Potter fans on Fidesz-related platforms (even if the present analysis only allows us to make assertions about those fans who are active on Facebook).

[13.3] Of the parties mentioned above, the Two-tailed Dog Party is an anti-establishment satirical party that is extraordinarily popular in the online space and on social media pages. Their most prominent slogan is "Free beer and eternal life for everybody." Still, with a result of only 1.7 percent, they failed to achieve a breakthrough in the 2018 parliamentary election. Jobbik had started out as a radical right-wing party with militaristic features, but in recent years it has begun to pivot toward the center and is now trying to reposition itself as a center-right people's party; this process has been accompanied by intraparty conflicts and a party split. Jobbik enjoys a high level of support among Hungarian youth, and the party has been very active in reaching out to and mobilizing young people from the very start. Seen from that angle, the 9 percent rate of activity may even be said to be low. The Momentum Movement is a small centrist-liberal party that was founded in March 2017, and thus we only had one year's worth of data on Momentum-related activity in the data collection period (as opposed to the four years of data collection on the other parties). In light of the fact that Momentum only received 2.2 percent of the votes in the 2018 national parliamentary elections, their 5 percent share of activity on the party's Facebook page could be described as significant.

[13.4] These platforms in question are primarily the Facebook pages of certain political efforts directed against the Fidesz-KDNP government that have grown beyond their initially limited objectives and now often serve as sources of general political news which are critical of the government (Százvezren az internetadó ellen [Hundred Thousand Against the Internet Tax], Egymillióan a magyar sajtószabadságért [One Million for Press Freedom in Hungary]), but we also saw high activity on the pages of civic groups and NGOs such as Budapest Pride, Migration Aid, and Amnesty International. In addition to their preference for these human rights organizations — which the currently prevailing government propaganda seeks to portray as left-wing/liberal groups — those in the target group were likely to be active on the pages of civic organizations that perform social/welfare-related activities (e.g. the Hungarian Interchurch Aid or the National Ambulance Service). Roughly a third (31 percent) of Harry Potter fans were active on pages relating to environmentalism and sustainable development. They were also preeminently active on the page of the environmental organization Greenpeace Hungary, but on the whole, it can be said that they were generally less interested in this subject matter than in public affairs/politics or social/welfare related issues. Figure 4 presents the overlap between the group with a Harry Potter affinity and the segments we analyzed.



Figure 4. Flowchart showing the overlap between the group with a Harry Potter affinity and the segments analyzed.

[13.5] Summarizing the above, it appears that Harry Potter fans evince not only a high level of interest in public affairs and politics but are also sensitive when it comes to social and welfare-related issues, even though their political preferences are mixed and the distribution of their party preferences includes right and left-wing parties alike. These observations mesh with the survey research data cited above, and it is apparent that the members of the group displayed a high level of social sensitivity not only in their professed attitudes but also based on the actual activities they perform. In this context, we should stress especially that this is the case despite the fact that the affinity toward Jobbik (the formerly far-right military party that has tried to reposition itself as a center-right people's party over the years) is exceedingly high in this group (also as a function of the young age of the target group).

[13.6] Finally, the question we need to ask is how generalizable these partial empirical results are. Do the value preferences of Harry Potter fans that we investigated and demonstrated above suggest that this group could serve as a new base for political activism more broadly understood?

[13.7] According to the first results of the European Value Study, trust in and the social acceptance of political institutions is at a low point in Western societies and in Hungary even more so, especially among the younger generations (EVS 2018). The basic question we explored in our research was whether being a fan of Harry Potter is correlated with a more open attitude toward public affairs and reflects more active social/political attitudes. Based on the empirical examples examined here, it can be asserted that this relationship unequivocally exists.

[13.8] We used a specific case study, the preferences and character of the fans of the Harry Potter universe, to show persuasively that such a value structure that harmonizes with substantial messages does exist. However, to assess whether this relationship is causal, how potent it is, how generally it applies, and what type of public life activism it engenders, would take much further research. Still, we are also in a fortunate situation in this regard because the reconstructions we created from the multitude of digital footprints lay the groundwork and open up the possibility of further research on this topic.

14. Epilogue

[14.1] The reader may recall that Momentum, a generational party founded in 2017 that explicitly seeks to attract and represent youths, has generated sufficient online reaction to be measurable in our research despite the lack of a long history. Still, the party failed to reach the parliamentary threshold of 5 percent in the national election of April 2018. In the European election of May 2019, Momentum achieved a stunning breakthrough when it won 10 percent of the votes, receiving a spectacular 17 percent in the Hungarian capital, Budapest. We obviously do not suggest that this particular success is owed to their references to Harry Potter, but what we can

nevertheless say with certainty is that under the illiberal Orbán regime it was the newcomer party that actively used the Harry Potter mythology to mobilize the Harry Potter generation which generated perhaps the most spectacular unexpected electoral result. As the party chairman, András Fekete-Győr, confirmed it, "the Harry Potter universe is relevant both as an inspiration within the organization and to successfully reach out to the new generation" (Fekete-Győr, pers. comm., July 23, 2019). It still remains to be seen how far the utilization of Harry Potter narratives will take Momentum in stimulating political activism, and how much impact they will have on Hungary by so doing. But it could be useful in awakening dormant values in society.

15. Notes

1. In analyzing Facebook data, we only collected and analyzed activities performed on public platforms. We have no access to the demographic data about users or their activities on private platforms, closed groups, and closed events. We reconstructed the young age of Harry Potter fans from the interests as they manifested in their Facebook footprint, preferences, and consumption patterns on the one hand, as well as from our survey research, which showed that 49 percent of the persons in the group with a Harry Potter affinity were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-nine.

2. For the methodology on how we measure overrepresentation, please see Methodology in the list of supplementary files.

3. The poll did not look at the support of the Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party.

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Table S4

FACEBOOK PAGE	FACEBOOK ID	ALL ACTIVITY ON PAGE (2014-2018)	HARRY POTTER AFFINITIVE GROUP ACTIVITY ON PAGE (2014-2018)	SCORE
Magyar Helsinki Bizottság / Hungarian Helsinki Committee	id122159141138679	28477	12%	19,2068622
Budapest Pride	id76748198685	22394	11%	24,02442414
Egymillióan a magyar sajtószabadságért	id169854769717975	221329	11%	40,34267674
Százezren az internetadó ellen	id1509298262645856	199979	10%	51,33900589
Migration Aid	id431755597026692	30259	9%	41,46246462
Greenpeace Magyarország	id35634348348	72018	8%	52,10004713
Amnesty International Magyarország	id44847086574	6917	7%	54,44761231
Országos Mentőszolgálat	id201120646565662	148819	7%	55,94897571
Magyar Ökumenikus Segélyszervezet	id248705293786	31872	6%	9,473958001
Nőe Állatotthon Alapítvány	id154601814438	74177	5%	15,59508378
Tetővált. Állatmentők Állatvédelmi Egyesület	id236527653060202	50392	3%	29,35769051
Baráthegy Vakvezető és Segítő Kutya Iskola Alapítvány	id171092089635555	40502	2%	11,33516098
Állat és Természetvédelmi Járőrszolgálat Újpest	id391873247591148	13047	2%	8,083072356
CBA-bojkott	id654120188038212	17479	2%	5,082637632
Budapest Bike Maffia	id319014781456256	10606	2%	5,194964892
Tanárok a közoktatásért	id143680702453209	12215	1%	3,813928221
Vesélyben vannak az egyetemeink	id804628502956760	4775	1%	4,155005613
Kiállunk Orbán Viktor mellett	id615208331923540	40790	1%	2,568974041
Erdőmentők	id662573163768024	3833	1%	1,601747419
Humán Platform	id392671854144817	9378	1%	1,176994861
Hallgatói Hálózat	id227607593919673	3302	1%	1,073381276
Nyitottak vagyunk	id407695802676878	3147	1%	0,991614121
MagNet Közösségi Ház	id364342090325806	3459	1%	0,762531962
MigSzol Csoport	id517382378312927	6756	1%	0,47316716
GREENFO_HU	id129119257103256	2953	1%	0,514317377
Jogi Fórum	id121868547824372	1853	1%	0,448713998
Százezren az Anyák Házáért	id263217647350640	8844	1%	0,404070373
K-Monitor	id170834092937469	8550	1%	0,324145814
A Város Mindenkié	id119483288121502	2944	1%	-0,184914088
CivilZugló Egyesület	id122387724456640	4241	1%	-0,25830476
Stadionok helyett ingyenes M0-ást	id1508955802719680	3213	1%	-0,49994104
Egymillióan az internetadó ellen	id371648969665462	914	1%	-0,832964823
Egyetemes alapjövdelem - havi fix.	id203774062972477	1622	1%	-1,129431493
Kiállunk Dr. Papp Lajos mellett	id263201673846726	5798	1%	-1,146926967
Komondor Fajmentés-Rescue	id1394644607441356	1968	1%	-1,148437431
Soha többé baloldal	id512625712109741	6686	1%	-1,158732262
Toleráns társadalomért - Nem kérünk a szélsőjobboldal	id310219995687575	769	1%	-1,285683913
Drogmentes Világért Alapítvány Magyarország	id105028709533035	895	1%	-1,533417829

Table S5

FACEBOOK PAGE	FACEBOOK ID	ALL ACTIVITY ON PAGE (2014-2018)	HARRY POTTER AFFINITIVE GROUP ACTIVITY ON PAGE (2014-2018)	SCORE
Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt	id14792493292	414922	26%	64,90386441
Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	id287770891404	332831	9%	31,38756648
Momentum Mozgalom	id592204747588011	83780	5%	30,04203012
LMP - Lehet Más a Politika	id47198507012	48987	3%	29,47982466
Együtt	id278219632295951	131515	3%	26,90536508
Párbeszéd Magyarországért	id113684438795574	105708	3%	23,90796716
MSZP	id115388925185513	177510	3%	22,01463766
Fidesz	id9844779306	245328	1%	15,51940854
Demokratikus Koalíció	id169599166463839	61626	1%	7,347285967
Liberalisok	id535850009768992	15837	1%	5,235763848

1. Supplementary File on Methodology

To perform the analysis, we drew up tables that feature the preferences of Harry Potter fan groups.¹ The figures that we generated based on Facebook data contain the following information: the segments that have been analyzed, the total number of Facebook users in the given segment, and the overlap between the target group and the given segments (ratio of activity). The final figure shows how many active users there were in the given segments. Furthermore, we used an indicator that includes the size of the segment (the number of its active users) to capture in which segments (or, for that matter, which specific Facebook platform) the users in our target group were more active than the average Hungarians, and where they were less interested than the average users. We refer to this as the *overrepresentation indicator*. The indicator takes into consideration the size of the segment (or page) and of the target group audience, looking at their overlap, juxtaposing them with the standard expected value calculation method. The indicator is a standardized number without a unit of measurement. Based on the rankings of the segments and the pages, we can talk about preferences, areas of interest, and attitudes within the target group (or target groups). The indicator is calculated as follows:

If the symbol of the target group is C, the symbol of the segment or page in question is S, while their overlap (the overlap of the target group with the given segment or page) is $C \cap S$, then Ratio1 $|C \cap S|:|C|$, Ratio2 is $|C \cap S|:|S|$.

Based on the above, the *overrepresentation indicator* is as follows: Ratio1 x Ratio2 = $(|C \cap S|:|C|) * (|C \cap S|:|S|) = (|C \cap S|^2):(|C| \times |S|)$.

¹ The data tables that we relied on for this analysis can be accessed in the enclosed Supplementary Files

Theory

The role of popular media in 2016 US presidential election memes

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[0.1] Abstract—The 2016 US presidential election was marked by the extensive role that social media played in the construction of the candidates as well as by the growth of a number of forms of digital political rhetoric, including memes. The subgenre of popular culture-based political memes that draw on well-known entertainment media, particularly those with large fandoms like the Star Wars and Harry Potter franchises, reveal inequities in gender representation in entertainment media that are replicated when these media become source material for memes. Memes based on popular culture that are designed to celebrate female candidates are disadvantaged by having a more limited popular culture lexicon than do memes featuring male candidates. This imbalance is compounded by the ways negative stereotypes of women already present in popular culture can be deployed in these memes, often in ways that align with news frames that work to police female politicians. Examining the popular culture materials deployed in memes and the way in which they replicate existing representational inequities can improve our understanding of the relationship among memes, popular media, and gender stereotypes.

[0.2] Keywords—Gender representation; Harry Potter; Social media; Star Wars

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Against a bright blue background, a meme proudly declares, "Sometimes you just need an old white guy to help fight the force of evil" above the words "Bernie 2016." In the image, Bernie looks out seriously alongside Obi-Wan Kenobi, Dumbledore, and Gandalf (figure 1). These choices were particularly salient; Bernie Sanders frequently appears as each of these characters in other memes, but the meme maker undoubtedly had other options. They could have gone to the pages of Marvel for Professor X, into the Disney vault for Merlin, or to the Back to the Future franchise for Doc Brown. The well available for heroic older white men is deep. For older white women, there are far fewer heroines to choose from. Indeed, the most frequently deployed older woman in political memes and discourse around the 2016 US presidential election, General Leia from the Star Wars franchise, is depicted as her younger self. Images of older white women in media are certainly available, and Clinton is frequently depicted through these unflattering lenses of Disney witches and dour scolds. This shouldn't surprise any film fan. Studies have demonstrated that not only are older women underrepresented in popular film but they also are depicted as less good (Bazzini et al. 1997). Heroic older women may be plentiful in life, but they are few and far between on screen.



Figure 1. Bernie Sanders associated with heroes Dumbledore, Gandalf, and Obi-Wan Kenobi.

[1.2] The availability of such images has become a matter of US national importance as fan-created memes and popular culture references have become an increasingly important part of political discourse. Indeed, candidates themselves use these touchstones. Hillary Clinton compares the vitriol directed at her by supporters of Donald Trump to the taunting of Cersei Lannister from *Game of Thrones* in her 2017 book *What Happened* (McCluskey 2017), while Trump tells a young boy at the Iowa state fair that he is Batman (Cavna 2015). Traditional media has also been quick to draw comparisons between politicians and popular culture figures. In a February 2019 episode of his TV show, Seth Meyers jokes that Donald Trump learned he could go back to the future by watching a documentary with Bernie Sanders (the 1985 film *Back to the Future*), playing on memes comparing Sanders to Doc Brown. Jimmy Kimmel draws on *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) in a fake trailer depicting Sanders as Captain America, Trump as Iron Man (described as a "diabolical Billionaire"), and Clinton as a (cackling) Scarlett Witch.

[1.3] Although popular culture references are woven into traditional media and the discourses of candidates, they are nowhere more prevalent than in internet memes. Because memes are often single images, they frequently rely on the shorthand of existing popular culture texts, such as films or television series. Chmielewski (2016) refers to memes as "the lingua franca of the modern campaign," while Ryan Milner describes memetic media as "a lingua franca...for mass participation" (2018, 5). However, if memes function as a language, then it is important to consider the available building blocks of their vocabulary.

[1.4] Despite ample consideration of the role of social media, memes, and even fandom in recent elections, we have yet to consider the way that these discourses are limited by the available language of popular culture and the problems of gender representation in popular media that are replicated in its use in political discourse. Popular-culture-centered memes about the 2016 US presidential candidates were shaped by the ample availability of highly salient popular culture references for depictions of men and by the limited referents, particularly positive referents, available for women. Here I trace the types of memes depicting Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton in order to better understand how the limited depictions of women in legacy popular culture have affected fan-made and viral memetic texts. Details of these texts, like the existing dynamic between iconic characters in these popular culture texts and the disciplining of ambitious women through the tropes of the villainous woman or the masculinized woman, place female candidates at a disadvantage in the meme wars. Although memes are understood along linguistic lines by discussing their vernacular (Milner 2018) and genre (Wiggins and Bowers 2014), this is not sufficient to elucidate how memes function as a single articulation. Memes draw on fan cultures and popular film and television, so it is vital to understand the limitations of this lexicon—that is, the components that comprise the language used to form the articulation we see when we look at a meme.

2. Literature review

[2.1] The literature shows that pop culture memes play a crucial role in political discourse, but what is rarely considered, in part because these studies focus primarily on memes made by fans of male politicians, is the extent to which pop culture is skewed to favor male heroes. Given the significance of popular culture to political memes, greater attention must be paid to the specific popular culture subject used and its limitations. Limor Shifman emphasizes the importance of media culture, noting that there is a "heavy reliance on pop culture images in political memes" (2014, 138) that adds layers of meaning associated with the text to comment on politicians like Barack Obama and events like Occupy Wall Street. Shifman argues that the use of popular culture in these instances is largely open to viewer interpretation; in Star Wars-based memes depicting Obama as Luke Skywalker, for example, "the Force is with Internet users" may be either "glorifying Obama" or criticizing Obama's "construction as a superhero" (150). Following Shifman (2014), I argue that that the "keying" of a meme's tone and style (Shifman 2014, 39) as well as its political valence powerfully delimits the preferred reading of many memes and the references used within them.

[2.2] The selection of memes in political discourse is not just a function of the available memes but also the work of fan culture in relation to those memes. Milner argues that "pop media is essential to memetic participation" (2018, 67), explaining that memetic grammar depends on reappropriation and is in part about "borrowing from the contributions of others and transforming those contributions into something unique" (61). In this way, we can see memes, especially but not exclusively memes based on popular culture, as related to other forms of transformative works that have long been part of fan cultures. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013) critique the model of the meme as frequently distorting the role of human agency in spreading media content, flagging fandom instead as a reference point that has innovated in participatory media. Milner's (2018) and Shifman's (2014) focused studies of memes demonstrate the existence of a specific and complex relationship between memes and the communities that spread and frame them, pushing beyond the previous models of memes as self-replicating that Jenkins, Ford, and Green rightly critiqued. Further, although neither text talks much about fans, these scholars' interest in affinity groups, the use of popular culture, and reappropriation call for a consideration of the role of fan logic in meme culture. The labor performed by political fans, including the circulation and production of memes, can be an important component of the creation and maintenance of a citizen's political identity, as well as a way to attempt to persuade others, celebrate victory, and even antagonize others (Penney 2017). While making these appeals, political fans frequently draw on other cultural touchstones, including popular media (Kohlemainen 2017; Penney 2017), thereby performing multifaceted labor to engage with the meanings and iconography of both the political figures and the popular media texts they put into conversation. Pekka Kohlemainen (2017) compares this reframing of politicians through new narrative conventions and character types to crossover fan fiction. While limited, the social media capital that is essential to campaigns can be supported by political fan behavior (Kohlemainen 2017; Penney 2017) and can involve the creation of both transformative and affirmational narratives around candidates. Transformational memes or narratives may substantively reimagine or reframe the political candidate, the media text supporting them, or both. Affirmational memes or narratives may support the candidate's campaign message, or more frequently simply an impression of them as a good or bad person, while simultaneously either affirming or transforming the source media text that the candidate is crossed over with. This is crucial because it requires an assessment of how the meme engages the canon of both the political and media texts.

[2.3] The memes created for the 2016 presidential election demonstrate how two different forms of fandoms, political fandoms and media fandoms, are active in political memes. Although we cannot assume that every one of the numerous political memes based on Star Wars was created by fans of either the franchise or the candidates, we can see how they can be understood as contiguous with fan practices, and they may be unpacked using strategies from fan studies. Furthermore, the extent to which it is being either created or perceived through the lens of a primarily political fandom (Penney 2017) or a primarily media fandom will affect the way we can understand a meme's operation from a fan studies perspective. For example, a meme made famous after Jessica Chastain shared it on Instagram of Hillary Clinton as Danaerys Targaryen from the *Game of Thrones* TV show (2011–19) standing proudly with a dragon on her shoulder can be understood as functioning differently from two fan perspectives (figure 2). From the perspective of *Game of Thrones*, this is unquestionably an example of transformational fandom, but for Clinton fans, this could be considered an example of affirmational fandom, which borrows the positive valance of the character from this popular series to emphasize attributes that they wish to celebrate about their candidate—in this case, strength and nobility.



Figure 2. Meme of Hillary Clinton as Danaerys Targaryen, dragon on her shoulder, from *Game of Thrones* (2011–19).

[2.4] Crucially, which fandoms and media circulate online with enough salience to make memes effective is essential to what kind of appeals can be made. Milner notes that "memetic reappropriation is constrained by the cultural systems that simultaneously facilitate it" (2018, 85). While this crucial relationship between popular culture and memes has been acknowledged in research on memes (Shifman 2014; Wiggins 2017), the extent to which this necessitates a consideration of the representations and structures of traditional media as a constituent element of new media discourses has not been considered. Film and television culture may be understood as a central resource for memes, but new media scholars analyzing memes rarely consider this culture itself, its features, and its limitations.

[2.5] Understanding political memes from the 2016 US presidential election can benefit from an understanding of gender representation and tropes in traditional media and gender representation and stereotypes in political media, as well as an understanding of the relationship between memes and politics themselves. Ample research has established that women are underrepresented both as speaking and lead characters in traditional media, particularly in the action and adventure films often referenced in memes (Smith et al. 2018). Further, depictions of female characters frequently fall into traditional gendered tropes (England, Descartes, and Collier Meek 2011). Smith et al. found that only 23.2 percent of characters in action-adventure films from 2007 to 2017 are female (2018, 6). Older women, like those who typically run for political office, are particularly rare. Of the one hundred top films in 2017, only five have a lead or colead aged forty-five or older (Smith et al. 2018, 6). Further, older women and those who do not conform to a feminine ideal are often framed in negative, even villainous, ways in film and television (Bazzini et al. 1997; Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2009; Robinson et al. 2007).

[2.6] This can be further complicated by a kind of representational double bind, where feminist imperatives of being seen and heard can involve the transgression of feminine norms (Rowe 1995)—a transgressive script that comes with its own limitations that can pen women into masculinist norms of strength and violence (Brown 2004; Coulthard 2007) or can frame them as abject (Rowe 1995). These images of strong women often need to be paired with clear markers of traditional femininity in order to make them palatable for audiences (Baker and Raney 2007). This also echoes the double bind that many women in politics find themselves in. Shawn Parry-Giles (2014) notes that news frames are used to discipline Clinton for her entry into male-dominated social and political spaces. Such spaces often frame her as insufficiently feminine and insufficiently authentic, thereby setting up political ambition and femininity as antithetical. Yet these negative surveillance and frames repeatedly recede when Clinton steps away from pursuing leadership roles. Popular entertainment frames more frequently associate men with leadership roles (Smith et al. 2012) and align empowered women in

leadership roles with youthfulness, attractiveness, and physical prowess, sometimes associated with the trope of girl power (Gonick et al. 2009). Similarly, news frames have been found to discipline women in the public sphere for failing to conform to feminine ideals (Parry-Giles 2014). Taken together, these news frames leave little space for positive models of women, particularly older women, to be seen as competent, active, trustworthy leaders. Conversely, not only are male leads and heroes much more plentiful, there is much more flexibility in what is allowable for male heroes. This is exemplified in images of postfeminist masculinity (Gwynne and Muller 2013) and in the rise of the antihero in popular media (Lotz 2014).

[2.7] This inequity in media representation parallels gender inequities in politics. Scholars have suggested that women are not disadvantaged at the ballot box, but women remain underrepresented in both state- and federal-level politics (Hayes and Lawless 2016). Kathleen Dolan (2010) finds that stereotypes about what male and female candidates are good at affects voting patterns. Ana Stevenson (2018) traces many stereotypes found in memes that address women's political participation back to women's suffrage postcards, which she argues function similarly to memes. Michelle Smirnova observes that in memes featuring Clinton and Trump, "discourses often draw on gender scripts and tropes in political critique, thereby supporting a patriarchal system that privileges men over women" (2018, 4). Smirnova argues that these memes reflect a "double bind" (13) for women, noting that many of the memes directed at attacking Donald Trump worked by feminizing him, further reinforcing hegemonic masculinity's connection to images of presidential fitness. The masculinization of Clinton is particularly relevant given that her failure to perform appropriate femininity was identified as a long-standing objection to her by evangelicals (Ward 2018) and Republican women (Aronson 2018). This framing can be tied to a long history of discourses disciplining Clinton's gender performance (Campbell 1998; Parry-Giles 2014) that extends beyond Republican communities. Bradley Wiggins (2017) observes that there is significant vitriol toward Hillary Clinton and less aggression toward Trump on the Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/berniesandersmemes/>), which Wiggins argues might have helped elucidate the dynamic of the election. He also observes, "Popular culture intertextuality functions as the dominant source material for memes" (200). This centrality of popular culture images in memes, which Shifman argues "play a key role in contemporary formulations of political participation" (2014, 171), means that we must not only look at meme culture or a meme's use of popular culture but also at the limitations of existing traditional media culture. Further, the relatively limited positive pop culture memes depicting Clinton and the ways in which she is disciplined in negative ones reflect existing prejudices in the ways female characters are depicted in popular media.

3. Methods

[3.1] Scholars have approached the identification of their meme sample in numerous ways, including immersing themselves in a single location (Wiggins 2017), using specific search terms on social media sites to identify frequently shared memes (Smirnova 2018), and analyzing dozens of meme pages using quantitative content analysis (Moody-Ramirez and Church 2019). Each of these methods allows researchers to find a relatively heterogeneous set of memes for analysis. However, because my project does not seek to generalize about 2016 presidential election memes or their effects on the election but rather to provide a close analysis of a specific type of meme, I elected to conduct a virtual ethnography (Hine 2011), culling relevant memes as they appeared on my social media news feed during the 2016 election and following them to related digital spaces (such as a Reddit page conducting a photo contest).

[3.2] I collected these memes primarily via both my personal Facebook page and politically themed Facebook groups, like the well-known Pantsuit Nation, which I belonged to during the 2016 election period. Because memes are often posted out of context, I followed them, whenever possible, to their original source (like Bernie Sanders's Dank Meme Stash or a Reddit thread) to collect related memes and get a better sense of the original context for the memes as well as the context in which I encountered them. All the memes I collected were widely distributed; to my knowledge, none was made by or unique to the sharers or the places where I encountered them. To diversify and complicate my sample, when a frequently repeated theme appeared (like the appearance of candidates as Jabba the Hutt), I conducted Google searches to identify riffs on the meme and conversations that might not have been captured by my initial sampling. Although I did not track Twitter or Instagram, if I found links to memes on these platforms during my sampling, these links were followed and relevant content collected. This multipart approach helped provide heterogeneity to my sample, permitting me to avoid the bias inherent in social media bubbles. I ultimately compiled a sample of 197 meme images relevant to my study. Primary data collection took place between March 2016 and December 2016. Additional memes were collected in the analysis and writing process in January and February 2019; these memes were located through Google searches conducted to look for additional variants of key memes and to ensure the heterogeneity of the sample. These memes were checked to ensure that they were circulating during the initial collection period.

[3.3] For this analysis, I focus specifically on a subgenre of memes that are a variant on face-swap memes—that is, memes that superimpose the face of one person in a photo onto the face of another person in the same photo. However, because the presidential candidate and characters like Darth Vader or Captain America don't appear in the same image, instead of swapping both faces, these memes instead simply superimpose a candidate's face onto the media character, relying on their recognizability. This need for recognizability made characters with iconic features or costumes particularly prevalent in my sample. In these cases, characters become a shorthand for commentary on a candidate or an electoral dynamic. For example, in figure 3, a meme that circulated shortly after the election, Obama is depicted as Jon Snow from *Game of Thrones*, declaring "My watch has ended," above an image of Donald Trump as the Night King, declaring "Winter is coming." Here, the idea that Donald Trump is not only villainous but an active threat to society—and indeed human life—is conveyed by the choice of adding Trump's head to the Night King's body. Those who create or share this meme are able to convey a complex set of feelings about both their perception of the morality of the new president and the threat he poses by relying on others' existing knowledge of the Night King and the role he plays in *Game of Thrones*.



Figure 3. *Game of Thrones* meme with Barack Obama as Jon Snow and Donald Trump as the Night King, summarizing the meme maker's desire for viewers to understand Trump as an active threat to society and human life.

[3.4] For my analysis, I focus primarily on groupings of memes that reference a limited number of media texts or fandoms in order to gain a better understanding of how the language of popular media is deployed in gendered ways. Bakhtin describes language as potentially "socio-ideological" ([1975] 1981, 272), with different languages belonging to different groups. Memes drawing on popular culture belong to a larger social media language and a kind of memetic discourse with its own linguistic norms; they simultaneously rely on specific lexicons of media texts and fandoms. Bakhtin argues that "language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents" (293). In the cases I address here, I consider how certain political memes function as a discourse through the appropriation of a lexicon drawn from popular media. Their meaning is structured in part by the limitations of the lexicon and in part by the accent with which its language is spoken. As a result, because these memes depend on shared understandings of both political and popular culture languages, they can be read in potentially deeply conflicted and contradictory ways, depending on the reader's understanding of the way they are accented. For example, one face-swap meme depicts Clinton and Sanders sitting at a table at CNN, where Clinton appears as Leia holding a blaster and Sanders as Gandalf smoking a pipe. A Sanders supporter may read the equation of Sanders and Gandalf as a reflection of Sanders's wisdom and heroism, while a detractor might focus on Gandalf's tendency to mislead and withhold information. Similarly, a Clinton supporter may perceive Clinton as a symbol of revolutionary female strength, while a detractor might read the blaster as a symbol of problematic militarism. Most memes have a clear negative or positive valance in their intent, however, that can be discerned by either the words accompanying an image or the context in which they circulate. As a result, memes may be interpreted through a triangulation of the political meanings evoked by any words included in the meme and the contexts in which it was circulated, the cultural meanings of the media texts involved, and visual communication cues like the facial expressions chosen.

[3.5] Additional complications emerge as a result of strands of an internet subculture that make memes for the lulz (that is, humorous effect), to top others, or as part of a challenge. Indeed, several images I encountered emerged from a single photo challenge on Reddit in which an unflattering photo was presented in order to be adapted into as many memes as possible. This challenge led to images as ideologically diverse as Roadhog from the video game *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), Corpus Colossus from *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), and Edna Turnblad from the film *Hairspray* (1988). As a result, the intention and even the original use of memes are not always discernible; instead, it is sometimes necessary to follow patterns across memes. The inconsistencies that their use and motivation reveal, exemplified by the Reddit photo challenge, frequently make it impossible to clearly connect a meme and a news event or candidate's immediate branding. Rather, more general news frames, like the understanding of Clinton as inauthentic (Parry-Giles 2014) or affective commitments to a candidate linked more to team allegiance than political philosophy (Penney 2017), seem to be activated.

[3.6] It is therefore important to understand each meme as open to multiple readings, sometimes obscured in terms of its original intent, and as fundamentally dialogic (Bakhtin [1975] 1981). It is therefore crucial that memes be considered in relationship to the "social life of discourse" (269)—that is, how they are circulated, and for whom. Divorced from this context, as well as the context of other memes, readings of memes can be misleading, as can be seen in the differing readings of the meme series "Texts from Hillary." Moody-Ramirez and Church (2019) use a coding process that leads them to identify an image of Hillary Clinton looking at her phone while wearing sunglasses as a negative meme drawing attention to her emails, whereas Stevenson (2018) recognizes this image as part of a Tumblr titled "Texts from Hillary," whose play on this image generally depicts Clinton as powerful and even cool.

[3.7] Further, because memes only become memes through circulation, modification, and imitation, it is essential that we look at how memes work in conversation with one another. The pro-Sanders "Sometimes you just need an old white guy to help fight the force of evil" meme I began with has been adapted into multiple variants. In some versions, Ron Paul or Donald Trump take Sanders's place; other versions play on its premise to critique it. One version copies the meme exactly but adds a smiling Senator Palpatine, one of Star Wars' chief villains, beneath it with the words, "Yes, exactly." Another meme, which features Senator Palpatine, Saruman (a wizard complicit with the villain in the Lord of the Rings franchise), and Sanders, changes the text to read, "Sometimes you need an old white guy, pretending to be a good guy, to make things worse." This same basic memetic form is therefore used to elevate Sanders as a hero, to

elevate his competitors, to question the centrality of old white men and our trust in them, and to depict Sanders as a wolf in sheep's clothing. Following this trope across multiple memes and considering the characters who are added or subtracted to influence their meaning can help us understand the conversation that is taking place through these memes. Crucially, this exercise also shows how the available lexicon of well-known media characters shapes the way this conversation can occur.

4. An uneven media lexicon

[4.1] The flexibility of the "old white guy" meme only reinforces the plenitude of white men to choose from on screen and in politics. Yet it is not enough to simply look at what popular culture signifiers are used in political memes. We must also learn to recognize and address the uneven distribution of available referents in popular culture that would have salience for a wide audience. Popular culture-based memes may be flexible in their interpretations and uses, but they are constrained by the cultural resources available. In the 2016 election, this affected the kinds of memes that came to represent the three major candidates, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders. The uneven distribution of male and female speaking characters and lead characters that Smith et al. (2018) observe is replicated in the uneven diversity of positive popular culture referents in the three candidates' memes.

[4.2] Positive Hillary Clinton memes most frequently depict her using the same few media figures. Princess or General Leia, Rosie the Riveter, Wonder Woman, and (occasionally) Supergirl appear in memes, where Clinton is shown wearing the characters' most iconic costumes and in the most iconic poses. This small constellation of Clinton/character crossovers had wide enough circulation and acceptance that a variant of each appeared outside of memes in merchandise and cartoons. Interestingly, two popular characters that Hillary Clinton was frequently compared to in the press (Leslie Knope from *Parks and Recreation* [2009–15] and Hermione from the Harry Potter franchise) did not appear to be used for face-swap memes with Clinton. This key absence points to the significance of what texts may be popular with meme makers and how factors like age may preclude some cultural connections from being considered suitable material. While Wonder Woman and Leia are depicted as young women, they originated during the youth and early adulthood of baby boomers, so they belong to an older generation than Hermione. Further, the Wonder Woman film was released in 2017, so most memes in my sample depicted her in illustrated form, perhaps avoiding friction between her youthful, sexualized embodiment by Gal Gadot and perceptions of Clinton.

[4.3] My sample ultimately did not include a large number of pro-Trump media-based memes, because as someone who is already a popular culture figure, Trump often features as himself. However, those that I did encounter draw from a wider variety of referents and tend to share some key attributes: hegemonic masculinity, independence, and physical strength. Trump appears most predominantly as superheroes: Captain America on the battlefield holding a shield with "Make America Great Again" beneath it, a pumped-up Superman (an image repeated on an inauguration button), Spider-Man wearing headphones while swinging above a city, Batman running through the streets alongside Ted Cruz as Robin. These characters are all symbols of righteousness and heroism—notably heroism that works outside the law. Like Trump, they alone can fix it. Notably, although Jimmy Kimmel's short video casts Trump as Iron Man, he appears most frequently as Captain America, a character intimately tied to patriotic Americana (figure 4). Significant here is the sheer number of superheroes pro-Trump meme makers have to select from. These choices can be understood as having particular significance in light of the way that Trump is constructed through a lens of hypermasculinity—an alpha male and a cowboy (Penney 2017).



Figure 4. Composite image of four separate superhero memes: Wonder Woman, Captain America, and Superman.

[4.4] However, despite Bernie Sanders's very different public persona, he too frequently appears as this same set of superheroes, indicating that although a candidate's specific attributes may affect the kinds of crossovers used in memes, demographics alone are sufficient for this large library of superheroes to be applied to both Trump and Sanders. The fans of both candidates can choose among many examples of male heroes to select those most visually suited to memes or those that carry appealing connotations, such as Superman's association with heroism behind a facade. Hillary Clinton fans have far fewer cinematic superheroes to choose from that the average American would be familiar with. As a result, there are fewer connotative associations to be activated or to avoid; further, few images exist that do not include stereotypically sexualized bodies for her face to be added on to.

[4.5] Within a single media text, the plurality of heroic male models allows meme makers to construct male political candidates through several alternative frames while limiting images of female characters. Across the abundant Star Wars-themed memes, Clinton, with a single exception, appeared only as Leia when positively framed, whereas Trump appeared as Han Solo, Sanders as Luke Skywalker, and both appeared as Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi. This allowed meme makers using Star Wars images to tell many more stories about the male candidates, depicting them as youthful warriors in battle, cowboys, wise advisors, and moral guides. The "Bernie Wan Kenobi" meme grew to encompass multiple functions and subgenres, the core of which was an emphasis on Bernie's quiet heroism, his unique knowledge of evil, and, most frequently, the fact that he is "our only hope." Bernie Sanders is cast in the widest variety of roles of any candidate in my sample. He appears as all the major superheroes that Trump features as, emphasizing heroic masculinity, but he also appears, among others, as the wise wizards Gandalf and Dumbledore, the mad genius Doc Brown, and the roguish Robin Hood. Sanders could be imagined in the highly physical alpha male characters central to Trump memes as well as in characters whose roles were the knowledgeable guide or the orchestrator behind the scene. Some character face swaps, like Doc Brown, focus on his physical appearance; however, most focused on his presumed ability to create a better world, either directly or in the role of mentor or guide (Penney 2017). Sanders is even able to cross into a celebratory cross-gendered appearance through a variant of the "Birdie Sanders" meme, which riffs on a campaign event during which a bird landed on Sanders's podium. This moment was taken up by Sanders's campaign as an iconic moment that implied the extent of his appeal and created a halo effect around the candidate. In popular culture-based memes, this translates into a comparison between Bernie Sanders and Snow White, whose goodness is represented by how she is beloved by woodland animals. Face-swap memes substitute Snow White's face for Sanders's, who is shown sitting among a group of adoring animals; a variant adds Sanders's signature hair and glasses to the animated character. Clinton, by contrast, does not appear as a Disney princess in these memes, perhaps because the problematic politics of these characters would be more clearly activated with a female candidate, or because the soft, youthful femininity inherent in a Disney princess would be a problematic match for Clinton's existing image (Campbell 1998; Pary-Giles 2014) and for the expectation that a female candidate would prove to have a strength and

competency not associated with these princesses.

[4.6] Sanders has proven to be particularly flexible in the eyes of meme creators; he appears as traditionally or hegemonically masculine superheroes, as older leaders, and even as a Disney princess. The mutability and variety of depictions of Sanders are consistent with Penney's (2017) observation that Sanders is a blank slate for his fans because he does not talk about himself and is considered by some to be a "known unknown." His political message is relatively clear and forceful, but the image of the man himself proves to have a good deal of space for fans to write on. This is not simply a matter of fan enthusiasm or creativity. Rather, it points to the greater diversity of heroic masculinities available in the pop culture lexicon that may be seen as compatible with political leadership and with male candidates, who may culturally come with some presumed leadership attributes and who may be able to more readily subvert expectations. This pattern parallels what Moody-Ramirez and Church (2019) find more broadly in Facebook presidential candidates' meme groups. Images of Hillary Clinton appear to be more univocal, presenting her in a narrower number of ways than the images of Donald Trump presented him. The smaller number of positive archetypes for women in media may synergize with and enhance narrower images of women and women candidates more broadly.

[4.7] How a single media text's vocabulary is deployed to frame multiple candidates at once can demonstrate not only the ways in which the memetic discourse draws on a text's lexicon but also the ways in which they are limited; characters in the text can become problematically fixed in ways that characterize candidates in relation to one another. For example, while all three candidates sometimes appeared as the Joker from the Batman franchise, when one or more Batman character was in the meme, Donald Trump was almost always depicted as the Joker. Indeed, Trump became connected enough to the Joker that Mark Hamill began reading Donald Trump tweets as the Joker, a role he previously played on *Batman the Animated Series* (1992–94). So although Hillary Clinton appears multiple times as the Joker in my sample (and Bernie does so at least once), when paired with Trump, these candidates are recast. Because the Joker's nemesis is the hypermasculine Batman, this role invariably went to Sanders when he appeared with either Trump, or Trump and Clinton. Although meme creators were able to imagine Clinton as a male character in the world of Batman, when she appeared in a Batman-themed meme with Trump, she appeared as the villain Two-Face, not Batman himself. This fits into a pattern in which Clinton cannot be imagined as a male hero but rather must be depicted as a male villain, suggesting that the masculinization of a female candidate is in itself suspect. Wiggins (2017) features two variants of these memes, which he collected from Bernie Sanders's Dank Meme Stash. Notably, only one features Sanders. The other focuses on the often repeated model of Clinton as Two-Face and Trump as the Joker, with "Choose" typed beneath them. Memes and popular culture archetypes both rely on shorthand to communicate their messages. In this case, Trump is associated with instability and a desire for destruction, while Clinton is associated with duplicity. When present, Sanders becomes the hero. Arguably, this negative meme of Clinton is more powerful when applied to Clinton than Trump because it echoes cultural discourses surrounding her emails and historical news frames, thereby treating her as inauthentic and duplicitous (Parry-Giles 2014). Like Palpatine, whom Clinton also appears as, Two-Face is a man who appears righteous, but he is twisted by fate and desire for power until he becomes an untrustworthy villain. Popular characters are here used as shorthand for a set of negative traits that critics seek to attribute to a character. They do so not only directly but also relationally. We are asked to either side with Sanders (the only hero), or to evaluate whether the Joker or Two-Face is the bigger threat.

[4.8] A similar dynamic is at play in Star Wars memes. Here Sanders's strong association with Obi-Wan Kenobi affects the roles the other characters appear to play. Bernie Wan Kenobi is shown fighting Donald/Jabba the Hutt, Donald/Darth Vader, and even Kylo Ren. The last is notable because Kylo Ren and Obi-Wan Kenobi do not fight on screen—and cannot in the canon's timeline. Bernie as Obi-Wan Kenobi is therefore implicitly brought back from the dead to fight Trump, and to sideline or replace a female character, Rey, who could have filled this role. In the only image or video in my sample in which Clinton appears with Trump or Sanders in the context of Star Wars (a parody image called Shit Wars) in which she is not the villain, she appears as Leia in her slave costume, sexualizing her and choosing the moment in the series where Leia has the least power, while Trump appears as Jabba the Hutt and Sanders appears as Yoda wielding a light saber (figure 5). Despite the availability of Rey in the franchise's timeline, I was only able to locate one meme in which Clinton appears as Rey; in this case, she is seen running away alongside Obama and BB-8; she is not presented in the context of her leadership potential. Both Rey's age and the relative newness of the character contribute to the dearth of her use in Clinton memes, as does Rey's existence in a different era from Kenobi, Vader, and Jabba the Hutt (key figures for her competitors). The Star Wars lexicon has a limited but increasing number of female figures for identification, while its classic vocabulary provides ample opportunities to place men into the roles of hero or villain. The appearance of Sanders as several potential heroes battling Trump in multiple villainous guises contrasts with the appearance of Clinton, who, when placed alongside them as a passive Leia, brings us back to the limits that the available media text's lexicon places on memetic discourse.



Figure 5. Composite image of two Star Wars-themed memes.

5. #Bernthewitch

[5.1] If we think of the available language of a media text (or media ecosystem) as having a vocabulary made up of characters, places, and objects with particular valences or accents (such as villain, hero, desired, and disgusting), we have to consider the gendered imbalances that exist not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of trends within the available lexicon. The dearth of salient pop culture images to draw on in memes supporting Clinton contrasts vividly with the negative images of older women available for anti-Hillary Clinton memes to draw on, particularly images of the woman as object—that is, women as witches and as grotesque. This ample vocabulary of "evil women" is supplemented by the willingness to depict Clinton as male characters when conveying a negative message, thereby reinforcing the association with villains as improperly performing gender (Griffin 2000; Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2009). A wide variety of characters from both classic and contemporary films, both male and female, are deployed in critiques of Clinton and frequently frame her as threateningly abject.

[5.2] In many cases, these character choices specifically activated existing tropes used to discipline women. A Bernie Sanders supporter posted a debate watch party on Sanders's website and titled it "Bern the Witch," and although the phrase received critique, it was widely taken up and used on merchandise like pins or shirts (sometimes completed with an image like Clinton riding a broom). This tag line makes explicit the animus behind the numerous images of Clinton as a pop culture witch. In my sample, Hillary Clinton frequently appears as *The Wizard of Oz's* (1939) Wicked Witch of the West. One variant synergizes Clinton with Birdie Sanders, depicting her as the classic witch with the caption, "I'll get you, Bernie Sanders, and your little bird too!" (figure 6). This meme, which appeared on a "Vote for Bernie in New York" page, casts Clinton not as a competitor (as the Captain America versus Iron Man memes did) but rather as the villain. Sanders in this formulation becomes the young innocent. Clinton also appears as several Disney witches, with her face swapped with that of the Evil Queen from *Snow White* (1938; both by meme makers and artists and illustrators), Maleficent (from the 1959 *Sleeping Beauty*) (figure 7), and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989). All three reinforce the association of Clinton with witches—a longtime trope used to discredit women and express fears of assertive or ambitious women (Miller 2018). However, they each activate a slightly different set of connotations and gender stereotypes. The Evil Queen is used to suggest vanity, and in some cases jealousy, toward Sanders, as in a case where she looks in the mirror and says, "What do you mean Bernie is the fairest?!", thereby activating the association of Sanders with the "pure" Snow White. In contrast, an *Animorphs* (1998–2000) meme shows Clinton transforming into Ursula, playing on associations of female witches with the grotesque and activating tropes that shame women for appearing less than thin and traditionally beautiful.



Figure 6. Hillary Clinton in greenface as *The Wizard of Oz*'s (1939) Wicked Witch of the West: "I'll get you, Bernie Sanders—and your little bird too!"



Figure 7. Hillary Clinton in greenface as Maleficent.

[5.3] A wide variety of memes depict Clinton as abject by exaggerating her slightly overweight body into an impossible grotesque. Ursula is one manifestation of this, but there is a veritable smorgasbord of memes in this theme resulting from a Photoshop challenge using a single unflattering photo of Clinton. This image was used to make memes featuring everyone from Mama June to Tommy Boy, as well as characters more common to political memes such as Emperor Palpatine, Jabba the Hutt (figure 8), and Doctor Evil. Each of these memetic connections associates Clinton with villainy or with the physically grotesque. Many of these images treat her failure to conform to the thin ideal of hegemonic femininity as an expression of greater transgressions. These images associate Clinton's lack of sexual appeal for some onlookers, or sexual threat as expressed in merchandise like the Hillary Nutcracker, with both evil and abjectness creating images designed to elicit disgust. These images police Clinton as an "unruly woman" (Rowe 1995)—a woman who refuses to make herself small or quiet, and who is in these images depicted as a grotesque excess as punishment. Indeed, after Clinton was perceived as comparing herself to Wonder Woman after election, memes appeared in response depicting her as a morbidly obese and scantily clad Wonder Woman, disciplining her in a way Trump never was for his comparisons to Batman. The extent to which these memes are about shaming women for their appearance and connecting appearance to trustworthiness is laid bare in a variant of the

plentiful Clinton-as-Palpatine memes. Such images depict Emperor Palpatine (this time without the traditional face swap) and the text, "A rare photo of Hillary Clinton without makeup." The use of Palpatine—a character who has become increasingly ugly through his interaction with the dark side of the force in the Star Wars universe—to undermine female politicians is seen throughout the 2016 campaign (figure 8), and it persists today, with Nancy Pelosi and Dianne Feinstein undergoing the comparison on Reddit. Similarly, female politicians Pelosi, Maxine Waters, and Kamala Harris all appear in memes as the Wicked Witch of the West.



Figure 8. Composite image of two memes illustrating the grotesque body via Star Wars memes: Hillary Clinton as Jabba the Hutt (top) and Palpatine (bottom).

[5.4] It is notable that many of these images depict Clinton as a male film character—something rarely seen in the positive memes featuring her. This is consistent with Smirnova's claims that "women seeking positions of authority in a patriarchy are often silenced or discounted by being deemed *too masculine*" (2018, 7). To some extent, Clinton's portrayal as these characters emphasizes an untrustworthy ambition in a way that defines her as both masculine and untrustworthy, even gluttonous, while also defining her as failing to perform a sufficiently appealing mode of femininity. Yet transformation of Clinton into the grotesque is as much a comment on her unruliness as a public figure who is perceived as aggressive and insufficiently feminine in her affect than it is her physical appearance. As Campbell (1998) demonstrates, Clinton's inability to sufficiently perform the rhetoric of soft femininity has engendered hate during her whole career. Many, like the images of Palpatine and witches, also activate existing frames of Clinton as inauthentic or conniving when she enters the public sphere (Parry-Giles 2014).

[5.5] The elements of disgust—both moral disgust and in some cases physical disgust—presented by these unappealing villains are also prevalently used in negative memes featuring Donald Trump. Trump, like Clinton, appears as Palpatine and additionally as Darth Vader, Doctor Evil, Gollum, and, particularly frequently, Jabba the Hutt. Election memes more broadly frequently draw on Trump's physical appearance (Moody-Ramirez and Church 2019), and indeed some variants of "Darth Vader as Trump" memes use Trump's signature hair, a gesture that serves to emasculate Trump by emphasizing his flabbiness or his age in ways that undermine his virility. This can vary by meme. Some memes featuring Trump as Jabba simply focus on him as disgusting in appearance, while others launch an explicit critique of his treatment of women. Smirnova (2018) observes how many of the memes that purportedly critique Trump focus on him as insufficiently masculine (emphasizing his vanity or implied subservience to Putin), noting that although these memes may attempt to undermine Trump, they do so by suggesting that he fails the standard of hegemonic masculinity associated with the presidency, thereby simultaneously reinforcing this patriarchal norm. Whether it is female politicians depicted as the Wicked Witch of the West, disciplining ambitious women as unappealingly aggressive and insufficiently feminine, or Trump appearing as the flabby and weak Jabba the Hutt, the characters used (and arguably the characters available) to represent villainy discipline both women and men through the idealization of hegemonic masculinity.

6. Heading to Hogwarts

[6.1] Within a single case study, such as the use of Harry Potter in political memes, several of the issues discussed above come into play: the available lexicon of the media texts, the impact that the other candidates' connections to specific characteristics have in fixing meanings related to a single text, and the ample tradition of memorable and threatening female villains. All three attributes may be seen in one of the most enduring images of the campaign: Hillary Clinton as the Harry Potter villain Dolores Umbridge, a McCarthyesque bureaucrat who works to undermine the great Dumbledore (typically cast as Bernie Sanders in memes) and who seeks to strip away the rights and pleasures of the youth of Hogwarts. Few media texts have the widespread salience and diverse fandom, particularly among millennials, that Harry Potter has achieved, so it is unsurprising that some of the most persistent media-centered memes of the 2016 election derive from this media text. In contrast to the fluidity that male characters from the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Star Wars enjoy, face-swap memes in the Harry Potter universe are generally relatively fixed.

[6.2] This fixity is particularly problematic in the equation of Clinton and Umbridge. Unlike Clinton's appearances as the Wicked Witch of the West, which involves significant distortion, there is little alteration of Clinton's appearance when she appears as Umbridge. Similarities in age, size, hair length, and use of pink in their wardrobe are apparently sufficient to fix the association of Clinton with Umbridge in memes (figure 9). This representation is particularly powerful because it activates both existing negative images of women as scolds, who stand in the way of both fun and heroics, and more insidious negative images of Clinton herself as a protofascist in disguise. The frequency with which this meme is used while eschewing other Harry Potter characters like Hermione, who appear to be too youthful, is telling. The size of a media text's lexicon of female characters is insufficient to allow for positive memetic use; the ages and appearances of female characters also become key in determining both the availability of positive and negative images for use in memes and the ways they may be fixed.



Figure 9. Harry Potter meme showing Bernie Sanders as Dumbledore, Hillary Clinton as Umbridge, Donald Trump as Voldemort, and Ted Cruz as Snape.

[6.3] This depiction is particularly sticky because two of Clinton's fellow presidential candidates are also firmly cast as Harry Potter characters in a large number of memes: Donald Trump as Voldemort and Bernie Sanders as Dumbledore (Wilson 2016). As noted in the case of Star Wars, representations of these candidates as each of these characters refer to one another both explicitly and implicitly, thereby reinforcing the entire constellation of references. In the Harry Potter universe, Donald Trump represents the unbridled racist evil of Voldemort, Bernie Sanders the wise and steadfast heroism of Albus Dumbledore (the more complex reading of Dumbledore as secretive and exploiting his young charges is often elided here), and Hillary Clinton the bureaucratic evil that for many may hit closer to home. Here again Clinton is cast as a witch and as untrustworthy; further, she is used in relation to two other popular culture characters in a way that supports two well-worn premises. First, which of these evils do you prefer, Voldemort or Umbridge, Two-Face or Joker? And second, once again, only Bernie Sanders (that old white guy) can save the day.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] Jeffrey Jones observes that in political discourse, "people talk *with* television, using its narratives as part of how the world is to be understood" (2010, 30). Political memes help make this dynamic of "talking with" media visible for analysis. However, they also demand that we consider the limitations of the language that media makes available for us to talk with and the way in which the inequities and injustices of old media are then replicated in new media. In a reflection on the digital dimension of the 2016 election of Donald Trump, Ben Schreckinger (2017) observes, "Veterans of the Great Meme War brag that they won the election for Trump." Although Schreckinger casts doubt on these claims, scholars have suggested that memes are significant. Wiggins argues that the memes on Bernie Sanders's Dank Meme Stash provide a clearer image of "the peculiarity of vitriol directed at Hillary Clinton and largely its absence about Trump" (2017, 203). Moody-Ramirez and Church (2019) trace scholarship demonstrating that memes can "change public opinion and promote social movements."

[7.2] Memes are a lingua franca used to discuss politics online, and popular culture is one of the chief lexicons used in their creation. Although the framing of candidates by political fans and antifans is important to shaping social media discourses like memes (Kohlemainen 2017), we must not underestimate the impact the contours of the popular media landscape have on these discourses. The history of popular entertainment media, particularly in regard to the genres most associated with fandom, is one that has long perpetuated inequities between the depictions of men and women as leaders—or indeed has depicted them at all. When women are shown as heroes, they are frequently the exception, not the rule. While in the last decade Sanders and Trump fans have been able to choose from over ten male superheroes who had led their own films, Clinton fans had only the promise that Wonder Woman was coming out soon. Not only are the available images of men and women that memes may draw from imbalanced but they also provide historical stereotypes of women, like the threatening witch. The relationships between characters within a text, which often include many heroic and villainous male characters and scant female characters (particularly older female characters), function to further delimit the ways in which women can be depicted, particularly given the cultural baggage these characters hold. The equation of women in power with villainy, and how this compromises the popular culture lexicon, is particularly influential. The power of this cultural trope is evident in the evolution of one of the few figures used in positive memes about Hillary Clinton: Danaerys Targaryen. While depicted positively in *Game of Thrones* at the time of the 2016 election, this icon of female leadership is transformed by the end of the series into a brutal, unstable tyrant.

[7.3] The 2016 election is now a memory, but as of this writing, the 2020 election is heating up, and already two of the initial slate of female candidates, Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris (who withdrew on December 3, 2019), have been depicted as witches at least once. As for their supporters? Well, we'll always have Wonder Woman (figure 10).

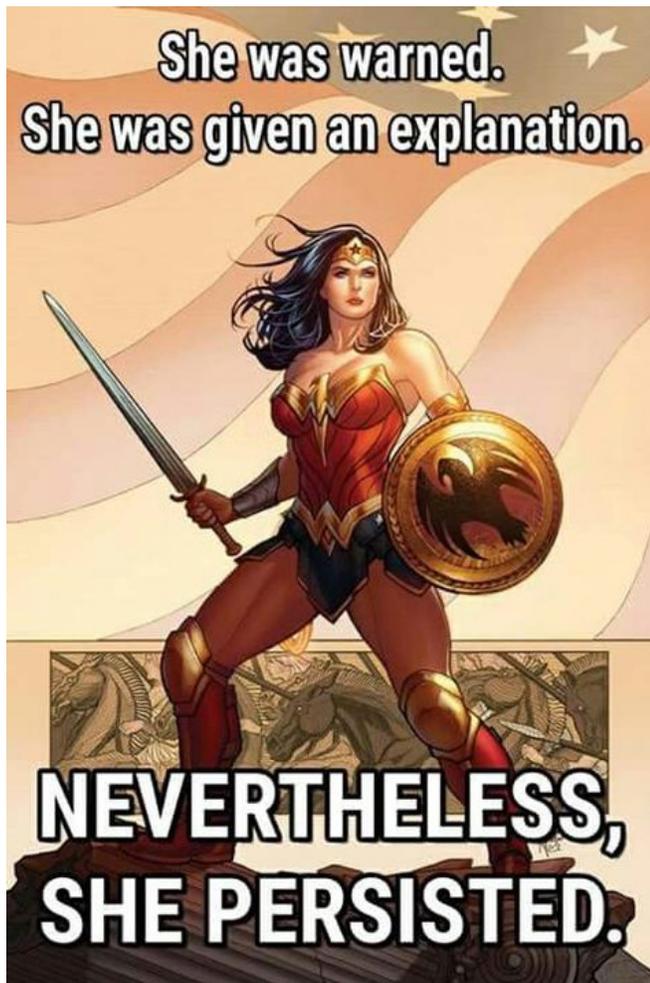


Figure 10. Wonder Woman meme.

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Theory

Faster, higher, stronger: Sports fan activism and mediatized political play in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games

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[0.1] Abstract—In an analysis of sports fans activism and theoretical approaches to understand experiences of mediatized political play, we address groups of activists who protest using fan resources and repertoires. We focus on some episodes of protests performed by casual sports fans against the then-acting Brazilian president Michel Temer during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. We also further discuss the category of fan when applied to sports and political fandoms, considering the disputes and competition background for which they are not only fans but also rooters.

[0.2] Keywords—2016 Rio Olympic Games; Mediatization; Political play; Sports fans

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1. Introduction

[1.1] On August 6, 2016, a group of twelve individuals was banned from Governador Magalhães Pinto Stadium, popularly known as Mineirão, during a women's soccer match between the United States and France. Nine of these individuals were wearing T-shirts with a single letter stamped on each shirt. Together, the shirts composed the phrase "Fora Temer" (or "Out Temer"). Some carried posters with messages such as "Come Back Democracy" (Betim 2016) (figures 1 and 2). Political pamphlets or mosaics of this nature and with similar content were displayed in various competition venues throughout the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. On the same day, during the archery finals in the Sambodrome of Rio de Janeiro, where carnival samba schools usually parade, a sports fan was removed from the bleachers

by National Security Forces agents, after supposedly yelling the very same "Fora Temer" expression during a moment of required silence (Romero 2016). Similar cases were reported on social media and by alternative media. In all these episodes, the issue of freedom of expression was put into focus, although it was generally minimized by mainstream media with a reference to an International Olympic Committee (IOC) directive prohibiting political and religious demonstrations at the Games, the so-called "Rule No. 50." The protests, of course, relied on the visibility of media broadcasts to audiences around the world.



Figure 1. Group of sports fans protesting against the then-acting president Michel Temer during a women's soccer match in Rio 2016. The individual letters on each shirt combine to create the phrase "Out Temer." Source: Congresso em foco. Photograph taken by Mãdia Ninja, 2016.



Figure 2. The same group of sports fans raising another protest phrase, this time in English: "Come Back Democracy," in reference to what has been claimed by some sectors to be a parliamentary coup that took place in Brazil against president Dilma Rousseff. Source: El País Brasil. Photograph taken by Mãdia Ninja, 2016.

[1.2] In the field of Social and Human Sciences, research that emphasizes the relationship between sports and politics, in its most varied aspects, has been growing significantly in the last fifteen years. The relationship between sports and politics, especially the uses of sports by authoritarian regimes and also the role of sports in the fabrication of a national or collective identity (Melo et al., 2013), has gained prominence. Similarly, literature on feminist sports activism and gender inequalities (Cooky 2017), black athletes' participation in politics (Marston 2017; Edwards 2017), and other topics have grown in importance. Despite that fact, little or nothing is being produced on the relation of sports fans and politics, especially in respect to the Olympic Games. The analyses remain focused either on national and collective identities or on athletes' activism. Organized sports fandoms is also a topic of discussion (see Hollanda 2017), but it is usually restricted to media or violence studies. Although it is possible to map a few studies on political activism covering organized

soccer fans in stadiums (Hollanda and Florenzano 2019), when it comes to unorganized or casual fans, it is hard to find other works.

[1.3] The main concern of this essay is to address this literature gap, presenting a theoretical approach to sports fandoms' politicization in the context of mega events such as the Olympic Games. Mega events are events of huge dimensions, like sports events (World Cup, Olympic Games, Pan American Games), music festivals (Woodstock, Lollapalooza, Coachella), or religious events (World Youth Journey), which generally imply logistical expectations, economic and social changes, infrastructural legacies for the hosts, and media attention (Müller 2015). Having recently experienced hosting sports mega events, emerging countries (like Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa) have been the stage for several protests and demonstrations against corruption, social inequalities, and gentrification of urban spaces. Therefore, these countries may be seen as the natural empirical laboratory for the debate on sports and fan activism.

[1.4] The remarkable process of commodification of the Olympics began more than four decades ago during the management of Juan Antonio Samaranch, then head of the IOC (Boykoff 2011), in response to 1968 black athletes' protests and 1972 terrorist attacks. The organization not only worked to increase the value of the Olympic brand, which had the effect of raising the costs of organizing the games, but also favored nondiscretionary acts by local authorities in the expectation of containing the combination considered to be pernicious between politics and sports. In this way, as a major stage for visibility and political activism, the Olympic Games are the concern of a significant number of recent studies on the theme (Boykoff 2017; Hong and Zhouxiang 2012; Cha 2010; Lenskyj 2017; Henderson 2009; O'Bonsawin 2015). But, once again, the majority of these studies emphasize athletes' activism. At best, some of them, especially the ones that examine the 2008 Beijing and 2012 London Olympic Games, center their attention on isolated protests led by activists representing social movements during the games, but none of them consider protests performed by ordinary citizens inside sports venues.

[1.5] Here, facing a scenario of politicizing sports events (Vimieiro and Maia 2017), we intend to discuss cases of protests against then-acting president Michel Temer during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, as well as to understand how the IOC and other entities evaluate political manifestations that occur during the Games. Our main hypothesis is that the protests in Brazil in 2016 were characterized mostly as mediatized demonstrations, performed by individuals or small groups, always embodying a political performative play.

[1.6] Before these considerations, the present paper aims to (1) understand how sports fans use resources from sports fandoms to perform political claims, (2) infer how political activists have been attentive to how they can strategically appropriate the logic of media in sports mega events to capture the awareness of civil society and political authorities, and (3) analyze how these claims have been treated, confronted, or silenced by the mainstream media, sports authorities, and government agents. We are particularly interested in observing how it is possible to understand the scenario of political protests during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games from the perspective of mediatization of politics; how the media ecosystem treats these episodes; in what sense the protests during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games are

similar to or different from other political demonstrations; and, last but not least, what are the internal contradictions present in the speech of Olympic committees and public authorities regarding the relationship between sports and politics according to the ideals of Olympism.

[1.7] To pursue these objectives, we have undertaken an exploratory research strategy that combines a historical mapping of protests at stadiums and venues of sports competition, as well as news coverage and social media about the 2016 episodes. Though one cannot speak on political fandoms in a strict sense, the casual sports fans we analyze here are undeniably using their condition as fans to politicize some issues and arenas. We are aware that Olympics spectators do not necessarily fit an understanding of fan behavior, as they generally do not belong to a particular sports fandom. Despite that fact, protests like the ones presented above clearly appropriate a sports fandom repertoire for rooting together, using uniforms, bringing banners, and shouting chants and command words. Furthermore, when it comes to events such as the Olympics or World Cup, we need to reconceptualize the usual understanding of fandoms, in order to include national fandoms joined by casual fans in special circumstances. In Brazil, for instance, it is very common that even people who do not like soccer become fans only during the World Cup. Additionally, these fans do not fit adequately under a traditional political protestor label, for they are not militant nor do they perform their demonstrations in more than a casual behavior while watching the games — which is a distinct change from protestors raiding the field during soccer matches as did Pussy Riot members in the 2018 Russia World Cup finals. This paper focuses its discussion on this casual sports fan activism, without forgetting that there may be plenty of other sports fan activism resources and repertoires.

[1.8] The article is divided into five topics from this introduction. In the first one, we begin with a review on the literature that deals with the relations between sports and politics, from the treatment of sport as a component of national identities (Hobsbawm 1984; Sigoli and De Rose Jr. 2004) to its instrumentalization through public policies or even as a form of political propaganda (Drumond 2013). Next, we discuss political activism during the Olympic Games. Then, we focus on our theoretical framework, presenting three distinct vectors of this debate: the fandom, the political play, and the spectacle. Finally, we bring some contextualization to the 2016 Rio Olympic Games and to Brazilian demonstrations during the Games.

2. Sports and politics

[2.1] History, social sciences and communication have become invested with greater importance recently in the transdisciplinary interface of sports studies. This development is analyzed by Melo and Fortes (2010), who point out that despite the significant increase in investigations, sport still suffers from a lack of academic prestige.

[2.2] It is important to emphasize that in contrast to what different sports entities convey (and also with the understanding of common sense), sports and politics are broadly associated categories, from the construction of sports public policies to the political use of sports by governments and social movements. In this regard, Drumond (2013) reminds us

that there are many political regimes that have used sports as propaganda for their governments, the most commonly known being the Nazi German spectacle during the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games and the Soviet Union's intense investment in sports. Magalhães and Cordeiro (2016) analyze the Brazilian Military Dictatorship (1964–1985) and the uses that the regime made of sport, with one of the most famous episodes being the exploitation of the 1970 national soccer team as ad-boys of the dictatorship and the firing of coach João Saldanha, a communist party militant, on the eve of the World Cup, after he had reported torture and repression in the country.

[2.3] When it comes to sports studies, scholarly literature in Brazil is mainly concerned with soccer, generally understood as a tool of national identity and cohesion, and as an arena of social mobilization and political struggle. In this regard, there are various investigations concerning the importance of clubs, local and national teams, and events such as the World Cup as a kind of social party in Brazilian culture. Lately, a particular theme has grown in terms of research interest: organized fans and their relationships with the stigma of violent behavior, as well as spaces of sociability and for political action. Holanda's work (2017; and Melo 2012), for instance, has been dedicated to reflecting sports fandoms from an oral history perspective. He interviewed not only leaders of the fandoms but also state authorities that have been trying to control and monitor organized fans' activities, in order to reduce violent episodes. His study discusses the growth of these fandoms, their criminalization and stigmatization as violent groups, and state actions to prevent fights (Holanda and Reis 2014).

[2.4] Organized sports fandoms are an expensive subject for this paper. However, we do not want to deal with the subject of the stigma of violent behavior in this paper. As we will discuss later, Brazilian sports fandoms, especially within the context of soccer, have a specific meaning for organized fandoms. They are formal associations, sometimes even professional associations, that support their teams going to the stadiums, singing chants, using uniforms, and posing with large banners. Soccer clubs usually reserve some of the tickets for these fandoms. And some fandoms develop an intense rivalry with others. That's why most of the discussion on this subject by scholars and the media focus on violence (Holanda and Melo 2012). The mega event fan is distinct from the common organized sports fans—although members of organized fandoms can be present as part of the audience at the World Cup or Olympic Games as well, most of them are casual fans.

[2.5] Richard Giulianotti proposes to analyze four ideal types of sports fans: fanatics, followers, fans, and flâneurs. Analyzing the process of hypermarketing experienced in soccer in recent years, he argues that this dimension, associated with spectacularization, impacts the ways in which fans cheer and also the identity formation of new types of sports fans. These categories do not account for precisely what we understand as the fan-activist or more specifically the fan-protester, the one who goes to the stadium not only to root for a team from a sporting point of view but also for a political cause. How is this fan different from the others? Our premise is that we can find expressions of sports fan-activism in each point on Giulianotti's typology, for we must analyze this matter using a double axis perspective, taking into consideration the fan engagement both in sports and in politics. Thus, the casual sports fan-activist is the one whose behavior is driven by a citizen-marketer permanent

practice (Penney 2017) without losing contact with a casual and episodic interest in sports entertainment. But are sports fans allowed to politically demonstrate? Doesn't politics defile sports somehow?

3. Sports and activism

[3.1] The 2016 Rio Olympic Games were not the first and will not be the last to become a showcase for articulated protest groups. In the 2012 London Olympic Games, for example, demonstrators played badminton in front of the main Adidas store in the city, a criticism of labor exploitation by the multinational, one of the sponsors of the mega event (Almeida 2012). In 2008, Tibet intensified its protests against annexation to China on the eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (Melo 2008; Cha 2010). The 2016 Rio Olympic Games, however, brought an unusual component to these demonstrations: the fans themselves. The protests mobilized the public present at the bleachers and were performed by fans against the government.

[3.2] If we think on the history of political activism in the Olympics, athletes have long played an important role as individual or group demonstrators. Since its early decades, competitors have used the opportunity provided by the presence of spectators to express themselves politically about specific causes. One of the first protests conducted by athletes dates from the 1906 Intercalary Olympics in Athens, an official competition that took place between the 1904 Saint Louis Olympics and the 1908 London Olympics. Irish long jumper Peter O'Connor gave the Olympic lap at the stadium carrying a green flag, referring to the colors of the republican movement that would proclaim Ireland's independence only ten years later. He had his record invalidated by the English judges (Phelan 2014).

[3.3] O'Bonsawin (2015) argues that as far as demands from interest groups and political minorities are concerned, the Olympic movement reacts slowly: "The actions of marginalized athletes who contest ongoing state violence and oppression are denounced and rejected as political and racial propaganda" (215). Analyzing the episode involving American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos, famous for the symbolic gesture on the podium with closed gloved fists at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games, and putting it side by side with the case of Australian boxer Damien Hooper, who in 2012 was prevented by the Australian Olympic Committee from fighting with a uniform bearing the aboriginal flag, the author notes that little or nothing advanced with respect to subsequent denials the expression of pride by indigenous identities and ethnic minorities in Olympic sports. The conclusion is precisely the same reached by Simon Henderson (2009), after analyzing the banning of South Africa under the Apartheid regime of the Olympics until 1992 in Barcelona.

[3.4] One can also easily discover similar responses to nation-states conflicts in previous editions of the Olympics, which makes it evident that the IOC does not work to prevent these political actions with the same rules applied to athletes or the public. Over the last five decades, the Olympic Games have experienced different boycotts and staged numerous demonstrations. From the most known cases of political retaliation during the Cold War—the refusal of 60 countries to participate in the 1980 Moscow Games and the reprisal of the Soviet bloc at the 1984 Los Angeles Games, the Black September in Munich in 1972—

international conflicts have always been an intrinsic part of the Olympic sports dynamics, in fact, since their origin, tied to national identities in competition.

[3.5] As Boykoff (2011) recalls, the adoption of the term "human dignity" rather than "human rights" as the ultimate goal of a campaign to promote sports is revealing of a marked conservatism in IOC positions. Cha (2010, 2373) classifies this kind of measure a "de-politicizing effort" in the Olympic Games, recalling Beijing's efforts to "quiet" all domestic political protests by imprisoning various activists. After a torch tour disturbed by the international community, with protests led by actress and UNICEF ambassador Mia Farrow, with the participation of Steven Spielberg, Brad Pitt, and Angelina Jolie, the pressure for a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was only reduced when the Olympic torch came to China that year. The response came in the form of generalized boycotts and a wave of nationalism among the Chinese (Hong and Zhouxiang 2012).

[3.6] In London in 2012, protests remained centered around demands for environmental and economic sustainability of Olympic equipment and the so-called Olympic legacy (Boykoff, 2017, 10–11). Something similar happened in the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games, which also saw demands for sustainability, when "safe spaces for dissent" were set up in armed tents in the Olympic Village and an alternative media coverage with independent social media distribution emerged (Boykoff 2011, 53).

[3.7] In Brazil, there were several reports of solo demonstrators or small groups, friends and family, who appeared in stadiums as fan-activists. The actions were punctual and discreet, performed nonviolently and generally assuming a quasiludic character, involving the bearing of posters, T-shirts, and flags that denounced Dilma Rousseff's impeachment as a coup to Brazilian democracy. The performances were filmed and photographed not only by the participants themselves but also by the media, especially those belonging to an alternative media ecosystem, such as the collective Mídia Ninja. Mainstream media carefully managed to avoid the scenes. The demonstrators, on the other hand, wanted to cause discomfort to editors of live images, and consequently to reach greater public visibility. It's very common, for instance, that soccer broadcasts focus on fans partying in the bleachers, and it became a mediatized strategy for some groups to carry posters with compliments and greetings to sports speakers in order to catch their attention. These posters turned in a kind of memetic behavior of Brazilian sports fans, broadly recognized by funny expressions like "filma nós galvão" (film us galvão)—a reference to nationwide play-by-play Globo Network announcer Galvão Bueno.

[3.8] Even before the Olympics, very similar tactics were being used by sports fans at the stadiums, especially in soccer matches. Using the typical features of organized fandoms, such as posters and flags, fan-activists demarcated the political territory of the bleachers and sought media attention through connective actions (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Highfield 2016).

4. Sports (fans) activism

[4.1] At least one different element distinguishes the 2016 Rio Olympic Games from the

previous experiences with protests in mega events, as in these Games the actor of the protest was the fan. Two other factors combined with this one were fundamental to the social mobilization atmosphere during the games: the political playing and the spectacle of mediatization, evoking fan culture.

[4.2] Protesters were ordinary spectators of the event, there to watch the games while protesting, and they protested using the usual resources and repertoires of sports fandom, like carrying flags and posters or combining uniforms, booing, and singing together cheerleading songs. Sports fans in Brazil are used to evoking these repertoires in order to support their teams and to call attention not only from the rivals but also from the media. So, they shout and sing louder, they bring giant flags to stadiums, they provoke players and also speakers themselves. In 2010, for instance, speaker Galvão Bueno was in the center of one of these jokes. During the opening ceremony of the South Africa World Cup, Bueno, who was commenting the ceremony for Globo Network, was accused of too much chattering. On Twitter, Brazilian fans started to post messages with the hashtag #calabocagalvão, which means #shutupgalvão, a Portuguese expression. Many foreigners started to ask themselves what the phrase stands for. One humorous blogger then created a prank explaining that #calabocagalvão was supposed to be a campaign for saving "Galvão birds" of extinction, and every tweet with that hashtag would donate one dollar for nongovernmental organizations concerned with the campaign. Described by Heather Horst (2011) as the world's biggest in-joke, the cyberprank was reported by the *New York Times* (Dwyer 2010) and is well-documented even in the Wikipedia entry for Galvão Bueno in English.

[4.3] This mode of rooting dates back to the 1940s, when informal groups of fans started to use fireworks and large flags for celebrations at the bleachers. Around the 1960s, most of these groups had already become formal organizations, known as *torcidas organizadas* (organized rooters). So, Fluminense Football Club has the Young Flu, Flamengo is represented with Raça Rubro-Negra ("Red and Black Race," in allusion to the club colors) and Torcida Jovem Fla ("Young Rooters Fla," in a free translation). Corinthians has the Gaviões da Fiel ("Faithful Hawks"), Palmeiras has the Mancha Verde ("Green Spot"), Cruzeiro has the Máfia Azul ("Blue Mafia"), Atlético Mineiro has the Galoucura ("Mad Roosters," which refers to the team mascot), and many others. Some of them are so much consolidated that they conduct social campaigns, get benefits from the clubs like free tickets, and had reserved places in the bleachers. A small portion even evolved to bigger and independent initiatives like samba schools, such as Gaviões da Fiel and Mancha Verde in São Paulo Carnival.

[4.4] Other organized sports fandoms like the *barras bravas* in Argentina, the *porras* in Mexico, and the ultras in Europe and Africa are also well known for similar behaviors, although the *torcidas organizadas* in Brazil not only use giant flags and sing all the time using musical instruments but also have humorous playing as an element of distinction. Before FIFA imposed a set of guidelines for the equipment (like security and comfort norms for the arenas), Brazilian stadiums had a popular space known as the Geral (General), where popular tickets would allow poor people to watch the matches with a direct (not superior) field view, and lots of sports fans were costumed like Superman, Bin Laden, Lula, and so on.

[4.5] All these elements were somehow appropriated in political protests performed at the bleachers by sports fans during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. To better understand what sports fan activism means in Brazil, it's absolutely necessary to recover three distinct aspects of its ritualized practice: the self-recognition of the subjects as rooters instead of fans, their role as casual and humorous protesters, and their desire for media promotion. Below, we discuss each of these elements in detail, calling attention to how these three vectors can constitute a framework for analyzing this practice.

[4.6] Fans or rooters? The term "fan" is rarely employed in Brazil to designate the sports fan. Although the term was originally coined to refer to sports fans in the late nineteenth century (Curi 2010), the word deriving from a contraction of the Latin *fanaticus*—that or the one who is possessed or has been abducted by a deity or a demon; who had divine inspiration; or that belongs to a temple or a sect—there's no such use in Brazil. Instead, when it comes to sports, we usually refer to *torcedores* (rooters). This difference may help us realize that what we generally call political fandoms is a theoretical abstraction and does not find parallel in self-recognized discourses of sports fan-activism. Native categories like rooters thus can better express the political behavior of some social groups.

[4.7] Cultural studies (Freire Filho 2007; Jenson 1992) helped to end the pejorative connotation, interpreted as a social pathology or deviant behavior. This new understanding allows the category to draw on other fields of knowledge. Media and democracy studies, for instance, have expressed greater interest in the last years in the identification of political fandoms (Parikh 2012; Sandvoss 2013; Brough and Shrestova 2012).

[4.8] Sandvoss (2013, 264) argues that the enthusiasm about politics is similar to the way sports fans cheer for their teams. In both cases, there is an identity affiliation and a discursive competition between rival groups. One could say that rather than the identification with the party (or the team), there is a sense of belonging and an identification with the fandom itself, even ideologically (266), following the conception of homophilic audiences of Dvir-Gvirsman (2017). In addition, Sandvoss also draws attention to discourse anchored in sports metaphors in the political universe, especially the framing of electoral running, to which some authors refer as "horse-racing" or "game-frame" (264). The celebration of victory or disappointment over the failure of a candidate mirrors, to a large extent, the behavior of other fans, given the deep affective investment (265; see also Papacharissi 2014). It is the moment when the virtues or merits of candidates are exalted.

[4.9] Political fandoms articulate, therefore, performances of taste and elements of distinction in the same manner as do other fandoms. The similarities between political fans and sports fans are so remarkable that activists (or enthusiasts) should recognize themselves as fans, suggests Sandvoss (2013, 258). But this would be, somehow, another artificial theoretical construction, for the fan presupposes an idol.

[4.10] Commenting on the rapprochement between popular culture and politics, Van Zoonen (2005, 56) states that the exercise of our preferences is increasingly a fundamental component of entertainment, especially in reality shows that invite viewers to elect participants to follow in the game. It is, at the same time, a practice that mixes the elective

character, the competition, and the fandoms. Political fans suffer from the common perception that politics should form citizens, whereas entertainment would only form fans. On the one hand, we would have a cognitive critique, and, on the other hand, only an affective appreciation (56).

[4.11] But the organization of cultural fandoms is, in many ways, similar to how party politics itself is organized. Recovering the typology developed by Abercrombie and Longhurst in 1998, Van Zoonen (2005, 60) argues that one can capture the mass-mediated politics in a scale of involvement degrees, in which there are: (1) the voters as fans, who are particularly attracted to a party or a candidate and have relatively casual involvement with politics; (2) campaign volunteers as "cultists," who constitute more organized networks and often meet at conventions; and (3) partisan representatives as "enthusiasts," who are guided by activities and processes, not by individuals or institutions. Similarly, we could establish comparisons with casual sports fans, organized rooters, and associate members of sport clubs.

[4.12] According to Van Zoonen (2005, 64), the fandom "is built on psychological mechanisms that are relevant to political involvement: they relate to the realm of fantasy and imagination on the one hand, and to emotional processes on the other," as mediators in the conformation of what Papacharissi (2014) describes as "affective publics." These two components are consistent with Street's (1997) perspective that politics operates through the constitution of groups and communities "around which people establish their similarities and differences (their identities), communities that exist in the memory and in the passage of time" (39).

[4.13] The metaphor of the rooter, however, makes explicit the expectation developed, imagined, or inculcated around the success of its object of admiration. While the fan is characterized as someone who follows or venerates an idol, the rooter expects to celebrate the victory over his equals; he mobilizes himself for competition, and this is why he must wield the biggest flag, he must shout louder, he must call more attention than others and support his team better.

[4.14] The game-frame is inherently connected to the sports fan-activism. Differently from other fandom practices, the element of agon, conflict (as well as the *ludus*, i.e., play, as we will see below), is remarkably present in sports fandoms. Though we are here concerned with casual fans, these actions performed in the stadiums are clearly driven by a clear purpose and a competitive attitude, ready to rhetorically declare victory over the target in a media battle.

[4.15] For calling attention to these distinctions, we want to highlight how political activists must be understood in a pragmatic sense not a normative one, that is, in light of ritualistic practices performed and self-recognized by their own. Sports fan activism may be better analyzed from this perspective, if we cautiously observe its particularities in relation to other fan-activist dynamics.

[4.16] If agon is one recurring element of sports fandom, *ludus*, play, is another intrinsic

element in this universe. Sports fan-activism cannot be fully understood if we do not call attention to its ludic behavior. Even in more radical actions, like field invasions, play is evident.

[4.17] The conception of political play was introduced in literature by W. L. Bennett in 1979 in his seminal essay, which argues that "it is tempting to relegate play to the realm of games, sports and children's activities" (331), but play may occur in the context of other social and age groups and in other interaction practices such as sex play or intellectual play. The political play, he says, is one that questions the basis of authority or the use of force, which redefines or problematizes issues, which guides the public agenda or creates new rules to guide it (336). It is, in short, a device most often used as a form of political action by repressed or alienated groups, which normally lack consistent organizational structures to sustain an engaged persistent action.

[4.18] According to Bennett (1979), political play may present itself as a strike, a series of protests or actions undertaken by solidarity networks. It usually consists of a dynamic that takes shape in a playful transformation of politics. Chagas (2017) sought to establish some principles for a differentiation between the readings of politics as game and politics as play. The fundamental point of this distinction lies in the strategic approach of politics in the former, as opposed to an understanding of the political scene from drama and the performance of its actors in the latter. The constant alternation between these two perspectives, once again, can be found in the world of politics as much as in sports.

[4.1] However, in order to understand the meaning of political play, we must focus our discussion on four of its fundamental components: (1) the political aspect of the play, (2) its influence on reality, (3) its public character, and (4) the desired results. These four elements make up the framework by which play is established.

[4.20] As to the political aspect of play, we may borrow Jasper's expression on the "surreptitious resistance" of social movements to call attention to play as the "weapon of the weak" that is "used with the public in mind" (2014, 37). Read as staged performance, play does not necessarily constitute a social movement, especially if we take into account the casual involvement of its actors. Even so, the play uses typical routines of protests undertaken by social movements when searching for windows of opportunity. As Bennett recalls, however, both sides need to agree on performance, since the play involves risks, including the integrity of the actors (1979, 336).

[4.21] As to its influence on reality, Bennett (1979, 335) asserts that political play, like other forms of play, can be seen as fantasy (performed by a single actor) or behavior (inscribed in a social form). It may also emerge from a recreational context of leisure or as an eminently serious activity. It is very common to attribute to play a marginal character in relation to the political protest in its strict sense. This is due in large extent to a mechanism of co-optation introduced by the institutionalization of politics in relation to conflict, as described by Miguel (2015, 39–40). In this sense, political play is more often than not a threshold experience of provocation, which is intended to test the frontiers of obedience, and is the last and most ingenious step before violent action. This brings us to the question posed by Street

(1997, 27) about the conversion of popular culture into a political subject. As he argues, in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, it is precisely when one urges the control of political expression that it is itself politicized.

[4.22] As to its public character, political play requires socially planned efforts, even when it encompasses the merely casual involvement of its actors. It also operates in situational contexts, not sustaining for long if not as repeated tactical intervention. In political play, the actors' involvement is unstable, uncertain, discrepant, and casual. In addition, this involvement may fluctuate on a scale from mere association to a collective agenda (like in click-activism) to a private manifestation of nonconformity and grievance, as in the case of boycotts in fan-activism (Brough and Shresthova 2012). The actors' involvement ultimately ends in resuming the effects of the action, since, as Bennett (1979) warned, to be read as a political behavior resulting in direct action on reality, play needs to garner players.

[4.23] And, finally, as to the desired results, play is tactical, directed to politicize an issue. Thus, in politics, as in sports, play is performed for an audience, one that gives it meaning. This implies that in most cases—such as booing politicians at stadiums or wearing costumes and carrying posters with funny messages expecting to be filmed—actions are not only socially mediated but also mediatized.

[4.24] The final vertex of this framework relates to media participation. The political actions of sports fans generally aim to attract media attention and foster visibility for their claims. The concept of mediatization was introduced as a theoretical hypothesis in the 1980s by Kent Asp and was subsequently developed by the Nordic school which incorporated this research agenda (Hjarvard 2013; Strömbäck 2008; Strömbäck and Esser 2014; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). It proposes a conciliatory approach between theories of media effects and reception studies (Hjarvard 2013, 16–20).

[4.25] According to Strömbäck (2008, 229), politics has become mediated and mediatized. But the processes of mediation and mediatization are not equivalent. With strong inspiration from the perspective of framing effects, mediation theory presents media as the most important source of information and the main channel between representatives and represented (231; Bennett and Entman 2001). In this way, both public and elites create a dependence relationship with media, either to keep informed or to reach people.

[4.26] Unlike mediation, mediatization presupposes the incorporation of media logic into performed social activities (Strömbäck 2008; Hjarvard 2013). The logic of the media operates as "a frame of reference from which the media constructs the meaning of the events and personalities it reports" (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999, 247; see also Blumler 2015). Thus, the spectacularization of politics is one of its main effects, since the internalization of this logic contributes to broadening the power of the media to shape society, exerting control over both public opinion and political behavior (Hjarvard 2008; Strömbäck 2011).

[4.27] In short, mediation is a first stage of mediatization, according to Strömbäck and Esser (2014). Mediatization can also serve to stimulate political action since internalization of media logic also generates social expectations before political demonstrations. Donges and

Jarren (2014) show how nonformal political actors have been appropriating these routines, staging for cameras in mediatized political plays, such as the ones performed in sports venues. That's what Strömback (2011) defines as a "spiral of mediatization," an action that seeks an opportunity window to spawn similar ones.

[4.28] In the next section, we try to evidence all of these three aspects discussed above, using brief case studies that took place in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

5. Rio 2016 protests: Serious matters cannot taint the show

[5.1] In February 2018, Brazilian sports journalist Thiago Leifert—who happens to be also the current host of the reality show *Big Brother Brasil*—wrote a piece where he asks if "a soccer match [is] the right place for political demonstrations" and he himself answers "I don't think so." Concerned with the electoral year in Brazil, he said that the mixture of sports and politics is not a good one, and recalls the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Rio Olympic Games demonstrations. Saying that he doesn't appreciate that players "hack" an event such as a soccer match, he says "There's a lot of contaminated stuff out there. We need to immunize the little space we still have for fun" (2018). Leifert is by no means alone in his crusade.

[5.2] In June 2013, Brazil watched mass street demonstrations. Protests coincided with the FIFA Confederations Cup, considered a dress rehearsal for the World Cup, and were marked by severe police clashes outside the stadiums even during the final match. Then-FIFA president Joseph Blatter even called on protesters "to stop linking demonstrations to football" (Watts 2013; Withnall 2013). Despite Leifert's aspiration, the 2018 World Cup in Russia also saw political demonstrations when Pussy Riot punk members broke onto the field during the final match between France and Croatia in a much more radical protest against Putin's government. Broadcast television also emphasized Iranian women rooting for their team, remembering that in Iran they are not allowed to go to the stadiums. Some of them would also reprise Brazilian fans with posters with sayings like "Support Iranian Women to attend stadiums" (Villar 2018).

[5.3] Turning to the relationship between Olympism and politics, the IOC representatives, in their speeches and official documents, point out that these are isolated incidents and that the Olympic Games, understood as a moment of celebration between peoples, cannot be profaned by political disputes. This perspective is reinforced in the Olympic Charter (IOC 2016), a document that proposes to establish the general guidelines of the Games. In its second paragraph of Rule 50, the IOC states that no political manifestations or propaganda can be carried out in the equipment and spaces designated for competitions.

[5.4] But some contradictions are noted in a recent study by Drumond (2017), which calls attention to the incoherence present in the IOC's position in asserting itself as an apolitical entity. The researcher points out that the Olympic Games (and also the process of choosing host cities) dialogue directly with national representatives. In addition, we understand that, during the competitions, countries affirm their symbolic (or soft) power in the world.

[5.5] Beyond that, we must bear in mind that the IOC has more affiliated countries than the

UN itself. Citing the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, Drumond (2017, 6) states that at the opening ceremony, 207 national delegations marveled at Maracanã and, "Among these delegations, in addition to the new Olympic Refugee Team, 13 National Committees represented countries or territories with limited or dependent recognition, without international recognition." These data highlight the IOC's position in global geopolitics. The treatise, provided to the athletes and fans, however, moves in the opposite direction, with their individual manifestations restricted by the aseptic discourse in relation to politics, assumed in this case as the very origin of the contamination of the Olympic ideal.

[5.6] In the Olympic Charter (IOC 2016), the International Olympic Committee textually affirms that "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic venues or other areas." On the other hand, the fundamental principles of Olympism contained in the same document make explicit reference to respect and nondiscrimination of any kind, such as race, color, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political opinion, or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or any other status."

[5.7] The contradiction is also present in Brazilian Federal Law No. 13.284, promulgated on May 10, 2016, as one of the last acts of President Dilma Rousseff when she was still in office (she was removed from office on May 12, after the Senate voted to open the impeachment process against her). Article 28 of the above mentioned law establishes as a condition for the permanence in the official venues of the Games "not to bear or display signs, banners, symbols or other signs with offensive messages, of a racist or xenophobic nature or that encourage other forms of discrimination" (item IV) "not to use discriminatory, racist or xenophobic slogans" (V), and "not to use flags for purposes other than festive and friendly manifestations" (X), but at the same time states that it ensures "the constitutional right to freedom of expression and full freedom of opinion in defense of the dignity of the human person" (X).

[5.8] Both documents, the Olympic Charter and Brazilian Federal Law, were subject to intense discussion, especially during the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in August 2016, when demonstrators were banned from stadiums. Beyond that, the Federal Constitution of 1988 was also the subject of intense disputes over the limits of its actions regarding the defense of the rights of expression and political manifestation in the country.

[5.9] Between May 2016 and August 2016, Brazil faced its second impeachment process in less than 30 years. This time, an action fostered by an opposition party unsatisfied with the electoral result in 2014 together with other parties started a process with controversial accusations against president Dilma Rousseff. Ending with her definitive removal from office on August 31, the whole judgement was described by many as a parliamentary coup. Michel Temer, Rousseff's vice-president, inherited the presidency up to December 31, 2018. At the time of the 2016 Rio Games, Temer was the acting president of Brazil, with an approval rate of only 1 to 3 percent. He was then the main target of political protests at the stadiums, bringing together the ones opposed to impeachment and the ones simply opposed to all politicians.

[5.10] On August 3, one Olympic torch runner was arrested by police after lowering his pants and shouting "Fora Temer." During the opening ceremony, Temer was massively booed, but broadcast television managed to hide the public demonstration in an attempt to remedy (or remediate) the circumstances. Many internet memes emerged with humorous footage showing fictional protests. In several live transmissions, people interrupted the journalists or simply raised posters with protest messages. On the first three days of competitions (August 6 to 8), lots of other creative demonstrations took place (figures 3 to 6), invariably ending with National Security Forces agents approaching and banning the individuals. On August 8, federal judge João Augusto Carneiro Araújo, in response to a Public Prosecutor demand, granted an injunction allowing this kind of demonstration. A huge debate on Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter was held before the Brazilian Constitutional rights of expression.



Figure 3. Another sports fan protesting during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. One can read on her arms the phrase "Out Temer." Source: PT Minas Gerais. Photograph taken by PT-MG, 2016.



Figure 4. One more sports fan holding a poster with the phrase "#OutTemer." She is wearing a Vasco da Gama team uniform. Source: O Globo. Photograph taken by Leo Correa / AP, 2016.



Figure 5. One sports fan taking a picture of himself at the stadium with a poster on which one can read "Out Temer / Coup Government: NO!" Source: Mãdia Ninja. Photograph reproduced from Facebook, 2016.



Figure 6. A large banner at the stadium on which one can read "Stop the coup in Brazil / Out Temer / Roses for Democracy." The last expression is the name of a women's left-wing collective linked to the Worker's Party. Source: Independente—Jornalismo Alternativo. Photograph reproduced from Facebook, 2016.

[5.11] In a sample of this debate, a BBC story interviewed jurists Oscar Vilhena and Ronaldo Porto Macedo, each one assuming a distinct position (Fagundez 2016). The former argued that exaggerated precaution could lead to disproportionate restriction, while the latter stated that some civil rights such as going to the venues with rainbow clothes must be preserved, but everything strange to the spectacle should be restrained. Araújo's decision was confirmed the next day, when the government appeal was dismissed, and the Union and IOC had to deal with the demonstrations without banning the sports fans from the competition venues. Until the end of the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, Brazilian fans could go to the venues wearing T-shirts and holding posters against Temer and the impeachment. Though broadcast television managed to avoid most of these images, alternative media captured the playing atmosphere in photographs and videos, showing that sports fans do root for their teams as much as for democracy.

[5.12] The mediatized and opportunistic intention that drives activists transpires when sports fans go to the arena looking to perform to the cameras, wearing protest T-shirts or holding banners with political messages but still behaving as ordinary rooters. This cynical and at the same time antagonistic conduct reinforces the humorous nature of the performance. There is no idol for this fandom but a cause to inspire. If put together, these three components (the activist-rooter, the political play, and the mediatization of the action) can help us understand how the demonstrations created and occupied gaps in the law, fostering a serious discussion on freedom of expression. Contrary to Leifert's opinion, these fans were having fun politicizing a sports event.



Figure 7. At a competition venue, a sports fan, wearing a Flamengo team shirt, is banned from the bleachers by National Security Guards, after shouting "Out Temer." Source: Estãdo. Photograph taken by Diego Azubel/EFE, 2016.



Figure 8. Two sports fans are interviewed live by a reporter from Globo Network while another one in the background holds a poster where one can read "Foouoora Temer" ("Out Temer"). The Olympic Rings are placed instead of the "o." Source: Mídia Livre. Image captured from YouTube video, 2016.



Figure 9. An Argentinean athlete parades live during the closing ceremony and shows her hand palm facing out where one can read "Fuera Temer" ("Out Temer," in Spanish). Source: UOL. Photomontage produced by an unknown author, 2016.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] While cultural studies scholars have been attentive to fan activism, and most recently political theory scholars have considered political fandoms an important field, there is still little debate on sports fans' political demonstrations. This paper calls attention to this phenomenon from an approach based on three vectors: sports fan activism, political playing, and incorporated media logic. Episodes such as the "Fora Temer" mosaic on T-shirts prove that some repertoires of fan cultures common to sports fans are also used by fan-activists to make political claims. We suggest that the category of fan must also be further discussed when applied to sports and political fandoms, considering the disputes and competition background for which they are not only fans but also rooters.

[6.2] This same case allows one to question the neutral policy of IOC and other sports entities, which persist in claiming that sports and politics are separate from each other. While there's nothing new to this specific debate, we consider that the staged protests at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games present an important contribution to it.

[6.3] This paper also proposes a first approach in order to understand political play as a form of disruptive and mediatized action. We expect to further develop other theoretical questions that surround this debate.

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Praxis

Fan geographies and engagement between geopolitics of Brexit, Donald Trump, and Doctor Who on social media

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[0.1] Abstract—The 2016 Brexit decision and Donald Trump's election to the US presidency that same year led to a wide variety of social media activity, ranging from visceral anger to unadulterated jubilation. How members of particular fandoms choose to express their emotions regarding a geopolitical event can be filtered through the lens of their fannish enthusiasm. Analysis of Doctor Who-influenced geopolitical engagement on Facebook that uses case studies of both Brexit and Donald Trump's election and 2017 inauguration shows that fans used Doctor Who to cope with emotionally taxing geopolitical events and expressed their anguish through the lens of selected Doctor Who plotlines. This use of social media permits fans to shape a new geopolitical landscape within which they can grapple with their political surroundings as influenced by their fandom.

[0.2] Keywords—Data mining; Facebook; Fandom; Science fiction

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Fandom is expressed through a variety of channels across a wide range of personalities, beliefs, and enthusiasms (Aden 1999; Hills 2002; Jenkins 2012). This can be said for most types of fandom around the world: while stereotypes exist regarding the members of certain fandoms, the real expression of fannish enthusiasm toward a subject is diverse, complicated, and unique. For some, fandom is escapism from distressing personal, social, and emotional circumstances, providing immediate camaraderie in situations in which such companionship may not exist outside the confines of the fandom. For others, fandom simply adds a further layer of enrichment to their lives, not necessarily serving as emotional escapism but rather fulfilling an additional role of entertainment in their lives. Therefore, fandom can be both a required alignment for mental health, simply a personal hobby, or even a combination of the two. The expression of fandom takes many forms, but it is highly prevalent on social media, where fans can engage with their affinity, either directly with central figures (whether they be celebrities, video games, or authors) or indirectly with other members of the fandom (Lopez

2001; Jung 2012). In an age when social media continues to grow in relevance for internet users, it becomes important to understand the intersections between social media and fandom, and how both forces influence each other in shaping online and off-line cultural landscapes.

[1.2] In online cultural landscapes, fans often discuss events in geopolitics, popular culture, and their personal lives through the lens of their fandom. Over the last few years, two major geopolitical events have flooded social media platforms, particularly in the United States and United Kingdom: Brexit (the popular term for the mandated withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union) and the election/inauguration of Donald Trump as US president. The online fandom community of Doctor Who is an example of a digital landscape in which fans discuss their reactions to prominent geopolitical events as mediated by their fandom. On platforms such as Facebook, Doctor Who fans grapple with their emotions toward geopolitical events by engaging in nuanced and deeply detailed discussions that merge geopolitical realities with plotlines and character arcs from the show. The online geopolitical landscapes associated with these events are altered by these Doctor Who references, contesting and shaping the digital situatedness of the event itself. Through such actions, Doctor Who becomes a lens through which to talk about and understand the world. This is a performance of fan geographies: the phenomenon of creating, shaping, and changing place through the lens of a fandom. This is not to be confused with geographies of fandom, which tend to engage with the patterns, distributions, and markers of fandom on the visual landscape, not necessarily the creation of place via fandom, as a fan geographer would explore.

[1.3] Here, I explore the online rhetoric from Doctor Who fan communities interpreting the geopolitics of Brexit and Donald Trump's election as mediated through the show's plotlines and characters. Undertaking an in-depth inquiry of Facebook posts, I highlight the categories of fan commentary and initiate a discussion about how the posts alter the digital geopolitical landscape associated with these events through a lens of fan geographies. I begin with a literature review of the intellectual works that inform this research: the intersections of social media and fandom, popular geopolitics, digital phenomenology, fan geographies, and brief histories of the Brexit decision and Donald Trump's rise to become president of the United States. Next, I describe the methodology used to collect data from relevant Facebook posts. I then present and discuss the categories of Doctor Who social media fan engagement with these geopolitical events. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how the posts have altered the digital geopolitical landscape associated with these two events. Holistically, these collections of posts highlight the power of using fan studies as a lens for understanding important social dynamics surrounding politics: fans express, (re)interpret, and comment upon their geopolitical ideologies through the lens of their fandom(s). Through processes such as "cultural acupuncture" (Jenkins 2012), in which energy within a culture is directed toward creating a more positive world, these fandom-driven commentaries may manifest as real-world social and political activism, demonstrating how geopolitical events and figures can have a strong influence on fan behaviors and mobilities. Accordingly, I use this paper to advocate for an increased focus on the impacts of geopolitics in the fields of fan geographies and fan studies, particularly so that we can consider fan movements and behaviors in light of fans' geopolitical surroundings.

2. Literature review

[2.1] Within fan communities, social media platforms provide a community through which fans may engage with the object(s) of their enthusiasm and other fans. Booth (2015) describes the liminal spaces of fandom in digital spaces as an environment where fans provide "emotional and subjective interpretation" (37) of the interactions between the plotlines and characters associated with their fandom. In some cases, these interpretations serve as metaphors for making sense of other external events in a fan's life, known as cultural acupuncture, through which characteristics from a fictional world are mapped onto the real world (Jenkins 2012). Activism within digital environments often takes place on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, through which fans may interact directly with a figure, franchise, or organization (Guerrero-Pico 2017). Through cultural acupuncture, we can understand how fan communities, such as Clan PMS and the Harry Potter Alliance, engage in a type of fan activism through which they confront real-world issues (Jenkins 2000, 2012). This activism may take place both in off-line and digital environments, and with varying foci, such as literacy, human rights, and equality activism in the Harry Potter Alliance (Hinck 2019), fancom activism within Korean popular music fandom (Jung 2012), and critical race activism through Racebending.com, a fan-created platform for critiquing whitewashed casting practices (Lopez 2011; Brough and Shresthova 2012). Similarly, Doctor Who fans use Facebook to engage with their geopolitical surroundings by using cultural acupuncture to interpret contemporary issues through the lens of their fandom.

[2.2] Popular culture is inherently geopolitical. If we understand *geopolitics* to refer to the study of politics within spatial contexts, *popular geopolitics* can be defined as the "process by which geopolitical ideas are produced and reproduced through popular culture" (Haverluk, Beauchemin, and Mueller 2014, 20). Popular geopolitics therefore includes the many ideas, tangible items, and experiences that constitute the everyday geographies of an individual, studied through a lens of popular culture. Dittmer and Gray (2010) offers a further useful interpretation of popular geopolitics as a branch of political geography in which the daily lived experiences of geopolitics are the subject of interest. Popular geopolitics influence who we, as consumers of media, fear and respect; what areas of the world (or, in the case of this research, which areas of our digital landscape) we associate with violence, peace, fear, or safety; and whether we accept or reject societal norms. Popular geopolitics are reflections of what a society considers important to its everyday personal geographies, not necessarily the items, actors, and landscapes that may actually hold importance. These issues, actors, and landscapes of perceived importance may guide digital human mobilities, that is, online movements occurring within the social media landscape. I here concentrate discussions of popular geopolitics on the consumption side of media, where fans co-construct the meaning of popular culture and the significance of media in daily geographies. It is through this co-construction that the linkage between fandom and geopolitics becomes clear, and I use fan geographies as a lens through which to understand how this linkage works to contest and influence the placefulness of the digital landscapes associated with geopolitical events. In the context of this paper, I use *placefulness* as defined by Tuan (2001) to indicate an extension of place, that is, as a space endowed with psychological characteristics and felt value (4). Therefore, placefulness in this context refers

to the felt value of a space based on social, cultural, and political influences within the space.

[2.3] The term *fan geographies* refers to the study of fandom's influence on how individuals perceive and interact with their daily landscapes. Fans of a cultural phenomenon may see the world's myriad landscapes through the lens of that fandom. For many individuals, particularly those who have felt alienated from a portion of, or even all of, their society, fandom can be a source of comfort and camaraderie. Involvement in a fandom can provide a sense of safety to those who have been bullied by providing a community in which individuals can comfortably engage in their own hobbies and interests. Fan geographies attempt to study how such involvement works to create and recreate place and mobilities. They differ from a geography of fandom in that studies of the latter are typically concerned with patterns and distributions of fandom artifacts, while fan geographies explore the phenomenon of fandom as place making in itself. Fandom, including affinity toward certain music, video games, and films, can be a deeply meaningful way for humans to align themselves with other individuals for camaraderie and support (Taylor 2006; Waggoner 2009; Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler 2006). Such alignment can become ingrained within their daily geographies: with whom they interact, where they travel, what they purchase, and where they live. Geraghty (2014) describes the impact of fandom-driven activities, such as collecting memorabilia, on the geographical mobilities of fans. His study explores how their movements and the spaces they choose to occupy are guided by a desire to engage with relics of their fandom. Some fans engage in fan pilgrimages to perform characteristics of their fandom and express their devotion to a franchise (Reijnders 2010), and can, according to Aden (1999), represent the "interaction of story and individual imagination" (10). In some cases, fan geographies transform the place identity of certain areas, such as Vancouver's imagined fandom landscapes associated with *Smallville* (2001–11), *The X-Files* (1993–2018), and the *Battlestar Galactica* reboot (2004–9) (Brooker 2007), and fan tourism to Holmfirth, England, to engage in a mediated reality guided by *Last of the Summer Wine* (1973–2010) (Hills 2002). Such engagement lends itself to place making: real-life landscapes becoming entrenched in the characteristics of a fandom, altering both the meaning of the fandom and the real-life places themselves. The nature of the fandom (peaceful, violent, compassionate, empathic, apathetic, etc.) narrates the placefulness of these spaces. Some members of a fandom may highlight more peaceful aspects of the fan community when engaging with a political event, while other members may choose to connect negative aspects of the fandom with the event, such as the online and off-line wave of sexist rejection of the new, female Doctor by a portion of Doctor Who fans after the announcement that the new Doctor would be a woman (Della Fera 2018). While these examples describe fandom-influenced mobilities across off-line landscapes, I propose a reading of fan geographies in which we assess the impact of fandom on fan mobilities across digital landscapes, such as those seen within fandom communities on social media platforms.

[2.4] Tying fan geographies to Doctor Who, hundreds of social media users have chosen to comment on Brexit and the election of Donald Trump through the lens of their Whovian fandom, often referring to plotlines, characters, and symbols associated with the show. Whether they make a passing mention or a deep analysis of interconnections between the show and these political events, Doctor Who fans' social media use displays varying levels

of entanglement between their fandom and their perceptions of surrounding political landscapes. This engagement weaves new online landscapes surrounding Brexit and Donald Trump, landscapes which are entrenched in the particular values of the Doctor Who fandom that a given fan has chosen to highlight. This transformation is a performance of fan geographies, a subfield of study within both geography and fan studies through which I explore both how fans navigate the world through the lens of their fandom and how geopolitical events impact the rhetoric used within fan communities.

[2.5] An overarching goal of this paper is to understand how fans of Doctor Who use images, themes, and lore from the franchise to grapple with the geopolitical realities of Donald Trump's presidency and Brexit, shaping the digital geopolitical landscapes associated with these two topics as well as shaping the discourse within the fandom. In these cases, the true realities of these geopolitical events may not be understood by the fans. Their engagement with the events and the way they connect them to themes from the show does, however, reflect their own geopolitical realities. Using fundamentals of digital phenomenology presents an excellent opportunity to analyze how the visual experience of consuming Doctor Who can imbue a viewer with the framework to process their emotions regarding political events and thus create their own geopolitical realities. This creates discourse around the complex relations that exist between geopolitics and fandom.

[2.6] Philosophically, this research deeply engages with phenomenology and the myriad ways in which individuals interact with the material realities surrounding them, such as the daily geographies in which they come into contact and the consciousness and experiences these everyday landscapes entail. Rehorick and Bentz (2008) succinctly and powerfully summarize phenomenology as a practice: "Phenomenology is many things to many people" (xi). Rather than having a specific, singular definition, the boundaries of this philosophical framework are fluid and adaptive. The fundamental theories of phenomenology are often appropriated for the subject at hand. In the realm of visual phenomenology (in which digital phenomenology can be included), scholars endeavor to understand how visual representation occupies a nexus of the image and the associated subject matter (Crowther 2009, 9).

[2.7] Minister (2016) highlights how phenomenology draws attention to a global society in which the subjectivity of others is often ignored, dehumanizing lived experiences and allowing individuals to become objects that can be exploited, their daily realities downplayed or ignored. In an increasingly volatile global geopolitical environment where marginalized groups continue to feel erasure, phenomenology reiterates its importance as a methodological framework by exposing one's own acknowledged (or unnoticed) insensitivities to the struggles of others. Phenomenology remains "a meditation on knowledge, a knowledge of knowledge" (Lyotard 1991, 31), and strives to isolate the foundations of the scientific knowledge that comprises society, the "immediate data of knowledge" (32).

[2.8] Considering a phenomenology of the digital world requires understanding how users form knowledge through a digital interface and how such knowledge influences their perception of off-line realities. In an article published by the *Atlantic* titled "The Case Against Reality" (Gefer and Quanta 2016), Donald Hoffman, a professor of cognitive

science, explains how individuals come to perceive reality, particularly as mediated by technology, using the metaphor of the computer desktop interface:

[2.9] Suppose there's a blue rectangular icon on the lower right corner of your computer's desktop—does that mean that the file itself is blue and rectangular and lives in the lower right corner of your computer? Of course not. But those are the only things that can be asserted about anything on the desktop—it has color, position, and shape. Those are the only categories available to you, and yet none of them are true about the file itself or anything in the computer... You could not form a true description of the innards of the computer if your entire view of reality was confined to the desktop... That blue rectangular icon guides my behavior, and it hides a complex reality that I don't need to know... And that's pretty much all of reality, whatever reality might be... I'm claiming that experiences are the real coin of the realm. The experiences of everyday life—my real feeling of a headache, my real taste of chocolate—that really is the ultimate nature of reality.

[2.10] While Hoffman's statement is metaphorical, it nevertheless highlights the complexities of knowledge creation and how notions of reality come to be perceived. While reality itself is complex (i.e., what really lies behind the blue rectangular icon) and not necessarily representative of what the individual actually sees (e.g., the color, position, and shape of the icon), true realities are the lived experiences of the individual. These lived experiences form a personal truth—a lens through which daily geographies are framed, analyzed, and acted upon.

[2.11] Many consider the Brexit decision and the rise of Donald Trump to signify a rise in global neo-nationalism, that is, in a perceived dominance of some nations over others (Lee 2017) that often manifests through xenophobic and discriminatory rhetoric. For millions of world citizens, these events provoked (and continue to provoke) strong, often polarizing emotions. Understanding the rationale of this research in discovering how Doctor Who fans speak about and make sense of Brexit and Donald Trump's presidency through the lens of the science fiction show necessitates a brief history of these two events that describes how they are embedded in emotionally charged narratives.

[2.12] Signifying Britain's exit from the European Union (EU), Brexit refers both to the nationwide referendum in June 2016 in which 51.9 percent of UK voters voted to leave the EU and to Britain's ongoing withdrawal from the EU. Commentators have called the Brexit vote "a choice between an imaginary past of which too many in this country cannot let go and a future about which all of us are inescapably uncertain" (Editorial 2016). Pro-Brexit voters see EU membership as economically and socially costly to the UK; they believe that being in the EU forces the country to give up much of its sovereignty. Brexiters also lament the ease of immigration enabled by EU membership, and many feel that leaving the EU will allow the country to regain control of its borders. Conversely, citizens of the UK who voted to remain in the EU see Brexit as racist, backwards, and detrimental to the country's economy, culture, and society. Considering the highly partisan nature of British media, extreme nationalism has forced the country into anti- and pro-Brexit echo chambers, leaving

a trail of hostility, negativity, and distrust. While a full British exit from the EU is still being hotly contested at the time of writing, emotions regarding Brexit are raw, polarized, and prominent in both online and off-line geopolitical landscapes.

[2.13] Similarly, Donald Trump's journey to the White House remains a contentious, polarizing, emotional, and violence-inspiring phenomenon. Beginning as an unlikely Republican Party nominee for the 2016 election, Trump quickly gained an almost cult-like following across the country and soon decimated the presidential hopes of other Republican runners. Running on a platform that many critics called racist, xenophobic, and backwards, Trump's anti-immigration, anti-LGBT, and pro-police brutality rhetoric appealed to (and continues to appease) many conservative voters across the country. He won an unexpected victory over Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton by virtue of his voters' distribution and the nature of the Electoral College, and during his first years as president has continued to polarize the country with problematic rhetoric. Much like anti-Brexit voters, many anti-Trump citizens feel that Trump, his policies, and his followers are trying to hold on to a social and cultural ideal of the past. His strongest supporters feel that he is helping to return the country to an ideal they believe once existed. Dialogue between pro- and anti-Trump parties is often hateful, tense, and volatile, and like Brexit, is also apparent in both off-line and online communities.

[2.14] Donald Trump's presidency and Brexit both shed light on country-wide polarizations of political and personal values, cultural acceptance, and neo-nationalism. For both the UK and the US, these events have left millions of people struggling to find methods to protest, cope with, or celebrate their reactions to these geopolitical events; continuing vitriolic rhetoric has created off-line and online spaces of political polarization. Given the strong emotions that often surround fandom, it thus becomes highly appropriate to explore if, and how, fans navigate these difficult geopolitical situations through the comfort and camaraderie of a science fiction fandom.

3. Methods

[3.1] Prior to official data collection, I initiated a pilot review of the Doctor Who social media landscape engaging with Brexit and Donald Trump on Facebook and Twitter. The results of this pilot review informed the development of the methods I employed for the research. The design of this study was inspired by Stavros et al. (2014), who cataloged posts made by sport fans on their respective team's social media pages and categorized the posts based on fan motivation types. The fan motivation categories from Stavros et al. capture much of the sentiment found in the pilot review; I therefore considered their methodology a strong one on which to base the study presented here. Appendix 1 shows these categories, their subcategories, and examples of each as found in the pilot review. Some categories were carried over from the referenced study, such as "loyalty" and "encouragement," as they were deemed to be common traits across most types of fandom. Other categories, such as "alternative realities" and "character judgment," were developed specifically for this research.

[3.2] After developing and delineating categories into which to organize social media posts, I

used these categories as a basis for developing search terms that capture iconic characteristics of the Doctor Who fandom. The pilot review revealed a majority of posts pertaining to the following merchandise, symbolic images, and mainstream references to Doctor Who: Cybermen, Daleks, the TARDIS, and/or the Weeping Angels. In many cases, a visual representation of these symbols harkens to Doctor Who without mentioning the show's name. The Cybermen, antagonists who have been present on the series since 1966, and the Daleks, villains since 1963, remain iconic characters on the show. The TARDIS, which stands for "Time and Relative Dimension in Space," is the Doctor's time travel vessel and is used as a standalone representation of the show. The Weeping Angels, first introduced in the episode "Blink," broadcast in 2007, remain terrifying and unsettling villains in the show who are most strongly associated with the new generation of Doctor Who antagonists developed since the 2005 revamp of the show.

[3.3] Holistically, even the newest or most superficial of Doctor Who fans recognize and/or use these symbols to reference the show. Combined with the results of the pilot review, they therefore heavily inspired the development of the search terms used to mine data. Accordingly, I developed the following ten search terms for use in the study: (1) "Cybermen Donald Trump," (2) "Cybermen Brexit," (3) "Daleks Donald Trump," (4) "Daleks Brexit," (5) "TARDIS Donald Trump," (6) "TARDIS Brexit," (7) "Weeping Angels Donald Trump," (8) "Weeping Angels Brexit," (9) "Doctor Who Donald Trump," and (10) "Doctor Who Brexit."

[3.4] Having developed the search terms, it was necessary for me to choose a social media platform for data mining. While Doctor Who fans engage with geopolitics on multiple platforms, the pilot review revealed that only Facebook demonstrated the level of engagement and detail needed to analyze how fans interpret Brexit and Donald Trump through the lens of the Doctor Who fandom. Posts found on Instagram and Twitter connecting Doctor Who with Brexit and/or Donald Trump either lacked enough detail for meaningful analysis or only employed hashtags. Initial searches on Facebook using the aforementioned search terms revealed richer, more detailed engagement. I therefore chose Facebook as the site for data mining.

[3.5] Data collection was conducted by entering each search term into the search field on Facebook. I mined all publicly available posts containing the words and cataloged these posts in a database. To ensure data quality, I analyzed each post for relevance to Doctor Who, Brexit, and/or Donald Trump, and discarded those in which there were no applicable references. As the posts gave no contextual information regarding users' levels of engagement with the Doctor Who fandom, the research design assumes all users posting about Doctor Who and either Brexit or Donald Trump to be fans of the show. No identifying information (such as usernames, profile photographs, and geographic location) was retained in the data. Upon categorization, the data were visualized in Tableau software to show the distribution of categories.

4. Results

[4.1] The goal of this research is to use fan geographies as a lens to explore the extent to

which fans of Doctor Who use social media and their fandom to discuss Brexit and/or Donald Trump. The results obtained begin to achieve this goal. Data mining yielded a total of 704 posts. After analyzing each post for relevance and quality, 197 posts were determined to not reference the show and either Brexit or Donald Trump. These were removed from the analysis, leaving a total of 507 posts for analysis. Each search term returned at least one post connecting elements of Doctor Who to either Brexit or Donald Trump. The analyzed posts were posted between December 2015 and October 2017. The search term that yielded the most posts was "Doctor Who Brexit," with a total of 121 posts. Conversely, the search term that yielded the least posts was "Weeping Angels Brexit," with one post. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the 507 posts across all search terms. Figure 2 highlights the patterns and distributions found in the data; only those umbrella categories and subcategories from Appendix 1 that returned data are included in these visualizations. In total, the highest percentage of posts fell into two categories: "Comparison → Character Judgment" ("Daleks Brexit" with thirty-nine and "Daleks Donald Trump" with thirty-six) and "Comparison → Alternative Realities" ("TARDIS Donald Trump" with thirty-four and "Daleks Donald Trump" with twenty-seven). Other categories with high numbers of posts were "Comparison → Plotlines" ("Doctor Who Brexit" with twenty-four), "Esteem → Venting" ("Doctor Who Brexit" with twenty-seven), and "Camaraderie → Problem Solving" ("TARDIS Donald Trump" with twenty-two). Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 display examples of the posts collected.

Search Term	Number of Posts
Doctor Who – Brexit	121
Daleks – Donald Trump	103
TARDIS – Donald Trump	86
Daleks - Brexit	72
Doctor Who – Donald Trump	46
TARDIS - Brexit	34
Cybermen – Donald Trump	26
Cybermen - Brexit	12
Weeping Angels – Donald Trump	6
Weeping Angels - Brexit	1

Figure 1. Number of posts per search term.

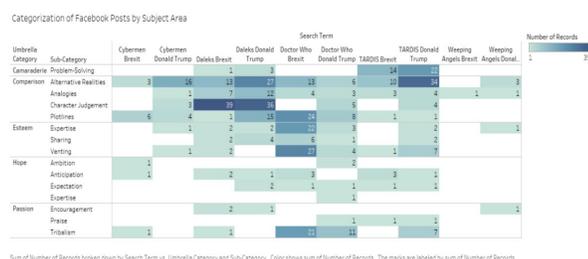


Figure 2. Categorization of Facebook posts by subject area.

June 14 at 10:41am

...What we need is a political Tardis that can take us back to 22 June last year..

Ministers leave UK Brexit department in sign of tension with May
www.ft.com

Figure 3. "TARDIS Brexit → Problem Solving."

February 18 at 12:33pm

THIS JUST IN! Donald Trump has fired his entire Cabinet and replaced them with Daleks. In a press conference, the President described the Daleks as "a bunch of really great guys".



Figure 4. "Daleks Donald Trump → Alternative Realities."

December 13, 2016 at 12:05pm

In other news, Trump Tower is apparently aTARDIS...how else could two such enormous egos have fit inside that building?

Kanye West meets with Donald Trump at Trump Tower
www.cnn.com

Figure 5. "TARDIS Donald Trump → Analogies."



I've finally worked out what is going on. The Tardis crashed into Westminster as the Tories got in and we are regressing back in time! We're living in an episode of Dr Who with Daleks who want to 'exterminate ' everything. 😊
(Geek explanation)

Figure 6. Post reflecting the geopolitical landscape of Brexit.

5. Discussion

[5.1] The results of the analysis provide insight into the interactions between current geopolitical events and fandom, using online engagement both between Doctor Who fandom and Brexit and between Doctor Who fandom and Donald Trump as case studies. These insights support the value of the emergence of fan geographies as a new area of fan studies. As Doctor Who fans grapple with the results of Brexit and Donald Trump's election, they compare many aspects of the two events to Doctor Who. They thus attempt to create an altered online geopolitical landscape associated with these two events. This use of fandom to bring order to and influence interpretations of real geopolitical, cultural, and social geographies is a performance of fan geographies.

[5.2] A high proportion of users compared the character of Donald Trump and Brexit figures (such as Theresa May and Boris Johnson) to the Daleks, villains from Doctor Who who are devoid of all emotions but hate. Wolfe and Wika (2010) note that the scariest science fiction

villains are often those who most resemble humans. While the Daleks do not visually resemble humans, the comparisons that Doctor Who fans have made between them and political figures on social media suggest that fans fear those who are monsters in disguise. In the case of character judgements of Donald Trump, his often violent rhetoric and racism/sexism/xenophobia are drivers of harsh criticism of his personal and political character in digital and off-line environments. Fan criticisms, by comparison, may reflect the geopolitical rhetoric commonly used in the US; as Parry-Giles and Steudeman (2017) state, "American presidential campaigns and elections are mostly (if not exclusively) about candidates rather than issues" (67). Further, Kronman (1998) discusses the prevalence of critics' use of character judgements of politicians that use their personal characters to call into question their political characters. Particularly in cases where information regarding the political character of politicians is limited (especially when politicians flip from one stance to another based on the audience they are addressing), individuals regain agency in the evaluation of these elected officials by using personal character judgements to assess the politicians' efficacy. In the case of Donald Trump, his use of extreme and polarizing language elicits strong and emotional responses from certain populations, especially from marginalized groups who have been the subject of his negative rhetoric. It is therefore unsurprising that a high proportion of posts analyzed in the present study demonstrated fans of Doctor Who making character judgements of Trump by comparing him to Daleks, which are, within the fandom, effectively known as the most evil creatures in the universe.

[5.3] Similar arguments likely apply to the multitude of posts comparing Theresa May and Boris Johnson to the Daleks: citizens feel emboldened to make strong character judgements of politicians who demonstrate inconsistent political character or use extreme rhetoric. However, we may also consider British national identity and nationalism as a driver for fans choosing to compare Brexit figures to iconic Doctor Who characters. Anderson (1983) describes *nations* as imagined political communities to which members feel a bond as inhabitants. Pro-Brexit rhetoric from May and Johnson fundamentally operates through the idea of an imagined political community separate from the real economic, social, and political bonds Britain has to the EU, while anti-Brexit rhetoric frames inclusion in the EU as an essential piece of British national identity. Because Doctor Who is an iconic British cultural phenomenon, fans can logically connect Doctor Who to an event that has polarized British national identities.

[5.4] Many users also constructed alternative realities in which the TARDIS was used to stop the rise of Brexit and Donald Trump. These alternative realities use the TARDIS as it is imagined to function in Doctor Who to revise the modern geopolitical realities surrounding the user. These posts may evoke specific mentions of real geographic landmarks affiliated with Brexit or Donald Trump's presidency. Others suggested that technology from the show could be used to remedy these geopolitical circumstances, continuing a legacy in which science fiction technologies are often adapted for creating human happiness (such as in Stanislaw Lem's *Cyberiad* series [1964–65]). Several fans applied Brexit logic to the Doctor Who universe, speculating how the Doctor's travels would be inhibited by the harsher immigration policies associated with Brexit. One fan jokes, for example, "The Doctor cannot go back to Gallifrey because he is stuck at customs!" It is clear, even from these initial Facebook posts, that Doctor Who fans have constructed new geopolitical landscapes in

which the show, Brexit, and Donald Trump are intricately connected. The data demonstrate a narrative of fan geographies, as hundreds of fans created geopolitical discourse that not only guides their own understandings of the political geographies in which they live but also allows them to alter the placefulness of these events by blurring the lines between fantasy and reality in an act of cultural acupuncture (Jenkins 2012). While fans know they cannot literally use the TARDIS to travel back in time to stop Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump, and while they know that Theresa May and Donald Trump are not literally Daleks, they are nevertheless able to craft a geopolitical landscape within the fandom in which certain actions are possible.

[5.5] Perhaps one of the most striking observations of the research is that none of the posts collected were pro-Brexit or pro-Donald Trump. The data, as collected, exhibit only anti-Brexit and anti-Donald Trump rhetoric. This is not to say, however, that positive sentiment toward Brexit or Donald Trump does not exist in the Doctor Who fandom. Several factors may account for this pattern in the data: first, many episodic themes in the show are antithetical to the moral and ethical foundations of Brexit and Donald Trump. While past episodes of the show have several problematic instances of othering and racism (Orthia 2013), the plots of episodes since the 2005 reboot have consistently (albeit not exclusively) been more progressive, compassionate, and empathic. Second, I can theorize that pro-Brexit and/or pro-Donald Trump posts were not publicly available at the time of data collection, suggesting that individuals who are drawing connections between positive sentiment for these geopolitical events and Doctor Who are not doing so as publicly as those exhibiting negative sentiment. Finally, we can hypothesize that recent episodes of Doctor Who, as well as media statements by the writers and actors, have alienated their pro-Brexit and pro-Trump fanbase. Many actors from the show made their disdain clear after the Brexit vote, and episodes from seasons ten and eleven have included jabs at Donald Trump, such as 10.12: "The Doctor Falls," in which the Doctor states, "Like sewage, smartphones, and Donald Trump, some things are just inevitable," and 11.4: "Arachnids in the UK," where supporting characters express that they have "hated Trump for decades." This reiterates the importance of understanding that fandom is dynamic, and geopolitical events and political landscapes can affect the level of comfort and camaraderie that fans feel within their fandom. In this case, pro-Brexit and pro-Trump fans may have felt betrayed by the show's political stance and have chosen to lessen, or end, their involvement with the fandom.

[5.6] Phenomenologically, the data advance an understanding of how knowledge of geopolitical events is created or influenced by fandom, using Doctor Who as a case study. Particularly within posts which were categorized as "Comparison → Alternative Realities," "Comparison → Plotlines," or "Comparison → Character Judgment," fans used their own knowledge of the geopolitical event and the show to draw comparisons, theorize solutions, and provide explanations for the political landscapes surrounding them. In these cases, Doctor Who gave fans the tools to attempt to understand Brexit and Donald Trump's presidency, reinforcing their personal realities and knowledge of not only these events but also of the show and of the Doctor Who fandom itself. The blurry borders between fantasy and reality provide insight into how important a role fandom can play for fans' knowledge creation and perceptions of reality. Waskul (2006, 33–34), through a lens of tabletop role-playing games, discusses these eroded boundaries:

[5.7] The presumably distinct categories of fantasy/persona, imagination/player, and reality/person can be shown as a subtle continuum of finely graded experience. More precisely, all selves and social reality can be understood as emergent from the interstices of these interrelated provinces of meaning...human beings do not experience reality directly; reality is fashioned and mediated by symbols, language, social structure, and situated variables of social interaction. Consequently, realms of fantasy, imagination, and reality are notoriously porous; experience, knowledge, and understanding routinely slips from one to another.

[5.8] The realities of Brexit and Donald Trump are constructed by the individual, and such realities are mediated through the lived experiences of said individual. When fandom plays a large role in an individual's daily geographies, it is more than reasonable to suggest that their perceptions of geopolitical events will be heavily influenced by and expressed through fandom. As shown in this research, Doctor Who fans, whether making a one-off reference to Donald Trump's being similar to a Dalek or constructing a detailed alternate reality in which the TARDIS is used to prevent Brexit from occurring, co-construct and alter their perceptions of these geopolitical events through their involvement in the Doctor Who fandom.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and future research

[6.1] As Hinck (2019) explains, fans often develop an emotional bond to their fandom, a bond which manifests through several aspects of their identity. One such aspect is their geopolitical identity. Even a cursory glance at social media highlights an interesting phenomenon: users are forming, shaping, and disseminating their geopolitical ideologies through lenses of their fandoms. Fandom can provide a source of emotional comfort, escapism, and/or a tool through which to express excitement or disdain. This paper highlighted social media posts on Facebook that blended references to Brexit or Donald Trump with themes from Doctor Who. In the case of Brexit and Donald Trump's election and inauguration, many fans used social media (and their own fandom) to express their negative emotions toward these geopolitical events. While some references were fleeting and brief, such as a comparison between Donald Trump and an alien overlord, others were detailed discussions that demonstrated deep knowledge of both the geopolitical event and Doctor Who.

[6.2] Through their comparisons, fans have no doubt shaped the placefulness of the online geopolitical landscape associated with Brexit and Donald Trump's election. However, it must be acknowledged that this research does not capture whether such references exist only in users' online spaces or if such cultural acupuncture also characterizes their off-line engagement with geopolitical events. This highlights an opportunity for further research that would not only look at other social media sites (Instagram, Twitter, Reddit) but would also characterize how fandom of the show affects off-line geopolitical engagement.

[6.3] It must also be noted that this research design was limited to publicly available posts; within the private groups of Doctor Who fans who use social media there may exist more detailed, emotional, and nuanced analyses of Brexit and Donald Trump. The posts included

in this research were either those that users felt comfortable sharing with the wider online community or those that were made public in error. In either case, future research designs should include reaching out to online fans (through specific Doctor Who fan pages) and seeking voluntary participation in studies. This would help us to deepen our understanding of how individuals use the show to grapple with geopolitical concerns. In this case, users may be more likely to share their personal social media posts.

[6.4] Future iterations of this research should also be expanded to assess engagement with other geopolitical events and figures, both in the Doctor Who fandom and in other fandoms, exploring how fans use different media affinities to engage with their geopolitical surroundings. This could be accomplished through a similar methodology, in which publicly available data on social media outlets is mined to provide an analysis of the current online geopolitical landscape, or it could assess how geopolitical messages are transferred across platforms.

[6.5] Despite my only using public posts from a single social media platform in this research, I have shown how fandom intricately intersects with fans' geopolitical concerns. This study sets the stage for increased academic attention toward the power of fan geographies, a lens through which we can understand how politics, place, culture, and knowledge are influenced by fandom. As a further discussion of cultural acupuncture through metaphor, the number of users creatively using fandom to strategize solutions to real-life geopolitical issues suggests an engagement with policy making. This opens up a new area of research. As fan studies scholars continue to explore the role of politics in fandom and fan communities, future research may engage more closely with fans who are creatively exploring policies and policy making through the lens of their fandom.

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Category	Definition	Examples
Passion —Loyalty —Encouragement —Praise	Comments showing a marked positive or negative emotional response to Brexit and/or Donald Trump, reflecting love, loyalty, encouragement, and/or praise, intertwined with a <i>Doctor Who</i> reference.	"Daleks for Brexit!!!" "Vote Dalek! In this video, we focus on our policy on Brexit!"
Hope —Ambition —Expectation —Anticipation	Posts which reflect hope, speculation, and/or expectation about the future of Brexit and Donald Trump, either relating to how such events will affect <i>Doctor Who</i> , or using a reference to the show to express hope.	"Brexit could lead to return of the plague, Adolf Hitler, Daleks and Godzilla." "Doctor Who is becoming more progressive in contrast to a looming brexit..."
Esteem —Venting —Expertise —Sharing	Comments that share personal perspectives, experiences, and frustrations regarding Brexit and/or Donald Trump, using a <i>Doctor Who</i> reference as a lens.	"Could Donald Trump actually be having a positive effect on the illegal immigration issue? I'm reminded of The Doctor's end speech in Genesis of the Daleks where he says that out of all the destruction the Daleks cause, there must come some good." "Would be interesting to see the Venn diagram overlap between 'people who say Doctor Who is ruined' and 'People who can only achieve orgasm if they shout 'Brexit means Brexit!'"
Camaraderie —Defense —Belonging —Problem-Solving	Posts harkening to a collective fandom; using references to the fandom to propose solutions to repercussions from Brexit and/or Donald Trump; defending either/or geopolitical events through a lens of the show	"Some people would use a tardis to go back in time to see the dinosaurs. Not me tho, I'd go back to June 8 th ." "What we need is a political Tardis that can take us back to 22 June last year.."
Comparison —Plotlines —Alternative Realities —Character Judgement —Analogies	Comments comparing figures associated with Brexit such as Theresa May and Boris Johnson, and Donald Trump, with aliens in <i>Doctor Who</i> , and/or using these geopolitical events to create new imaginative plotlines in the show, and/or taking portions of <i>Doctor Who</i> canon to imagine a different reality surrounding these events.	"Donald Trump on watching an episode of Doctor Who: 'Theres been a lot of violence and evil from Davros and the Daleks... Theres been a lot of evil and violence on all sides...on all sides. Extremist Timelords and Tardises pushing their left wing agenda... humans refusing to submit to their Dalek overlords...Terrible extremism...'" "I just came to the realisation that the Daleks are just the Donald Trumps of Doctor Who."

Praxis

Wolfenstein II and MAGA as fandom

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[0.1] Abstract—The current political discourse in the United States is generally understood through the framework of partisanship, but this framework alone is insufficient to encompass all forms of political engagement. An analysis of the discourse around the Bethesda Softworks video game *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (2017) reveals that the outraged discourse around the references to the current political climate in America by right-wing groups is best understood through a framework of fandom. From this perspective, the discourse around the game is understood as an expression of fandom for President Donald Trump as an individual rather than of a persistent political identity or ideology. As fans, Trump supporters are guided in the political engagement by Trump's pledge to make America great again (MAGA).

[0.2] Keywords—Donald Trump; Ideology; Partisanship; Political engagement;

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In October 2017, video game publisher Bethesda Softworks released *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*, a direct sequel to 2014's *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and a continuation of the larger *Wolfenstein* franchise. The game is a first-person shooter set in an alternate timeline 1960s in which Nazi Germany won World War II and has taken control of the United States of America. Players take on the role of B.J. Blazkowicz, a World War II-era soldier who wakes up from a coma after nearly being killed in an assault on an enemy fortress. Blazkowicz makes it his duty to wrest control of America back from the Nazis using whatever violent means necessary.

[1.2] While the game is set in an alternate timeline in which Nazis control America, the marketing for the game made direct reference to the current political climate in the United States in which far-right groups freely march in public. In one trailer for the game posted on Twitter in October 2017, the developers of the game stated "Make America Nazi-Free Again," a direct reference to President Donald Trump's campaign message of "Make America Great Again" (Gilbert 2017). The trailer itself features footage from the game of

Nazis marching down American streets along with the message "Not My America" (Gilbert 2017).

[1.3] These connections to current events did not sit well with members of far-right groups, who took to social media and other online spaces to express their displeasure. One user on Twitter said in response to the trailer, "Oh wow, what a clever marketing trick: tapping into hysterical leftist power fantasy. So current. So subtly political. Wow. Go fuckyourselves [*sic*]" (Marcin 2017). Another user said, "Cool. Didn't know Bethesda teamed with SJWs and ANTIFA!" (Marcin 2017). Although the game's developer and publisher may have only intended the marketing messages to be a means of building up hype for the game through references to current events, the messages were perceived by members of far-right groups to be direct attacks against them. Their reactions to the marketing for *Wolfenstein II* reveal the limitations of the current framework used to understand political engagement ([note 1](#)).

[1.4] The current tensions evident in American political discourse are generally understood through the framework of partisanship. This framework leads us to consider those involved to be serious actors engaging in politics through their differing ideologies. In analyzing the discourse around *Wolfenstein II*, partisanship is insufficient to explain the forms of engagement employed by those involved. Fandom proves to be a more useful framework through which to understand political engagement in this case and in the larger political discourse through its focus on how objects of interest can serve as a means of engaging in politics rather than through a fully formed political identity or ideology.

[1.5] In order to understand how Trump supporters engage with politics as fans of Trump himself, I begin by first reviewing the literature on partisanship to understand how Trump supporters' engagement differs. I then make the argument that Trump supporters' actions are best understood through the framework of fandom using the concepts from Ashley Hinck (2012) of public engagement keystone, ethical framework, and ethical modalities. Trump's campaign promise to "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) serves as the primary ethical framework and guides the actions taken by his supporters. In this case, Donald Trump serves as the object through which supporters engage with politics, and his pledge to restore America to greatness serves to guide the actions they take in response. This framework for political engagement becomes clearer when analyzing the discourse around *Wolfenstein II*. I conclude with suggestions for how engaging with Trump supporters differs when viewed through the framework of fandom.

2. Partisanship and political discourse

[2.1] The current heated political discourse in the United States is generally attributed to partisanship. Partisanship has been studied both as a social identity and as an attitude (Bartle and Bellucci 2009, 5). As a social identity, partisanship is defined by Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes in *The American Voter* (1960) as "the individual's affective orientation to an important group-object in his [or her] environment" (121). From an attitude perspective, partisanship is defined as an individual's ever-evolving relationship to parties (Fiorina 2002, 98). Partisanship can be understood either as an important part of an individual's identity or as reflective of an individual's attitudes toward

the existing political parties and ideologies.

[2.2] In order to resolve these opposing interpretations of partisanship, Bernard Grofman, Frank Wayman, and Matthew Barreto (2009, 71) focus on the contextual nature of partisanship, arguing that party identification is not just an enduring social identity or reflective of current attitudes on relevant issues but may be either, depending on the context the individual finds themselves in. Eric Groenendyk (2013, 5) reinforces this contextual understanding of partisanship in his dual motivations theory by arguing that partisans look both to identify with the party that matches their policy preferences and to maintain an existing party identification. Partisanship is, therefore, not just a social identity or an attitude but can function as either, depending on the contextual needs of the individual.

[2.3] To better understand partisanship's role in current discourse, it is important to recognize that partisans express themselves in ways more in line with defenses of avowed social identities or with conceptions of themselves as neutral observers making objective assessments of the actions of the parties, depending on what is most effective in the situation. How we conceive of ourselves politically and how we communicate with others on political issues are shaped by partisanship.

[2.4] Political elites also play an important role in partisanship because elite polarization leads to greater polarization among citizens (Levendusky 2009, 104). The polarized positions taken by elites on important issues signal to citizens that they should take more polarized, partisan positions as well. How political elites talk about important issues and about their fellow citizens has a significant impact on political discourse because of the outsized role played by elites. Even when trying to be inclusive of specific, local audiences, political elites like presidents cannot avoid framing the audience in contrast to other citizens who fail to embody national ideals (Beasley 2001, 37). Polarized communication is just part of the fabric of American political discourse. This framing of some citizens as not embodying national ideals is part of an effort to manage the pluralism of the American identity (Beasley 2001, 37).

[2.5] Citizens look to political elites and parties for messages on how they should feel and act in regard to the issues that dominate the current political context. According to Howard Lavine, Christopher Johnston, and Marco Steenbergen (2012), citizens "operate according to three motivational principles when forming political judgments: (1) least effort, (2) sufficiency, and (3) belief perseverance" (12). Dependence on political elites and parties fulfills these principles by reducing the time and energy citizens have to exert to take a political position, making citizens feel that they have done their due diligence in making such decisions. As the political parties in America have become more ideologically distinct, this dependence ensures that their beliefs on an issue will continue to be supported. Parties provide clear signals to voters that the actions taken by politicians, should they be elected, will align with their beliefs (Grynaviski 2010, 2–3). High levels of partisanship make it easier for citizens to confidently make political decisions. Partisanship, though, not only shapes the positions taken by citizens on important issues but also shapes how these issues are understood.

[2.6] Partisanship, both of political candidates and citizens, leads to political issues being framed differently (Arbour 2014, 605). The parties make decisions on how to frame issues both through the candidate, allowing them to draw on how the candidate fits within the traditional views of the party, and through the citizens, showing how the candidate will uphold citizens' dominant views on an issue. Issues are not defined solely through elite discourse, however. In an analysis of the effects of party affiliation and partisan media on attitudes toward same-sex marriage, Dyann Diercks and Kristen Landreville (2017, 207) found that the partisan messages had indirect effects based on attitudes toward homosexuality, meaning that someone who already held negative attitudes toward gay people would be affected by partisan messaging on the issue.

[2.7] Partisanship is shaped just as much by existing attitudes toward political and social issues as it shapes people's attitudes toward these issues. The effects of partisanship on citizens' perceptions of political issues and of the different positions on those issues demonstrate the complex ways people form their political identities and opinions in an increasingly polarized context. These effects are even more apparent when citizens engage with partisan messaging.

[2.8] Increased partisanship in media leads users to inaccurately predict public support for their positions. Exposure to partisan media congruent with the user's ideology leads to "biased perceptions of public opinion" and the "perceived public support for one's opinions was associated with political outspokenness and politically meaningful acts" (Dvir-Gvirsman, Garrett, and Tsfati 2018, 126). Because of this perception of greater public support for their positions, partisan users are often not prepared to deal with opposing opinions. Encountering online comments critical of their party often leads users to become more polarized (Suhay, Bello-Pardo, and Maurer 2018, 107).

[2.9] Use of uncivil news sources also tends to lead people to practice more incivility (Gervais 2014, 575). Partisans are less likely to be able to handle criticism of their positions and more likely to engage with others in an uncivil way. Such uncivil engagement also cannot be dismissed as an unfortunate byproduct of users encountering opposing positions in their search for more information on an issue; disagreeable discussion of politics online is driven more by emotion than by information seeking (Lyons and Sokhey 2014, 245). Users become uncivil because of the emotions they feel when engaging with opposing positions, not as a result of trying to engage with the opposing position to gain more information on the issue. Anger is one of the primary emotions prompted by partisan news messages. Online news that matches the user's political position leads to greater anger toward the opposing party and to more sharing of information (Hassell and Weeks 2016, 653).

[2.10] Sharing of information is the result of an effort to support the feelings held by partisan users, rather than the reason they chose to engage with political issues in the first place. Partisan media also has so come to shape our perceptions of politics that watching news from a different partisan position leads to less trust of the opposing party (Levendusky 2013, 576). This decrease in trust and increase in emotions like anger when encountering opposing position will only continue to increase because the rhetoric of ideologically homogenous groups tends to become more antagonistic (Warner and Neville-Shepard 2011, 209).

Partisanship clearly has an impact on how users understand their positions on political issues and engage with those who hold opposing positions.

[2.11] Partisanship tells us a lot about the current political climate in the United States. Our partisan identities are very important to us and inform our attitudes toward political issues and parties. Our partisan positions are informed by the polarized positions taken by political elites and by the beliefs and attitudes of others within our social networks. Partisanship also shapes how issues are framed. We are drawn to messages that affirm our partisan positions, and this engagement with partisan content shapes how we perceive and interact with others, making us less trusting of and angrier at those who hold opposing positions.

[2.12] Partisanship plays an important role in current political discourse, but is it enough of an explanation for all forms of political engagement? When looking at the discourse around *Wolfenstein II*, I argue that the engagement seen in this case cannot be fully explained by partisanship. Partisanship reflects identification with a particular political group that holds certain ideological positions that inform an individual's attitudes on political issues. The discourse around *Wolfenstein II* lacks these qualities, and our reliance on the framework of partisanship leads to an inability to fully understand an important part of our current political discourse. In fact, the framework of fandom provides a more accurate means of understanding the discourse around *Wolfenstein II*.

3. MAGA as fandom

[3.1] Fandom differs from partisanship as a means of explaining political engagement in terms of its object of interest. Partisanship is grounded in behavior generally accepted to be expressive of civic identity, such as party identification and political ideology. Few would question classifying a card-carrying Republican or libertarian's behavior as political. The behavior of fans, on the other hand, is seen as of a different sort than the clearly political behavior of partisanship. Fans may exhibit a deep commitment to the object of interest that is similar to partisanship, but the difference is that fans are seen as having internally invested interests while partisans are seen as necessarily having to engage with those who hold opposing viewpoints. Fans' actions are also seen as having an impact only within the fan community and on the bottom lines of those companies whose financial success depends on fan texts whereas the behavior of partisans is positioned as having clear impacts on the entire political system. Recent history provides an example of the potential influence fandom can have on politics in the form of GamerGate.

[3.2] Online fandom, especially right-wing reactionary practices within fandom, can only be fully understood within the context of recent online harassment campaigns, most notably GamerGate but also the Fappening (the release of nude photos of female celebrities and other women) and campaigns directly inspired by GamerGate such as fans advocating against diversity and progressive values in comics under the banner of ComicsGate, the Sad Puppies' attempts to organize fan-voting for the Hugo awards so that more conservative sci-fi authors would win, the harassment of actors like Leslie Jones and Kelly-Marie Tran, and the review-bombing of movies like *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2019) in attempts to express outrage at the continued diversification of Hollywood. GamerGate is

the focus here because of the role it played in shaping and inspiring future reactionary movements.

[3.3] GamerGate was an online harassment campaign against women and other marginalized groups that began in August 2014 with false allegations made against game developer Zoë Quinn by an angry ex-boyfriend of her trading sexual favors for positive press coverage of her video game (Salter 2018, 252). The harassment brought down on Quinn and many other women associated with video games, notably Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, and Leigh Alexander, was justified in the minds of many GamerGaters by perceiving their targets as outsiders to true gamer culture. Claims were made that the outrage was inspired by a supposed lack of ethics in games journalism, but the targets of the harassment reveal the true motivations of the campaign.

[3.4] GamerGate can be understood as "a performative exercise of identity-building" (Muñoz-Guerado and Triviño-Cabrera 2018, 195). This identity was originally centered on playing video games. "Gamer culture began as a way to create a sense of belonging, but with it came the need to exclude others in order to retain that. Gaming was part of an identity, that identity was shaped by the way games were designed, and games were designed as a way to cater to that identity—a cyclical loop which helped create the male-centered norms of gamer culture" (Ruxton 2017, 460). The construction of this identity around certain features of the group members and of games themselves lead to others, primarily women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people, being included only as outsiders to the dominant identity of "gamer" (452). As the culture changed to more actively include those once excluded, members of the dominant group of gamers began to lash out at no longer being privileged as the true representatives of the community (464).

[3.5] GamerGaters view the world in binary terms of true, hardcore games and outsiders, which "precludes coalition by demarcating identities and making culture seem a zero-sum scenario of gaining and losing power" (Evans and Janish 2015, 130). The desires expressed by GamerGaters to prevent further changes to the video game industry they believe are driven by feminists and Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) reflect an inability to cope with shifting political and social realities (Chess and Shaw 2015, 216). Grafting these feelings onto cultural products allows them to be more effectively directed against those seen as the cause of the changes, whether in their roles as game developers or critics (216). With the increased presence of formerly excluded groups within gaming culture and the changes made to video game texts to reflect the wider tastes of this expanding gaming culture, GamerGaters perceive themselves to be victims by no longer having their tastes solely catered to.

[3.6] GamerGate shares with the alt-right this belief in their own victimhood (Bezio 2018, 557). The fervent belief that they are the true victims of hostile and illegitimate opponents shapes the public image of both movements. "It is an ethos of ostensible disenfranchisement which ignores the fact that what is being removed is a centuries-long legacy of unwarranted supremacy—that the equality of others does not in and of itself diminish the humanity of those who have always stood alone on the top of the mountain" (564). The public image of the movements is built around the harassment of those considered outsiders. As a result of

this behavior, both GamerGate and the alt-right can be understood as "toxic technocultures," which "are unique in their leveraging of sociotechnical platforms as both a channel of coordination and harassment and their seemingly leaderless, amorphous quality" (Massanari 2017, 333).

[3.7] The culture of harassment that developed around GamerGate was dominated by two behaviors. First, they behaved like a swarm in that there was no obvious leader directing the movement (Mortenson 2018, 789). Without a leader, there was no one to rein in the more noxious and violent aspects of the movement, but there was also no one directing their harassment toward specific targets, leading to a lashing out at anyone associated with the individuals or marginalized groups excluded from gamer culture. Second, they behaved like hooligans in that their participation in attacks was often driven by the thrill of conflict with a perceived rival team rather than deep ideological commitments (Mortenson 2018, 796). Online platforms support these sorts of behaviors by privileging the "aggressive and competitive qualities of geek masculinity" (Salter 2018, 256).

[3.8] Online fandom is still wrestling with the aftermath of GamerGate. Even though GamerGate may no longer receive as much media attention, "the cultural and technological conditions that gave rise to Gamergate remain intact. Gamergate's core narrative that treasured symbols of techno-masculinity, such as video games or the internet, are being destroyed in a 'culture war' waged by feminists and progressives has merged with other reactionary masculine identity movements and taken on unexpectedly virulent forms" (255). The reactionary politics of GamerGate have found new life in the alt-right and MAGA supporters of President Donald Trump. The connections between the movements go beyond just adoption of terminology or tactics for organizing the harassment of others, as the MAGA supporters behave more in line with the expectations of fans than of traditional partisans.

[3.9] Ashley Hinck offers a means of understanding how objects of fan interest guide engagement with the political and civic spheres. She argues that fan texts and communities provide a public engagement keystone, a "touch point, worldview, or philosophy," that guides civic actions (2012, ¶4.6). The object of fan interest serves as the medium through which fans engage with civic life. Hinck then argues that the fan object provides an ethical framework, "a worldview or a frame of understanding based on an ethic that is theoretical and all encompassing," which leads to certain ethical modalities, "a way of meeting an ethical obligation" (Hinck 2016, 8). The difference here between fandom and partisanship is that the object of interest that leads to political engagement is often a product of popular culture rather than a political party or ideology. The means and methods of political engagement differ because of the difference in the object of interest that is at the root of their behavior. Partisanship is widely understood as contributing to people's political engagement, but fandom provides a means for better understanding that engagement when its origins do not lie within established political parties or ideologies.

[3.10] This brings us to Donald Trump. Through my analysis of the discourse around *Wolfenstein II*, I argue that the behavior of those supportive of Trump more closely resembles that of fans rather than partisans. Trump's MAGA supporters are fans of Trump,

not traditional conservative or right-wing partisans ([note 2](#)). If Trump is the public engagement keystone through which his supporters engage in politics, what ethical framework does he provide and what ethical modalities does this framework lead to?

[3.11] The ethical framework provided to Trump supporters is encapsulated in his "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan. Every action he takes or belief he expresses is interpreted through the lens of returning the nation to its (supposedly) lost greatness. This leads to a set of ethical modalities defined by an "ends justify the means" attitude. Anything is permissible so long as it is in service to restoring the nation to greatness. The vision of what constitutes greatness for Trump is limited solely to the nation's material wealth, not the ideals that it strives to live up to and communicate to the rest of the world (Edwards 2018, 189). Atrocities like locking children up at the southern border and attempting to ban all Muslims from entering the country can be excused so long as America is doing well financially. These attacks on internal and external others are based on the idea that these groups are interfering with the project of making the nation great again, which "functions by casting aspersions and tapping into existing prejudices and disaffection" (Peters 2017, 38).

[3.12] This worldview of insiders and outsiders is consistent with Trump's perception of politics as "a world of polar opposites, in which representatives of the two sides have completely opposed characteristics" (Fuchs 2017, 57). Trump constructs his supporters as insiders to the MAGA project by positioning them as powerless, which they enjoy for the sense of agency it provides (Johnson 2017, 239). By constructing themselves as powerless in the face of the political and social forces that interfere in their project of achieving national greatness, Trump's supporters see themselves as being given license to take action to overcome the powerful forces standing in their way. Trump's call to "Make America Great Again" was built on this fear of a changing nation (Goldman 2017, 71).

[3.13] An important explanation for his supporters for why the nation is now declining is the political and social changes that have taken place in their lifetimes. This reveals the promise Trump made in his campaign slogan to be "driven by resentment and anger, not a vision of restoration" (Deneen 2017, 29). This led his supporters to "emote—to express uninhibited feelings of fear, anger, and hatred" (Ivie 2017, 708). Trump's ethical framework of making America great again led his supporters to see themselves as insiders to this project who are united in combating the powerful global forces that stand in their way. The main ethical modality inspired by this framework is to lash out in fear and anger at those who are seen as outsiders—generally the socially and politically marginalized and oppressed—interfering with the MAGA project. The discourse around *Wolfenstein II* is best understood through this framework rather than more traditional partisan alignments.

[3.14] How do the comments made about *Wolfenstein II*'s marketing reflect the ethical modalities available to Trump supporters? Trump supporters expressed clear feelings of anger about the messaging of *Wolfenstein II*'s marketing and its drawing on contemporary politics. Along with the "Make America Nazi-Free Again" ad, the marketing made direct references to the "Unite the Right" rally that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, with a message that there is "only one side" in the fight against Nazis. It also referenced the meme of white nationalist Richard Spencer getting punched on inauguration day in January 2017

with a video of the main character punching one of the Nazi enemies in the game (Dornbush 2017).

[3.15] Trump supporters did not interpret these messages as confined to the fictional alternative universe of the game but took the marketing as making direct political statements. The primary feeling evoked by this interpretation was anger. One user on Twitter encouraged the game's developers to clarify that they are not anti-Trump, saying, "I dislike how you phrased this. You guys might want to make a statement that you guys dont [*sic*] hate Trump or freedom" (Marcin 2017). Another user said in response to the marketing, "Yay more political agendas and false equivalences being shoved down my throat! Because every1 [*sic*] I disagree with is a nazi [*sic*!]" (Shitty Gamer Takes 2017b). Another user reinforced the idea that the anti-Nazi messaging was supporting a clear political agenda and predicted negative financial results for the game: "Glad you're now giving me a reason not to buy your crap. It's not like pushing political agendas today fires back in a good way" (Skarn 2017).

[3.16] Along with supporting a vaguely left-wing political agenda, the marketing was also interpreted as symbolic violence against Trump supporters and other right-wingers, with one user saying, "Oh a Trump joke, because the subtext is advocating murder of Trump supporters. Pretty funny, devs!" (Gilbert 2017). Perceived symbolic violence in the marketing was translated to threatened material attacks by Trump supporters. One user expressed excitement over retaliating against anyone who purchased the game, saying, "Can't wait to spit at people buying this game in store. Great way to expose Anti-fa degenerate losers. Cheers lads" (Wolfenstein 2017). A user also threatened actual violence against anyone who supported the perceived political agenda found in the game's marketing: "Fine, please try! COME AT US IN REAL LIFE," posted with an illustration of a soldier holding a gun along with Nazi imagery and the phrase "We are not dead yet" (Wolfenstein 2017).

[3.17] These emotional responses to the game's marketing, ranging from mild upset at the perceived political agenda underlying the game to threats of actual violence, are part of an ethical modality in line with the ethical framework laid out by Trump of lashing out over any perceived slight. These are fans of Trump who are upset with how they perceive the game's marketing to be attacking Trump as a politician; they are not conservative partisans who have a true political disagreement over the ideology supported or the policies proposed in the game or its marketing. As fans, Trump supporters feel the need to defend Trump the man from any perceived attack, based on the ethical behavior taught to them by Trump. This defensiveness is also supported by the other ethical modality found in Trump's ethical framework, the perception of the group as powerless and in need of defense from more powerful forces.

[3.18] In order to construct themselves as powerless, Trump supporters must first show that they are the true video game fans that developers should be making games for. One user says of the game's perceived political agenda, "You have no idea how much you just sold out your core demographic to side with a bunch of whining sjw's that don't buy your games" (Shitty Gamer Takes 2017a). The Trump supporters angry at the game's marketing are presented here as the true gamers who have been betrayed in an attempt to appeal to other groups.

Video games are understood here as the domain of a limited group of people, namely cisgender, straight, white men who lean politically conservative. Any game that does not clearly privilege this group is perceived as a betrayal, as seen most clearly in the misogynistic and sexist harassment of women in video games organized under the banner of GamerGate (Todd 2015, 66).

[3.19] If this reaction was only about the audience for video games, it would be just fan behavior that does not intersect with the larger political discourse. However, Trump supporters made it clear that the game was not just a betrayal of their conception of themselves as gamers but also of certain qualities of American identity that they have come to see as embodied in Donald Trump. As one user said, "People aren't mad about nazis [*sic*] being killed in Wolfenstein, they're mad because the game seems more like an attack on whites, capitalism, and traditional American values" (Maiberg 2017). By connecting the game to larger political issues in the United States, Trump supporters have made it clear that their fandom is not oriented around video games but around Trump. The style of interaction seen in this case may be in line with the general discourse online (Shaw 2014, 275), but the particular form it takes here is guided by the ethical framework set up by Trump. The game is seen as hindering efforts to restore the nation to greatness, so attacking those expressing or supporting the messages found in the game is constructed as ethical behavior for Trump fans.

[3.20] Having constructed themselves as powerless by no longer being the only group that matters in the worlds of video games and politics, Trump supporters must identify a more powerful force in society that is undermining the efforts to make the nation great again. Not surprisingly, the efforts to construct a more powerful force in society are rife with anti-Semitism. One user explicitly connected their hatred of Jewish people to the construction of Trump supporters as the true fans of video games: "And because Bethesda Jews [*sic*] are trying to destroy gaming industry with political correctness faggotry... If we fall, gaming industry ceases to exist. You think any of those cucks actually buy games? They simply want to ruin the gaming industry" (Maiberg 2017). The language used here also reflects popular anti-SJW (social justice warrior) discourse, particularly the attack on political correctness and the use of the term "cuck," which is used to refer to anyone who does not have the vigor to stand up to the SJW menace.

[3.21] SJWs and political correctness are seen as the truly insidious forces undermining society. Some of the concerns raised are fairly mild, such as one user's hope that the game would not be politically correct (PC): "Please Bethesda, do not give into the PC pressure... Don't let the PC Police curb your game making" (Robertson 2017). Political correctness here is seen as stifling the true creativity of game developers. Like Trump supporters, game developers are unable to resist the power of political correctness—if they could, video games would clearly match the perspective of Trump supporters. The fact that games do not is an illustration of the clear power of political correctness and the powerlessness of Trump supporters. The attacks by Trump supporters are seen as acceptable because of this powerlessness.

[3.22] If Trump supporters are powerless in the face of political correctness, then SJWs are the group pushing and benefiting from it. While some, like the previously cited user, are

willing to conceive of the game's developers as being merely unable to resist the power of political correctness, other users position the developers as SJWs themselves. Evidence for this was seen in the text of the game itself by one user, who said, "This game looks like an SJWs wet dream. Fighting (actual) nazis [*sic*], black women being racist toward white people and an actual 'resistance' that will probably succeed in this fictional world" (Robertson 2017). Other users just take it as a given that the developers are SJWs. One user said, "It's been fun playing your games until you removed your balls for SJW points" (Nawara 2017). Another user expressed dismay at the developers' adoption of an SJW identity and warned of dire financial consequences for this shift: "Don't go all SJW on us... You *will* lose customers if you keep this up" (Nawara 2017). After using a racial slur to express disdain for the number of prominent black characters in the game, one user argued that the developers' adoption of an SJW identity is reflective of the downfall of the video game industry as a whole: "when bethesda goes SJW you know the game industry is fucked" (Robertson 2017).

[3.23] From the perspective of Trump supporters, the video game industry can no longer be saved because it no longer centers them. They construct themselves as the true fans and argue that the industry should cater solely to their desires. They perceive themselves as powerless because of the shifts that have occurred in video game content. In line with the ethical framework provided by Donald Trump, that every effort should be made to return the nation to greatness, Trump supporters perceive the fall of video games as further evidence of the nation's decline. They must speak out against the capitulation by game developers to political correctness and the powerful SJWs who promote this perspective. Only then can video games—and, by extension, the nation—be saved.

[3.24] This rhetoric of the fall of video games and the nation found in the discourse around *Wolfenstein II* reflects the ethical modalities associated with Trump's ethical framework of making the nation great again. Trump supporters construct themselves as powerless in the face of political correctness and SJWs while also arguing for their power to ruin the video game industry financially. This is in line with Trump's conception of the true power in the nation being constrained by illegitimate forces. The nation would experience unparalleled safety and prosperity if only Trump was able to implement his draconian immigration policies. The video game industry would reach new heights of financial success if only companies would center Trump supporters in their games. Constructing the group as powerless allows for attacks by the group to be excused because they are only standing up to the more powerful forces in society. Attacking is also acceptable because it is in service to restoring the nation. These qualities of current political discourse are not accessible from a framework of partisanship. When political engagement is understood from the perspective of fans looking to emulate their object of interest rather than as partisans committed to working to improve the nation from different perspectives, new means of engagement become possible. Suggestions for how to engage from this perspective are explored in the conclusion.

4. Conclusion

[4.1] Donald Trump's supporters are guided by the ethical framework of "Make America

Great Again." This leads to ethical modalities of perceiving the group to be powerless and engaging emotionally with those perceived as benefiting from the social and political changes in the nation. In the discourse around *Wolfenstein II*, this manifests as perceiving the in-group as the true fans of video games who are being left behind as the video game industry caves to political correctness in an attempt to appease the out-group of SJWs. The perception of themselves as powerless allows Trump supporters to lash out at game developers and other fans for not privileging them. These aspects of the current political discourse are absent in the framework of partisanship. The insights offered by the framework of fandom lead to suggestions for differing means of engaging with Trump supporters.

[4.2] First, the labels of partisanship should be applied carefully. Many Trump supporters bristle at labels like "right wing" and "alt-right" not because their views do not fit with these ideologies but because they are engaging as fans of Trump and not as committed partisans. More effort needs to be made to explain why the views of Trump supporters fit these partisan ideologies instead of using these labels as an easy shorthand. Media scholar Christian Fuchs provides a model for this kind of analysis through his identification of the different elements of Trumpism as an ideology (2017, 48). Rather than assigning a partisan ideology to Trump and his supporters that they can easily brush off, Fuchs identifies key components of the ideology that Trump espouses to show how it is similar to that of other right-wing groups while also demonstrating its own unique qualities. By being thorough in the application of partisan labels, the labels themselves are harder to deny. The caution argued for here is not intended to deny the far-right beliefs held by many Trump supporters but to consider how that audience will receive such labeling. It is important to show why the beliefs of Trump supporters fit a particular ideology rather than using partisan labels as an easy shorthand.

[4.3] Second, reinforcing their ethical modalities should be avoided. When dominant groups in society begin to feel their power declining, they often go through the stages of grief as they try to come to grips with the changes (Jones 2016, 198). Denial and anger are the first stage of this process (198–99), and Trump supporters can be understood as expressing these feelings in their response to Trump's calls to "Make America Great Again." Rather than changing in order to adapt to the new realities, Trump supporters seek to go back to a time when their power and status in society were unquestioned. Pushing them to greater levels of anger is counterproductive because they view their attacks as legitimate. Their dominance is the only way they have ever conceived of the world (Jones 2016, 229), so any means of returning the nation to greatness is seen as justified.

[4.4] Although arousing these supporters' anger via insult and dismissal has cathartic appeal because of their constant attacks on others, what is needed is more pushback against their construction of themselves as powerless. British sociologist Anthony Giddens has argued that power is having the ability to act on the world around you (1984, 14). Powerlessness, then, would be the experience of your actions no longer having an effect. Many Trump supporters are used to being in a dominant position and having the power to shape society. When they look around now, they see their actions having less of an impact on others. Their anger about immigrants seeking asylum on the southern border of the United States or the representation of Nazis in video games is no longer accepted as the default position. They feel powerless because they believe their actions should have more of an effect, while still

wanting to present themselves as the dominant group who should be catered to exclusively. This paradoxical position of powerless dominance can be seen in their claims of their financial impact on the video game industry or other expressions of their inherent power. They believe their desires should be catered to because of the power they inherently have as a result of their dominance within the industry and society at large. They perceive themselves to be powerless because these actions do not have the immediate results they desire. In order to counter this ethical modality of powerlessness, they should be pushed to provide evidence to support their position; they should be forced to wrestle with the contradiction in their claims to powerlessness in the face of illegitimate forces while they also are claiming the power to bring down social and political institutions.

[4.5] Finally, their conception of themselves as powerless is reflective of the ethical framework they are operating under, which argues that the nation has declined and their perceived powerlessness is evidence of this decline. Their perceived powerlessness is the result of their actions no longer having the results they expect; it is not statistically verifiable or the product of a victimhood ideology. It is a strategy for achieving the goals encapsulated in their ethical framework. It is an effective strategy as well; as philosopher Eric Hoffer has argued, people are drawn to mass movements like MAGA because they provide a sense of belonging and identification with something larger than the individual (1951, 35–36). Many Trump supporters are drawn to the movement because the ethical framework of decline Trump has put forward speaks to their frustrations at their perceived loss of their dominant place in society. Moving forward, it is important to determine whether Trump's supporters believe in him because of the resonance between his ethical framework and their existing concerns and prejudices or if they have become true believers in MAGA as a mass movement who will stick with Trump no matter what he says or does. For those who find resonance with his ethical framework, it is possible that a different framework could persuade them to abandon Trump for an individual or movement that better reflects their concerns. For those who are true believers, it becomes more difficult to persuade them to abandon Trump given the fulfilling role that mass movements often provide people (41–42). Our concerns should lie primarily with contesting Trump's ethical framework because this is the course of action most likely to produce results.

[4.6] Fandom provides an alternative perspective on political engagement and behavior. Ethical frameworks and modalities help us to understand how people can take unified action while not being driven by the same partisan ideology. These concepts also help to better explain the personality-driven success of someone like Donald Trump, whose supporters act out of loyalty to him as an individual and not in accordance with a shared partisan identity. By recognizing the differences between partisanship and fandom, new strategies for engaging with political opponents—from being more thorough in the deployment of labels to disrupting their ethical modalities—become possible. A firm belief in Trump's MAGA pledge can only be challenged by defusing the emotions that drive supporters' engagement, pushing them to reckon with their perceived powerlessness in the face of their continued dominant positions in society.

5. Acknowledgments

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6. Notes

1. When analyzing social media posts and other online comments, there is a legitimate concern that the statements have actually been produced by bots and are not being expressed by actual people. For the purposes of this article, though, I am interested in analyzing these posts as part of the public discourse surrounding the game. The posts are treated as legitimate parts of the discourse by the journalistic outlets covering the incidents and are treated in the same way in this article. Should a significant portion of the statements made in response to the marketing of *Wolfenstein II* be revealed to be part of an organized bot campaign to misrepresent the views of the MAGA movement, the argument made in this article will need to be revisited.

2. It is certainly up for debate whether Trumpism is a fully formed political ideology yet. I would argue that it is still in the development stages at this point in time, with Trump's supporters still focused mainly on Trump as an individual rather than on the ideas that develop from his political behavior.

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Praxis

Fanon Bernie Sanders: Political real person fan fiction and the construction of a candidate

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[0.1] Abstract—Writers of Bernie Sanders fan fiction incorporate elements of both canon and fanon in their characterization. Canon elements largely reflect the mediated reality of the senator and showcase the impact of media-produced narratives on followers. Writers incorporate fanon elements as a manner of altering unsatisfying realities and participating in communities in which they are not typically welcomed, such as politics. Engaging in writing political real person fiction enables fans to envision altered realities and gain a greater understanding of politics, a phenomenon which was especially evident during the unpredictable 2016 election season.

[0.2] Keywords—Archive of Our Own; Candidate branding; Political fandom; US presidential election

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Political real person fiction (RPF) builds on the public identities of politicians, using their media appearances, social media activity, and campaign platforms to provide the source texts, or "canon," of the fiction. Similarly to writers of fan fiction who depict fictional characters, writers of political RPF fill in the typically one-dimensional personas of political figures and, as a community, attribute favored characteristics to different candidates. These characteristics, based not in fact but in community belief, are considered "fanon" versions of real people (although some argue these "real" people are merely personalities cultivated for media consumption) (Hagen 2015; McGee 2005). An examination of Bernie Sanders–tagged fanfiction on Archive of Our Own (AO3) reveals a combination of canon elements, such as physical appearance, and fanon constructions, such as romantic entanglements and a rebellious persona. These fan writings provide insight into fans' perceptions of the senator, including those aspects that have most captured fans' imagination and support. Canon elements serve to create a connection between the altered reality of the fan fiction and Sanders as a candidate, while fanon elements enable fans to accentuate (or fabricate) certain

aspects of Sanders's personality or lived experience to create a more satisfying version of the candidate's life. While candidate image building and branding have been managed by paid campaign staffers in the past, in the current post-broadcast era, political fans have begun participating in the branding of candidates alongside more traditionally cultivated official campaign narratives. Investigating fan fiction featuring Bernie Sanders can therefore provide insight into the evolving practices of candidate image management.

2. Literature review

[2.1] RPF involves fans creating stories about real people rather than the fictional characters of traditional fan fiction. In keeping with the practices of fan fiction more generally, RPF builds from an official canon (Hagen 2015, 45), although RPF differs from traditional fan fiction in that there is no unified canon such as a novel or film (Popova 2017). Instead, RPF-related fan fiction communities expect writers to incorporate information about celebrities' "individual personae and cultures," as well as themes from previous fan works (Hagen 2015, 46). Media representations of celebrities, from "concert performances and interviews to articles and personal interaction," serve as the "blueprint of the 'real' star[s]" (Busse 2006a, 259) from which fans can develop complex identities to flesh out celebrities in a process of humanization (Busse 2006b, 214). Furthermore, fans can adapt and interpret the source text in any number of ways, incorporating the elements of celebrities' public personae that best align with the writers' desires (Hagen 2015, 47).

[2.2] Following the commodification of mass media, an increasing overlap between politics and entertainment developed (Wheeler 2013b, 60) that led to the celebritization of contemporary politics. Political figures seeking to appeal to a mass audience appear increasingly frequently on popular media such as television talk shows (Drake and Higgins 2006, 88) and rely on the development of campaign "narratives" that appeal to the public (Wheeler 2013a, 87). These narratives facilitate the formation of fandoms around the mediated identities of specific candidates. Voters typically look for specific qualities such as "honesty, intelligence, friendliness, sincerity, and trustworthiness" (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019, 917), and candidate image building therefore often focuses on promoting politicians as possessing these attributes. Candidates' use of social media such as Twitter also contributes to their celebritization, as politicians can engage directly with their public, "narrow[ing] the boundaries between the public and private life of politicians" (Ekman and Widholm 2014, 519). These social media accounts, along with mainstream media appearances and political platforms, are considered source material, or canon, for RPF centered on specific politicians.

[2.3] Canon materials are not, however, always factual and objective. As Raymond Boyle and Lisa Kelly (2010) contend, analyses in television studies are often complicated when attempting to create a distinction between "personality," or those who appear in factual media, and "actor," or those who appear in fiction. In some sense, even personalities are always acting, as they are intentionally cultivating a specific image. Writers of RPF often consider a celebrity's identity to be "in some sense fabricated" (Hagen 2015, 48) as it is "created for the consumption of the public" for the purposes of profit (McGee 2005, 174). Kristina Busse (2017) argues that celebrity RPF incorporates "available material while inventing what is not and cannot be known," revealing a complex relationship with media

representations, which these fans "simultaneously believe and disavow" when characterizing the object(s) of their celebrity fandom (44).

[2.4] In RPF, frequently ficed (fan fictionalized) celebrities develop a "fanon," that is, "a collection of generally accepted character traits that accrete from...fan productions" (Hagen 2015, 46). These characteristics build on canon but have more basis in community/author desires than in fact (Hagen 2015, 46). Through incorporating both fanon and canon, communities build a network of texts that ultimately conveys the community's assumptions and beliefs about featured celebrities (Piper 2015). While RPF writers combine fact and fiction in their stories, the fanon identities of their characters are understood to be more reflective of a "fandomwide conceit" than any reflection of "real" celebrity identities (Busse 2006b, 209).

[2.5] Political RPF is likewise a mixture of canon and fanon. As Amber Davisson (2016) argues, political discourse tends to "push aside emotional language in favor of rational argument" (§ 2.1). Such rationality often fails to inspire traditional political action, like voting, leading political advertising firms to prioritize the development of emotional connections with candidates. They often do so by casting issues in "starkly moral terms," giving citizens both a "hero" to support and a "villain" to fight against (Serazio 2017, 235). Fans draw on these narratives in the development of their fictions, both extending and modifying characterizations of specific politicians. Given the highly crafted media representations of politicians, it is not surprising that political fans engage in cultural production similarly to fans of other media.

[2.6] As can be expected, then, fans of Sanders draw on campaign materials to extend and modify the senator's brand. As Pekka Kolehmainen (2017) argues, "Much of Sanders's heroic narrative was...performed...by people participating in the numerous online initiatives around him" (7). Fans actively participate in the construction of Sanders's brand via social media. Some fans even create accounts, such as the Twitter @SassySenSanders, which tweets "snappy comebacks and pointed responses" to issues in the manner in which supporters wish Sanders would respond (Kolehmainen 2017, 8). These fan-produced narratives distill Sanders's core values, resulting in the "larger-than-life" version of the Senator (Kolehmainen 2017, 12–13) that appears in much of the fan fiction on AO3. Sanders fan fiction writers use canon elements to ground their fictions in reality and develop fanon elements to highlight (or fabricate) aspects of the candidate's persona that have been insufficiently covered in the press. An investigation of Bernie Sanders fan fiction can therefore provide valuable insight regarding fan engagement with, and adaptation of, mediatized politics.

3. Methods

[3.1] Online fan fiction is frequently housed in searchable, fan-run archives. This study focuses on AO3, on which an August 2018 search for "Bernie Sanders" produced eighty-two political RPFs featuring the senator, who ran for the democratic nomination for president in 2016. An analysis of these narratives reveals the canon facts incorporated from source texts as well as the fanon characteristics attributed to the senator by fan authors. The fanon

components of these fictions reveal fan beliefs regarding aspects of the senator's life and personality that are not sufficiently covered in popular media. Fan beliefs regarding Sanders are demonstrated as fans seek to complete the characterization of Sanders begun through media appearances, debates, and interviews.

[3.2] Similarly to Busse's (2017) research in *Framing Fan Fiction*, my work sought to find a balance between "the particular and the universal" (2). Like Busse, I aimed to recognize the specific context of the stories I chose for my case studies; while these stories do offer insight into Bernie Sanders fan fiction as a genre, my results are not wholly generalizable. In order to determine which characteristics are attributed to fanon Bernie by the AO3 community, I investigated the eighty-two fics tagged with "Bernie Sanders" on AO3. Of the eighty-two stories, thirteen had tagged Sanders but did not feature him in the body of the text. As a result, these were not included in the analysis. I have based my conclusions on the remaining sixty-nine fan fictions that contained descriptions of Sanders. Thirty-seven of these fictions featured Sanders as a main character, while the remaining thirty-two merely mentioned the senator in passing.

[3.3] When reading, I particularly investigated three areas of content related to Sanders's depiction in the texts: description, actions, and dialogue. These categories were developed a priori to aid in the organization of my data, with the above categories relating to expository data about Sanders's character, Sanders's activities in the text, and dialogue either originating from, or pertaining to, Sanders, respectively. I then developed connections between fan fiction content and known features of Sanders, his platform, and journalistic coverage to determine which characteristics were based in source texts, such as campaign materials, photographs, and interviews. From these comparisons I determined the main themes evident in both source materials and fan fiction. Sanders's personal appearance, his political leanings, and the particulars of his platform were the predominant features of source texts that were incorporated by fans. Depictions of Sanders that did not originate in source texts I attributed to fanon; trends across fan fiction on AO3 thus provide insight into characteristics that fans attribute to Sanders despite little or no evidence to support these beliefs outside of the fan community.

[3.4] Researching fan fiction, similarly to researching any materials produced and disseminated via social media, requires careful consideration of the ethics of analyzing and incorporating such texts. Fan studies is an emerging discipline and as such is still developing its own ethical standards (Nielsen 2016, 235). Although literary scholars do not typically interact with the authors of the published works they study, the practices of fan writers, as well as fan fiction communities, vary drastically from more traditionally published works, and thus require different standards of conduct (Nielsen 2016, 234). Likewise, the assumption that all works published via the internet are available for researchers' use fails to account for fan writers' understanding that their primary audience is their fan community rather than academics or others not involved in the community (Reid 2016, 278).

[3.5] In addition, the marginalized identities of many fan fiction writers call for researchers to take steps to minimize potential risk to these communities. As a 2013 census of AO3 determined, 54 percent of users identified as members of minority groups (centrumlumina

2013). In many fan fiction communities, audiences can access a writer's personal weblog by following the hyperlink attached to the writer's name (Reid 2016, 278); fans might also fear being "outed" through the discovery of their legal name and the association of their offline identity with the writing of fan fiction, which is a practice that is stigmatized in mainstream media as the province of "desperate/lonely/very young" women (Nielsen 2016, 245).

[3.6] In this publication I have worked to treat the fan writers in question with respect. While the majority of fan fiction community members are women, there is also a significant proportion of nonbinary people in these spaces (Nielsen 2016, 243). I worked to respect these identities by making no assumptions about writers' pronouns. In addition, I realize that pseudonymity does not guarantee privacy (Reid 2016, 276), so I have refrained from quoting extensively from specific fics in order to avoid needing to provide identifiable information.

4. Results

[4.1] Several characteristics evident in Sanders fan fiction were derived from canon, that is, they are directly related to information included in source texts such as journalistic coverage of the senator. While the descriptions of Sanders in the popular press are themselves not objectively truthful and, in fact, participate in branding practices similar to those used by both campaign officials and fans, fans treat coverage of the senator in much the same manner as other fandoms treat their source texts. As Busse (2017) emphasizes, if fans collectively choose to include information in their canon, "it has become truth within the fannish universe" (167). One "truth" in the Sanders fan fiction universe is Sanders's physical appearance (see figure 1; Roeder 2016), to which fan representations of the senator generally conform. For instance, six of the fan fictions here analyzed describe Sanders's white hair with varying descriptors, such as "fluffy," "frizzy," "wispy," and "frail." The connotations of each of these word choices can also provide insight into both press portrayal of Sanders and fan reception. While "fluffy" pleasantly connotes a soft texture, "frizzy" is generally associated with an unkempt appearance. In addition, both "wispy" and "frail" can be related to old age; fans using these terms may be building on popular debates about whether Sanders's age should be considered prohibitive in his bid for the presidency. As noted in the *Time* headline in 2015, "Bernie Sanders Would Be the Oldest President in US History" (Wilson).



Figure 1. Bernie Sanders in an appearance at Roosevelt High School on January 28, 2016, wearing his usual campaign attire of wrinkled suit and tie, which was consistently represented by fans in their fics (photo credit: Phil Roeder).

[4.2] Authors also make note of Sanders's apparel. One depicts Sanders "in a suit and tie," which is consistent with Sanders's public appearances, while others focus on the worn appearance of Sanders's clothes, which Paul Fahri (2015) asserts look "as if he pressed them under a mattress" or "borrowed them from another man's closet" in the *Washington Post*. This bedraggled appearance is in keeping with the above example of the depiction of Sanders's hair as "frizzy." Sanders is described as wearing a "ratty" pullover in one fic, while in another he sports a shirt with sleeves not quite long enough to cover his arms. One writer in particular describes Sanders's appearance as "a little worn," and Sanders's "baggy jacket" even saves him from an assassination attempt by the Zodiac Killer. These descriptions depict Sanders in a fashion consistent with press coverage, such as Fahri's contention that Sanders's attire is an "anti-fashion statement" compared to politicians with image handlers. Part of Sanders's brand is that he is different from establishment candidates like Clinton, and his appearance may have been calculated to emphasize this difference during his 2016 campaign for the Democratic candidature. By incorporating coverage of Sanders's personal appearance

from source materials, fan writers participate in upholding and extending this brand.

[4.3] Unlike fandoms with a unified source text, political fandom incorporates a diverse range of sources that can be considered canon, even when these sources may contradict one another. For instance, a *Politico* article published in early 2016 warns Democrats to "Beware [of] Sanders' Socialism" (Starr 2016), while the *Atlantic* argues, "Bernie is Not a Socialist" (Tupy 2016). As stated above, Busse's (2006b) research on celebrity fandom concludes that fans must both believe and contest realities constructed by popular journalistic sources. The choices fans make when determining which constructions to embrace and which to reject reflect the narrative they choose to believe or tell about the candidate. In this case, fans (and potentially anti-fans developing negative portrayals of Sanders) were divided in the elements of Sanders's brand/canon that they chose to include in their fictions. Sanders's position as a democratic socialist appears in many of the fictions, although some writers label him purely a socialist, or even a communist. In several stories, Sanders only makes a brief appearance to plug socialist propaganda; in one, Sanders's fictional Instagram is likewise filled with socialist content. The varying classifications of Sanders's politics are emblematic of the differences in image building practiced by the official campaign and journalistic sources and their respective competing narratives about the candidate.

[4.4] The particulars of Sanders's platform, however, remain consistent across fictions. Opposition to wealth inequality is evident in fans' depictions of Sanders. Part of Sanders's platform focused on raising taxes on wealthy Americans in order to provide free higher education and a \$15 minimum wage (Egan 2015). Sanders's campaign to raise the minimum wage is explicitly mentioned in one story, while another remarks on Sanders's desire for wealthier citizens to pay increased taxes. However, although these key aspects of Sanders's 2016 platform are incorporated into fan characterizations of Sanders, they typically have little bearing on the plot development of the fictions.

[4.5] Sanders's position on healthcare is likewise included in fan depictions of the senator. Even following his defeat in the 2016 Democratic primary, Sanders continued to fight for affordable healthcare. In 2017, Sanders revealed his "Medicare for All" bill, which would result in single-payer healthcare for American citizens (Gambino 2017). The Sanders fictions reflect the senator's continued fight for healthcare; one describes Sanders as looking as satisfied as he would if he succeeded in providing healthcare to all American citizens. There is no further discussion of the healthcare bill in the story, signaling that the writer assumes readers will have prior understanding of Sanders's proposed policies from source texts before they encounter the fiction. A slightly less coherent Sanders featured in another fic yells, "Single payer healthcare!" His brief appearance in this story condenses the complexity of Sanders's platform to a single talking point; again, the writer assumes readers share common knowledge about Sanders derived from official media representation. In contrast to the above debate regarding Sanders's general political values, the consistency of fans' depictions of Sanders's positions on income inequality and healthcare indicate a coverage of these issues that is unified within the Sanders canon. The diversity in fans' labeling of these policies is similar to the variety of framing techniques employed in journalism. While the details of Sanders's platform remain consistent, both mass media sources and fans can choose how to present all or part of this information, which can impact "learning, interpretation and

evaluation of issues and events" (de Vreese 2014, 141) and result in differing labels. Although it is impossible to tell where exactly fans acquire source material, looking at news framing can provide a helpful analogue for understanding the choices fans make when incorporating these materials in their creative works.

[4.6] Fans' use of canon material in their fan fiction represents their impressions of Sanders from media portrayals. His physical appearance and the core values of his campaign were well-documented in mainstream media during his 2016 campaign, and these impressions carried over into fan portrayals of Sanders. However, there are several characteristics associated with Sanders that have little or no direct connection to source texts. For instance, although Bernie is married to Jane Sanders, many of the Sanders fictions involve Sanders in relationships with other politicians. In six of the fictions, Sanders is involved sexually with Trump. The sex scenes are often graphically depicted, with one partner sexually dominating the other. The second most common pairing is Sanders and Hillary Clinton, in which the relationship tends to be romantic rather than purely physical. In the three fictions featuring the Sanders/Hillary Clinton pairing, Sanders provides emotional support to Clinton, who is depicted as the much-abused partner in her relationship with her real-life husband, Bill Clinton.

[4.7] Both "slash" (so named for the slash mark used in denoting a same-sex erotic fiction as male/male, female/female, etc.) and "shipping," or "the pairing of two fictional characters into a romantic relationship" (Gonzalez 2016, ¶ 1.1), are common in fan fiction communities. Slash featuring politicians continues a trend of sexualizing political candidates that has extended from the 1990s onward (Rowley 2017, 2). The sexual remarks Trump made during his 2016 candidacy further contributed to the "pornographication of the election" (Rowley 2017, 10); thus, it is not surprising that Trump features in slash fictions on AO3. Although motivations for writing slash vary, slash featuring politicians can serve as a forum for political satire and commentary. For instance, in Trump/Putin slash, Trump is "infantilized...and feminized by his submission, sexual or otherwise" (Rowley 2017, 21). Sanders/Trump slash on AO3 likewise positions Trump as sexually submissive to Sanders. The juxtaposition of Sanders and a submissive Trump serves to critique Trump's masculinity and ability to lead while attributing strength and dominance to Sanders.

[4.8] The shipping of Sanders and Hillary Clinton can provide a variety of insights regarding fan adoption of journalistic perspectives and coverage. In these fictions, Sanders is positioned as the "hero," providing care and support to his rival despite their political differences. These narratives build on the branding of Sanders as a political "hero" to the middle class that was prevalent throughout his 2016 campaign. As Sanders and Clinton were the only two candidates who remained in the race for the duration of the Democratic primary, popular media coverage of later debates and political events offered source material showcasing interactions between the two. Just as slashers of pop stars "find cracks in the 'façade' of the official star text" (Busse 2006a, 259), writers of Sanders and Clinton shipping stories elaborate on an imagined relationship between the two built on their frequent proximity and interactions during media events. In these stories, Clinton is depicted as a victim of her husband, Bill, and Sanders provides comfort and support. The abusive relationship between Hillary and Bill Clinton also builds on narratives prevalent in popular

journalistic coverage, which often speculated on "the legitimacy of their marriage and the inner workings of their political partnership" (Davisson 2016, ¶ 2.5). While Clinton is arguably sympathetic, especially in comparison to fan fiction featuring Trump and Sanders, she is often depicted as a helpless and emotional character. Media coverage of women often frames them as ruled by emotion, and therefore incapable of logical thought (Davisson 2016, ¶ 2.6), and characterizations of Clinton in these stories are consistent with this framing. Sanders is, in comparison, portrayed as a competent and collected caregiver.

[4.9] Fanon characteristics of Sanders also include the depiction of Sanders as "cool" and rebellious. In several of the fictions, characters note that there is "something cool about Bernie." The depiction of Sanders as "cool" in fan fiction is consistent with other fan portrayals of Sanders, such as in the "Bernie or Hillary" meme that riffs on a traditional campaign poster and positions Sanders as culturally savvy. Figure 2 (Hugpocalypse 2017) is an example of this meme, depicting Sanders as well-versed not only in the entire corpus of the band Radiohead's works but also its impact on the rock genre. In contrast, Clinton knows only the band's single, "Creep." The consistency with which fans characterize Sanders as "cool" and culturally informed both in memes and fics demonstrates how fan writings, when accepted by the fan community, become "truth" (Busse 2017, 167). Fans can then continue building upon such "truths" in much the same way that they incorporate materials from source texts.

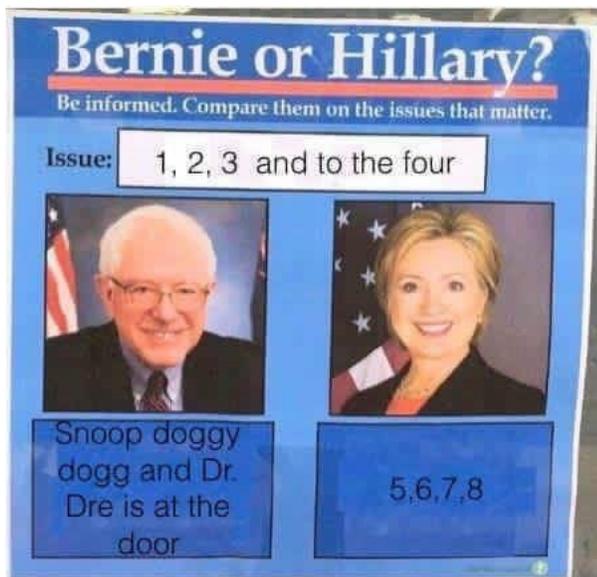


Figure 2. An example of the popular "Bernie or Hillary" meme that focuses on the band Radiohead; Sanders is depicted as familiar with the band's entire repertoire and their influence on the rock genre, while Clinton can only name one song.

[4.10] In addition, many of the fics studied characterize Sanders as rebellious. In one story, Sanders is primarily referenced by his nickname, "Antiestablishment," which he supposedly earned by "shaking up the status quo." In others he is variously described as a "gonzo politician" and as "notdonefighting" against the establishment. Interestingly, two fan fictions depict Sanders as a musician in a traveling band, one who was likewise ready to fight, although in these stories, he engages in physical violence. Even in the two fictions in which

Sanders appears as a white Persian cat, his grumpiness and combativeness are noted as key characteristics. Regardless of whether characterizations of Sanders are rooted in reality or transplant Sanders in an unfamiliar context, Sanders is a character who is prepared to fight to change existing circumstances.

[4.11] Although the actual Sanders does not appear to be particularly savvy regarding pop cultural knowledge or general "coolness," depictions of Sanders as rebellious may still be rooted in mainstream media coverage. In 2016, the *Chicago Tribune* published a photo from their archives of a young Sanders being arrested after protesting segregation in 1963 (Skiba). The photo's circulation online potentially served to inspire representations of Sanders as rebellious. Sanders's own books, such as *Our Revolution* (2016) and *Bernie Sanders' Guide to Political Revolution* (2017), position Sanders as radically opposed to the current state of the American government. In addition, media did refer to Sanders's movement as a "rebellion" (Frizell 2016), although Sanders did not use the term himself. While depictions of Sanders toting spray paint and engaging in brawls diverge from source materials about Sanders, mainstream media coverage may have provided these writers with the inspiration to characterize Sanders as a rebel. Fans' willingness to define Sanders according to these characteristics is driven by the impression management practiced by both official campaign staffers and journalistic sources; Gian Vittorio Caprara, Claudio Barbaranelli, and Philip Zimbardo (2002) assert that voters "develop uniquely simplified perceptions of political candidates' personalities" that privilege traits voters believe to be "central and relevant" (77–78). The characteristics ascribed to Sanders by fan writers therefore provide insight regarding the aspects of Sanders's personality (according to the brand established in source texts) that fans found the most appealing.

5. Discussion

[5.1] When candidates run for office, they develop narratives that appeal to their constituents. Rather than an absolute reality, voters are offered a mediated reality, which results in politicians' seeming little different from fictional characters; voters can fabricate additional narrative scenarios involving these individuals in the same manner in which fan fiction writers elaborate on the hidden lives of characters from books and movies (Waysdorf 2015). Fan writers are not alone in contributing to the construction of a politician's persona, as typical users of social media also use materials taken from source texts and incorporate them into their own unique narratives (Kolehmainen 2017, 2–3). These stories enable individuals to imagine alternative realities based on the viewpoints presented by the candidates; however, these realities must incorporate some material based in the source texts in order for the realities to remain recognizable (Kolehmainen 2017, 4).

[5.2] The elements of canon in Bernie Sanders fan fiction are indicative of the branding practiced by both campaign officials and journalistic media sources. Fan writers' attention to Sanders's physical appearance reflects the content of press coverage, particularly negative coverage of Sanders's age and dress. Danny Hayes, Jennifer Lawless, and Gail Baitinger (2014) contend that the physical appearance of candidates matters to voters, particularly when their appearance is the subject of critiques in the press (1196). As press coverage of Sanders often highlights his disheveled appearance, this has become an integral component

of his brand and one that fan writers often include in their fictions. Fans' faithfulness to certain aspects of Sanders's platform likely stems from his regular use of social media for discussion of key issues. Kolehmainen (2017) argues that when candidates have a high level of social media capital, top-down narratives are more common (5); Sanders's extensive use of social media likely helps to enforce certain aspects of his platform, such as his dedication to income equality and healthcare access.

[5.3] Fans contribute to the branding of Sanders through their development of fanon characteristics, which reflect fans' idealized version of Sanders. During the 2016 presidential election season, fans incorporated information from canon sources and popular culture in their RPFs to ultimately participate in candidate brand building, "easily discard[ing] those elements they found unfavorable in their candidate and focus[ing] on those that supported the story being built" (Kolehmainen 2017, 3). As is outlined above, the branding of candidates, which originated in the practices of professional campaigners, develops links between aspects of policy and emotional attachment to candidates by promoting qualities such as "authenticity, approachability, and attractiveness" (Scammell 2007, 187). Campaigners, and now citizens, can develop and sustain consumer brand loyalty to candidates in the same way that marketing professionals build loyalty to product lines.

[5.4] While slash and shipping can enable the exploration of "issues of sexuality by reading and writing...desires, and by acknowledging and sharing sexual preferences" (Busse 2017, 159), slash featuring Sanders and Trump appears to primarily serve as a venue for criticism. The strength of Sanders and the weakness of Trump are emphasized in these stories as fan writers simultaneously contribute to the branding of both candidates. Likewise, stories featuring ships of Sanders and Clinton position Sanders as a leader and caregiver, more capable of serving the office of the President than the emotional Clinton. Rowley's (2017) finding that Trump/Putin slash fictions offer "a heavy dose of political critique alongside their satirization of Donald Trump's sexuality" (11) is consistent with the practices of political RPS (real person slash) writers on AO3, who use the platform and community to convey their perceptions of candidates.

[5.5] Participation via "informal, noninstitutionalized, nonhierarchical networks" allows greater democratic participation (Brough and Shresthova 2012, ¶ 3.2). Sanders fans on AO3 can express support or disdain for candidates through writing and sharing fan fiction with the community. In so doing, fans not only extend the branding practices of campaign officials and journalistic sources but also help to further develop politicians' brands by creating and incorporating fanon characteristics. Political RPF offers an opportunity for fans to shape the image of their favored candidates and promote qualities that best exemplify those desired by fans.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] Studying the political fan fiction on AO3 provides insight into the simultaneous construction of political brands by campaign officials, journalistic sources, and fans. Fictions centering on Sanders emphasize the elements amplified in media narratives, such as his appearance and the core values of his platform, as well as building elements into Sanders's

brand to address aspects of the candidate fans found unsatisfying, namely his failure to be more assertive and "sassy." While further research is necessary to determine the extent of branding practices employed by political fans on other platforms, this study provides insight into the evolving practices of political branding and image management. As user-generated content plays an increasing role in the political landscape of the United States, an understanding of how fans both build and extend political brands will be essential to future political successes.

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Praxis

Positivity, critical fan discourse, and "Humans of New York"

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[0.1] Abstract—"Humans of New York" (HONY) is a popular photography project, with a global fandom and great outreach on social media platforms like Facebook. However, the creator of HONY has placed heavy restrictions on political discourse within the fan page in order to maintain the spirit of goodwill and positivity for which the fandom has come to be renowned. Yet the culture of positivity on HONY may be problematized: two case studies show that positivity was utilized to protect white men at the expense of women of color. HONY fans have pushed back against the culture of positivity by reclaiming the right to engage in political discourse or by creating alternate spin-off groups that engage with local political issues. Case studies of HONY provoke questions about what it means to engage in political discourse in a fandom that is premised on lying outside the realm of politics.

[0.2] Keywords—Critical discourse; Fandom; HONY; Photography; Politics; Spin-off; Brandon Stanton

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1. Introduction

[1.1] "Humans of New York" (HONY) is a photography project started in 2010 by Brandon Stanton, with the aim of gathering 10,000 portraits of New Yorkers framed against an interactive map of the city. Stanton engaged his subjects in conversation by asking them questions like "What is your greatest struggle?" or "Give me one piece of advice" and presented the responses as micro-stories captioned onto each photograph. The stories were posted on Stanton's blog as well as the HONY Facebook page, where fans came together to discuss the stories and their emotional impact. Empathy evolved into a desire for civic intervention as the fans began expressing a desire to help the subjects of the photographs through funds or resources, and between 2012 and 2018, Stanton transformed HONY from a street photography project to a social change initiative. The use of reform photography as a way of implementing social change is not unprecedented. In 1890, photographer Jacob Riis published a book documenting the bleak lives of the Mulberry Street immigrants, which resulted in legislation banning the construction of dark, poorly ventilated buildings in New

York (Riis [1890] 2014). During the Great Depression, Dorothea Lange's photographs of displaced farm workers and immigrants were central to bringing their plight to public attention (Nardo 2011). HONY also bears similarities to what social documentarian Glenn Ruga calls "actionable" as opposed to "representational" photography, or photography that sparks public discourse, spurs reform, and changes the way we think about the world (quoted in Bogre 2012). Actionable photography initiatives eschew the traditional model of journalistic objectivity for an empathetic storytelling model, through which stories of abuse, survival, and justice can be documented and shared with a wider audience.

[1.2] However, there are three main ways in which HONY differs from other examples of actionable photography. The first is the close integration of the Facebook fan community with the social justice ethos of HONY. Although Stanton has a photoblog where his content is visible, he has consistently used Facebook to interact with his fans and invited them to engage with his work through the comment sections. The Facebook page currently boasts more than 17 million fans, and fan talk in the comment sections has played an active role in shaping the pushing for a more interventionist approach to social change on HONY (Sengupta 2020). The second is Stanton's cultivation of a culture of positivity within the Facebook fandom, by championing the narrative that it is a kinder, more compassionate, and less judgmental space than other internet communities. In a Facebook post from 2016, he said: "I think the HONY community is largely composed of people who try to choose compassion over cynicism, and that's why we've been able to accomplish so much." The third is Stanton's repeated insistence that his work is humanitarian, but not political. In a 2014 video interview on photographs taken in the aftermath of the terrorist attack during the Boston Marathon of 2013, Stanton explained this dichotomy: "The media from all over the country was in Boston. I'm the only dude who spent a week there and didn't ask a single person about the bombings. Media naturally gravitates towards drama...I just try to show normalcy." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nW4YJew1pI0>)

[1.3] Despite Stanton's increasing popularity as an actionable photographer, these three elements contribute to a problematic ideology of the humanity of HONY, which prioritizes unconditional positivity over critical discourse on the HONY Facebook fan page. This paper problematizes the depoliticized culture of positivity of HONY and argues that Stanton's vision of a color-blind, universal humanity is heavily inflected with white masculine politics and ideologies, and contributes to an erasure of race, gender, and nationality-based oppression. It also examines two different but noteworthy ways in which HONY fans push back against the culture of positivity. Through a content analysis of two case studies from the HONY Facebook page, I examine how the culture of positivity has been criticized by erstwhile HONY fans, both on Facebook and other social media platforms. On a more transnational level, the Western colonialist impulse of Stanton's coverage of Iran is critiqued by the HONY spin-off page "Humans of Tehran," which foregrounds Iranian political and social issues by encouraging Iranians to regain control over their own narratives. These two forms of resistance complicate the position of the object of fandom within the intersection of fandom and politics, and raise the question of what it means to engage in political discourse within a fandom that explicitly disavows critical engagement in favor of a culture of positivity.

2. Fandom, celebrity, and the culture of positivity

[2.1] Civic engagement on HONY strikes an uneasy balance between fan activism and celebrity philanthropy. Literature on fan activism argues that it is a useful resource for revealing the political potential of young people who are already culturally engaged, and redirecting their networks and energies toward more political goals by deploying existing skills and capacities in new ways (Van Zoonen 2004). Their affective engagement with popular culture provides them with "touchstone texts" (Kligler-Vilenchik 2015) that enable them to map their political concerns onto the contours of the fictional world. Although HONY is not a fictional world, the social justice ethos of HONY fandom bears many similarities to fan activist organizations like the Harry Potter Alliance. What differentiates the HONY fans from being merely audiences or interlocutors is their intense emotional investment (Van Zoonen 2004; Hunting and Hinck 2017) in Stanton's photographs and the stories behind them—they collectively deconstruct the narrative subtext of Stanton's truncated captions and attempt to write happier endings to the stories through civic intervention initiatives such as raising funds, spreading awareness, or sharing resources. In other words, the fan community uses their affective investment to Stanton and his photography to enact a mode of public engagement that fan scholars refer to as "fan-based citizenship" (Hinck 2019), or a wide range of civic engagement actions that draw on the emotional commitment to a fan object. The social connections and the low barriers of participation for the Facebook comment section provide a further impetus toward activism (Jenkins, Ito, and boyd 2016). HONY fans have raised money for a plethora of charitable causes, including Hurricane Sandy, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the movement against bonded labor practices in Pakistan. The fandom has also used their collective hive mind to help subjects of Stanton's photographs locate missing pets, find employment, prevent a small neighborhood bakery from going bankrupt, and get legal counsel for immigrants. Each of these campaigns was premised on the affective relationships that the fan community developed with Stanton's photographs and the conversations in the Facebook comment sections, thereby aligning their civic engagement along the lines of fan activism.

[2.2] Stanton has also attempted to refashion himself as a philanthropist, both in terms of the social justice causes he engages with as a photographer, and his successful fund-raising efforts. Although celebrity philanthropy has a long history, dating back to the development of radio, the networked era has seen a heightened visibility of celebrities publicly engaging with philanthropic causes (Thrall et al. 2008). Research on celebrity activism has suggested that emotional connections cultivated through intimate feelings between celebrities and fans are key to a successful celebrity philanthropy campaign (Hunting and Hinck 2017), because they generate feelings of "affective proxy" through which their fans feel like they are "making a difference simply by feeling" (Fuqua 2011, 193). His fund-raising work with Hurricane Sandy and the Syrian refugee crisis have been nationally acclaimed, and he has received awards, book deals, a web series on Facebook Watch, and the opportunity to work with high-profile celebrities, including a 2015 interview with President Obama. In 2014, the United Nations recruited Stanton to go on a fifty-day global peace tour to war-ridden countries in the Middle East to publicize their Millennium Development Goals project. However, scholars have also pointed out that the carefully crafted subjectivity of a celebrity philanthropist can problematically blur the line between "altruism, self-promotion, and self-

preservation" (Trope 2012, 158), and Stanton is no exception to this. Stanton's subjectivity as a celebrity philanthropist is defined by his self-promotion as a storyteller perpetually searching for the tenuous humanity of human nature, and his subjectivity is key to the culture of positivity on HONY. The narratives that are featured on HONY are filtered through Stanton's personal understanding of what makes a story human, and the culture of positivity is premised on the fan community following Stanton's lead on how to read and interpret a story, instead of mounting independent critical interpretations of it. He has publicly stated his desire for HONY to be a "supportive culture" free of judgement or criticism, where his audience would express compassion for the subjects of his photographs, but refrain from criticizing their stories (Choi 2015; Sengupta 2020). He sees anonymous online conversation as being antithetical to the culture of positivity, and allows his fans to comment only on the HONY Facebook page and not the blog itself. He has also openly announced his intention to ban fans from commenting if they do not meet his standards of niceness. Following an incident where the conversation in the comment section took on a more critical bent, Stanton posted a public announcement stating, "Unfortunately, the 'right to free speech' does not apply here. This is not the place to further an ideology at the expense of an individual...Let's try to get back to saying nice things about strangers. In short, let's make HONY different than the rest of the internet."

[2.3] The culture of positivity on HONY creates a schism between fan activism and celebrity philanthropy. The technical affordances of the internet are often seen as a way for networked publics to circumvent the gatekeeping functions of traditional media outlets, and create their own points of entry into civic engagement (Earl and Kimport 2011; Papacharissi 2014). However, it is also possible for these spaces to create their own gatekeepers, who preclude participation from marginalized voices in the interest of maintaining a conflict-free atmosphere for the majority. Although the social connections and affective relationships that the fans develop redefine HONY as a touchstone text for fan activism, Stanton's moderation of critical discourse demarcates him as the celebrity philanthropist whose personal beliefs and ideologies demarcate the boundaries of political talk on HONY. As the two case studies discussed below indicate, Stanton has repeatedly used his gatekeeping powers to protect white men at the expense of women of color. However, each example also indicates ways in which fans have pushed back against his moderation policies by voicing their opinions in the Facebook comment sections, and even migrating to other digital platforms to continue the political conversations if they were unable to engage in these discourses on HONY.

3. Data and methods

[3.1] The primary research question of this study is how the HONY fan community subverts its founder's contrived culture of positivity and engages in political conversation. To answer this question, I conduct a critical content analysis of two Facebook pages—the "Humans of New York" page created and moderated by Stanton, and the HONY spin-off page "Humans of Tehran" run by Iranian photojournalist Shirin Barghi. On the HONY Facebook page, I focus on two case studies where Stanton invoked his gatekeeping powers to shut down critical discourse on race and gender in an attempt to preserve the culture of positivity, leading to criticism and backlash from the fan community. The culture of positivity that lies at the heart of Stanton's celebrity philanthropist subjectivity is implicit not only on HONY,

but his photographic tour of Iran. Framed against the background of Stanton's depoliticized and color-blind perspective on Iran, I examine "Humans of Tehran" as a HONY spin-off page that follows the basic structural paradigm of HONY, but moves away from the culture of positivity by encouraging Iranians to engage critically with local political issues and regain control over their own narratives.

[3.2] Both "Humans of New York" and "Humans of Tehran" are public Facebook groups, which means that group membership is not needed to view, share, or comment on posts. Accordingly, I identify Brandon Stanton and Shirin Barghi as public figures because of their status as founders and admins of the Facebook groups "Humans of New York" and "Humans of Tehran," respectively, and use their real names when quoting them. However, I have avoided using the real names or social media handles of individual fans. The only exception to this is Brianna Cox, whose blog "Chocolate Pomp and Circumstance" was central to my analysis, and whose name is featured prominently on her blog. Unfortunately, the blog is now inactive, and Cox could not be reached for permission to be quoted. Data for this study was gathered from posts from the Facebook pages "Humans of New York" and "Humans of Tehran" published between 2014 and 2017, manually coded using an inductive approach, and analyzed using textual and discourse analysis. As a member of both "Humans of New York" and "Humans of Tehran," I have long been engaging with the content of both groups. In 2014, when Stanton publicly announced his decision to delete comments that disrupted the culture of positivity, I started using a screenshot tool and cached pages to document posts every time issues of race, oppression, or religion came up, and the post ran the risk of being deleted from Facebook. Using this method, I have assembled an archive of approximately 3,500 screenshots of discussions that have been removed from the HONY Facebook page. While this method of archiving is arbitrary and imperfect, it does offer a countermeasure to the fragility of social media research in the face of online gatekeeping. While there were several posts that had been removed for being too contentious, two stood out as examples that not only revealed the normativity of white masculinity that underlies the culture of positivity on HONY, but where Stanton's gatekeeping practices faced severe backlash from HONY fandom.

4. Race, gender, and the gatekeeping of fan conversation

[4.1] Fan scholars have stressed the importance of paying attention to political talk in "interest-driven networks" (Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen 2014), or spaces where groups of people can discuss politics with their peers in a supportive and enjoyable environment. Kligler-Vilenchik (2015) traces the wide spectrum of conversation in fan spaces from "wizards and house-elves to real-world issues" to young people's alienation from civic action, sometimes because of age restrictions, and at other times because of the exclusionary language and social groundlessness of electoral politics. The fan context, which Kligler-Vilenchik describes as "the love of the stories and the mastery of the text" brings diverse groups of people together, and provides an informal space for discussing political issues that are relevant to them. However, given HONY's uneasy negotiation between a space for fan activism and for celebrity philanthropy, fan talk in the HONY Facebook comments has repeatedly become an area of contention between Stanton and the fans.

[4.2] On April 11, 2014, HONY posted a photo of a white teacher at a school in Harlem, with a caption reading: "I worry a lot about the kids who aren't on the 'college track.' Many of them just don't have a culture of expectation at home." Although the majority of the fandom expressed their support and appreciation for the subject, one HONY fan named Brianna Cox pointed out that a "culture of expectation" can be difficult to attain "when you are in a culture of 'I work 16 hours a day.'" Although her comment was not critical of Stanton or his subject, it was an indictment of the white privilege of speaking uncritically about cultures of expectation in an overwhelmingly nonwhite school district, without addressing the systematic inequalities that sustain these conditions. Following this comment, Cox was banned from posting on the HONY Facebook page, and her comments were removed from the post. Cox, who is a woman of color who owned a blog called "Chocolate Pomp and Circumstance" about race and education in America, responded with a detailed blog post titled "Why I Will No Longer Follow Humans of New York." She wrote from her position as a long-term HONY fan who had been drawn to the fandom because of its social justice ethos, but found the culture of positivity contrived and stifling. Her post concluded with a call for open engagement with uncomfortable issues, like race and oppression, even at the price of discomfiting white people:

[4.3] Critical discussion about race and racism should not be silenced. I hope you will reconsider your choice to ban a person for their attempt to address racism in all of its forms, even the seemingly subtle forms that can be difficult to discuss without people feeling hurt...If you are going to ban people for discussing race, then you must ban all discussion of race, not just the ones that make some white people uncomfortable. (Cox 2014)

[4.4] By publishing a story that provokes the fan community to think about "cultures of expectation" in society, Stanton is invoking a certain social consciousness, but as a producer and a moderator, he is also imposing strict boundaries on the political discourses that arise out of that consciousness, especially when those discourses disrupt the stream of supportive messages. In other words, while the culture of positivity is ostensibly meant to create a wholesome online community focusing on sharing stories, creating empathy, and helping strangers in need, in reality, it is racially coded. Stanton's gatekeeping practices preclude critical discourse, and hold up a single norm of color-blind humanity to which the whole community has to subscribe, or risk censure. The act of removing and blocking comments from marginalized voices from within the fandom is a deliberate act of erasure. Technocratic spaces like Silicon Valley are rife with ideologies of color blindness, which obscure structural and social oppressions under the guise of protecting multiculturalism and diversity (Noble 2013). Cox was permanently blocked from posting comments on the HONY Facebook page, and her condemnation of racial discrimination was dismissed in Stanton's next post: "If you're attacking the subject with an erudite, graduate level vocabulary, you're still attacking the subject. Again, you're not being oppressed, silenced, persecuted, or targeted for your beliefs...But please, write about it on your own blog. Humans of New York can continue to exist without your enlightenment."

[4.5] Stanton's response indicates that the culture of positivity on HONY demanded an attitude of uncritical niceness from the entire fandom, without acknowledging that

individuals are positioned differently on the axes of oppression, and might have experiences that contradict the insouciant narratives that Stanton favors. The erasure of Cox's testimony, not just as a fan but as a cultural critic and a black woman, effectively protected a white man by silencing the voice of a woman of color. Thereby, the innate whiteness of Stanton's vision of humanity is accepted as normative and even rendered invisible.

[4.6] The first example highlights a solitary HONY fan's attempts to exert her right to political talk in the face of Stanton's gatekeeping, but the second indicates how Stanton's actions have drawn more widespread criticism of Stanton from the fan community. It concerned a photograph that featured a Sudanese woman, engaged in conversation with an Orthodox Jewish rabbi. The caption read:

[4.7] I came upon these two on the sidewalk. They were having a conversation. "Excuse me," I said, addressing the girl: "I'm sorry to interrupt, but is there any way I can take your photo?" "Why would you want my photo?" she asked. "Because you look beautiful," I said. And she did. She was Sudanese. There is a very distinct beauty among people from the Sudan, and she was filled up with it. Suddenly the man cut in: "I was just telling her she was beautiful," he said...As I examined the photos on my camera, the man started whispering to the girl. She answered him in a loud voice: "I told you! I'm not that kind of girl."...When the man left, the girl's demeanor changed completely. She seemed shaken. Her eyes were tearing up. "He just offered me \$500 to go out with him," she said. "And then when I said no, he offered me \$1000. Why does this always happen to me?" "It happens a lot?" I asked. "All the time," she said. "Do you mind if I tell this story?" I asked. "Please," she said. "Tell it."

[4.8] The post went viral within moments and was reposted widely by the fan community on Facebook and Tumblr, but within 24 hours Stanton deleted it. He followed up with a disclaimer saying: "There is deviance in every religion, simple as that." He also posted a letter sent to him by the Orthodox Jewish community, which read:

[4.9] You have a microphone that now reaches beyond the humans of New York. You can speak to the humans of the world...often, in our quest to do justice, we rush to false judgment...It's a foundational imperative in the Jewish tradition of *dan lekaf zechut*—judging another favorably—or refraining from judging another unfavorably in the absence of proper evidence.

[4.10] Both these posts have been deleted from the HONY Facebook page since, although the second post is still visible on the HONY photoblog. However, I managed to archive screenshots of comments from the two posts before they were deleted from Facebook. While a large number of the responses to Stanton's original post started conversations about sexual violence and shared personal stories about rape culture, for the purpose of this study I focused my analysis on the 356 comments that were explicitly critical of Stanton in order to better understand how his fans pushed back against the imposed culture of positivity on HONY. I textually analyzed the comments using an inductive coding method, and the data indicated the presence of two prominent themes in the fan responses.

[4.11] The first was in reference to the explicit exoticization of a woman of color by two white men, as evidenced by Stanton's casual statement, "There is a very distinct beauty among people from the Sudan, and she was filled up with it." Rape culture is augmented by practices of victim blaming, where society fosters the belief that it is natural for an attractive woman to experience higher instances of sexual harassment in her personal and professional life (Sills et al. 2016). Of the 356 fan comments in the screenshots I was able to obtain, forty-two argued that not only did the detail about her appearance add nothing of significance to the story, it brought in female attractiveness and sexual harassment together into conversation in a way that contributes to the widespread normalization of rape culture. Critical race scholars have also argued that rape culture in America has been shaped by the violence inflicted on the black female body (Roberts 1998). Female slaves had no autonomy over their bodies, and were not in a position to refuse the sexual demands of white men. The fans' critique of Stanton was explicitly phrased in terms of his insensitivity to the lack of autonomy women of color have over their bodies and narratives. This perspective was represented by twelve comments in one comment chain, which asked Stanton if he would have mentioned her attractiveness in the context of his story about sexual violence if she had not been a woman of color.

[4.12] The second critical response focused on Stanton's decision to delete the post despite the victim's request to document and share her story. The original post faced some backlash against Stanton for not recording a commensurate statement from the rabbi, but instead of asserting his position as a reliable eyewitness who had seen the scene unfold before his eyes, Stanton chose to delete the post—a decision that impairs political talk on HONY in three different ways. Firstly, Stanton's attempt to disguise the racial politics of this story in order to preserve HONY's culture of positivity was a deliberate act of epistemic violence. It mirrored the systematic erasure of black women's trauma and sexual exploitation from the annals of American history (Noble 2013). The erasure is further amplified by the rhetorical gaslighting of his follow-up post. Gaslighting is a form of psychological and emotional manipulation through which an oppressor destabilizes and delegitimizes the victim's testimony through misdirection and denial, and it has been linked to both gender (Stark 2019) and race-based oppression (Davis and Ernst 2017). Stanton's disclaimer, "There is deviance in every religion," gaslights sexual violence against a black woman by misdirecting it into a conversation about religion and calls the HONY fandom to band together in solidarity for a flawed, human religion instead of condemning it as an instance of racialized and gendered violence. Finally, Stanton's decision to replace the testimony of a woman of color with the imperative to "speak to the humans of the world" shows that Stanton's celebrity philanthropy is entrenched in a system of exchange where it is more beneficial to his personal brand to champion a universal, color-blind humanity than to acknowledge humanity as a dominantly white male privilege. As Dyer (1997) pointed out, when constructs like diversity and humanity are leveraged in opposition to race, it furthers the notion that Whiteness is "human, individual, and without race, while the Other is racialized," and the humanity of "Humans of New York" is inextricable from the whiteness of Stanton's philanthropist subjectivity.

[4.13] From my archive of screenshots, I was able to obtain 278 comments that responded to Stanton's decision to remove the original story from HONY. Textually analyzing these comments also indicated two major thematic categories. The first was fans' backlash against

Stanton for removing a post about sexual harassment, despite the explicit request of a black woman, in order to protect a white male harasser:

[4.14] Calling attention to the FACT that the aggressor, the perpetrator of this outrage was the one protected, and the victim is just supposed to disappear? To that I say no. No. Open season on Black women is OVER.

[4.15] You said you would share that Sudanese woman's story. Why didn't you leave it up in respect of her family and her wishes? Why did you side with the man who caused the problem in the first place? Why does he deserve more respect than she does?

[4.16] I'm incredibly disappointed that you took down the picture of the Sudanese woman and her harasser. I know why you did it, but more than protecting his privacy, you silenced a victim of sexual harassment and a member of one of the most marginalized and ignored segments of society: women of color. Why is this man's privacy more important than taking a stand against sexual harassment? Perhaps he should've considered not harassing an innocent woman if he wanted privacy.

[4.17] The second category of responses expressed an active desire to archive the deleted story on other social media platforms, so that the anonymous woman's testimony could not be erased in its entirety. The Tumblr pages for *Feminist Media*, *Stop Street Harassment*, and *Real Men Don't Rape* issued calls to action, asking their individual communities to save copies of the screenshots on their hard drives, and keep reposting them, even as Tumblr tried to take down the posts for intellectual copyright infringement. Comments indicate that the fans' digital archival effort was framed explicitly in terms of countering the erasure of women of color:

[4.18] I will always reblog this, because if this woman were white, the mass-erasure of this image and story would not be happening. and that just speaks volumes to me. The bigotry that contributes to this woman's constant harassment is the same bigotry that led to the erasure of this story in order to "protect" this man. This is a vicious cycle that perpetuates anti-blackness and the degradation and silencing of black women, and women of color as a whole.

[4.19] Tumblr deleted this post from everyone's blog. Here it is again. And people have saved copies to their computers, including me. Reblogging this picture has an educational reason behind it—to show how black women are dehumanized, and then silenced if they ever speak out. Story's not going away. The internet is forever.

[4.20] Jenkins et al. (2016) assert that participatory politics in the networked age is often the result of informal, noninstitutionalized, and nonhierarchical groups in and around the internet seeking to change the world through "any media necessary." Although HONY fandom did not come together out of a shared interest in politics, they do not see spaces of fandom as being divorced from political and cultural issues, and resist Stanton's celebrity

philanthropist instinct to keep HONY depoliticized, color-blind, and free of critical discourse. The two HONY incidents discussed in this study resulted in fans exerting their right to engage in political discourse in interest-based networks, and even migrating to other digital platforms such as personal blogs and Tumblr in an effort to counter the culture of positivity. It also points to the nature of social media terrains as highly contested spaces, where networked publics will use any media necessary to stage guerrilla warfare. As digital culture researcher, I often use screenshot tools and cached pages to archive discussions before they disappear from social media communities, but the same method acquires a more radical overtone when it is used by HONY fans to preserve the testimony of a woman of color, and circulate it indefinitely within their own digital networks. In the face of the racially coded culture of positivity on HONY, the act of posting and reposting the story on Tumblr marks the collective resistance of people of color against the erasure of marginalized voices.

5. Decolonizing humanity in "Humans of Tehran"

[5.1] In this section, I want to analyze the fan-created spin-off group "Humans of Tehran" as offering an alternate model of actionable photography, which replaces the culture of positivity and celebrity philanthropist subjectivity of HONY with a more grounded approach to storytelling. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2018) define media spreadability as a participatory logic that leads audiences to retrofit material to the contours of their particular community. Unlike virality, which is quantified by how often content is shared and circulated online, spreadability refers to how well a media artifact can be altered to fit the contours of a particular cause or community. The "Humans of" model is memetic in its spreadability because it can be culturally transmitted from one group to another, and be personalized and adapted by various communities to tell their own stories (Shifman 2014). "Humans of" spin-off groups span transnational boundaries, and several major international cities currently have their own "Humans of" pages. Pop culture fandoms have fictionalized spin-off pages, including "Humans of Westeros" (<https://www.facebook.com/HumansofWesterosGoT/>) and "Humans of Hogwarts" (<https://www.facebook.com/HumansofHogwarts/>). The format has also been widely parodied, and there are spin-off pages for "Orcs of New York" (<https://www.facebook.com/orcofnewyork>), "Goats of Bangladesh" (<https://www.facebook.com/realgoatstoriesbd/>), and "Non-Humans of Bombay" (<https://www.facebook.com/nonhumansbombay/>). The spreadable media model recognizes that audiences play an active role in determining how the content is circulated—their decisions, investments, and agendas shape the value of the content (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2018). Within the HONY fan-verse, more than one spin-off group has rejected Stanton's culture of positivity in favor of engaging with and documenting local political issues. "Humans of Flint" (<https://www.facebook.com/humansofflintmi/>) focuses on coverage of life in the face of the Flint water crisis, "Humans of CSB/SJU" (<https://www.facebook.com/pg/humansoftwocolleges/posts/>) ran a photo-series on cyberbullying on college campuses, "Humans of Late Capitalism" (<https://www.facebook.com/humansoflatecapitalism/>) runs a steady stream of critique against large industries and exploitation of labor, and "Humans of Hindutva" (<https://www.facebook.com/humansofhindutva/>) satirizes the right-wing, militaristic rhetoric of the Hindutva movement in India. Framed against the context of

Stanton's color-blind, universal humanity and his photographic representation of Iran, "Humans of Tehran" establishes itself as a counternarrative to Stanton's Westernized sentimentalization of the Middle East.

[5.2] In 2012, Stanton traveled to Tehran, and wrote extensively about his experience on his Facebook page. He described how his trip had started with fear and trepidation, believing that the country was "angry, fanatic, and bent on conflict with the West," as portrayed in popular media depictions of Iran, but his fear slowly gave way to a feeling of being underwhelmed: "I was underwhelmed by the danger. I was underwhelmed by the religious fanaticism...The only thing present in a larger-than-expected dose was normalcy. The entire country was plagued by normalcy. Everywhere I looked—on street corners, inside of shops, and even inside of homes—there were normal people doing normal things."

[5.3] He explained that unlike the unfriendly denizens of New York City, Iranians had been warm and accepting of his presence, and happy to be photographed. He also praised Iranians for their love for America and their integration into American culture; they watched the same movies, listened to the same music, and lived in homes "fully supplied with Western ideas and Western art." Stanton's celebration of the Westernization of Iran celebrates traditional white American values—family, hard work, hopes, and dreams—but reframes them as underwhelmingly normal, and therefore human. An Iranian experience made palatable to a white audience is a colonial interventionist project that promotes diversity and tolerance for populations demonized by Western media, but only when they subscribe to the ethnically neutral model of "normal people doing normal things." However, the Western impulse to humanize the Middle East has long been resented by local artists and storytellers, who want to be able to gain control over their own narratives. According to Iranian-American anthropologist Alex Shams (2013), it is demeaning for Iranians to be forced to prove their humanity to the Western world on a quotidian basis: "It seems that just about every other week another Western journalist 'discovers' Iran and its 'manically welcoming' people, explaining to the world for the fifty-millionth time that contrary to the audience's assumptions, Iran is a pretty nice place to visit." The implicit subtext of the Western colonial gaze that equates American cultural integration with normalcy is the essential deviance (or non-normalcy) of Iran's own traditions and cultures.

[5.4] "Humans of Tehran" is a HONY spin-off group that was created on Facebook in 2012 by Iranian multimedia journalist Shirin Barghi, and currently boasts 170,000 fans, despite the government ban on Facebook in Iran. In an article in *Aslan Media*, Barghi expressed the need for Iranian storytellers to have their own narrative space free of the constrictions of a Western humanizing project: "Western journalists and photographers frequently describe their work as 'giving voice to the voiceless'...Our project decentralizes the 'voiceless' approach and we strive to take foreign intermediaries out of the creative process." As a long-time fan of HONY, she decided to start a spin-off page where Iranians could build "a new visual vocabulary through which the world can communicate and connect with Iranians, who have been politically, and in many other ways, isolated in recent years." Content analysis of the 400-odd posts published by "Humans of Tehran" between 2012 and 2018 indicates that although it mirrors the basic structural format of HONY, there are three main ways in which the spin-off page offers a fan-generated alternative to HONY's depoliticized universal

humanity by engaging more critically with Iranian culture and politics.

[5.5] Stanton's account of his photographic tour of Iran portrayed Iranians as being warmer and more welcoming of an American photographer than the native New Yorkers whom Stanton encountered on a daily basis. However, Barghi's own experience with creating the spin-off fanverse of "Humans of Tehran" was quite different. During the government crackdown against the Green Movement of 2009, surveillance equipment was used to covertly photograph protestors at demonstrations, and use them as intimidation tactics. Therefore, when Barghi started approaching people on the streets of Tehran, she found them cautious and suspicious about being photographed anonymously for a public platform. Although Barghi has never spoken publicly about moving away from HONY fandom, her comments are indicative of a certain fannish discomfort she felt when she attempted to replicate Stanton's methods in Iran: "I love the captions that 'Humans of New York' provides for its photos, but it's not the same in Tehran, people don't want to tell their stories. People are very, very private, as soon as people go outside, they become private people and they set up these barriers." As a fan and creator of an alternate fanverse, Barghi's comments complicate the Western colonial impulse of Stanton's textual world of homogeneity and normalcy, and the fact that she publicly acknowledged the messy origin story of "Humans of Tehran" and its intersection with the cultural politics of Iran indicated that she did not repudiate political discourse in favor of a culture of positivity.

[5.6] "Humans of Tehran" also inculcates a space for political discourse, either by engaging directly with political issues or by collaborating with other storytellers. Barghi works with Iranian photographers Omid Iranmehr and Nooshafarin on curating the photographs and translating the captions from Persian to English, and solicits photographs for consideration from the entire fandom, thereby allowing native Iranians to surpass the colonial lens, and tell their own stories. "Humans of Tehran" addresses a wide variety of complex and sometimes uncomfortable political issues, such as government censorship, the growing suicide rate among young women, and the struggles of maintaining transcontinental familial connections in the face of the US travel ban. To encourage young people to vote in the presidential elections, the page ran a series profiling students and young professionals, where they shared what it meant for them to lend their voices to partisan politics. The page also highlights the voices of women in technology in Iran, an area frequently overlooked by American photojournalists. One post featured a female graduate student who had been accepted to doctoral programs in the US, but who had to turn down her acceptance because of the travel ban. Another post interviewed a blogger who narrated a story about becoming weary of the white, meritocratic technoculture of Silicon Valley, and returned to Iran to open an independent bookstore. Political commentary also takes the form of satire, as in a photograph of a newsstand captioned: "Newsstands in Tehran are absolutely awesome—you can find anything in them, lock, stock and barrel." The caption is a mischievous reference to the fact that newsstands in Iran run a flourishing trade in alcohol and marijuana, even in the face of government control and a possible death sentence.

[5.7] The third difference lies in the way "Humans of Tehran" views humanity not through an overtly sentimentalized lens, but as a signifier of communal diversity. Where Stanton saw Iranians as unremarkable in their normalcy and Western integration, Barghi portrays Tehran

as a rich and multicultural metropolis through photographic micro-series of the ethnic minorities in Iran. A series of photos taken at a Sikh *gurdwara* in Tehran speaks of the experience of being a turbaned Sikh *sardar* who speaks Persian with an effortless Iranian accent. Another series features a young man from a Persian-speaking, Muslim minority in China, who had traced his heritage back to the Bukhara district of Iran. Unlike HONY, the coverage of ethnic minorities is not always positive and uplifting. The page has collaborated with the "We are all Afghan" advocacy campaign to raise awareness about the persecuted Afghan refugees in Iran by sharing photographs describing the ethnic discrimination and racism faced by this community.

[5.8] The three differences between political conversation on "Humans of New York" and "Humans of Tehran" are conducted within the infrastructure of allowing Iranians to regain control over their own narratives and depict their culture on their own terms. They affirm that actionable photography can tell stories and raise awareness about political issues without shutting out political conversation, or silencing marginalized voices. Barghi has never publicly disavowed HONY, or indicated that she had become apathetic toward the fandom. However, as Busse (2018) argued, fans can sometimes replace their attachment to a canonical text with an alternate fanverse full of new creative possibilities. Unlike the color-blind humanity of the canonical HONY universe, "Humans of Tehran" can be read as an alternate fanverse that engages with Iranian cultural and political issues in a way that celebrates the community's ethnical uniqueness, while allowing for room to critique government autocracy. It continues to pay homage to the civic-mindedness of the HONY fandom, but pushes back against Western colonial interventionism by allowing the community to tell their own stories, and offers alternatives to the dichotomy of demonization and integration that characterizes stories about Iran in American photojournalism.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] HONY was purportedly meant to create a space for community and storytelling, focused on appreciating ordinary human interactions between strangers. However, as Stanton started getting global recognition as a celebrity philanthropist, the culture of positivity for which the fandom was renowned was channeled into a draconian moderation policy that augmented an invisible normativity of white masculinity. Stanton's model of universal humanity silenced marginalized voices amongst his fandom, and homogenized other cultures in a misdirected attempt to humanize the unfamiliar for a Western, white audience. In 2015, Stanton delivered a lecture at the University of Dublin where he spoke about being in negotiations with Facebook about using keyword filters to moderate the comment section, and altering the Facebook mobile app such that comments would be organized in order of popularity instead of chronologically, pushing the upvoted comments to the top of the post, where they would have the most visibility (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOfp9qTfNjY>). This would allow Stanton to maintain the culture of positivity by upvoting the comments that aligned with his own vision and further suppressing dissenting opinions. Therefore, on a social media platform that is already premised on color-blind content protection clauses, HONY's contrived culture of positivity becomes an even larger threat to marginalized voices within the fandom.

[6.2] Fans have pushed back against the culture of positivity on HONY by voicing their disapproval in the Facebook comment sections, and continuing the conversation on other social media platforms when they were banned from commenting on HONY. They have also used any digital media tools, networks, and platforms at their disposal to combat Stanton's gatekeeping efforts, and make sure that a testimony of sexual trauma was preserved on the annals of internet history. The critique of the culture of positivity and the subsequent guerrilla warfare staged by HONY fans establish their right to articulate their political opinions on an interest-driven network, and affirm that no fandom can be apolitical, even if the object of fandom specifically demands it. The spreadability of HONY as a template for actionable photography also makes it possible for spin-off groups to engage more directly with local politics and representations. "Humans of Tehran" has structural similarities to HONY that makes it a part of the HONY spin-off tradition, but it deconstructs the model of universal humanity, pushes back against Western colonial understandings of the cultural Other, and encourages the community to regain control over their narratives. Therefore, as a fan-created artifact that violates one of the central tenets of the original fandom, "Humans of Tehran" can be read as an alternative fandom that replaces the rules of the canonical text with new rules and possibilities. The varied fan responses to the culture of positivity of HONY confirm that fans can engage with political discourses through a myriad of different ways, some of which might even conflict with the ideologies of the touchstone text. Political talk within fan spaces does not fit the historically understood categories of civic engagement, but it is critical to establishing how spaces of everyday talk contribute to the development of a political consciousness.

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Praxis

To wave a flag: Identification, #BlackLivesMatter, and populism in Harry Styles fandom

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[0.1] Abstract—Scholarship on the influence of celebrity politics often highlights the role of identification in the process of fans' own politicization and centers how a star's politics shift those of their fans. In a series of interviews with fans of musician Harry Styles, this research explores how identification with the singer instead served as the basis for fans' own attempts at shifting Styles's political expression to represent their own values. Drawing on the populist theory of Ernesto Laclau, I argue that Harry Styles fans relate to him as a populist unifier and collective representative of the fandom's values, and mobilize his image for their own political purpose. Rather than passively consuming his music and image, fans rhetorically construct Styles as a collective, popular object through identification with his star image, and they project their own values into the void of his signification. Through an exploration of fans' perception of his values, vague rhetoric, and engagement with #BlackLivesMatter, Harry Styles fans provide a useful new framework through which to explore the populist potential of fandom.

[0.2] Keywords—Celebrity activism; Ernesto Laclau; Identity; One Direction; Pop music

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1. Introduction

[1.1] When Yann Barthès, host of the French talk show *Quotidien*, asked pop star Harry Styles about Brexit in April 2017, the singer demurred, replying, "I don't really comment on politics. To me, anything that brings people together is better than things that pull people apart." Barthès continued, citing Styles's repeated and public support of the LGBTQ+ community. As a member of the British-Irish boy band One Direction, Styles had made a habit of waving LGBTQ+ pride flags at concerts (Mattia 2018); fans and media alike had popularly deemed him a "queer icon" (Rubin 2018). On *Quotidien*, however, Styles eschewed any political implications: "That doesn't feel like politics to me. I think stuff like equality feels much more fundamental." Styles repeated this sentiment in *Rolling Stone* magazine when he defined equal rights "for everyone, all races, sexes, everything" as

"fundamentals" (Crowe 2017). While he eventually admitted to the *Sunday Times* that he was "probably going to vote for whoever is against Brexit," his rationale—that "the world should be more about being together and being better together and joining together" retained the ambiguity of his party line (Murison 2017).

[1.2] Rhetorically, these statements are Politics Lite. "Togetherness" and "equality" are edgeless, uncontroversial signifiers of a liberal-leaning position, which evoke the same kind of polite sentiment as Styles's slogan, "Treat People With Kindness." But although Styles is reticent to associate his public ethos with "politics," his fans have repeatedly made his shows political spaces (Garland 2017; Gross 2017; Leszkiewicz 2017). Around the world on tour throughout 2017 and 2018, fans brought LGBTQ+ pride flags and #BlackLivesMatter signs with the intent to not only affirm their own identities within the "safe space" of his concerts (Khan 2017), but also to receive recognition and support from Styles himself.

[1.3] This analysis explores how fans relate to Harry Styles as a populist representative of the fandom, and mobilize his image for their own political purpose. Utilizing fourteen interviews conducted throughout Styles's 2018 world tour, I argue that fans' relationship to Styles is similar to that of Ernesto Laclau's "the people" and the populist leader, who unites the differences among them through an equivalential chain of signification (Laclau 2002). Through an analysis of Laclau's work, I apply populist theory to fans' differential understandings of the singer and to the rhetorical "emptiness" of his signifier to position Styles as a populist unifier. Then I explore how fans relate to, identify with, and interpret his public performance. Finally, I explore politics and representation within the fandom to analyze how fans relate to Styles as a value-based representative of the collective. The resulting collective construction of Styles ultimately positions him as more than just a consumed fan object. As fans relate to and attempt to shift the pop star's own performed politics, Harry Styles also becomes a representative embodiment of his own fandom's values through the mobilization of his image toward support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

2. Methodology

[2.1] This case study relies on interview data pulled from research for my master's dissertation in the department of Media and Communication at Goldsmiths, University of London, between April and July of 2018. In this time, I interviewed fourteen fans on the European and North American legs of Styles's world tour. The interviews were semistructured and were framed to the participants as guided conversations focused on the ways fans related to and thought about their relationship with Styles, how they understood his personality, and how they perceived his politics. Each interview took place before one of Styles's concerts, and each lasted between forty minutes and one hour. The participants ranged from eighteen to forty years old and were from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and the Philippines. Thirteen participants identified as female; one identified as genderqueer/gender fluid. The participants were chosen after responding to an online call for participants on Twitter and Tumblr in March of 2018.

[2.2] The following analysis applies scholarship in fan studies, celebrity studies, and populist

theory to my original research within the Harry Styles fandom. This work contributes to this body of scholarship by providing a case study for fan identification and interpretation, and provides a unique, populist lens through which to view fan political engagement, which culminates in an analysis of fans' engagement with the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Through this case, my study interrogates the limits of the previously mentioned scholarship as well as attempts to expand its bounds.

3. Filling the void: On rhetorical emptiness and kindness

[3.1] In a review of Styles's October 2017 show in London, Emma Garland wrote for the UK music website *Noisey*, "Harry Styles is a faithful disciple of silence" (Garland 2017). The following spring, Styles fan Erinn, age 37, echoed this statement when she called him "an evasive bopper when it comes to answering questions." This silence and evasion is often literal. Fans met Styles's initial response to #BlackLivesMatter signs at concerts—after posting photos of the signs on Instagram—with frustration at his lack of verbal affirmation of the movement. This indirectness, combined with what Arianna, age 30, called Styles's "controlled" presence on social media, has bred a public reputation for mystery that verges on blankness. Rare access to Styles online and off necessitates, as a result, a variety of interpretive strategies for piecing together who he is, and with what pieces of him fans identify. Although Styles told *Rolling Stone* that he's "not...trying to be this mysterious character," his aversion to social media and the relative dearth of in-depth interviews have contributed to fans' engagement with him as an empty signifier (Crowe 2017). Fans construct Styles as a Laclauian popular object by filling in the gaps of his rhetorical emptiness and uniting around their different interpretations of his signification.

[3.2] Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2002) is first and foremost a work of political theory, intended for application to popular movements and identities. In his work, Laclau makes the case for an understanding of populism as an ideologically untethered, rhetorically constructed unification of a collective through identification with an empty signifier. This means that populism is not inherently right-wing or left, but rather is a form in which the identity of a public—a "people"—emerges and becomes unified among its difference through a leader.

[3.3] Laclau defines an "empty signifier" as "a place, within the system of signification, which is constitutively irrepresentable; in that sense it remains empty, but this is an emptiness which I can signify, because we are dealing with a void *within* signification" (2002, 105). To the extent that we might understand Styles as this empty signifier, it's in how he signifies *himself* while simultaneously constructing a void into which fans might project. This is not to say that Styles himself is empty, but rather that he *signifies emptily*. One example of this empty signification in action is Styles's slogan-turned-charity initiative, Treat People With Kindness (TPWK).

[3.4] TPWK first became associated with Styles in April of 2017, when he appeared on the television show *Saturday Night Live* with a small button featuring the phrase pinned to his guitar strap. When Styles hit the road five months later, a wide variety of TPWK merchandise—T-shirts, tote bags, journals, and pins—was made available for purchase on

tour and online. In 2018, Styles expanded TPWK into a charity initiative, through which he donated profits from sales of TPWK-branded hair ties and a portion of ticket sales to local organizations in each city the tour visited. The funds raised totaled more than \$1.2 million and benefited a range of recipients, from centers for treatment of childhood cancer, to the TIME'S UP Legal Defense Fund against sexual assault in the workplace. According to Styles's management, the organizations benefiting from TPWK were directly chosen by Harry himself.

[3.5] Throughout this research, fans articulated that TPWK aligned with their understanding of Styles, or what Cornel Sandvoss has called the "textual boundaries" of their fandom (2005, 131). Treating people with kindness, as Melodi, 18, said, "is something he would do." But although fans repeatedly noted throughout my research that TPWK was a positive sentiment, as Bruna, 21, further remarked, "it's broad. You can put anything in that category." TPWK, in this sense, can mean anything to anyone, and it is further reflective of the "vagueness" and "imprecision" central to the empty signifier (Laclau 2002, 99). That which Styles communicates—kindness, niceness—is ultimately devoid enough of hard content as to be multi-interpretable. According to Hannah, 32,

[3.6] Everything he puts out there is quite bland. You can kind of put a lot of your personality on to how you feel he would be. In my head, he could come round to my house. I could make him tea, it would be nice, we could be friends together. And I feel like that because there's a lot that I don't know about him, really, so he could be any sort of person. He gives off a general feeling of being kind, interested in things, but you don't really know.

[3.7] That Styles "could be any sort of person" while simultaneously remaining a figure of identification—a "known" fan object—reflects Sandvoss's conceptualization of "fandom as a mirror" through which an infinitely interpretable text "allows for so many different readings that...it does not have any meanings at all" (2005, 126). Sandvoss's mirror-like fan text further mimics Laclau's empty signifier, the void of which fans fill with their own projected understandings. How fans view "Harry Styles" as an idea, as a fan object, depends upon the content with which they fill his "textual blanks" (Sandvoss 2005, 142).

[3.8] Inasmuch as fan identity is "social (that is, discursive)," Laclau's analysis further applies to the rhetorical organization of fandom (2002, 80). As this work explores how fans relate to Harry Styles through discursive processes of interpretation and identification, I argue that they mimic "the people," and Harry Styles is the popular representative upon which they project their demands. According to Laclau, popular identity is constituted at "the meeting point of difference and equivalence" (2002, 80) and "needs to be condensed around some signifiers (words, images) which refer to the equivalential chain as a totality" (2002, 96). Such an "equivalential chain," for Laclau, refers to when heterogeneous elements come to be seen as similar enough to form a cohesive whole—a collective people, or for our purposes, a united fandom. This equivalence of the people through projection and identification is "precisely what subverts difference" and unites the collective (Laclau 2002, 70).

[3.9] The publicly consumed image of Harry Styles, made up of various interpretations and assumptions about his personality, is defined by difference. Fans "all love Harry," but Sophia, 22, notes, "we all love different versions of him." This is central to Laclau's understanding of populism, through which difference among the people is subverted through the equivalence of the popular object. The popular identity of fans, as in Laclau's people, is "condensed around" Styles's empty signifier, "which refer[s] to the equivalential chain" of every version of him (Laclau 2002, 96). That is to say that the collective idea of "Harry" embodies every different interpretation of Styles's star image. Sanj, 22, said this difference defines fans' relationships to each other: "It just goes to show that you can be so different, but [Harry] is such a special connection that still brings you together. If not for Harry, you probably wouldn't speak to that person twice because there'd be nothing more." While fans may interpret or identify with him differently, his singularity subsumes their difference through an "equivalential chain" of signifiers (Laclau 2002, 96). That is to say, for example, all the fans' different interpretations of "Harry"—the "narcissist," the "mystery," the "sensitive dork"—collapse into the singular person of Harry Styles; his fandom is a collection of individual fans of "Harry," through which "equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader" (Laclau 2002, 100).

[3.10] Populism, Laclau writes, is the "terrain of primary undecidability between the hegemonic function of the empty signifier and the equivalence of particularistic demands. There is a tension between the two, but this tension is none other than the space of constitution of a 'people'" (2002, 163). To the extent that fandom might be understood as either an ideologically influenced consumptive strategy through which people construct their identities, or as a resistant process of challenging and reworking mediated forms of hegemonic culture, I posit that it is not totally unlike this definition of populism, or at the very least a close-enough comparison to warrant investigation. And if, as Laclau writes, the "symbolic unification of the group around an individuality" is central to the formation of the collective (2002, 100), then Styles plays this role; his ability to do so, according to Aman, 22, "makes him more than just a person. He's like a symbol." But inasmuch as the construction of Styles as a popular object of fandom requires an understanding of and relation to his signification, fans further engage in processes of interpretation (Dyer 1986; Sandvoss 2005) and identification (Cavicchi 1998; Fraser and Brown 2002; Sandvoss 2005) with Styles's public performance and star image (Dyer 1998).

4. Our stars, ourselves: On Harry Styles and identification

[4.1] For the uninitiated, Styles, 26, is a singer-songwriter, actor, and member of the massively popular, "on hiatus" British-Irish boy band, One Direction. Alongside fellow members Louis Tomlinson, Liam Payne, Niall Horan, and Zayn Malik (until the latter's abrupt departure in 2015), Styles released five One Direction albums. In 2017, Styles released his first solo album, the self-titled *Harry Styles*, and he made his acting debut in Christopher Nolan's World War II drama *Dunkirk*. From September of 2017 to July of 2018, he performed eighty-nine shows on a two-part international theater and arena tour, selling nearly one million tickets around the globe (Aswad 2018).

[4.2] This is a Wikipedia-like summary of Styles's work, a basic scan of his public life viewed through facts and figures. But who Harry Styles is to fans goes far beyond these, for like most megastars, he is famous not only for his artistic production but also for being himself. In the tabloids, his love life and sexuality are fodder for the masses; he is alternately called a womanizer, a teen heartthrob, and the second coming of David Bowie. While fans throughout this research echoed Hannah's sentiment that he "could be any sort of person," they simultaneously identified with Styles's ethos and public performance of self. By piecing together his personality through his star image, the fans relate to, identify with, and derive support from their interpretation of Styles and his beliefs; through this, fans find escape, confidence, comfort, and community. Beyond merely internalizing Styles's qualities into their own lives, the fans' identification with Styles further reflects Sandvoss's construction of fandom as a mirror, in which "the object of fandom...is intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self" (2005, 97).

[4.3] To the extent that relating to or even caring about celebrities necessitates a particular kind of understanding of them—at base, a certain level of knowing who or what they are like—the content from which we derive this understanding, simply put, does matter. Richard Dyer's work, and in particular his scholarship on celebrities as interpretable, "constructed personages in media texts" (1998, 97), can frame broader analyses across fan and celebrity studies on fan/star identification through an interrogation of the mediated sources of these relationships. When we talk about stars, Dyer posits that we primarily reference their "star image": the composite of their promotion, publicity, films (or other artistic works), criticism, and commentary (1998, 60). From profiles in *Another Man* and *Rolling Stone* to press junkets for *Dunkirk*, from the lyrics to his music to his onstage banter, the fans come to know and relate to Harry Styles through his public performance.

[4.4] Although Dyer's analysis focuses primarily on film stars, the framework is useful for understanding the varied media texts that factor into the construction of the idea of a celebrity as an object of interpretation, rather than an individual, original person. We relate to stars more as "thoughts, concepts, or mental impressions of those people" than we do as their unmediated, "real" selves (Cashmore 2014, 18). The star image, then, not only defines the myriad sources of a celebrity's examinable text but also specifically generates investment "according to how much it speaks to us in terms we can understand about things that are important to us" (Dyer 1986, 14). In other words, how we relate to and interpret stars reflects not only their significance in society but also what matters most to us and how we see ourselves.

[4.5] On this subject, a wide variety of scholarship has been dedicated to the ways fans relate to stars as reflective or identificatory objects. Stars' particularly visible performances of individual identity provide potentially persuasive, alternative modes of being for fan emulation and identification (Caughey 1984). Fan studies scholarship on identification with stars is wide-ranging, from embodying a star's aesthetic (Stacey 1994; Fiske 1986), to taking on or performing their politics and values (Click, Lee, and Holladay 2017; Fraser and Brown 2002). In their analysis of Elvis Presley fans, Benson Fraser and William Brown defined identification as when people "reconstruct their own attitudes, values, or behaviors in response to the images of people they admire, real and imagined, both through personal and

mediated relationships" (2002, 187). As fans "selectively integrate" celebrity values into their lives, Fraser and Brown's findings that "the image of the celebrity can be more tightly held and more powerful than the real person upon which it is based" further highlight the role of interpretation of the star image in fan/celebrity identification (2002, 202). Throughout this analysis, this understanding of identification grounds how fans interact with the idea of Harry Styles as a mediated text and identificatory object, and lays the foundation for engagement with his politics.

[4.6] Within analyses of intimacy and identification, several scholars have centered fans' personal role in the interpretation of stars' personalities and values (Dyer 1998; Klein [1946] 1996; Rodman 1996; Sandvoss 2005; Tudor 1974). Beyond the ideological contexts within which stars signify (Dyer 1998), fans' own personal characteristics and traits further contribute to our readings of celebrities. In research on female cinemagoers of the 1940s, Jackie Stacey (1994) explored fan projection onto movie stars, which created an "emotional bond between fan and star" (Sandvoss 2005, 80). This projection is the externalization of one's own values onto the star, which reinforces the fan/object connection and ties one's sense of self to their image. Caughey's (1984) description of identification as one in which fans "temporarily abandon their own identities and social roles and, by imaginatively projecting their consciousness onto the media image, take on alternate personal and social identities" (38) further highlights the role of projection in the process of identification. Fans alternately see parts of themselves in stars, and take on those most desired pieces that they do not have but wish to embody.

[4.7] Bridging both Dyer's interpretive, semiotic approaches to celebrity and the work on identification is Cornel Sandvoss's notable conceptualization of fandom as a space of self-reflection in which "the object of fandom...is not so much a textual possession; nor does it only define the self...[but] is part of the fan's (sense of) self" (2005, 101). This sense of fandom as a "mirror" highlights the role of the fan in "reading" and understanding stars; the object of our fandom "is intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are" (Sandvoss 2005, 96). Sandvoss positions identificatory fan/star relationships not only as a way of reading oneself through stars, but also as a productive mode of internalizing their best or most desired qualities (Cavicchi 1998; Fraser and Brown 2002).

[4.8] In this sense, loving Harry Styles is not only a matter of knowing him but also of seeing oneself within him. As fans come to know Styles on tour, online, and in his music, the depth of their understanding encourages identification with his most desirable or relatable qualities. Whether offhandedly remarking that he reminds them of their friends, or detailing how he has helped them through challenging times, fans repeatedly reify Styles—or the idea of him—as an identificatory figure in their real lives. As a result, some fans express a desire to take on Styles's values and adopt his positive traits.

[4.9] Although "it sounds cheesy," Sophia noted that "treat people with kindness" has personally become "a sort of mantra...a kind of 'what would Harry do in this situation?' thing." Wearing TPWK merchandise similarly serves as a check on Melodi's engagement with others: "Like when I'm wearing the shirt, I'm not gonna go out and be mean to someone

because I'm literally wearing something that says 'Treat People With Kindness.'" These statements support Melissa Click, Hyunji Lee, and Holly Wilson Holladay's (2017) study of Lady Gaga fandom, in which the authors found that celebrity political activism influences the political engagement of the fans. Beyond merely admiring the charity initiative or purchasing merchandise with the phrase, fans saw TPWK as a quasi call to action. Both within the fandom and outside it, Erinn noted that TPWK was "what the world needs more of," particularly with regard to the current political climate. "[Kindness] is important to spread around, especially right now," said Bruna, 21, "and he's one of the best people to do it."

[4.10] Beyond TPWK, identification with Styles manifests in a variety of ways. If, as Dyer notes, "we love [stars] because they represent how we think that experience is or how it would be lovely to feel that it is," then identification with Styles in part functions as a means of relating to what it might be like to be him (1986, 15). For Debbie, 25, identification with Styles provided one such means of navigating her own experience at university. Realizing she was "roughly the same age" as Styles when she first found One Direction in 2013 "really helped [her] becoming a fan." While Debbie studied, seeing Styles "living this crazy life and handling it very well...[was] just really cool." At its most basic level, this kind of identification with the fan object can become a simple matter of putting oneself in their shoes.

[4.11] For others, identification with Styles primarily manifested as an altered sort of presumed intimacy. While Styles's general absence from social media negates any direct parallel to work like Alice Marwick and danah boyd's (2011) study on celebrity and parasocial online relationships, several fans noted believing that they could be friends with him, or that they identified certain qualities of his in the friends they do have. When asked why Styles was her favorite member of One Direction, Bruna, 21, responded, "he was always the one I was most drawn to, because a lot of people I get along with have [his] persona." Aman, 22, similarly noted that she looked up to Harry, "not in a 'king of my world,' kind of way," but because he "seems like one of [her] friends." Fans seeing traits of Styles within those they are closest to reifies the idea of him and grounds their identification in reality: their versions of Harry may be nothing more than "mental impressions" (Cashmore 2014, 18), but their friends are real people they know and understand. That Styles might share traits with these friends further grounds the idea of him in something (or someone) tangible.

[4.12] Just as Fraser and Brown found that subjects "tried to adopt the positive attributes of Elvis...and apply them to their own lives" (2002, 200), Styles fans repeatedly noted a desire to take on his most admirable qualities. Like Elvis fans wishing to reflect "his love and respect for his parents, his politeness, [and] his generosity," Styles's fans articulate a desire to embody certain of his traits and values, from confidence to self-love and kindness (Fraser and Brown 2002, 200). Sanj, 22, Sophia, 21, Bruna, 21, and Laura, 22, all noted that Styles's stylistic evolution has given them confidence to branch out of their comfort zones and has served as inspiration for their own fashion choices. This process of adopting Styles's attributes ultimately stems from a deep identification with his person. As Bruna explained, "seeing him being comfortable with certain things, you're kind of like, if he can do it, I can

do it as well. It's not like we're that much different... There's nothing that can stop me." In the same way that Fraser and Brown believed identification with Elvis among his impersonators was "a means to an end, and not an end in itself," fans' identification with and internalization of Styles's admired qualities similarly functions as a source of personal support (2002, 197).

[4.13] On stage in San Jose, California, in the summer of 2018, Styles read aloud a sign made by a fan named Grace which read, "I'm gonna come out to my parents because of you!" Similar interactions occurred throughout the tour across the United States as LGBTQ+ fans repeatedly credited Styles with a role in their coming out. This sentiment was echoed by several queer participants in interviews, who alternately attributed some part of their own self-realization to Styles or to the community oriented around him. Debbie "figure[d] out [she] was bisexual by being in the fandom," while Laura "realized [she] didn't need a label" for her sexuality when Styles told *The Sun* that he "never felt the need" to apply one to himself (Wootton 2017). While Styles makes his concerts LGBTQ+ safe spaces by waving pride flags and encouraging all present to "be whoever you want to be in this room" (Khan 2017), queer fans further noted feeling personally supported by him as a result of their own identification. For Destiny, 18, Styles's comment about not needing a label was "the biggest thing ever."

[4.14] When he said that, I was like, that's me. I felt that. And the fact that he actually said it was huge, because he doesn't say anything. They were like, are you straight? And he was like, I've never felt the need to put a label on it. I was like, that's amazing. I had never heard someone say that before... I've never related to something so much. I was like, wow, that's awesome. That's my baby.

[4.15] This is not fan/celebrity identification in the sense that Fraser and Brown outlined in their study of Elvis fans because sexuality isn't an attribute one can adopt from another person like "respect" or "generosity" (2002, 200). Nor is it aspirational identification in the way that Daniel Cavicchi writes of Bruce Springsteen fans "holding 'ideal' or 'potential' selves in their minds as a way to guide their actions" (1998, 140). Rather, Destiny's identification with Styles strengthens empathetic ties to him based on qualities of her own. This reflects Sandvoss's understanding of fandom as an identificatory form of self-reflection wherein "the object of fandom... is not so much a textual possession; nor does it only define the self. It is part of the fan's (sense of) self" (2005, 101). Beyond merely interpreting Styles as a "constructed personage" (Dyer 1998, 97) or redefining the self based on adopted characteristics (Fraser and Brown 2002), fans locate traits of theirs within Styles himself. This centering of fans' selves in identification with Styles sets the stage for his populist representation, through which fans navigate both their own interpretations of Styles as well as their own political desires through his public performance.

5. On politics and representation

[5.1] Before the first of two London dates on Styles's fall tour in October 2017, a Black fan named Yasmin passed out nearly 400 #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) signs to the queueing crowd with the intent to gain Styles's attention during the show. After the evening passed without recognition from Styles, fans interviewed by the *New Statesman's* Anna Leszkiewicz

(2017) expressed disappointment and explained their desire for acknowledgment. For Melodi, bringing BLM signs to Styles's gig was a matter of "want[ing] him to recognize us and our struggle" by "actually say[ing] he supports the Black Lives Matter movement" (Leszkiewicz 2017).

[5.2] These London shows kicked off a tour-long journey for Black fans and allies, who continued their efforts to receive Styles's recognition in cities around the globe. Like activists "bird-dogging" a politician through repeated intervention at public events, fans held up BLM signs and flags throughout shows on tour to attract Styles's attention. Just as the popular representative "has to show that it is compatible with the interests of the people" (Laclau 2002, 158), these efforts to get Styles to reflect fans' support of BLM most clearly exemplify the application of Laclau's populism to fandom. Fans construct Styles as a collective, popular object by utilizing their pieced-together understanding of his star image to further position him as a representative of the fandom, seeking explicit representation of their own political will, and mobilizing his image for their own political use. While fans identify with Styles's values and support the ethos with which he approaches sociopolitical causes like March for Our Lives and his charity initiative Treat People With Kindness, they want him—simply put—to do more. Beyond Click, Lee, and Holladay's (2017) findings that fans are influenced by the politics of fan objects with whom they identify, Styles fans routinely work to shift his own political expressions to more clearly represent their own values.

[5.3] My focus on political engagement in the Harry Styles fandom builds on existing scholarship on fan/star identification (Cavicchi 1998; Fraser and Brown 2002; Sandvoss 2005) and the influence of celebrity political work on fandom (Click, Lee, and Holladay 2017; Hunting and Hinck 2017). Although Couldry and Markham's (2007) findings determined an inverse relationship between subjects' interest in celebrity culture and their political engagement, more recent scholarship has found that strong identificatory bonds between fans and their fan objects provide inroads to political interest or participation. Kyra Hunting and Ashley Hinck's (2017) research explores this influence through fan feelings of intimacy, tracing the rhetorical means by which actor Ian Somerhalder of *The Vampire Diaries* (CW, 2009–2017) utilized fan connection with his character to influence support for an environmental activist campaign. Similar work by Click, Lee, and Holladay (2017) in their study of Lady Gaga's Little Monster fan community further suggested that online engagement with an a deep connection to the fan object inspired Lady Gaga fans to become more politically active. Their findings suggested that Lady Gaga's own activist work influenced her fans to "develop their own political positions by embracing and adopting these fundamental aspects of her identity" (2017, 614), and Click, Lee, and Holladay further called for scholarship exploring the role of identification into studies of political celebrity. In this vein, my analysis builds from an understanding of identification with Harry Styles to explore his fans' engagement with politics.

[5.4] Many fans interviewed cited Styles's previous behavior on tour—and, in particular, his habit of waving LGBTQ+ pride flags thrown from the crowd onto stage—as the logical basis for believing he might acknowledge BLM. Waving pride flags, Bruna noted, is "his way of communicating and supporting [the LGBTQ+] side of fandom." That he might then support BLM in a similar manner fell squarely within the "textual boundaries" of their interpretation

of Styles (Sandvoss 2005). In Melodi's view, Styles's flag waving is "a way to see that the person you look up to...cares about you, and cares about problems you're going through." By waving flags fans give to him, Styles becomes the vessel through which certain elements of fan identity are uplifted and supported at his concerts. This is another means by which Styles embodies the role of Laclau's representative, the function of whom "is not simply to transmit the will of those he represents, but to give credibility to that will in a milieu different from the one in which it was originally constituted" (2002, 158). Styles's support of marginalized fan identities ultimately affirms their presence within the alternately constituted public of his concerts. As Kula, 19, noted in an interview with the *New Statesman*, while Black fans "[don't] need his validation, because Black lives will always matter... [acknowledging BLM] is about making Black fans feel safe and loved in that room" (Leszkiewicz 2017).

[5.5] Eight months after Yasmin first passed out signs in London, Styles finally waved a BLM flag and said "thank you for your Black Lives Matter signs" on the second night of two shows in New York City. Though Styles had previously paid tribute to BLM by posting photos of fans' signs on Instagram and through other nonverbal forms like pointing to or waving at signs in the crowd, fans counted this as the most explicit acknowledgment to date. After the New York dates, two BLM stickers soon appeared next to a call to "end gun violence" and a small pride flag on one of his electric guitars. According to Melodi, Styles's statement "was a great moment" because, for the first time, "he said the words [Black lives matter]." But while many fans were glad that Styles recognized the movement, they also articulated a desire for further engagement and advocacy. For Elham, 21, this means that Styles should "educate himself...so [he] can relay that back to [his] fans so that they have an opportunity to open up their eyes or their mind to something that they probably never would have before." In this way, speaking up about BLM becomes not only a matter of acknowledging the movement but also about actively working to influence the positions of those among his fans who might disagree.

[5.6] These desires echo the findings of previous scholars (Click, Lee, and Holladay, 2017; Hunting and Hinck, 2017) on the role and influence of an identificatory fan object's political activism on fans. But rather than exclusively positioning the celebrity or fan object as a source of political education or activist inspiration, the actions of Styles fans invert the direction of influence. Not only do fans attempt to get Styles to make certain political statements, but they also actively work to promote and express a desire for a sincere shift of his values and political beliefs toward their own. To this end, both the Black and non-Black fans I interviewed repeatedly described wanting Styles to actively engage with the causes they support beyond waving a flag or holding a sign, which Destiny likened to "the bare minimum" of advocacy; just posting a photo on Instagram, Sanj said, "doesn't mean anything."

[5.7] The fan response to Styles's lack of engagement with BLM further reflects concerns addressed around TPWK. According to Laclau, "the popular symbol or identity, being a surface of inscription, does not passively express what is inscribed in it, but actually constitutes what it expresses through the very process of its expression (2002, 99). If Styles is this symbol, a blank surface upon which we inscribe our interpretations, he passively

expresses kindness by having TPWK as his slogan but also "actually constitutes" it "through the very process" of "promoting kindness in the charity initiative." Through TPWK, Styles functions as a Laclauian representative by both embodying and promoting the value-instruction of its slogan to the fandom. But throughout the course of my research, several fans interviewed framed their desire for more explicit political action by Styles through the language of TPWK: "Being kind is important," Debbie said, "but it's not going to solve anything. You have to get more political if you want to solve things." Although Styles frames TPWK as an initiative driven by the rhetorically apolitical, good intention of "kindness," the significance (and indeed, anomaly) of a pop star with a value-instructive slogan in 2018 is a point of interrogation for many fans. As Johanna, 21, noted, "it's not gonna spawn some kindness revolution necessarily. I like it, but it's just kind of another campaign phrase almost."

[5.8] As such, appeals for a more political engagement by Styles challenges the conclusions of Click, Lee, and Holladay, who found that Lady Gaga's "political outspokenness and activist work inspired [fans] to develop an awareness of and think more deeply about certain issues" (2017, 614). Though TPWK does to some extent encourage this ethos within the fandom, fans' engagement with Styles's politics is comparably more challenging than it is passively approving. Instead of being exposed to politics via Styles's own views, most fans interviewed articulated a desire for Styles to reflect and represent their own political views beyond advocating the vague impunity of his slogan's "kindness." By bringing BLM signs and flags to concerts, fans not only are attempting to mobilize—reshape, adapt, use—Harry Styles's image for their own representation but are playing a direct role in developing his political meaning. Though this goes beyond merely representing a particular will, the desire for real engagement further reflects Laclau's understanding that "the representative is not merely a passive agent, but has to add something to the interest he represents" (2002, 158). "Representation," in this sense, becomes less a direct reflection of fans' selves and more a constitutive advocacy of them in the public sphere.

[5.9] This addition that Laclau speaks of—fans' desire for the active inclusion of something to their representation—most explicitly pushes the relationship between fans and Styles past Sandvoss's fandom "as a mirror" (2005, 126) and into the realm of populism. While fans' identification with and interpretation of Styles's (empty) signification requires "self-reflective" readings, his true representative power lies in the ability to embody their desires and do more with them through the elevation inherent to his celebrity. This is what fans mean when they speak of Styles using his "platform," what Sanj refers to as the "responsibility" that comes with it. If, as Dyer has written, "stars are also embodiments of the social categories into which people are placed and...make sense of our lives—categories of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on" (1986, 16), then fans' desire for Styles to represent these politics also stems from the privileges afforded not only by his fame, but also by his own social categories. As Elham notes, Styles is "a privileged white man, who has money, who has been given this platform of millions of followers." Beyond the "vagueness" and "imprecision" of language that characterizes Styles's "empty signifier" (Laclau 2002, 99), fans root their positioning of Styles as a popular representative of the fandom in a more active, explicit engagement with politics and the platform provided by his celebrity. More so than just providing a platform for their values, identification with

Styles as a representative relies on a value added to the vessel, a sincerity beyond doing so merely because fans want him to. Styles embracing fans' flags, according to Elham, sometimes feels "like he's doing a job...he's doing what people want him to do, and not doing it because he wants to do it." While fans want him to do more, they also want Styles to really mean it.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] The identification and interpretation intrinsic to Harry Styles fans' understanding of the star and his politics provides for his construction as a collective, popular object. Through embodying the varied, multi-interpretable versions of himself through an equivalential chain of signification, Styles becomes the unifier of fan identity à la Laclau's "symbolic unification of the group around an individuality" (2002, 100). His comparable silence online and the vagueness of his signification otherwise allow for both an identification with his values and a functional engagement with his politics toward representation of fans. Identification becomes not only a matter of fans taking on Styles's interpreted traits, but also one of looking at him and seeing their own values reflected back, whether in a flag waving on a stage or a political sentiment explicitly named. If how we relate to stars reflects both their significance in society and what matters to us and how we see ourselves (Dyer 1986), then fans' engagement with Styles highlights what can occur when fans mobilize the fan object's star image toward their own personal, political ends. To this end, fans relate to Styles as a popular representative of their values, both through identification with what he promotes and by calling on him to make his politics more explicit. Beyond becoming politicized through the fan object's politics (Click, Lee, Holladay 2017), Styles fans attempt to politicize him from the base point of their identification, and to mobilize his image for their own political endeavors.

[6.2] My study of Harry Styles fans is a contribution to celebrity and fan studies scholarship on fan/object identification and explores new terrain through a populist analysis of fandom. On the subject of identification, this work corroborates the findings of established work in the field, in particular Fraser and Brown's (2002) work on fan/star identification. On Styles's fans' political engagement, however, my work provides a new way of looking at certain findings regarding the political influence of celebrities (Click, Lee, and Holladay 2017; Hunting and Hinck 2017). Most scholarship on fan/object identification perceives the relationship as unidirectional from star to fan and explores celebrity politics as an expression of influence upon fans; however, my study illustrates an inverse direction in fan engagement with celebrity politics, as Harry Styles's fans attempt to actively influence his politics into aligning with their own interpretation of them.

[6.3] This analysis is merely one case study of how fans construct and relate to fan objects, and as such it only scratches the surface of potential areas of exploration across the subject. In particular, future research might explore the extent to which fans' politics shape the political expression of their fan object, or the effectiveness of similar attempts by fans to affect celebrity political activism. As the application of populist theory to fan studies opens new lines of inquiry within the former, future research might further examine additional cases of fan construction through this lens and explore whether this analysis might prove

insightful toward understanding populist dynamics of the political sphere. Whether focused on the rhetorical or the externally oriented, explicitly political relations of fandom, populist theory may prove to be a useful framework through which to examine certain fan practices in future research.

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Symposium

How One Direction prepared young women for the revolution

Rachel O'Leary Carmona

[0.1] *Abstract*—The One Direction fandom demonstrates the ways in which the online networks common to fandom can play a critical role in the informal training and education of young women. This engagement in fan networks prepares fans to use networked cultures as a positive force, allowing them to agitate for feminist changes to the current political landscape.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Decentralization; Fan community; Feminism; Mobilizing; Networked; Organizing; Social movements; Twitter

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Once upon a time in 2010, a small group of girls on Twitter created the phenomenon that is One Direction. Widely considered the first band to break via social media (Tiffany 2016), One Direction set sales records for albums, concert tickets, and merchandise. The One Direction fandom was and remains a decentralized network: it doesn't have one center but rather has many interconnected nodes. Decisions, ideas, and information can come from anywhere and travel throughout the group in any direction. One Direction was, in effect, created when young women organized their peers, who organized more young women, until the band became a worldwide phenomenon.

[1.2] The One Direction fandom is as large as it is notorious; there were around forty million active fans at the height of One Direction's popularity, and One Direction fans (Directioners) are known for their extreme passion and behavior both online and off-line. Although there are many articles highlighting the lengths to which fans would go for just a glimpse of the band, those anecdotes are the least important part of fans' stories. What is much more important is the story of how fans mobilized to showcase their love of a musical group. Today, many One Direction fans are young women in their twenties who own and wield their power through the very online spaces that fueled their fandom. The story of how they popularized and engaged with One Direction online thus runs parallel to how they now mobilize to bring about feminist change as part of their resistance to current regimes of

power.

2. Background

[2.1] Online spaces have long been known for their potential both to bring about change and to bring out the worst in people. For example, Facebook has connected millions of people worldwide, but it is also responsible for the spread of fake news and is considered a central site of Russian interference in the 2016 American elections. Reddit is a space where forums share crucial, crowdsourced information, but its seedy underbelly was responsible for Gamergate, a harassment campaign which sought to exclude gamers who did not fit the stereotypical image of young, male, and heterosexual. Twitter has become notorious not only for its ability to mobilize the masses but also as a vehicle for harassment and threats masquerading as free speech.

[2.2] For women, the paradox of online spaces is inherent both in the potential to have the opportunity to build community and exercise leadership and in the potential to entrench and disseminate sexism and misogyny. Sexism pervades not only the ways in which those spaces have been built and maintained but also the internet more broadly, through a general environment of hostility, danger, or even persecution online. But young female digital natives have turned to informal systems online that wield influence over public opinion in new ways. These informal systems often exist under the radar (Males 2018). Rather than engage directly with the tech that reinforces their own oppression, they have instead innovated and evolved, forming decentralized networks (Feldmann 2017).

[2.3] Our lives are increasingly lived in networks. Our friends are one kind of network, our colleagues, a different kind. Movement NetLab, a think tank focused on networked social movements, posits that when we talk about culture wars, we need to think more about network versus network rather than people versus people. The last few years have demonstrated that our opinions are often the aggregation of all the opinions of the people in our networks. These networks have no true central node. Decentralized, self-organizing networks have cores, but they are huge. Similar to the city of Los Angeles, decentralized networks have many centers, and they are all connected to each other. Decisions, ideas, and information can come from anywhere and travel throughout the group in any direction. In decentralized networks, the periphery is constantly stretching outward. As it does so, it brings in new information and members. As network membership grows and members become more closely connected to each other, they also become more likely to take bolder, riskier actions.

[2.4] When people begin to initiate action themselves, without waiting for anyone else to tell them what to do, untapped energy is released. When people collaborate with diverse groups on that action, boundless creativity is unleashed. When people share what they are doing and gain new insights through the reflection that sharing generates, breakthroughs occur. When networks identify leverage points, the system begins to shift dramatically. In a complex communications ecosystem, ideas and actions spread rapidly and many more people get involved (Golan et al. 2016).

3. The One Direction network

[3.1] The One Direction fandom is a perfect example of how online networks function. Online engagement allowed the demands of the Directioners to shape the brand of the band. The grassroots, participatory culture allowed the One Direction fandom to grow to an unprecedented size and strength. Inside the fandom, young women found an outlet for their untapped strength and potential, and they created a vibrant international community capable of large mobilizations and highly coordinated fan actions planned entirely over social media (Bueneke 2015).

[3.2] Directioners played many different roles in the network, from acting as promoters of the band to creating fan fiction and fan art. Some created fundraising drives for charities that the band supported, while older fans provided critical support to younger Directioners facing issues outside of the fandom. In the early days of the fandom, Directioners understood their ability to make an impact on three levels: the first impact they knew they could make was to influence the band's identity. Early on, the fandom realized that the One Direction brand was very responsive to fan discourse on social media. Fan feedback could thus literally change the public behavior or narrative of the group, and often did so. The second impact was to and through the community that the fandom created and the spaces for connection it provided. Most fan activity was about One Direction, but Directioners also supported each other emotionally, socially, and politically through the fandom, instilling confidence in each other and providing crowdsourced problem-solving where needed. The third and least discussed impact was their ability to mobilize a network of support to help propel their cocreated brand forward to commercial success. Over the course of five years, fans supported the band by driving album, concert ticket, and merchandise sales valued at over \$1 billion.

[3.3] The story of One Direction is interesting if you are a Directioner, but the story of the fandom should pique the interest of anyone interested in mobilizing collective action via online networks. The internet has given those shut out of the public sphere by virtue of their socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, religion, or ability the opportunity to engage in collective action or exert cultural influence in transformational ways. That is why online networks, including networked social movements, fandoms, and other online communities, are so important: they not only provide opportunities for people to exercise leadership in the public sphere but also provide real opportunities to influence culture via public opinion and profitability.

[3.4] The impacts of fandoms and other online networks can be huge, and businesses and grassroots organizations would do well to understand them. Snapchat learned that the hard way, when they posted an offensive ad featuring Rihanna on their platform in 2018. Upon seeing the ad, Rihanna tweeted that everyone with Snapchat should delete the app, and over the course of two days, Snap—Snapchat's parent company—lost \$800 million in value (Stefansky 2018). The lesson? Networked online communities wield immense economic power.

[3.5] Scholars like Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd (2015) have conducted decades of research on participatory culture and the evolution of audiences, advancing the

argument that passive audiences no longer exist. Audiences, they suggest, are now active, organized, and transformative. In order to successfully engage modern audiences, you must build the necessary structure for stakeholders to cocreate the brand itself. The One Direction fandom was positioned in such a way that fans could find a place to exercise shared values, build identity, and find purpose, which in turn created the perfect conditions for a super fandom to emerge.

[3.6] This new, online amateurization of the production of culture (Shirky 2008) provides transformational opportunities and accessibility for young women, especially young women from marginalized backgrounds. It means that the ability to participate in creating and critiquing public values and public opinion is no longer controlled by a few; rather, it has been radically democratized such that young women are the cocreators of culture. This participatory culture can influence market conditions that allow or disallow certain art and artists to be successful in our current cultural landscape. With that power, young women can literally breathe life into new realities through the power of their networks.

[3.7] It is worth noting, however, that networks of women advancing positive change is nothing new. In the past, it happened in neighborhoods and faith-based communities, in knitting groups and social clubs. Today, online networks have removed both the geographical obstacles and the opportunity costs of creating community, and digitization allows networks to operate at scale without the inconvenience of leaving home, work, school, or family. A case in point: many influencers within the One Direction fandom never expected to see the band in person, either because of their country of origin or because of their inability to afford concert tickets. Yet they worked tirelessly to support One Direction because of the community and space the fandom provided for self-actualization. This global reach also gives the fandom the power to shape the way that news travels and mobilizations happen across social media.

[3.8] One Direction is certainly not the only online network with which young women engage. Women are power users of all social media platforms and engage in online networking and entrepreneurship. One Directioner Jada Kissi (pers. comm.) learned many of her organizing skills in the One Direction fandom through organizing fan mobilizations and taking part in activations such as fan-driven "follow trains," where Directioners on Twitter would recommend other Directioners to follow certain accounts. These follow trains would trend globally, building network density in addition to network scale. For decentralized networks, density is one of the key measures of successful mobilization and replication. In studying networked social movements, people often juxtapose networks based on their densities and reaches. The One Direction Fandom was wide and deep, which was why leadership and innovation were so prevalent. Today, Jada is a key leader with Platform, a political training and lobbying organization dedicated to ensuring the voices of all who identify as young women; gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and femme folx are heard in the rooms where decisions are made (Platform 2017).

4. Conclusions

[4.1] Social change in America has always been part of our culture. Our country was

founded upon principles of protest, and that, alongside our role as a global cultural exporter, has created an order of operations for social change in which popular culture influences the choices, opportunities, and values that are necessary preconditions for social change. Popular culture drives the logic that people use to connect their values and actions with the problems that they see in the world.

[4.2] Fandom in particular has the power to affect culture in ways that are often hidden. Modern fandoms have the structural, group-based, and value-based elements of activism baked into them such that fans are prepared, through their participation in fandom, to drive social change. Whatever the community, it is clear that the skills and knowledge many young women are developing in online networks, where their leadership is valued and legitimate, have created a generation of women who have wrested public opinion and collective action from the gatekeepers who have held that influence out of reach for too long. They may just save us all.

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[/13/13937688/one-direction-one-year-hiatus-anniversary-social-media-blogging.](#)

Symposium

Mobilizing minions: Fan activism efficacy of Misha Collins fans in *Supernatural* fandom

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[0.1] Abstract—In 2009, *Supernatural* (CW, 2005–) actor Misha Collins tweeted to his followers in an effort to raise government funds for nonprofit initiatives, resulting in the fan-made website Minion Stimulus whose creator Collins later approached about growing the site into a private charity, Random Acts. The circumstances of Random Acts' inception paved the way for Collins's current philanthropic strategy, which operationalizes fan activism for social good. Collins's approach to fan mobilization takes place on social media, which he has used to effectively operationalize the potential of fan activism.

[0.2] Keywords—Celebrity studies; Charity; Civic engagement; Fan/celebrity relationships; Parasociality; Politics; Social Media

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Social media has changed the ways fans interact with celebrities, creating a perceived intimacy and sense of friendship on the part of fans (Marwick and boyd 2011; Bennett 2014a; Ballantine and Martin 2005). Though this kind of interaction can resemble a market relationship—characterized by its ability to swap parties out indiscriminately—the fan/celebrity rapport can, in some cases, also resemble friendship as defined by scholars and academics (Baym 2013). According to Nancy Baym's 2013 study on the relationship between musicians and their social media audiences, public figures "do not just affect audiences. Audiences affect them" (312). This is not a one-sided relationship; celebrities mediate, negotiate, and renegotiate their relationships to their audiences on a sliding scale from fan to friend (Baym 2013; Philips 2011). Depending where on this scale a public figure finds themselves, the use of social media can subvert and complicate the notion of parasociality—defined as a one-sided relationship characterized by the overacknowledgment of one party, and lack of acknowledgment of the other (Baym 2013; Ballantine and Martin 2005; Horton and Wohl 1956). Social media allows for celebrities previously thought of as untouchable to interact with their fan bases more directly and, in certain cases, cultivate a

relationship that encourages fan mobilization for various forms of political and nonpolitical activism (Beer 2008; Marwick and boyd 2011).

[1.2] This is particularly true of Misha Collins. Best known for his role as the angel Castiel on the CW's *Supernatural* (CW, 2005–), Collins has distilled a formula to efficiently and effectively mobilize his fan base for various causes. He first joined Twitter in 2009 (with Facebook to follow a year later), where he asked followers for ideas regarding a "minion stimulus" project that would raise money for nonprofit initiatives (Random Acts 2019c). The tweet resulted in the fan-made website Minion Stimulus, whose creator, Lisa Walker, Collins later approached about growing into a charity. This eventually became the private charity Random Acts, whose cofounder and board president is Collins to this day (Random Acts 2019c).

[1.3] The circumstances of the inception of Random Acts paved the way for Misha Collins's current philanthropic strategy which operationalizes fan activism, here defined as the organizing of fans for civic and social engagement and to achieve both content- and non-content-related goals (Earl and Kimport 2009; Brough and Shresthova 2011; Hink 2011; Bennett 2014a; Jones 2011). Using a mix of audiovisual and text content, Collins has distilled a formula for effectively mobilizing his fan base, mostly achieved through a specific framing of fandom acknowledgment. Through the creation of his online persona, and specifically by referring to himself and the fandom as part of the *Supernatural* or SPN Family (a long-used moniker for the fandom, cast, and crew), Misha Collins firmly categorizes the relationship with his audience as friendly, and I argue that it is this, in light of the fandom's history with its own source material, that allows his mobilization efforts to be so successful ([note 1](#)).

2. A fandom primed for mobilization

[2.1] The *Supernatural* fandom's potential for mobilization has been present since the show's conception. Its genre subject matter and narrative structure made *Supernatural* a fantastic candidate for a dedicated cult following from the outset, despite the fact that the show's modest original marketing strategy pointed to the expectation by its producers of an equally modest audience reception (Felschow 2010). This expectation is painfully obvious when considering the lack of marketing initiatives used to encourage *Supernatural* fan engagement. Unlike *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010), which courted fans through podcasts, hidden Easter eggs, and the creation of an official message board, there were no sanctioned power structures in place to curate and control the ways in which *Supernatural* fans engaged with their source material. The fandom had free rein to encounter and celebrate the text without being invited or told how to do so by the network or creators, which generated a sense of intense ownership that is shared with show producers, and in turn has cultivated a very vocal and engaged fan base—one that remains so to this day (Felschow 2010; Lowe 2017).

[2.2] The best and most recent example of this engagement occurred with the death of the hacker fangirl character Charlie Bradbury, who was regarded as the fandom's representation and was the only sustained queer representation on the show. Outraged by her death, especially because its apparent only purpose was to supply the male protagonist Dean

Winchester with further "man pain," fans' anger toward creators remained prominent on social media until San Diego Comic Con in 2015, when, in response to a pointed fan question about sexism and the death of a female character, then-showrunner Jeremy Carver explained that "[the writers] have to go where the story takes us" (Flicks and the City 2015). This statement did not go over well; showcasing what happens when *Supernatural* fans are upset, the following season had a 240,000 decline in average live viewership ("*Supernatural* TV Ratings" 2019). It should be noted that while many fans left the fandom after Carver's faux pas, many others remained and simply refused to watch future seasons as an act of protest.

[2.3] Thus, the sense of ownership *Supernatural* fans have over their source material moves them to action—whether that means speaking out directly against The Powers That Be, or depriving them viewership. It also makes fans particularly responsive to the equalizing fandom-as-friends framing that Misha Collins employs. Baym's 2013 study uses Jeffrey A. Hall's four dimensions of friendship to prove friendliness between musicians and their social media audience, and the same can be applied to television actors and their fans. By fulfilling Hall's dimensions through the creation of his social media persona, Collins distances himself from the *Supernatural* producers, allowing for a relationship that greatly resembles regular friendship (Hall 2011). This makes mobilization an act of support, unification, and allyship, which *Supernatural* fans are primed to value. How Misha Collins's fans exhibit Hall's dimensions goes beyond the scope of this short study, though scholarship on parasociality has established fans' friendly framing of public figures (Ballantine and Martin 2005; Marwick and boyd 2011).

3. Friends and friends as family

[3.1] Hall's first dimension of friendship is symmetrical reciprocity: an expectation of mutual "loyalty, authenticity, trustworthiness, and support" (2011). This is demonstrated through the sharing of Misha Collins's family life (figure 1), giving fans a look "behind the curtain" which in turn establishes his persona's authenticity (Schulzke 2011). Support is demonstrated through the interaction with and acknowledgment of individual fans online. Figure 2, for example, illustrates his tweeting his support to a single fan in the hospital as well as support of the fandom at large. The latter also can be seen in figure 3, where Collins shares that he bought a star for the fandom to combat feelings of loneliness.

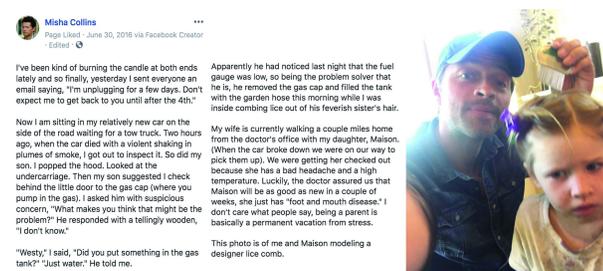


Figure 1. "I've kind of been burning the candle at both ends..." Facebook post by Misha Collins (officialmisha) sharing the details of a bad day (June 30, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/officialmisha/photos/a.129194833769199/1150479008307438/>).



Figure 2. "The #SPNFamily is pulling for you, Monica!" Misha Collins tweets his support to a fan in the hospital (@mishacollins, Twitter, May 4, 2018; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/992463644699971584>).

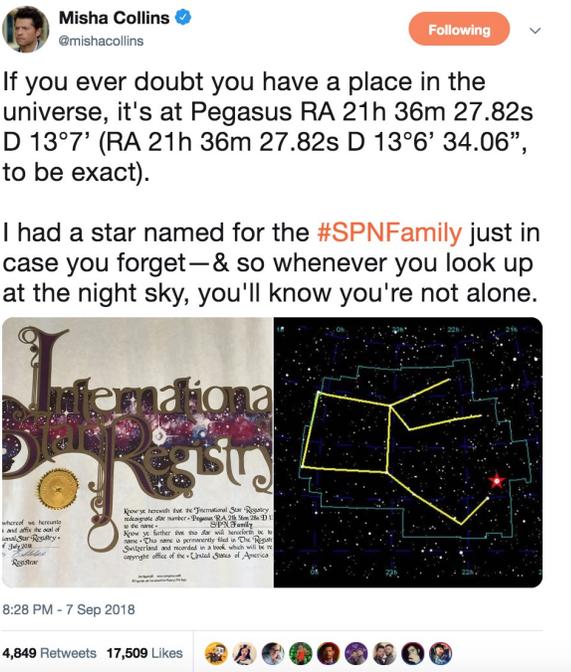


Figure 3. "If you ever doubt you have a place in the universe..." Misha Collins tweets that he has bought a star for the *Supernatural* fandom (@mishacollins, Twitter, September 7, 2018; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/1038267774039019520>).

[3.2] Figure 4 includes a graphic created by costar Kathryn Newton in reference to the supremely popular relationship "Destiel," which pairs Collins's character Castiel and Dean Winchester, the character of costar Jensen Ackles. Misha Collins's tweet of this graphic demonstrates that he actively encourages and acknowledges fans' shipping activities. His nod to Tumblr here is especially telling in that regard—the microblogging platform was home to many *Supernatural* fans in 2015. Although Newton posted her graphic to Twitter, the fact that Collins claims to have seen it in an important fannish space implies an acceptance, enthusiasm, and participation in fannish behavior. This creates trust and loyalty, especially in a fandom where references to shipping were, at one point, forbidden during convention

question periods and fans asking them were antagonized by producers (Wilkinson 2010; Felschow 2010).

The spinoff has been announced... on tumblr
(where i gather all my breaking news
updates).



Figure 4. "The spinoff has been announced..." Misha Collins tweets a reference to shipping (@mishacollins, Twitter, April 30, 2015; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/593831931948568577>).

[3.3] The second friendship dimension is communion: an expectation of "emotional availability and empathic understanding" (Hall 2011). This can be observed in figure 5, where Collins mentions the You Are Not Alone T-shirt campaign (Twitter hashtag: #YANA). YANA's goal was to create a text-based online hotline for fans in crisis (Random Acts 2019a), born of the desire to, in Collins's words, "make a material difference" in the lives of fans struggling with mental illness—of which "literally dozens" share their stories with him and his costars at every convention (Prudom 2016). This type of communion is further observed in the instances illustrated by figure 6, which presents an image of Misha Collins becoming emotional at a convention while a fan shares the same kind of story just mentioned. Collins displays empathy at the fan's display of vulnerability, making himself emotionally vulnerable in return. But not all moments of sharing are as intense and emotionally charged as this.



Figure 5. "This campaign will fund the new #SPNfamily Crisis Support Network." Misha Collins tweets to his followers about a new campaign to benefit the *Supernatural* fandom (@mishacollins, Twitter, February 12, 2016; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/698206170931068928>).

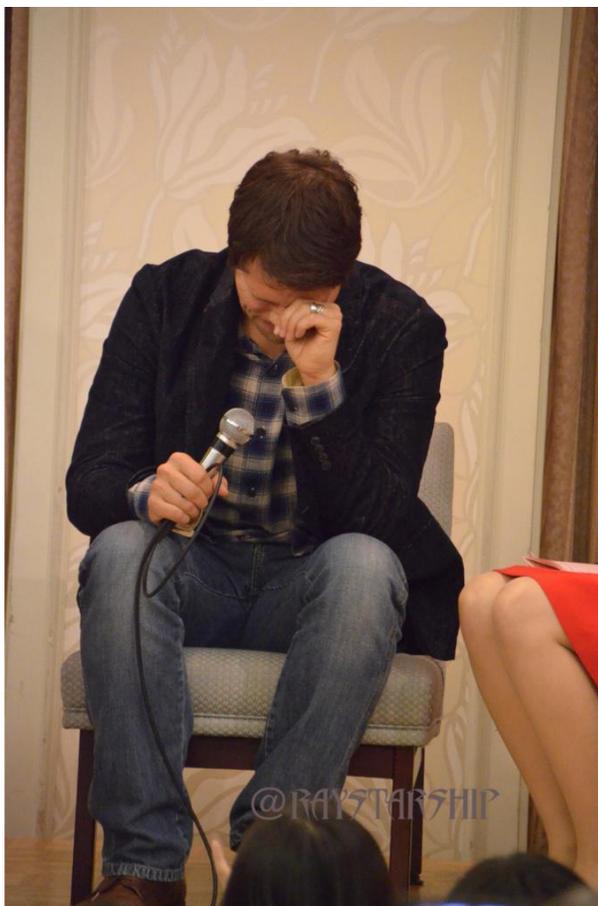


Figure 6. Misha Collins gets emotional hearing a fan story at a 2015 convention, image sourced from Tumblr (casthewise 2015).

[3.4] Through livestreamed videos, Collins has shared details of his sporadic homelessness as a child, showcasing further emotional vulnerability (figure 7). Livestream as a medium is also particularly effective in establishing a friendship between himself and his audience, in part due to its vividness as a video—its ability to stimulate as many of the senses as possible,

encouraging audience engagement—and in part because this vividness extends to its real-time aspect, creating a further sense of intimacy (de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012). The fact that Collins uses livestreaming and video so regularly (fifty-seven videos on Facebook from January to July 2019), often filming on selfie mode, combats the feeling of this content being staged or overly performative—which, again, lends an even further sense of authenticity and intimacy to his persona.



Figure 7. "Memory Lane." Screenshot taken of a livestream posted September 18, 2018, to Facebook (officialmisha), in which Misha Collins divulges personal details (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1091037047717552>).

[3.5] Solidarity is the third dimension of friendship, characterized by an expectation of companionship and engaging in activities together (Hall 2011). This manifests primarily as Collins live-tweeting *Supernatural* episodes with fans when they air (figure 8).



Figure 8. Misha Collins live-tweets the third episode of season 12, "The Foundry" (@mishacollins, October 27, 2016; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/791855719679008768>).

[3.6] The last dimension is agency, an expectation that the relationship will be mutually beneficial by providing things such as assistance to success, access to resources, and popularity (Hall 2011). This is demonstrated most obviously through fans providing Misha Collins with information as in figure 9, where a fan shares important information about

voting in the US presidential election.



Figure 9. "Thank you! Registration is not the only thing that matters, everyone." Fan Northern Sparrow (@NorthernSprw) provides Collins with voting information via Twitter (@mishacollins, October 9, 2018; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/1049743901127467008>).

[3.7] Popularity is gained through voting to ensure Collins wins awards such as Celebmix's Philanthropist of the Year 2018 (figure 10). The tweet attached to the Celebmix announcement implies that Collins really only sees himself as a mobilizer and an organizer. He builds the infrastructure for do-gooding, and the fans flock to it—he operationalizes a potential that is already there. This sentiment has been echoed at conventions where Collins has admitted to seeing large potential to do good with a group of passionate people who have a common interest—in this case, the *Supernatural* Family (Zrana 2015).



Figure 10. "I actually didn't win this." Misha Collins replies to costar Rachel Miner's tweet regarding his Celebmix award for 2018 Philanthropist of the Year (@mishacollins, December 22, 2018; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/1076541254282985473>).

[3.8] The SPN Family is the most compelling piece of evidence to prove celebrity friendliness in this context. The use of familial and community language like "ours," "we," and "us" in reference to the cast, crew, and fandom minimizes the distance between audience and public figure. This can be observed in figures 11 and 12, where two different groups are termed members of the *Supernatural* Family. The familial relationship frames all individual actions as equal and part of a greater whole, no matter who a person is and how famous they are (figure 13).



Figure 11. "You will be missed by your #SPNFamily." Misha Collins refers to the #SPNFamily as comprising the cast and crew (@mishacollins, January 6, 2015; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/552643669467992064>).



Figure 12. "The trouble with the #SPNFamily..." Misha Collins thanks the *Supernatural* Family on Twitter for their hurricane Harvey relief fundraising efforts, here addressing the #SPNFamily as comprising the fandom (@mishacollins, August 29, 2017; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/902679578820280320>).



Figure 13. Screenshot of a 1:23-minute video embedded in a tweet, with Misha Collins noting that *Supernatural's* fifteenth season will be its last (@mishacollins, March 22, 2019; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/1109192901416775680>).

[3.9] After telling the rest of the cast and crew, *Supernatural's* three leads recorded a video for the fans to inform them that season fifteen will be the show's last, showcasing just how seriously family is taken as a community identity. *Supernatural* fans didn't have to wait for an official statement from the network; the cast spoke to them directly, apparently immediately after all producers were made aware. During the video, Collins even makes the point of assuring fans: "we love you guys and this family is not going anywhere" (see figure 13).

4. Collaborative results

[4.1] The unification of an engaged, enthusiastic fandom with a public figure who establishes himself and his fan base as friends cultivates a culture of intense engagement, support, and loyalty, which is then wielded for various activist endeavors (Bennett 2014a) such as raising funds through Random Acts to buy a bus and build a campus and school for a rural Nicaraguan community (Random Acts 2019b). Through Dreams2Acts Nicaragua, fans were encouraged to fundraise and had the opportunity to be part of a team that met Collins and helped build the school (Random Acts 2019b). Another activist endeavor, YANA, is now a fully functional online hotline with trained volunteers, of which there were almost 10,000 at the end of the T-shirt campaign during which over 10,000 T-shirts were sold (cocklestfw 2016; miss-devonaire 2016).

[4.2] Fans were also mobilized to campaign and participate in the political process during the 2016 US presidential election. Though Collins's robust efforts go beyond my scope here, figure 14 lends some insight as to how this mobilization manifested.



Figure 14. "My fellow citizens & I..." Misha Collins tweets his followers to meet him on a short, informal campaign trail in Iowa (@mishacollins, October 10, 2016; <https://twitter.com/mishacollins/status/785514275653562368>).

[4.3] Collins also raised money via a GoFundMe campaign to buy Congress's data after they voted to pass a law that allowed internet service providers to collect and sell users' information without their consent (Collins 2017). Though the campaign did not attain the \$500 million required to buy the data, all the funds that were raised were donated to the American Civil Liberties Union (Highfill 2016).

[4.4] The Greatest International Scavenger Hunt The World Has Ever Seen (previously known as GISHWHES and now as GISH) is an international scavenger hunt initiated by Collins with the goal of "wak[ing] up the world and chang[ing] it for the weirder and better" (GISH 2019). Since 2011, the hunt has moved its participants to volunteer at over 3,000 food pantries, to clean up thousands of beaches, to volunteer at women's shelters and senior centers, and to make cancer patient care bags (GISH 2019).

[4.5] These are only a handful of the projects Collins and his fan base have accomplished, proving that the unity between fans and celebrities can move people to action that has a huge impact (Bennett 2014a, 138–52).

5. Conclusion

[5.1] As more of our lives and our activism begin to play out online (Kahne and Bowyer 2018; Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2011; Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017), it is important to know why certain groups are particularly effective at mobilizing. This can help us to understand other online activist movements that partner with public figures, and how social media can be used to mobilize people to social and civic engagement. It also reaffirms the idea that fandom can be used as a way to move people to these ends (Jenkins 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2011).

[5.2] Still, we need to acknowledge the problematic aspects of complicating the parasocial relationship. When a celebrity refers to a fandom as a family and works to treat that fandom as a friend, it can be very easy for the audience to labor in excess and endanger their mental health for what will still be a relationship with a very large imbalance of power. This is something scholarship has established, which in my view needs to be further explored going forward. My study additionally does not address the fact that Misha Collins is an upper-class, white, cis-man with a primarily white and middle-class fandom—factors that most definitely contribute to the fandom's efficacy and the kinds of charity-based activism they often partake in. This aspect would be well worth exploring in the future.

[5.3] In 2014, Lucy Bennett noted that the limits of fan activism and celebrity studies were just starting to be pushed (2014b, 5–20). As this case study of Misha Collins's fandom has shown, five years later there is still much to explore.

6. Note

1. It should be noted that I am both a *Supernatural* and Misha Collins fan, and though this is not an autoethnography, parts of this research have been informed by my own experiences.

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Symposium

Taylor Swift, political power, and the challenge of affect in popular music fandom

Simone Driessen

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[0.1] Abstract—When Taylor Swift came out politically via Instagram in 2018, her fans, the Swifties, reacted to their object of affection and her political position. An analysis of the online fan response provides a snapshot of how politics is empirically manifest in mainstream pop music fandoms—a genre and space often overlooked when it comes to discussing politics.

[0.2] Keywords—Celebrity politician; Fan comments; Polarization; Swifties; Vigilantism

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[0.3] Finally omg. She's been so vague over the past and FINALLY! She says it loud and clear. I'm so proud.

—Taylor Swift fan (Reddit.com, 2018)

1. Introduction

[1.1] Mainstream, commercial pop songs are not often associated with politics. Yet in May 2016, Vice journalist Mitchell Sunderland reported on something remarkable. Allegedly, the so-called "alt-right" movement considered pop singer and musician Taylor Swift as its "Aryan pop queen who is 'red pilling' America into a race war through her pop hits" (Sunderland 2016). Swift did not debunk these allegations when they appeared in mainstream media. Nor was it the first time she had been associated with right-wing politics. In 2013, Swift was the target of a young Pinterest user who pinned Adolf Hitler quotes to images of Swift—labeled as Taydolf Swiftler—to create memes (see Malone 2013; Sunderland 2016; Prins, forthcoming). Although Swift never publicly reacted to these cases by confirming her political position, it can be argued that her image as the "white, heterosexual All American girl" and her music, rooted in the country genre, expressed a conservative and nostalgic sense of Americana that might appeal to such groups.

[1.2] Taylor Swift has been active in the music industry since 2006. Typically, her songs are personal (e.g. about previous relationships) and upbeat ([note 1](#)), not political or activist. The absence of politics from Swift's persona changed in 2018. She posted a lengthy account on Instagram regarding who she would vote for in the United States midterm elections, and why. Swift revealed that she had been "reluctant to publicly voice my political opinions, but due to several events in my life and in the world in the past two years, I feel very differently about that now" (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BopoXpYnCes/>). In her Instagram post, she explained that she planned to vote for a male senatorial candidate, given that the only woman running for office, Marsha Blackburn, had a "voting record in Congress [that] appalls and terrifies me." Blackburn voted against equal pay, the Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, and gay marriage—all political items Swift revealed she cares greatly about. Swift ended with an appeal to her fans, "For a lot of us, we may never find a candidate or party with whom we agree 100% on every issue, but we have to vote anyway." Because of this addition, I consider her post not only personal, but also political: actively urging her audience to use their right to vote.

[1.3] This call for action and the revelation of her political preference define her as a Celebrity Politician (CP) (Street 2004). A CP can be a nonelected politician: a celebrity persona who speaks out on "specific causes and for particular interests with a view to influencing political outcomes" (Street 2004, 438). According to Dean (2017), fandom is a proven aspect of politics that might help us to understand issues like polarization or controversies in today's society. Thus, Swift speaking out against and for certain causes might have an influence on her fandom, the Swifties. How does that sit with Swift's carefully constructed pop musician persona?

[1.4] In the remainder of this article, I will briefly connect music, politics, and fandom. I will also present fans' reactions to Swift's political reveal. By offering this insight, I expose how politics is manifest in mainstream pop music fandom—a space not typically associated with politics.

2. Music, politics, and fandom

[2.1] Music and politics are no strangers to each other. Politics can be made audible through propaganda songs, or in subcultural genres where lyrics and sounds express resistance or opposition (cf. Street 2003). Think about genres like hip-hop or punk challenging society's status quo. John Street declared that "songs and sounds are more powerful weapons [in politics] because of the way music works directly on our emotions" (2003, 114). Pop music like that of Taylor Swift's, however, has not been attributed this power, given its fleeting character and the high focus on personal over social topics in the lyrics. However, with the rise of artists like Beyoncé or Lady Gaga, I argue that nowadays mainstream pop has also become an arena in which to express political views or address civil rights. That makes these stars and their celebrity image and reach highly influential.

[2.2] Brough and Shresthova argue that fan activism in neoliberal society is not solely about understanding fan-driven efforts, but more about "how particular actors construct, use, and circulate their voices through the production or reproduction of cultural content, as well as

whether and by whom content is consumed and engaged" (2012, ¶4.9). In Swift's case, this might imply that through her music or her social media commentary (she was one of the most influential people on Twitter in 2018), she might hold the power to produce or reproduce a certain voice her fans could feel encouraged by.

[2.3] The potential political power of Swift invites one to examine how her carefully constructed persona sits with her status as celebrity politician. Wilkinson (2019, 441) described the singer as zany: a "hapless pop princess *and* an autonomous and savvy industry professional," which helps to craft and promote an authentic image of Swift. That might also explain her popularity with many of her fans: Swift is upbeat but proficient, and wacky but real. How does that influence her political image, particularly when conservative politics has tried to lay such a strong claim on her? I will offer a brief analysis of fans' reactions to Swift's Instagram post to explore this question.

3. Evaluating pop politics

[3.1] To understand how fans interpreted Swift's political declaration in 2018, I analyzed comments in a thread dedicated to the post in Reddit's r/TaylorSwift community. This community is devoted to Swift (discussing news, music, etc.), and openly readable for all internet users (participating requires an account). I will not include usernames of the message posters, to ensure anonymity. Although the Swift community is only a small part of Reddit, I consider this community a space where fans of different ages, genders, and political and sexual orientations meet and exchange information. For example, some fans openly express themselves as fans since their teens or as members of the LGBTQ community, or ridicule the politics of the alt-right.

[3.2] Fans' reactions to Swift's political coming-out were twofold. Some were happy that she finally declared a political stance, but denounced her for the timing. According to this group of fans, it followed conveniently after a tour, when no new material had come out for a while. Other fans were vigilant and defended Swift against other fans and critics, arguing that she did not have to go public with her politics. However, they did consider it Swift's responsibility in today's political climate. To illustrate my observations, I give a few examples of these different modes.

[3.3] When her political announcement went public in late 2018, Swift had not released any new music for a while. This was considered to be an important factor, according to some fans. Reactions like this one—"Somebody said that Taylor finally said this because her US tour is over so she could use all the Republican money she has and throw it back to their faces... We love a calculated snake queen"—are illustrative for this observation. The "calculated" remark is also telling of how this fan perceives her image: created to fit and appeal to her audience. The Redditors, however, knew that it could also have different roots: "Last year she was basically accused of being a white supremacist due to her radio silence. Even though her silence extended to all areas of her public life/career because she was literally on hiatus," another fan argued. So, there were justifiable reasons why she did not react to such allegations: she was busy touring, or they took place while she was on hiatus.

[3.4] These two events led a fan to argue that the singer "is irrelevant and has been for awhile now. She's forced to make posts like this for publicity now." Again, this attributes her political comments to the constructed image of Swift. Yet this also might imply that she is actually fueling her next career move or reinforcing her image as a pop singer who has successfully moved away from her Republican-associated country roots. Another fan's interpretation is illustrative of that: "...when you're in the country scene you're kinda stuck on that side [of conservative politics]. I'm just glad she's got a pop head audience to cushion the fallout so she doesn't end up like the Dixie Chicks." This remark implies an expectation of Swift to be more conservative in her politics and that she may have waited until she had that "pop head audience" to go public. The reference to the Dixie Chicks is important, because this group was shunned and boycotted by country music lovers after their overt statements against former president George W. Bush's second Iraq invasion in 2003 ([note 2](#)). Such a fate might also have been bestowed upon Swift if she had opened up about her views earlier on.

[3.5] These comments imply that some of the Swifties denounced her for going public with her politics. They considered it a career move and were particularly critical of the moment at which Swift's political disclosure happened. This fits Wilkinson's (2019) claim regarding Swift's authenticity: speaking up in this activist persona also emphasized her progressiveness and perhaps her zany nature. But, this also led to some fans feeling compelled to defend and act as vigilantes to support Swift's decision of making her beliefs—finally—public. They also castigated other fans, saying that Swift does not owe them an explanation of her private politics. The following is a typical argument of her vigilant fans: "Given her country roots, I *guess* you could see how it would be easy to think she wasn't liberal. However, if you look at her actions over the past several years, it's pretty obvious where she stands politically..." Through offering this addition, this fan suggests everyone could have known what Swift's beliefs were already, given, for example, that she had donated money to several LGBTQ advocacy organizations.

[3.6] Another fan commended Swift for being comfortable enough to share her political views now: "It's not a matter of *finally* cuz she doesn't owe us shit, but a matter of her trusting us enough to let us know about her stance on politics..." This fan seemed to appreciate the singer's awareness that her stance on politics might be important to her fans. Taking it a step further, another Redditor stated that Swift did not have to go public but does have a responsibility toward her fans: "...with current events and her having a huge platform it would have been vastly irresponsible for her not to do so if she truly believes in the causes she's talking about." Such a statement resonates with the responsibility or position of a celebrity politician (Street 2004); she is apparently thought of as being able to influence her fans by sharing her views on political matters. Moreover, these fan arguments, whether critical or vigilant, seem to imply that an affective investment in Swift is an investment in her persona beyond the music.

4. Affective politics?

[4.1] Van Zoonen (2004) argues that fans offer a blueprint for democracy. If Swifties are representative for today's society, we can learn from these fan comments that they do care

about politics through the celebrity persona. Although this sample of fan responses offers just a glimpse into this fandom, I argue that this does invite further reflection and examination of how these young pop fans can be mobilized and invited into participating in political discussion. Through the Instagram post, Swift actively displayed her political preference for her fans to reflect upon and discuss.

[4.2] Nevertheless, as some critical Swift fans pointed out, it might also be part of a marketing strategy of Swift as an industry professional. Taking a stance against certain politics, in a society that is characterized by political controversies and polarization, and where, for example, advocates of LGBTQ rights still really need to fight for their cause, it matters that she—in her celebrity politician role—does so.

[4.3] Although this piece can only offer a brief and slightly blunt sample of fan reactions, a lengthier analysis could show more nuance and balance to demonstrate how Swift's political persona is influencing her fans. Still, this does expose how mainstream pop, particularly through the persona of the artist, might hold a political emphasis. And that might just lead to Swifties using Swift and her music as a resource to make sense of politics in everyday life.

5. Notes

1. Taylor Swift's music has been largely devoid of activism, yet she has been known to take action in favor of artists owning their own music: in 2014, she took her music off of streaming platform Spotify. She openly supported and donated money to help fellow pop artist Kesha in her lawsuit against Dr. Luke in 2016. In 2019, she called out music manager Scooter Braun, who, upon purchasing the label she was signed to in the past, now also owned the rights to her music, without her being presented a good opportunity to buy her catalog back.

2. During a concert in London in 2003, the Dixie Chicks, who were vocally against the plans of former president George W. Bush to invade Iraq (which happened and became the second Iraq War). Many fans disagreed with the Dixie Chicks' viewpoint and boycotted their music and concerts, also leading to cancellations of partner and sponsorship deals for the band. In 2016, they also expressed themselves as being against President Donald Trump by taking a banner of his face, defaced with a devilish mustache, goatee, and horns, on tour.

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Symposium

Click here to buy. Click here to vote.

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[0.1] Abstract—Taylor Swift's October 7, 2018 Instagram post marked her first public foray into politics, and indeed, media accounts credited her with inspiring 65,000 people to register to vote. However, Swift's social media posts reveal deliberate fan engagement strategies deployed for sustaining her celebrity status. These fan engagement strategies, like those of many other celebrities, present an illusion of fans' collective power while actually reinforcing a dynamic that privileges the celebrity over the fan.

[0.2] Keywords—Celebrity; Politics; Social media; Taylor Swift; Voting

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1. Introduction

[1.1] On Sunday, October 7, 2018, Taylor Swift posted the following on Instagram: a picture of herself with her endorsement of two Democratic candidates for US Congress along with a general call to her followers to educate themselves on the issues and candidates and to register to vote at Vote.org (figure 1). Ripples from her post could be felt within hours: the candidates thanked her, the president of the United States rebuked her, and tens of thousands of people registered to vote. By Tuesday, October 9, dozens of national and international media outlets had reported that Swift's call to action may have resulted in 65,000 new voter registrations (McDermott 2018). In Swift's home state of Tennessee, about half of the new voter registrations from the month of October happened immediately following her post (Kornhaber 2018).

[1.2] Though celebrities channeling their fame through their social media platforms to promote causes is nothing new, Swift's actions and their highly visible results garnered an extraordinary amount of attention. The October 7 post marked Swift's first explicit political call to arms and was widely regarded as a departure from her well-documented silence on politics (Haas 2018). The post itself also seemed to be a departure from her glossy, fun social media presence as a pop star. Industry watchers generally consider Swift's use of social media as savvy, effective, and thoughtfully deployed by Swift herself (Kornhaber 2018). In this essay, I argue that the October 7 post and her other political posts follow the same fan

engagement strategies as her more overtly promotional posts and, in doing so, capitalize on fan labor in ways that reveal a complex, if unsurprising, power dynamic inherent in celebrity/fan social media relations.



Figure 1. Screenshot of Taylor Swift's October 7, 2018 Instagram post (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BopoXpYnCes/>).

2. Celebrities, social media, and fan engagement

[2.1] Celebrities using social media to connect with fans and the larger public has been well studied despite any relative newness of specific social media platforms (Marshall and Redmond 2016). Celebrities use social media to promote themselves and their work, but they also use it to share personal moments, likes and dislikes, and to promote causes (Stever and Lawson 2013). Further, the range of topics in a celebrity's social media posts is itself a body of work that offers fans an experience beyond the celebrity's particular product (i.e., movies, songs, albums, videos) (Stever and Lawson 2013; Morris 2014). For example, the majority of Swift's social media posts are clearly promotional of her music, but she also includes selfies with friends and her cats and informally made videos of herself talking about her new music.

[2.2] Marwick and boyd (2011) have described celebrities' social media behaviors as important performative work for the celebrity. Celebrities craft their social media posts to offer glimpses into the "backstage" of their professional lives, which establishes their authenticity as real people and facilitates a sense of intimacy with their fans (Marwick and boyd 2011). Importantly, these backstage glimpses are still work that celebrities engage in to maintain their status as celebrities. In short, even the most personal selfies or appeals for action are work for the celebrity.

[2.3] Fans also engage in work to consume the experience offered by celebrities via their social media platforms (Morris 2014). Though few scholars would describe scrolling through Twitter or Instagram as hard work, fans do spend their time and energy engaging, albeit one-sidedly, with celebrities on social media platforms. Although scrolling is a relatively passive way to engage with celebrities, Swift's use of social media encourages fans to do more by offering rewards for their work. On Twitter, Swift asks her fans to use a

designated hashtag when they tweet themselves fulfilling one of her other requests. For example, fans use the hashtag #taylurking when they tweet pictures of themselves with her latest album. Ironically, "taylurking" is a portmanteau of her name and "lurking," which is the most passive way to engage with someone online. Swift then rewards a small number of fans by recognizing their efforts through retweeting their tweets. While the fan is rewarded, their work coproduces free publicity for Swift ([note 1](#)). Swift's hashtags trend upward in popularity, and Twitter is flooded with images of happy fans posing with her new album.

[2.4] Celebrities using social media to engage with fans provides an illusion of fan empowerment (Marshall and Redmond 2016). Celebrities do require fan engagement in order to operate a successful social media presence, much like celebrities require fans in order to maintain their celebrity status. This would appear to give fans a huge amount of power to determine the fate of celebrities or of their various requests delivered through social media. Swift's posts *ask* fans to watch, listen, click, retweet, use a hashtag, or buy. Even though Swift is but one person, she sets the parameters for fan engagement and, as such, benefits most from the engagement. Even when fans use the technological features of a social media platform to try to harness their collective power—for example, by reclaiming or subverting hashtags—their efforts benefit the celebrities who they continue to publicize (Ingram-Waters and Balderas 2018).

3. Promoting music, promoting causes

[3.1] Taken as a whole, Swift's social media posts on Instagram and Twitter offer fans an interactive experience of her celebrity persona, though the level of interactivity varies from lurking to liking, retweeting, or using hashtags. Regardless of the what the fan does, their online presence is counted, so even the most passive lurker is included in the millions of views a particular post of hers may collect. When Swift posts anything on social media, she effectively coproduces her celebrity status with her fans.

[3.2] On Instagram, fan engagement may be counted by likes and views. As shown in figure 1, her October 7 endorsement post garnered 2.1 million "likes." Following the October 7 post, she made two other overtly political posts. On October 17, she posted a picture of her feet with her toenails painted alternatingly red, white, and blue. With that picture, she wrote, "Something I wish I knew about when I was 18 and voting for the first time: EARLY VOTING. It is so quick and easy to go and cast your vote before November 6" ([note 2](#)). She goes on to give information on early voting in Tennessee and directs fans to her Instagram bio for more information on early voting dates in other states. That post got 1.4 million likes. Later that month, on October 30, Swift posted a picture of herself posing next to a large "Phil Bredesen US Senate" poster ([note 3](#)). That post had 895,000 likes.

[3.3] For some context, the vast majority of Swift's 334 posts are promotional in some way, with just a small handful featuring her cats, her noncelebrity friends and family, or her taking personal time. Recent posts of Swift posing in outtakes from a new music video have garnered 1.2 to 2.4 million likes, and a recent post of her cat had 1.8 million likes ([note 4](#)). A recent video post in which she appears to be filming herself describing different aspects of the songs on her new album has 8.1 million views ([note 5](#)). The differences between likes

and views reflect the differences in how fans interact with her posts.

[3.4] Only six of Swift's 334 Instagram posts are political, including the original endorsement post and the two other midterm election–timed posts I have described. The three other political posts have addressed the youth gun control movement known as "March for Our Lives"; the "metoo" movement, to which Swift added her own claims of sexual assault; and her most recent activism comprising a letter-writing campaign to US senators and a related petition to bring the "Equality Law," which would guarantee many protections for LGBTQ Americans, for a vote in the US Senate ([note 6](#)). All three of these posts have about 1 to 1.2 million likes, bringing them in line with her other posts. It is striking to note that her overtly political Instagram posts result in as much fan engagement as her usual posts. While her Instagram account boasts 120 million followers, it is quite normal for just a few million Instagram users to like any one of her posts. Though the 2.1 million likes are often cited in any reporting on her October 7 endorsement post, it is clear that this number is on a par with most of her other promotional and personal posts.

[3.5] Swift's Twitter activity, generally, is similar to her use of Instagram in that the majority of posts are promotional. Twitter's retweet and hashtag functionalities allow Swift to engage in political activity with her Twitter followers similar to how she uses the previously described #taylurking process. In May 2019, when Swift published an online petition at Change.org to ask the US Senate to vote on the Equality Law, she encouraged her Twitter followers to write to their own senators to make a similar demand. Through retweeting, Swift recognized and rewarded those Twitter users who posted pictures of themselves with their letters to their senators (figure 2). Swift encouraged the use of the #lettertomysenator hashtag, which when used next to her Twitter handle, resulted in publicity for both her activism and herself.



Figure 2. Screenshot of Taylor Swift's retweet of @PetermanAudrey, June 1, 2019 (<https://twitter.com/PetermanAudrey/status/1134905642412584961>).

4. Conclusion

[4.1] The journalistic accounts of Swift's use of social media as a political call to arms have presented Swift as a commander, rallying her legions of young fans to do her bidding. Indeed, the possibility that 65,000 new voters heeded her call lends credence to this perspective. However, a closer look at her social media strategies shows that her political posts follow the same strategies as her promotional and personal posts, all of which contribute to a marketable celebrity persona.

[4.2] Swift uses Instagram to promote her career as a pop star by primarily sharing professionally rendered images of herself alongside details of how to consume her products. Interspersed with these promotional posts are posts with more personal pictures of herself, her friends and family, and her cats. These images also contribute to her professional celebrity persona in that they facilitate the illusion of access to a side of Swift that presumably only those closest to her would have. Because she has deliberately cultivated a fan experience of herself as a pop star and a regular person, her political posts fit right in. She posts a nonprofessional, personal image of herself alongside a personal appeal with links for fans to click. Rather than a departure from her usual Instagram posts, the October 7 endorsement post was part and parcel of her wider strategy for fan engagement. On Twitter, Swift's strategies for promoting political causes even more clearly mimic her strategies for promoting her products as seen from the #taylurking and #lettertomysenator campaigns.

[4.3] Though she's not a commander ordering her troops, Swift's use of social media to promote herself and the occasional political cause reflects the power that celebrities retain in their social media interactions with their fans. Swift's carefully expressed political social media posts have operated as fan engagement in much the same way as her usual posts do. Her strategies for connecting with fans follow her usual range of techniques: she presents herself to fans, asks them for something, and offers them a variety of ways to fulfil her requests. Fans can lurk, like, or engage in more robust ways to earn her recognition. Regardless of the level of their participation, they work with her, or perhaps for her, to coproduce and sustain her celebrity. Whether they buy her music or register to vote, she benefits from their actions.

5. Notes

1. See Morris (2014) for more on how musicians use social media platforms to engage in similar kinds of reciprocal relations with fans.

2. taylorswift (2018), "Something I wish I knew about when I was 18 and voting for the first time: EARLY VOTING. It makes it so quick and easy to go and cast your vote before November 6. Early voting starts TODAY in Tennessee and goes to Nov 1 US You can check out your state's early voting dates at the link in my bio," Instagram, October 17; <https://www.instagram.com/p/BpCQFC3HKGo/>.

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Symposium

The fandomization of political figures

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[0.1] Abstract—This article examines the application of traditional fandom characteristics to political and historical figures using two case studies: the Notorious R. B. G. fandom surrounding Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and an urbanist meme community on Facebook that pays homage to mid-twentieth-century journalist and activist Jane Jacobs. These case studies illustrate how these two figures are turned into icons. Such fandomization can inspire enhanced civic education, strong political coalitions, and activism if the icons are viewed with nuance and paired with concrete action and study.

[0.2] Keywords—Civic engagement; Ruth Bader Ginsberg; Jane Jacobs; Online communities; Politics; Social media

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Online communities have existed since the earliest days of the internet. They continue to evolve in style, format, and popularity as digital technology becomes more accessible around the world. Across many online communities with shared political values, there is a growing trend of political and historical figures being transformed into icons, closely mirroring the world of traditional fandom, which typically focuses on fictional characters.

[1.2] These icons are not unlike heroines such as Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter* or Rey from *Star Wars*. Both fictional and real-life heroines can be found in feminist artistic depictions and merchandise in stores across the US. In this article, I seek to examine this trend of fandomization through case studies of two culturally significant, contemporary female icons: Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, known online as the Notorious R. B. G., and Jane Jacobs, a mascot for the popular Facebook group New Urbanist Memes for Transit-Oriented Teens (NUMTOTs).

2. The proliferation of online communities

[2.1] A variety of market and social factors has led to a trend in the past few years of

strangers using tools like Facebook groups to connect over shared interests, hobbies, and values. Topics as broad as parenting and as specific as a shared genetic trait have inspired the creation of these communities. Over the past two years in particular, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has repeatedly emphasized the importance of Facebook groups as part of the platform's content curation strategy. In 2019, Facebook announced that more than 400 million of the platform's 2.37 billion active global users are members of at least one Facebook group (Fottrell 2019).

[2.2] Ahead of the upcoming United States presidential election, Facebook users are congregating around presidential candidates to mobilize voters through groups affiliated with campaigns or created by independent supporters. Unless Zuckerberg decides to shift Facebook's news feed algorithm away from groups, conditions will likely be set for these types of political groups to flourish well into the current campaign cycle and beyond. This essay examines two key examples of fandomization that have largely been driven by social media tools like Facebook groups.

3. Jane Jacobs and the transit-oriented teens

[3.1] In its Facebook URL (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/whatwouldjanejacobsdo/>), the NUMTOT group poses a question: "What would Jane Jacobs do?" This Facebook group has amassed over 170,000 members and is dedicated to discourses surrounding "new urbanism," an urban design movement that promotes walkable neighborhoods and transit-oriented community development. Although not generally a household name, Jane Jacobs has become a mascot for many members of the NUMTOT community. NUMTOTs have created anti-Robert Moses memes, visited Jacobs's former home, dressed as Jane Jacobs for Halloween, participated in the Jane Jacobs City Walk program, and noted the appearance of Jacobs as a character in season 1 of the popular Amazon TV show *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–).

[3.2] Amidst Jane memes and posts advertising "What Would Jane Jacobs Do?" T-shirts, one can find the occasional examination of Jacobs's magnum opus, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). In a community poll taken by 466 members of the group, 95% of participants voted that one should read this book. There is no doubt that *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is a valuable read for anyone who wants to learn about urban planning. The fruits of Jacobs's activism, such as the preservation of Washington Square Park, are enjoyed today by millions of New Yorkers. However, the content of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* belies the image many NUMTOTs hold of Jacobs, as it perpetuates concepts that have negatively affected Black and Latinx communities. Jacobs's emphasis on "the aesthetics of incivility" — from graffiti to loitering — formed the basis for "broken windows" policing, a popular theory of criminology developed in the US that suggests minor forms of crime, such as vandalism and fare evasion, encourage major forms of crime. Because minor crimes like fare evasion are often related to poverty, the broken windows theory has led to disproportionate policing of marginalized communities of color in the US (Schrader 2016).

4. Notorious R. B. G.

[4.1] In 2015, *Slate* editor and Supreme Court expert Dahlia Lithwick detailed the rise of the Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsburg ("Justice Ginsburg" or "R. B. G.") from Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court to an internet meme and cultural icon. A critical moment in the creation of the Notorious R. B. G. fandom came after a particular dissent of Justice Ginsburg's. After the landmark decision in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* (573 US 682 (2014)), which struck down a contraceptive mandate regulating for-profit corporations under the Affordable Care Act, a law student named Shana Knizhnik and journalist Irin Carmon co-created a blog called *Notorious R. B. G.* This blog went viral almost immediately and began selling merchandise soon thereafter (Lithwick 2015).

[4.2] Over the past five years, the Notorious R. B. G. fandom has expanded far beyond Knizhnik and Carmon's blog, with Justice Ginsburg's face emblazoned on everything from fine art to kitchenware ([note 1](#)). Knizhnik, Carmon, and Justice Ginsburg herself were featured in the Academy Award-nominated documentary *RBG* in 2018 (Leder 2018). That same year, the biopic *On the Basis of Sex* (Cohen and West 2019) showcased Justice Ginsburg's early life and career. It is not uncommon to walk into a feminist store in the US and find an array of Justice Ginsburg-themed gifts.

[4.3] The hype around the Notorious R. B. G. is not unfounded. Justice Ginsburg has advanced gender equality through a number of landmark cases from her early days as a lawyer working with the American Civil Liberties Union to the decisions she makes in the Supreme Court. However, the fandomization of Justice Ginsburg leaves room for inaccurate interpretations of her work. To a neophyte, Justice Ginsburg may very well be the perfect progressive icon of the movement against President Donald Trump, who has a vocal fandom of his own, but an in-depth analysis of Supreme Court history tells a more nuanced story. In the 1990s and 2000s, Justice Ginsburg was widely regarded as a liberal centrist rather than a progressive dissenter. Even today, she makes some decisions that baffle progressives, including a ruling that allows companies to avoid compensating warehouse workers for time spent awaiting security clearance (*Integrity Staffing Solutions v. Busk*, 574 US 27 [2014]). Critics opine that the iconography of the Notorious R. B. G. reduces her to little more than a mascot and obfuscates the true role of a Supreme Court justice as a neutral interpreter of the US Constitution (Kinder 2016).

5. Political fandom as a tool for civic education

[5.1] When contemporary political figures are interpreted superficially via the lens of fandom, fans will likely be surprised when those same figures make decisions that contradict the values they symbolize. As with Justice Ginsburg, the ethos and intents of the fandom do not necessarily align with the traditional expectations of a political icon's role. Rigorous fan cultures that place excessive emphasis on real-life individuals set themselves up for disappointment.

[5.2] However, fandomization in this sense has demonstrated positive social impacts when paired with real, actionable civic engagement and nuanced readings of the figures in

question. The Advancement Project, a civil rights organization dedicated to preserving voters' rights in the US, has received proceeds from the sales of R. B. G. T-shirts advertised on the official Notorious R. B. G. blog (notoriousrbg 2013). The beauty brand Lipslut released a Notorious R. B. G. lipstick and donated 50% of the proceeds from this shade to She Should Run and the American Civil Liberties Union, where Justice Ginsburg achieved many of her earliest victories as a lawyer (Lipslut n.d.).

[5.3] In the NUMTOTs group on Facebook, there are many comments that address Jane Jacobs's relationship to marginalized communities and the unintended consequences of her work. Rather than worshipping at the altar of Jacobs, NUMTOTs use the group space to educate themselves further about the specifics of contemporary urban planning issues around the world, find jobs and internships in the field, and even engage in social and environmental justice efforts. Of course, they may still be wearing a "What Would Jane Jacobs Do?" T-shirt while doing it (Spacing 2020).

[5.4] Over the course of the past thirty years, the US experienced a significant decline in major civic institutions, such as charities and local political groups. The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University describes this troubling trend in a report on "civic deserts," in which they note the erosion of civic and history education since the 1990s (Atwell, Bridgeland, and Levine 2017). However, in the report, Professor Peter Levine argues that digital communities can counteract local "deserts," emphasizing in particular the powerful role of the internet, and specifically social media platforms, as a tool for connection, civic education, political mobilization (Atwell, Bridgeland, and Levine 2017).

6. Conclusion

[6.1] Nuanced representations of political and historical figures provide a foundation for civic education and engagement in a country where formal civic education has been eroded. The friendships and coalitions that form between would-be strangers through their participation in digital communities like the Notorious R. B. G. fandom and the NUMTOT group can serve as replacements for more traditional modes of activism if they encourage concrete actions, such as donation campaigns organized around a particular nonprofit or time spent volunteering in participants' respective local communities.

[6.2] This form of civic engagement has the potential for everlasting impact on individual participants' political and social identities, mirroring the way popular cultural fandoms like Harry Potter or Doctor Who have become an intrinsic part of the fans' personal ethos. Political scientists, acafans, and digital political strategists alike should pay closer attention to political fan communities as their influence over American political discourse and civic education grows.

7. Notes

1. See, for example, <https://www.etsy.com/listing/649091879/notorious-rbg-oil-painting-ruth-bader>.

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Symposium

Automating fandom: Social bots, music celebrity, and identity online

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[0.1] Abstract—In an analysis of the intersection of media and politics through the increased presence of social bots on social media platforms like Twitter, it becomes evident that years before internet bots were used for geopolitical cyberconflict, fan communities online were already subject to these forces in driving user engagement for music brands and celebrities. Fan scholars must interrogate the presence of these bot networks for their impact on online fan cultural activity.

[0.2] Keywords—Digital fan communities; Fan labor; Identity; Identity politics; Pop music; Social media; Twitter

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1. Introduction

[1.1] While recent public discourse has warned about the rise of social bots in politics, their presence has applicability for those studying the construction and maintenance of fan communities online. Social bots, in entertainment as in politics, are used to influence the impressions, experiences, and behaviors of fandom on the internet today. Responsive to this environment, fan scholars must interrogate the presence of these bot networks for their impact on online fan cultural activity. This automated enhancement of a celebrity's digital presence matters for its role in creating, fostering, and reifying the social inequities between users and celebrities on social media platforms.

[1.2] A social bot is a "computer algorithm that automatically produces content and interacts with humans on social media, trying to emulate and possibly alter their behavior" (Ferrara et al. 2016, 96). Of these automated processes, social bots try to pass a version of the Turing test, in which a machine attempts to exhibit intelligent behavior indistinguishable from humans (Turing 1950). Social bots attempt to participate, structure, and shape public discourse. As Gregory Asmolov (2019) discusses it, bots as social actors "increase the visibility of information." The use of these social bots by celebrity and entertainment brands is thus a practice precisely about expanding their digital presence. One way they influence

the organization of user attention online is by contributing more engagement—more likes, more comments, and more retweets—to existing social media posts that works to increase the reach of social media content to interested users.

[1.3] Their capability, however, is not merely through the amplification of media visibility. It also includes the production of cultural discourse that manages audience perception. Take, for example, the controversy over accusations that Lady Gaga or her fans attempted to sabotage *Venom* (2018) during its timed release against *A Star Is Born* (2018) (Krishna 2018). The alleged strategy found user profiles posing as Twitter moms to amplify bad word of mouth against the competing film. One user, @Yves_new, appeared to mimic the same divisive rhetoric used by Russian political bots, stating, "Just got back from seeing #Venom in theatre .. So disappointed. Lots of democrat nonsense, pushing LGBT agenda down throat too. Disgusted. I can't believe I am saying this but I might have to take the kids to see #AStarIsBorn tomorrow to make up for the terrible night. Very sad" (Gemmill 2018). This example reflects a strategy of what is known as astroturfing—masking a message's sponsors to create the impression of grassroots support. Such examples of astroturfing represent part of the unique dangers for democratic discourse online in the relationship between music celebrities and their audiences, especially as these incidents mirror how social bots can amplify and alter user perceptions across digital platforms.

[1.4] Studies of digital fandom must be attentive to the growing presence of social bots designed to automate and regulate the visibility and perception of economically and politically privileged actors (Metaxas and Mustafaraj 2012) and entertainment brands (Echeverría and Zhou 2017). As social media platforms become the terrain where the control of perception is fought, it is imperative that humanities scholars work to archive and critique the impact of these automated behaviors on the affective processes of online fandom today.

2. Tribal pop fans and social bots

[2.1] Since the arrival of the Beatles in the United States in 1964, images of fans have been a visible spectacle in the media presence of musicians (Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs 1992). Images, most often of screaming teen girls, have been the aesthetic framing through which stars pierce the zeitgeist. In the digital age, the use of fans as a marketing frame has continued, with some key transformations. This new circumstance reflects how fan communities have become increasingly more public online over the past three decades of the internet. As Nancy K. Baym (2018) suggests, the rise of networked computing and the internet created opportunities for organizing music fandom into digital communities. In its early days, such participatory forms of fandom were organized around the margins of the internet, accessible through decentralized text-based forums like group-sharing note files and bulletin boards that were often city specific. With the rise of the hyperlinked World Wide Web, fandom was accessed through online service providers and other amateur-run HTML websites. Today, outlets for fandom have become concentrated through social media platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. Fandom is arguably more public; no longer is it as shaped by fan-created content on local platforms. The net effect has been a growing commercialization of these communities.

[2.2] Indeed, fandom is now the logic of global media marketing itself. This emphasis on communities of fans can be observed in the transition of popular music's stars onto social media platforms like Twitter. In the early 2010s, entertainment journalism frequently gawked at pop stars like Lady Gaga referring to their fans as communities of followers. As the labeling of other fan groups like the "Katy Cats," "Beliebers," "Swifties," and "Directioners" continued into the early part of the decade, the *Atlantic's* Jason Richards (2012) questioned the tribal state of pop music. These tribes comprised the sphere of internet culture known as "stan culture," a portmanteau of "stalker" and "fan" derived from Eminem's song "Stan" (2000), which narrated the one-sided affections of a fan invested in Eminem's stardom (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stan>). Lady Gaga's "Little Monsters" appeared among these groups and were repeatedly referenced in the singer's talk show appearances. This group identity did not merely foreground the performer's organization of her fans into a networked community online; it also facilitated vital forms of community. For in Gaga, they saw an artist whose music video productions and avant-garde fashions mirrored the growing acceptability of explicitly queer and LGBTQ+ themes in popular culture. Some of these fans invested in the performer as their "Mother Monster" because her celebrity made them feel uniquely visible as gay and queer subjects. This type of celebrity-fan relationship is not new. Judy Garland, Annie Lennox, and Dolly Parton, among others, are all artists whose celebrity has offered narratives and feelings of queer visibility in the public sphere. With the arrival of Gaga's social media network, Little Monsters (<http://littlemonsters.com/>), this feeling of queer visibility became digitally networked into fan and audience communities that originally served as a resource for Gaga's celebrity presence online.

[2.3] Monickers like the "Little Monsters," however, were not just an expression of celebrity-fan intimacy. During this same period, ancillary celebrity journalism and marketing content producers like PopCrush began to engage these groups through their use of reader polls, specifically in the development of the "Best Fan Base—Readers Poll," which sought to generate traffic from these networks of celebrity fans (<https://popcrush.com/best-fan-base-readers-poll>). Within these fan communities, users were compelled to recruit their fellow fans to go vote in earning the crown of best fan base—a media strategy that indicates how entertainment marketing borrows its metaphors from the political process. These fan bases were part of a discourse that reflected the economic and marketing value of these networked platforms, as algorithms and hashtags worked arduously to extend and manage the visibility of entertainment brands and personalities online. The success of pop stars on social media reflected their attempts to streamline and augment their audience reach by increasing the feeling of intimacy with their fans through their social media presences. These calculations have succeeded in creating the necessary forms of affective investment for users to produce marketing content, and therefore value, for these entertainment brands and personalities (Andrejevic 2008). Moreover, this social media sharing and producing of content also helps fans receive attention for their own digital presence while promoting the visibility of their favorite stars to other interested users.

[2.4] While the circumstances of bots on platforms are contemporaneous with concerns about political legitimacy, there are reasons to be suspicious of their influence on social media fandoms. The latent democratic impulses that marked the initial rise of internet technologies have started to crater. The growth of fake followers and inflated metrics on

social media now work as drivers of celebrity marketing, reflecting how legacy media industries have been shaped by the emerging logic of social media networks in both their casting and marketing decisions. In 2015, Music Business Worldwide reported its audit of follower counts of popular music stars. Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, and Rihanna were found to be the biggest offenders; their fake followers comprised between 55 percent and 65 percent of their total follower count (Music Business Worldwide 2015). After 2016's election-year controversies on its platform, Twitter has started to take the issue of fake followers more seriously. In 2018, the *New York Times* reported the company's efforts to delete millions of suspected bot accounts (Confessore and Dance 2018). These numbers reflect the ongoing tensions in the democratic and authoritarian underpinnings of contemporary social media culture that extends beyond the field of politics into entertainment.

3. Automating fan marketing

[3.1] Identity sometimes functions as a narrative we tell ourselves about our bodies and others as part of a shared community based on the intimate truths of social life. To this point, a certain logic in contemporary celebrity and entertainment culture works in dialogue with the celebration of various social identities. Over the past decade, issues of identity and its politics have taken a renewed place in the marketing of key music personalities. In 2011, Lady Gaga released her album *Born This Way* (2011), which underscored the performer's relationship to LGBT acceptance through her foundation's focus on antibullying efforts (Ferraro 2012). When Beyoncé accepted MTV's music video vanguard award in 2014, it featured the singer standing in front of the tall letters spelling "FEMINIST" (Bennett 2014) (figure 1). As Taylor Swift moved into her promotional campaign for *1989* (2014), her evolution on the politics of feminism was made a centerpiece of her cultural appeal (Swift 2014). The construction of politicized social identities poses many upsides for entertainment brands beyond just the display of socially conscientious art. Fan investments in these stars are intensified by the centering of aspects of identity in their works. In keeping with traditional analyses of music celebrity (Marshall 1997), these cultural efforts foster a more authentic connection between celebrity and fan. That these artistic expressions appeal to various meanings of cultural identity is of interest here precisely because it underscores how aspects of identity politics, critiqued by some as a form of tribalism, appeal to the networking processes of social media. In centering cultural identities in their work, these celebrity artists have been able to speak more intimately to the ways that identity connects to the heart of how we imagine ourselves. As entertainment branding has shifted to a focus on social media networking, it has recentered how female pop stars in particular function as avatars for various cultural groups, which in turn has fostered greater forms of intimacy with their fans.



Figure 1. Beyoncé standing in front of letters spelling out FEMINIST, MTV music video vanguard award, 2014.

[3.2] In her commentary on gift culture, Abigail De Kosnik (2009) takes up this specific component of fandom in her analysis of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1982) to argue that romance novel culture represents a space in which fans receive the gift of intimacy with themselves through the private practice of reading. Relatedly, fans seek the production and consumption of fan content online as one way they can articulate their identity through their imaginative engagements with their idols. Yet it is necessary here to interrogate the ways that entertainment branding now standardizes and automates this fan cultural activity. With these bot-led amplification processes, fan labor is stimulated and spread across more users through social media engagement. In this regime, fans work in tandem with social bots as unpaid or low-cost marketers who secure the visibility of these stars and brands online.

[3.3] Social bots help explain the arms race of the early 2010s, in which Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber vied for social media dominance on Twitter (Snead 2012). The use of social bots to increase follower counts has yet to justify legal or political concern because these bots can be perceived as less threatening as they affect primarily already interested users. This perception minimizes the ways that such commercial speech represents distinct threats to the health of public discourse online. In fall 2013, pop stars and their fan communities were publicly feuding across social media thanks to multiple high-profile album releases. Gaga's *Little Monsters*, threatened at the idea that their star might not achieve the same commercial success as previous albums, grew ugly in fan forums and on social media as they bullied competitors like Katy Perry and her fans. Emmanuel Hapsis (2013) positioned this bullying within traditions of misogyny in popular culture. The behavior of fans warring with others on social media grew to the point where Lady Gaga herself issued a tweet stating: "Don't fight with Katy's fans, or anyone. STOP THE DRAMA. START THE MUSIC. Pop music is fun, and these 'wars' are not what I'm about" (Robinson 2013).

[3.4] This intensity of investment was not an aberrant quality in Gaga's fandom, particularly as her work highlights issues of LGBT identity and politics with previous albums like *Born This Way* (2011). That her fandom has had a legacy of problematic activity online points to what might be described as a conservative impulse—conservative precisely as these fans attempt to work their bodies in ways that conserve their belief in her stardom. This textual

and toxic labor, while not universal among fans, reflects the ways that Gaga's social media branding worked to mobilize real bodies in the world. It reflected fans' needs to preserve the status quo of her celebrity at a time when her career had taken on resonances for their own personal identity in the public sphere. This perception of her celebrity was inflated, built partially out of the mobilization of these bots to provide a digital infrastructure for her stardom. These bots likely amplified, and thus helped control, the specific types of meanings that circulated around her entertainment brand and stardom. If fans felt deeply invested in the range of meanings coalescing around her celebrity, it is attached, at least in some part, to this automation of user attention and its relationship to producing fan activity. This bot amplification of a celebrity presence online illustrates the antidemocratic undertones of an industry that uses the language of politics to market its appeal through social media networks.

[3.5] Fan scholars must reckon with digital social bots not just through metaphors like advertising but also through their ability to organize the affective bonds between celebrity and fan. Take the case of the "Beyhive," who were once known for their hostile approach to fandom through the spray of Bee emojis on critical commentators of Beyoncé. That routine behavior of the fan group appears to have arisen after the artist's recent political turn in her work. *Beyoncé* (2013) and *Lemonade* (2016), in particular, have centered her celebrity as a type of avatar for Black feminism following critiques from prominent Black musicians (Belafonte 2012) and intellectuals (hooks 2014). Beyoncé's status as a political avatar is not incidental to these fan attacks. The Beyhive targeted musician Kid Rock's Instagram account with nearly 40,000 comments following his racist remark that he preferred slender white women compared to Beyoncé (Lindner 2015). Jezebel's Clover Hope (2016) discovered in her querying of these social media posters from other Beyhive incidents that while many of these comments may appear to be genuine, the bee or lemon emojis represent a mix of fan and bot posts. Such intermixing of fan and bot media posts suggests the ways bots may reinforce the crowd and mob psychology of fandom. Clearly there is a need to further distinguish the extent of this automated activity, but this circumstance raises clear questions about the design and function of robotic actors in shaping the affective processes of digital fandom today.

[3.6] While social bots may pose less risk for entertainment marketing than political attacks on the United States, the automation of Twitter discourse and the attempted automation of fans should be viewed as antidemocratic developments on these platforms. The presence of toxic behaviors by fan communities online can be linked partially to these conditions. As scholars, we must question the ways these social bots help corrode public discourse online and the extent of their influence on digital fandoms today.

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Interview

Academic dialogue: Why study politics and fandom?

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[0.1] Abstract—An academic dialogue between PhD candidate joan miller (University of Southern California) and associate professor CarrieLynn D. Reinhard (Dominican University), conducted via Twitter direct messaging over several weeks, illustrates that academic dialogues do not have to occur in person at universities or conferences. Social media provides a forum for scholars around the world and in different disciplines to consider a topic from a new perspective. Such dialogues provide a fertile ground to develop new insights, theories, and even research projects that can further our understanding of the topic and perhaps push the entire field into new areas. The conversation here explores the topic of how fandom and politics intersect to consider the issues involved in such intersections. The conversation—a journey two people take to come to understand each other—considers what fandom is, what the intersections of fandom and politics are, and whether we should be applying fan studies concepts, theories, and methods to understand politics.

[0.2] Keywords—Activism; Affect; Attitudes; Empathy; Interdisciplinary; Public sphere; Rationality; Social media

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Academic dialogues do not just have to occur in person at universities or conferences; social media provides forums for scholars around the world and in different disciplines to consider a topic. The choice of a dialogue over a more traditional academic article was a deliberate attempt to engage in a different approach to scholarship. joan miller was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in Fall 2019; this dialogue grew partly out of a lament over the ways traditional academic work creates unseen barriers for people with disabilities. Since her diagnosis, miller has struggled to keep up with

the pace of academic life, including publishing work outside of the classroom. Academic dialogues like the one below not only help two academics understand each other's approaches and differing perspectives but also enable participation from those who might otherwise be left out of the conversation. At the same time, the dialogue provides fertile ground to develop new insights, theories, and research projects that can further our understanding of the topic and propel the entire field into new areas.

2. Defining fandom

[2.1] CarrieLynn D. Reinhard: I think a good place to start may be this question: how do you define fandom?

[2.2] joan miller: That's a great question! So, to preface this, my personal super research question is "what is the nature of empathy, how does it work, and what can it do?" And so I've come to understand fandom through its affective qualities, particularly the ways in which it can accelerate intimacy between two relative strangers, even strangers who would never associate otherwise.

[2.3] I got into fandom studies partly because I was a really lonely kid and I felt othered by everything (being mixed race, small, smarter than even many of the adults around me, and a child of divorce). I made my first best friend through X-Files fandom and then she introduced me to Harry Potter. My two maids of honor and my bride's-dude are all friends through Harry Potter fandom (our group chat is called The Marauders). I met my husband in a playwriting class and he noticed me because it was Savannah, Georgia, and I was wearing a Detroit Red Wings hockey jersey. Once we realized we were both mega Legend of Zelda fans, the deal was pretty much sealed. The cake cutter from our wedding is a Master Sword that we pulled from its pedestal as cake topper.

[2.4] All this is to say I am interested in fandom for its ability to connect people, so I worked out a definition for my research: "A fandom is a group of people with a shared affect toward a given source material or idea." And the affect is not necessarily positive, such as in the case of antifandom—I believe Melissa Click has written on that but I haven't had the chance to read it yet. So, after meditating on that...

[2.5] CDR: Do you see community as being important to defining fandom? Like, do you think a person has to be a part of a fan community to constitute having a fandom? Or are those things separate?

[2.6] jm: I think community is a big part of it, but there are different levels. For me the shared affect is what makes you part of the fandom. A single person who is positively obsessed (I draw this from Octavia Butler's discussion of positive obsession) with Spider-Man but has never discussed it with anyone but his secret fanfic journal is just as much a part of the fandom because his affect is what ties him to it. You can imagine that when he encounters another Spider-Man fan in the right conditions, the bond could be instantaneous. So, it's almost like being a patriotic expat of your homeland. I suppose a negative obsession—J. Jonah Jameson?—would make you part of the antifandom.

[2.7] CDR: Is having a fandom always good?

[2.8] jm: Nah. Fandom like any other form of social grouping is obviously subject to the same types of problems as classmates or religious congregations or political parties. It's not the grouping itself that makes it a unique thing, at least in popular parlance; rather, it's the object of the affective relationship.

[2.9] I'm trying to come up with a visualization to explain what I'm seeing in my head. Imagine one of those public fountains that shoots water jets (affect) straight up from the pavement. Each person in the fandom is a jet. All the jets aim in the same direction (sort of a pyramid). At a certain point, the water of those jets just melds together into a single stream. Actually, this works better if you turn the whole thing upside down. So, the jets are coming from the ceiling. At the point of the pyramid, the water flows together into a straight line and that stream aims at the object of the fandom.

[2.10] So, the unique thing is the object the affect is aimed at. The Legend of Zelda, or My Little Pony, or Bob Ross. All that affect submerges Bob Ross and we believe things about Bob Ross fandom because we see them in the affect around him. Bob Ross fandom is usually pretty good peaceful affect in general, so it's a nice clear lake. Star Wars fandom has so many streams, with so much variation in affect and the intensity or valence of that affect (dark side versus light side, senator versus stormtrooper, marginalized people versus privileged people, etc.) that it is a very stormy murky ocean. You can only imagine what Lake Bill Cosby would look like. Also, for what it's worth, my model of good and evil is the Dungeons and Dragons alignment scale.

[2.11] How would you define fandom, either before seeing my definition or in comparison?

[2.12] CDR: To me, I see fandom as a series of attitudes. A fandom is a collection of beliefs and feelings about some object of affection that then predicts certain behaviors depending on the type, amount, and valence of those beliefs and feelings.

[2.13] I use the jawbreaker metaphor. At the center of fandom is the object of affection. Around that are the layers of feelings, beliefs, and behavioral intentions, and these layers then are different for different people given the variety of types, amounts, and valences possible. Because the object of affection is going to be shared (although I do think fandom can be for just one person), people can recognize one another as sharing aspects of that fandom—perhaps they share beliefs, feelings, intentions, actions. Whatever they share, that can help them bond to one another. But it may be that they really don't share those aspects of the fandom, and thus fractures can occur in what, outwardly, looks like a communal experience, which to me is what I see as the fan community definition of fandom. And like any other attitude, fandom can be highly integrated into a person's identity, which is also a source of good and ugly. It's fun to celebrate yourself and what you love, but it's dangerous to get defensive to protect your ego.

3. Fandom, emotions, and rationality

[3.1] jm: I think those definitions are very similar in that we both see affect and affection as a central component. I say affect because I think it makes space for antifandom like #nevertrumpers, for example. It's not really affection that they share, but abjection.

[3.2] CDR: Right, I like that, because it also demonstrates the importance of emotion: we are all both emotional and rational, but it's just a matter of knowing how to act given what a situation requires.

[3.3] A lot of what is being talked about with fans right now is focused on the toxic nature of fans—do you think we are getting back to a general public view that sees fans as irrational, fanatical, and blaming the affective core of fandom for all this?

[3.4] jm: I don't think rationality is the opposite of emotion. I think logic is the opposite of emotion, and rationality is the ability to consider information in order to make situationally appropriate decisions; that is, it's not irrational to stay home all day if you're sad and it's not irrational to be sad when your family member has just died. It's not logical to stay home. Logically it's better for you in the long run to go out in the sun or whatever.

[3.5] I know this is a bit pedantic, but it matters in so far that we use these things to explain behavior. Things that are illogical are not always irrational when you consider the affect involved. And I don't know that I would've put in so many words without prompting, but, yes, I worry that we're excessively focused on the things that we are afraid of largely because we are afraid of them. Henry Jenkins was once criticized as being too nice and optimistic in his writing, and I can't see that as anything but a compliment. I'd rather look for hope than guard against fear. Plus, there are more than enough people writing about all that stuff anyway and my life is less depressing when my work is celebratory.

[3.6] CDR: I like that distinction between logic and rationality (and it makes me think about how much Jurgen Habermas messed up our ideas about public discourse, but that's for later), but I do wonder if a fan who is highly identified with something being criticized and acting defensively about it would see their reactions as being logical—after all, they are just trying to protect their sense of self/ego/identity/whatever from being threatened and trying to shield themselves from any negative affect they might feel for their actions, like spending so much money or time on something, or possibly losing friendships. In particular situations, it may seem completely rational to go on the attack because doing so feels better than not doing so.

[3.7] jm: Yeah, I think that logics and affects can be contorted into all kinds of shapes to rationalize bad or unhealthy behavior, but it at least gives us a way of understanding the other. I've started thinking in this triad of mind/body/soul to break the mind/body dualism. Plus, it overlays neatly onto other triads like ego/id/superego. Another is logical/physical/emotional, for what it's worth.

[3.8] I know you have more experience than I do. Have you seen the field shift along those lines? Do you think we're boomeranging back into a Shatnerian view of fandom?

[3.9] CDR: I don't think the field is boomeranging back into the fanatical conception, but I do fear public discourse is, because of how much media coverage there has been over toxic

and fractured fandoms.

[3.10] Then how does this relate to politics, and the idea of finding overlaps between politics and fandom? At least in the Western, Habermasian (and white straight male) perspective, politics is meant to be based on rational arguments, per Aristotlean logos. But, of course, we see lots of appeals to ethos and pathos in our politics, yet we usually criticize politicians as being manipulative or propagandistic for using those. But if fandom is more about embracing the affective, what does that mean for the current work being done looking at these overlaps—or the current examples of these overlaps?

[3.11] jm: I believe that empathy is emotional speech in configurations (I don't remember right now who exactly said that) wherein the ability to speak constitutes participation in the public sphere as well as agency in general. I think that we need to include emotion in politics and that we often identify a lack of empathy in politicians as a failure in leadership such as Trump's and Bush's inability to empathize with hurricane victims or Clinton's (so-called) inability to empathize with the white working class (whatever that is).

[3.12] I also think it means there are other beings who need to be considered as agentic and deserving of certain rights, particularly those we usually think of as human rights. To bring it back to fandom and politics and the ways in which the two blur, I think that how we feel about something needs to be considered as deeply as what we think about something. That our politics would be healthier for everyone if they were also more empathic and (frequently but not always) more compassionate; but what's more, I believe you are not giving a full accounting of the available information if you do not include the emotions involved.

[3.13] We know that the things that make fandoms powerful are the ways that people feel about the thing they fan over, and they use passion to accomplish tangible results like getting *Brooklyn 99* (2013–) picked up by NBC or making a *Deadpool* movie happen or, importantly, getting Warner Brothers to commit to free-trade chocolate in all of its Harry Potter-branded candy. You can't explain that without understanding how Harry Potter makes those people feel. So, does that make me a sophist? Heh, I think white men, especially in societies that rely heavily on mind/body dualism, privilege logic because empathy would dismantle their privilege.

[3.14] CDR: But does fandom encourage empathy, or does it encourage insularity?

[3.15] jm: I have an opinion but I'm curious what you think. Do you think it's one or the other? Neither? Both? I think you could probably guess what I would say, but I can't say the same. Although I'd argue about the rhetoric of the sentence being a bit too muddled now that I think about it. Empathy being an ability—it's like asking does fandom encourage thinking or ignorance? With ignorance being not quite the opposite of thinking. I guess it would be. Does it encourage empathy or objectivity and in that case I'd say obviously empathy.

[3.16] CDR: Hmm, before I can answer your question, I want to know more about how we each see empathy, because I was considering it an ability, a skill, just like the various types of thinking (e.g., critical, creative, etc.).

[3.17] jm: Yes, I also see it as an ability. The ability to feel, perceive, and understand the emotions of others.

[3.18] CDR: Well, I think some people are born with the ability, but others have to learn it—and even then they have to have an innate foundation on which to build true empathy and compassion. I think some people lack that foundation and may never be able to build the ability. So, I think it's not a causal relationship but an intersectional one: if you are empathic or more likely to be empathic, then I think fandom can help you expand that. But if you aren't, then you may gravitate toward insularity and really focus on the likemindedness of community. And that I think is an overlap between politics and fandom—and may also break down as a difference between those who are more progressive and those who are more conservative.

[3.19] Just a thought: we talk about fandom in terms of affect—object of affection, how much affect a person has to something—and of course affect is impact—so we are also saying how much something impacts us. With a fan, it impacts us so much that we have to do something about it: we have to talk to others, to buy things, to wear things that identify us, to seek out people similarly impacted, to share our joy over being impacted, and so on. That same view of impact is what we see in political and religious contexts: when people can be so impacted that they are moved to do something. In culture studies (media, pop, high class, whatever), we call such impact-to-move "fandom." So, why not call it that in politics as well?

4. Fan studies of politics

[4.1] CDR: Do you think seeing politics through a fandom lens is helpful?

[4.2] So, to start, I do think that seeing politics through fandom's lens can be helpful because it helps us to understand the importance of affect in politics. I think for too long the Western approach to politics has been far too focused on the rational or logical, on the logos aspect of Aristotle's ethics, while denigrating the pathos and ethos parts. But fandom focuses a lot on those pathos and ethos parts—and that isn't always a bad thing! Emotions are motivators; by caring about something we are more likely to do something. To be politically active is to care, even if the action is just voting. We don't vote out of a sense of duty, unless we care about doing our duty.

[4.3] So, seeing politics through fandom means we bring attention to the affective aspect of politics without also denigrating that aspect as corruptive to democracy; instead, we see the affective as a fundamental part of democracy. Emotions cannot undermine democracy if it has been a part of democracy from the beginning. And, given the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, having women in politics cannot be bad because having emotions in politics is not necessarily bad. It helps us to move past a patriarchal, white-centric, heteronormative conception of politics.

[4.4] But is there a danger to looking at politics through a fandom lens?

[4.5] Well, yes, as with any media uses and effects study, there is always the potential for our learnings to be misused. And there is also the potential for misunderstanding the intersections between fandom and politics given the status of the one compared to the other. Fan studies is not seen as legitimate as political science, so the application of fan studies to politics may be derided and any findings ignored or, worse, ridiculed and misunderstood. That could do great danger, especially if there are people out there who are taking the intersections seriously and using what they learn to manipulate people.

[4.6] So what should we do? Do we study politics from a fandom lens, or just study how people bring politics into their fandom?

[4.7] jm: I'm sorry, I'll do my best, but I have a dissertation deadline soon, and orientation this week, and I'm dealing with family in the hospital, and all of that is causing me to flare. So, I promise I'll do my best, but that's what I'm up against.

[4.8] CDR: Completely understand. If it is easier, you can just email me or leave a Skype voice message and I can transcribe. Really just need your thoughts on if it is good or bad to look at the intersections of politics and fandom.

[4.9] jm: Definitely. I think it's good [to study politics from a fandom lens]. There were some key points I wanted to address in what you said, but a preview version is that I think it's very valuable both in terms of Politics and politics. Like the ways government organizes society —because after all, fandom is a type of social organizing that privileges coincidental relationships to a certain source. That source can be the MCU or the Democratic Party or the concept of gun control, or #blacklivesmatter or white supremacy or any candidate. Political affiliation and fandom I think are not completely synonymous, but it's pretty common for the two to overlap. Therefore, it stands to reason that the behavior of that group is worthy of consideration under such a lens.

[4.10] It's also worth being able to draw the distinction between a Bernie Sanders voter and a BernieBro. It could be useful to think of Trump supporters as affirmational fans when interpreting their reactions to his contradictory behavior. I've always wanted to analyze Bernie fandom because it seemed very rapid and intense and affirmational and it concerned me. I don't think I could do it without passing judgement though—not yet.

[4.11] So, I think it's absolutely useful and vice versa; I mean, we already talk about the political economy of fandom. So, in general I always advocate for interdisciplinary approaches because I think it does more to get at true diversity than a lot of other tactics. I could hardly ever think of discouraging someone from studying the interaction of those or a variety of topics, domains, fields, and so on—there's just not enough of it. I'd love for some acafans to read some cognitive neuroscience and affect studies, and it would be great if the social scientists would put some effort into learning from artists and humanists about the human condition.

[4.12] Fandom and politics make sense as a pairing both because of their similar characteristics and because of how easily those groups can be directed toward a cause, so long as it aligns with the fandom's core values: for example, Harry Potter, slavery and free

trade chocolate via the efforts of Dumbledore's Army, or members of the Star Wars 501st visiting hospitals and wounded warriors.

[4.13] Even just political behavior by fans—especially the recent rescues of several shows (like *Brooklyn 99*) from cancellation based on social media response. Even today the issue with Spider-Man, Sony and Marvel; it's trending nationwide and people are upset. I definitely am. I doubt the situation will endure for long. One of the two studios will buckle or risk the next film being a flop that could cost them both. It's a pretty pure demonstration of Habermas's notion that speech constitutes the public sphere and Jacques Ranciere's that politics happen in the moment that the invisible subject becomes visible.

[4.14] Actually the event that inspired me to write about fandom was #coulsonlives. People were painting #coulsonlives graffiti on highway overpasses, and at first it just seemed like a fannish way to mourn a beloved character, but then they actually made Coulson live and I was stunned. This was around 2012, I think, before fans were practically crowdsourcing treatments via social media. (Cough, *Oceans 8*).

[4.15] To me #coulsonlives represented the fandom exercising ownership over the source material. Despite the fact that the checks are made out to whomever, the terms and stories—like any cultural mythology—belong to the people. Incidentally, this is why I'm fascinated by fanon and the way that fan knowledge is canonized. So, if we think about politics as the exercise of power, again we see an example of fandom—when enabled to participate in the public sphere via political speech—actually hold a great deal of power that they can exercise for change as long as they all agree.

[4.16] Perhaps fandom is likely to be political in nature because it encourages or provokes speech (though not always dialogue) in many situations. Rebecca Sugar has mentioned "A Lovers Discourse" in her inspiration for Steven Universe and the idea that if a character finds that words are not enough, they sing and if that fails, they dance. I think for many fans, to keep silent is to hold something in that wants to be released.

[4.17] At this point I feel I'm talking in circles, perhaps? I'm not sure. Fibrofog et al.

[4.18] Honestly, if you don't mind, I'd like to keep in our notes about me being sick. I want to surface that more often in academia whenever and wherever I can. I think this will have to do. Even though I wanted to respond more specifically to your previous comments, I'm too fatigued to think of a good way to sum up without starting another lap, so what you see is what you get. I want to peel back the curtain a little about how my fibromyalgia and ADHD affect me as a scholar and what I'm able to make. Plus, it would be nice to let other spoonies know I'm here and I'm getting through it thanks to compassionate collaborators and faith in the work.

[4.19] CDR: That's also part of politics and fandom: acknowledging what stressors like health and workload do to us and our scholarship. If part of the system now is to be overworked and underpaid—to be in tenuous situations because society has deemed caring for physical and mental health are secondary to profits and growth—then being a fan scholar dealing with such stressors should be a part of the conversation—otherwise we continue to

marginalize and denigrate voices, the way people have done to fans for decades or to emotions in democracy for centuries. Only by confronting the actualities of people's lived experiences, in fandom or politics or health, can we address what the polis needs to survive and thrive.

[4.20] And because everything personal is political and vice versa—because we are social animals with identities formed through social interactions—because every form of governance we practice involves social interactions—the question is not if fandom and politics intersect, but rather how to study the complex ways in which they do.

[4.21] jm: Mic drop.

Review

Productive fandom: Intermediality and affective reception in fan cultures, by **Nicolle Lamerichs**

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[0.1] Keywords—Affect; Ethnography; Play; Transmediality

McCann, Caitlin. 2020. *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, by Nicolle Lamerichs [book review]. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 32. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1895>.

Nicolle Lamerichs. *Productive fandom: Intermediality and affective reception in fan cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018, hardback, \$115 (244p) ISBN 978-90-8964-9386.

[1] In *Productive Fandom*, Nicolle Lamerichs investigates how fandom and its practices extend beyond the text as a form of ongoing productive identity maintenance. Utilizing a case study–style approach, the text explores television, fan fiction, role-playing games, and cosplay as potential mediums for fan's emotional and bodily experiences. This experiential take foregrounds the lives of fans, illustrating one of the central arguments of the text: that understanding fans is as much about understanding their processes of connection and engagement as the end result of fandom itself. Lamerichs's overall holistic and interdisciplinary approach makes *Productive Fandom* a versatile text that can inspire continuing scholars as well as new students or curious readers.

[2] *Productive Fandom* comprises seven chapters. The introduction and conclusion offer concise and thoughtful characterizations of the field of fan studies. Using a wide array of scholarship, Lamerichs outlines the field's present state and its future potential, where her work intercedes. Each chapter tackles a different medium or mode of the fan experience. The chapters introduce key terminology and theory—such as the text's pivot points of intermediality and transmediality—and build toward a unified understanding of the networks of production that enable fan identities. At the end of the core chapters, Lamerichs includes what she calls ethnographic vignettes, which detail her experiences at conventions or other events that informed her research. These vignettes are personable and center on her own experience as a fan and researcher; they also create a persona of Lamerichs as an affable, engaged acafan. The vignettes often lead to insights on fan community building or how academic conceptions of fandom collide with real-world practices. In terms of pacing, the vignettes provide welcome breaks, letting readers process the preceding chapter and modeling how readers could reflect on their own experiences. (The only chapter that comes

close to engaging in the personal on the same level as the vignettes is chapter 5, where much of the experiential data provided stem from Lamerichs's own game play and exploration of in-game worlds.) The events detailed in the vignettes range from the author's local venues, like Elf Fantasy Fair (Netherlands), to more international spaces like the World Cosplay Summit (Japan). These interludes are also the only points that provide images. The photos are always full page and black and white, and they provide a sense of the mediated fan body and its relationship to a specific event. The vignettes are followed by detailed bibliographies for the full chapter. A consistent author biography is also provided, suggesting that the chapters could readily be read singularly for an article-oriented syllabus.

[3] One of the core strengths of *Productive Fandom* is how Lamerichs models scholarship and transparent practices throughout the text, which is part of what makes this book ideal for introductory coursework at either the undergraduate or graduate level. Lamerichs identifies her approach as being "dynamic and self-reflexive" (234), illustrating the drive for interdisciplinary scholarship as well as honest, transparent research policies. Chapter 2 deals with methodology at length and shows how thoughtful and respectful Lamerichs has been with her subjects. She describes her research and writing techniques openly, including strategies such as approaching forum moderators for permission, giving respondents agency in how they wish to be identified, creating a blog to further collaboration, and allowing her subjects to read drafts so that they could be accurately depicted and have stakes in her research. The chapter also lays out Lamerichs's reasons for utilizing ethnography both in person and online; it reveals a holistic take on the fan experience. Every part of *Productive Fandom* enhances what may very well be a central tenet of the text: that fandom is for everyone.

[4] Despite this sense that fandom is for everyone, *Productive Fandom* emphasizes that the fan is also a highly discursive moving target—and one that scholars should not presume to fully understand. Lamerichs emphasizes fandom's lived-in-ness and its ephemeral quality, which requires an of-the-moment interpretation of what it means to be a fan. She pushes away overgeneralization to provide a clearer understanding of a community. Yet the text foregrounds a narrative, like a sisterhood of traveling pants, where fandom has the aspirational ability to fit over different bodies based on fans' needs. For Lamerichs, fans are flexible, migratory beings that freely move between mediums and between various texts on the basis of their emotional needs and lived experience. Fans are at once a communal cluster and a series of highly individualized players. This logic is crucial to how the chapters are structured: surveys of the field narrow to readings of lived experience and how that experience intertwines with the media text.

[5] Lamerichs's writing style strikes a good balance between intellectual rigor and approachability. This stylistic choice enhances the sense that not only is fandom for everyone but so is fandom scholarship. Chapter 3 provides a good example of this outlook, which covers international interpretations of television narratives by examining Dutch *Sherlock* (2010–17) fans. The chapter leverages work by Jonathan Culler and Monika Fludernik to describe German reader-response theory wherein readers have differing responses as a result of their lived experience. Dutch fans thus experience the narrative and Englishness of *Sherlock* in differing ways. Chapter 3 in particular creates a model for scholars to look at text

as an ongoing process that is singular and personal but can also apply to a broader understanding of how fans connect to media.

[6] *Productive Fandom* notes that relationships between producers and fans are complex and specific, and should therefore be considered on a case-by-case basis by scholars. Chapter 4 best illustrates this concept as Lamerichs delves into *Glee*'s (2009–15) storied history of queer fan fiction and explores the role of fan fiction as interpretive rather than subversive. This chapter's engagement with queer sexualities is perhaps the moment in which the book most specifically addresses fans' personal identity politics within the text. Still, Lamerichs maintains throughout *Productive Fandom* that texts are highly personalized encounters and that the media text is nothing without its reader, whether that reader is a fan or even an antifan.

[7] Central to *Productive Fandom*'s overall argument is the concept of intermediality. Lamerichs defines the term as "a transfer or combination of form and/or content that relates an individual media text to other media" (21), and chapter by chapter, she explores the different values and practices of mediums that resonate with fans. The text does not position itself as the definitive resource of intermediality; rather, it reads as compelling advocacy for Lamerichs's brand of scholarship, inspiring her readers to consider how fans mimic nomadic structures by migrating across media forms and modes of production. There is a useful diagram in chapter 1 to help readers process different modes of intermediality, and Lamerichs takes the time to explore all the definitions and applications relevant to her study. Some scholars utilize buzzwords or phrases, assuming they are on the same page as their readers, but by doing so, they put their work at risk of misinterpretation or vague applications. In contrast, Lamerichs's explorations and clearly defined terms result in an approachable text with a clear value as a resource for both new and continuing scholars. In particular, the way Lamerichs defines affect in chapters 4 and 6 clears away any nebulosity surrounding the term and articulates the stakes of affect within contemporary fandom studies. Using Deleuze, Grossberg, and Hills as her predominant touchstones, Lamerichs engages with affect as an intense emotional and bodily dynamic that is not merely a result of the fan experience but a precursor to it—an openness, a willingness to be overwhelmed or to lose one's sense of self in other spaces and bodies.

[8] *Productive Fandom* skillfully explores historic debates in the field and maps the current landscape of fandom studies, both in terms of what it is and what Lamerichs thinks it could be. Yet one significant limitation of this book is that it avoids engaging with one of the most fraught contemporary debates in fandom: the pervasive issue of whiteness in both fandom and its scholarship. Throughout the book, the word "diversity" is used in regards to sexuality, age, and fictional characters' depictions, but the text skirts the issue of addressing ethnicity or race among fans themselves. This absence becomes increasingly notable as the book progresses, ultimately leaving the word "diversity" with unclear implications.

[9] Early on, Lamerichs takes the stance that her viewpoint is a European one, with some abridgment to American or Japanese identities based on the media texts used. Yet she makes the case that fandom should be understood as "a transcultural space in which fans with different national experiences and memberships come together" (32). Here the study comes

off as being too romantic, too free in its definition of fandom. Any cultural lineage inherently deals with the aftermath of colonialism from either the lingering viewpoint of the oppressor or the oppressed; scholarship at large desperately needs to deal with this issue more transparently and more aggressively, and Lamerichs fails to do so. However, Lamerichs freely notes her potential biases in regards to her own identities as a researcher, which is a welcome clarification of her scholarly stance. Her strengths of transparency, clarity of communication, and ethos-driven expression would have made for a dynamic response to this pressing issue in fandom studies, so its lack is all the more felt. Instructors using this text should take the opportunity to continue the discussion of race and the pervasiveness of white identities within fandom and global culture.

[10] Despite this important absence, *Productive Fandom* is a strong text that may be used to introduce readers to the realm of fandom studies. What makes *Productive Fandom* interesting for scholars already embedded in the field is the text's novel models for lived experience and affect, which Lamerichs articulates from both the fan perspective and from the perspective of an individual academic. Lamerichs repeatedly shows that the personal can be made professional, and she offers a model for how scholars engage in the field. *Productive Fandom* adds to the field by addressing how different mediums engage transmediality and by promoting the body of the fan as worthy of play and exploration.

Review

Politics for the love of fandom: Fan-based citizenship in a digital world, by Ashley Hinck

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Ashley Hinck. *Politics for the love of fandom: Fan-based citizenship in a digital world*. Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2019, hardcover, \$45 (264p) ISBN 978-0807170342; e-book, \$39.49 (2813KB) ASIN B07NWX5LMH.

[1] 2020 brings with it the United States' next presidential election, which means that a whole lot of presidential hopefuls, their campaigns, and a constellation of supporters and detractors are all ramping up their best rhetorical game, trying to convince voters that their particular person is the one most suited to lead America for the next four years. With all of this on the horizon, Ashley Hinck's excellent new book *Politics for the Love of Fandom* is a timely addition to our reading lists, as Hinck traces connections between fan ethos and activities on the one hand and rhetoric, civics, and social engagement on the other.

[2] In writing *Politics*, Hinck sets out to examine the phenomenon she terms "fan-based citizenship." Simultaneously related to and distinct from fan activism (which, Hinck contends, describes a narrower range of activity), fan-based citizenship is "public engagement that emerges from a commitment to a fan-object" (6). Or, in other words, this is civic action that stems from participants' fandom experience and fan values, rather than from traditional religious or social institutions such as a church or political party. Hinck maintains that this new mode of citizen activity is made possible through a "digital, fluid world" (20) in which ethos-defining texts and meanings can stem from any source—popular, political, religious, and/or cultural—and can then be communicated to others through a variety of media. To this end, Hinck's book focuses on the rhetorical strategies used to initiate, recruit for, and maintain fan-based citizenship performances, exploring how fans are "invited, encouraged, and persuaded to take civic action" (16) that touches upon the fan-objects they love.

[3] I was already interested in *Politics* prior to its publication, having seen intriguing blurbs on various fan studies blogs (...Tumblr. I first saw it on Tumblr) and caught glimpses of Hinck's larger project in *Poaching Politics* (2018), which she coauthored with Paul Booth, Amber L. Davisson, and Aaron Hess—and which is another read I would highly recommend, this one for its superb investigation of participatory culture's role in the 2016 US presidential election. Even so, *Politics* captured my attention with Hinck's early distinction between fan activism and fan-based citizenship, and then won me over completely with Hinck's sharp focus on rhetorical strategies. Scholarly interest in the rhetoric of nontraditional—and even nontextual—texts has certainly increased (Jean Bessette's fantastic 2017 *Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives* also comes to mind), but for these kinds of subjects it can be difficult to distinguish specific rhetorical elements without isolating them from the whole.

[4] Hinck, however, succeeds in this kind of analysis splendidly. Even more admirably, she also takes care to make *Politics* accessible to professional but non-academic audiences who might be seeking to learn more about fan-based citizenship in order to incorporate that knowledge into their own work. The book's coda, for instance, reframes her research by distilling findings from Hinck's case studies into practical suggestions for practitioners who will be "creating, inventing, audiencing, and participating in fan-based citizenship performances" (172); Hinck also anticipates that these lessons will be equally valuable for "a fan, a staff member at a charity, a chief of staff on a political campaign, or a major media corporation" (172). I believe, though, that this wide-ranging audience named in Hinck's coda is also the audience of her entire book. Though the structure and theoretical grounding of *Politics'* main chapters will certainly be more familiar to academic audiences than lay ones, Hinck's concepts are approachable and applicable just the same.

[5] The exploratory but accessible nature of *Politics* is apparent from the start. Though it might seem like well-trodden ground, Hinck uses her introduction to lay out clear definitions of citizenship (3–4), fandom (9–10), and online community (13), and then examines how each one functions as a mode of participation. Readers soon see the payoff of revisiting these terms, since Hinck introduces her term fan-based citizenship (6–7) as an additional mode of participation—and one that draws important characteristics from those previously described.

[6] Hinck follows this introduction with an initial chapter—possibly my favorite section of the book—theorizing what citizenship and citizenship performances look like in a digital and fluid world that "enables citizens to choose popular texts to authorize civic actions" (23) after rhetors, creators, and others already "encourage fans to adopt a particular interpretation of a media object" (37). In doing this, Hinck demonstrates that there are at least two levels of rhetoric involved in fan-based citizenship and its performances—the first when a fan-object is presented to its audience with "a particular interpretation" (37) and the second when fans base their *own* rhetoric upon that fan-object, whether or not this fannish rhetoric is based on the interpretation originally handed down to them. Specifically, Hinck suggests that we pay attention to "which textual interpretations are invoked when, how, by whom, and with what implications" (37) since there is definite possibility for a mismatch between creators' and fans' rhetorics—let alone politicians', campaigns', and so on. For Hinck, then, digitality and fluidity are central to fan-based citizenship because they enable these communications and

choices; however, they are also key to her contention that both academics and practitioners should be paying more attention to fan-based citizenship as an emerging and evolving mode of civic participation. Then, on a more actionable level, Hinck also identifies three rhetorical strategies that observers might notice at play in fan-based citizenship performances: "connecting" certain aspects of the fan-object with a real-world social issue (18), "expanding" fannish value frameworks to include civic activities as well as fan ones (18), and "retelling" important fan-object narratives in order to mobilize fans to civic action (19).

[7] In tandem with the important concepts discussed above, I also appreciated how Hinck acknowledges that the presence of popular culture, new media fandoms, and online fan communities won't necessarily translate into fan-based global citizenship practices (37). Instead, she observes, a mode of fan-based citizenship requires ongoing rhetorical work from those pushing it. This realization is so crucial to Hinck that it becomes one of three theoretical assumptions guiding the analysis of the entire book: "that texts have multiple meanings, that the political use of popular culture is not automatic, and that access to popular culture texts varies with social location and power" (39). This grounding, along with her structured discussion of frameworks and modalities (30–33), is one of the many instances where Hinck works hard to ensure that field-specific concepts and terminology remain accessible to readers both across disciplines and beyond the academy.

[8] Following this introduction and initial theoretical chapter, Hinck draws on four years of fieldwork to present four case studies of fan-based citizenship, each one looking at a specific example in which a fannish framework has been paired with a civic cause. Chapter 2 looks at the Husker Football Coaches Challenge, which involves "connecting" (18) the values of University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Cornhusker football team fandom with a program for mentoring for at-risk youth. Here, fan ethics of supporting the team and being neighborly can translate into giving time, support, and expertise to local at-risk youth and racing to recruit more volunteer mentors than other states. Chapter 3 explores the Project for Awesome, a donation drive that entails "expanding" (18) the ethos of Nerdfighter fandom (fans of John and Hank Green's YouTube channel) to public causes by raising money for charity. Here, fandom values of support, collaboration, and community are transported beyond fannish spaces in order to serve nonfan communities. Chapter 4 then looks at the Greenpeace campaign #SavetheArctic #BlockShell, which involved "retelling" (18–19) the ending of the highly popular 2014 *Lego Movie*. By depicting this fictional world being destroyed by an oil spill, Greenpeace tried to appeal to fans' sense of play and creativity to mobilize action against the oil company Shell. And finally, in another excellent move that I would add to the list of *Politics*' strengths, Hinck's fourth case study looks at an example where the pairing of fan framework and civic modality *failed*. Disney's Star Wars-based Force for Change campaign asked fans to donate in support of UNICEF in exchange for chances to win merchandise, not by appealing to Star Wars-driven values such as standing up to evil forces or rallying for a greater social good. Thus, although the Force for Change campaign drew enough funds to be considered a financial success, its focus on material goods that fans might collect instead of values that fans might emulate means that this campaign did not truly draw acts of fan-based citizenship.

[9] In addition to the aforementioned coda that reframes Hinck's findings into five workable

takeaways for practitioners, *Politics* wraps up with a conclusion where Hinck continues to make excellent points in approachable ways. After recapping the main themes and ideas of her book, Hinck proposes three implications of her work on fan-based citizenship and names two possible futures stemming from this new mode of affective political engagement. The implications include her argument that "to ignore fan-based citizenship would be to ignore a central part of contemporary public culture" (165) and the realization that "online communities are increasingly serving as a source of community, public values, and ultimately, citizenship performances" (166). However, she also notes the very pressing reality that many fan communities are predominantly white, or presume a default whiteness, and so cannot adequately address certain civic issues or meet the social needs of non-white communities (167–69). Hinck thus joins an array of scholars—including Rukmini Pande, Abigail De Kosnik, and andré carrington among others—in bringing these concerns to popular attention and noting that fans, and fan studies, can do better at being truly inclusive. Finally, Hinck closes by predicting that fan-based citizenship could lead either to fuller integration with electoral politics (169–70) or to corporate appropriation (170–71), and that fans' own awareness of their power as citizens will likely play a large part in determining which future we see more of.

[10] Looking back, I wish I still had that Tumblr post where I first saw the blurb for *Politics for the Love of Fandom*, because I'd really love to reach out to that blogger—on a couple of counts. First of all, I'd definitely tell them: *you were right, this book was great, keep up the awesome fan studies work!* And second, I'd probably go through their blog to see what fandom(s) they're a part of, and ponder whether those fandoms' ethical frameworks pair well with ethical modalities like promoting curiosity and encouraging learning. Just because.

Book review

Straight Korean female fans and their gay fantasies, by Jungmin Kwon

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[0.1] Keywords—Gender; Korea; Sexuality; Slash; Yaoi

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Jungmin Kwon. *Straight Korean female fans and their gay fantasies*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019, paperback, \$65 (236p) ISBN 9781609386214, e-book ISBN 9781609386221.

[1] Jungmin Kwon's *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies* provides a detailed look at the role that young women's imaginative projections have played in shaping the national mediascape in contemporary South Korea. The book aims to unravel the seeming paradox by which (mostly) straight Korean women's fandom of a fantasized gay sexuality has inadvertently expanded the larger public's conception of acceptable forms of masculine gender presentation and sexual identity. What's more, Kwon argues, straight women's projected desires for aestheticized gay romance are the source of what is now seen as the trademark of Korean culture industries more broadly—that is, feminized masculinity, especially in Korean wave media content such as K-drama (Korean TV serials) and K-pop (Korean idol pop) and their transnational fandoms.

[2] Kwon's study takes care to contextualize Korean women's fandom of gay-themed media. *Straight Female Fans* posits the following indispensable frameworks for situating these fandoms: the sociocultural transformations of the millennial turn in South Korea; the history of South Korean women's relationships to consumption; and public attitudes toward gendered consumption—especially but not exclusively media consumption—as the domain in which ideas about liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and national branding converge in South Korea, from the early 1990s onward. On the basis of this latter framework, Kwon aggregates various forms of gay-themed media, focusing on the community of reception rather than genre characteristics or industry factors that differentiate various texts. The appetites of Kwon's straight female fans range from slash/yaoi fan fic to art house and commercial cinema to what might be termed the global gay media, particularly North American television shows, that have been credited with mainstreaming gay representation during the

late 1990s and early 2000s, albeit through global gay media's association with whiteness, aspirational consumerism, and middlebrow taste. In this regard, Kwon mentions *Queer as Folk* (British, 1999–2000; American, 2000–2005), *Queer Eye* (2003–7), and *Will & Grace* (1998–) as key examples, alongside the postfeminist standard *Sex and the City* (1998–2004). It is this very expansiveness of the category of gay-themed media that gives the fan identity that Kwon explores a specific sensibility and rationale. Straight female fans' omnivorous appetites for narratives of nonheterosexual intimacy become legible as resistance to the oppressive force of patriarchal heteronormativity in the lives of these newly self-reflexive liberal subjects.

[3] *Straight Female Fans* presents a historical argument across five thematically organized chapters as well as an introduction and a conclusion, each divided by subheadings. The book thus reiterates the temporal beats of its diachronic narrative through varied lenses. Kwon also embeds her own membership as one of "those girls"—the somewhat dismissive phrase used to describe the straight female fans who serve as her primary subjects—into the project at various points, thus imbuing her narrative with a deep sympathy and a confessional air. The introduction explains Kwon's position as a particular type of acafan—one whose trajectory from innocence to experience is representative of the group whose contours Kwon sketches throughout the book. First as a participant and later as a researcher, Kwon identifies the varied groups—marketers, academics, journalists, and media producers—that hail this consumer demographic. This gender and industry context impels Kwon to coin the term "FANTasy" to name the fan culture of straight women's interest in gay male representation as well as the aggregate forms of gay-themed media whose consumption defined a generation of young women who came of age during the period of media liberalization in South Korea. Kwon writes,

[4] I collectively refer to all female fans' interest in and desire for gay male erotic relationships as FANTasy. The syllable "fan" is capitalized intentionally to highlight the subjectivity and cultural power of these enthusiastic media consumers in imagining and realizing their fantasy. These fans may be longtime fans of yaoi, BL [boys' love], or slash fiction; ardent watchers of global gay-themed programming; repeat viewers of mainstream gay-themed movies; and readers and authors of Korean fanfic. It is difficult to define this subculture because it is a manifestation of diverse tastes and aspirations for gay identity and love among (heterosexual) women across the world. One clear common denominator is that FANTasy fans consume a gay male body that they themselves create based on their own fantasies, not a real-world gay male body. However,... these fantasies are leading to real societal changes. (11)

[5] After establishing the analytic category of FANTasy, Kwon relies heavily on it throughout the book. Chapter 1 details the context of media liberalization in 1990s South Korea that opened the Korean cultural landscape to multiple sources of FANTasy or gay-themed content, tracing the transnational flows of gay representation in American television and film and the so-called gay boom in Japan. Kwon subtly suggests that a desire for cosmopolitan attitudes befitting a newly democratic society spurred audiences to seek out depictions of sexual minority subjects, and that the association of gay culture with conspicuous consumption also

fueled these cosmopolitan fantasies. However, she stops short of making the explicit connection between gay representation, liberalism-cum-cosmopolitanism, and the opening of the Korean media market to new foreign content. Kwon's analysis nonetheless suggests that the globalization boom at the turn of the millennium involved not only the fantasy of a borderless world but also one of plastic and boundless consumer identity, demonstrated by a new appetite for the exotic spectacle of nonheteronormative characters and lifestyles.

[6] Chapter 2 uses the discourse of postfeminism to explain the conflation of consumer and gender empowerment in South Korea (as elsewhere). The chapter begins with a broad history of popular misogynist attitudes about the promiscuity of women's desires, based on women's perceived appetites for foreign brands and media. Kwon then highlights a qualitative shift in public assessments of women's consumption patterns in the 2000s: while still derided as shallow, antisocial, and deviant, women's pursuit of individual pleasure through consumption began to gain legitimacy as a form of societal agency and liberal self-determination.

[7] Chapters 3 and 4 narrow their scope to present a more targeted historical narrative of the mainstreaming of gay bodies in South Korean cinema. Moving across both spheres of commercial and indie cinema, and citing both fiction and documentary films in the same general phenomenon of "FANtasy Mainstreamed," Kwon posits a definitive rupture around the 2005 box office hit *The King and the Clown*. These two chapters query the pros and cons of increased visibility through close readings of select examples of domestically produced, gay-themed films, comparing their aesthetics and political valences in pre-2005 and post-2005 cases. Ultimately, Kwon concludes that the phenomenon of increased visibility of gay bodies and lifestyles, even if resulting from a cynical strategy to capitalize on straight women's putatively perverse desires, has had a progressive impact on the attitudes of the general public toward homosexuality. To arrive at this conclusion, Kwon suggests a more expansive assessment of the effects of commodification, arguing that the reification of gay identity as commodified spectacle can have a pedagogical effect, much as fan studies scholars have argued for the pedagogical impacts of fandom as praxis. Here Kwon draws on scholarship that maintains that the commodification of marginalized identities can consolidate group identity, especially by bringing into public consciousness previously unimagined or invisible subject positions. By the same token, fandom understood as praxis —generative and communal world building—rather than merely as a mode of consumption may offer similar appeals.

[8] The final chapter shifts focus from "those girls" to Kwon's interviews with young gay men in Seoul and their views on gay representation in mainstream media and on the latter's female fans. In contrast to the critical views of straight women's objectification of the fantasized gay male body, particularly those of Asian scholars of yaoi and BL fandom that Kwon summarizes earlier, Kwon's interviewees suggest a tolerance and appreciation of the possibility for solidarity between gay men and young (straight) women as groups who are similarly oppressed by Korea's culture of Confucian patriarchy.

[9] This last set of assertions about the ways in which media fandom can function as protoactivism and a basis for solidarity between a marginalized group (gay men) and another

marginalized group that is drawn to the commodified version of the former group's identity (FANtasy fans) is perhaps the shakiest ground for Kwon, who admits that she has been a target of criticism for precisely this proposition, and that she had difficulty recruiting gay male interviewees, given that her FANtasy fans often do not actually know or interact with members of the queer community in South Korea. On this point, readers coming to Kwon's text from queer, gender, or sexuality studies may find her response to this criticism inadequate. She states that she understands the criticisms (and her feelings have been hurt by the accusation of condescension), but she nevertheless wants to try to encourage alliances between FANtasy fans and gay men in South Korea. Moreover, readers may question the text's lack of clarity about the ways in which metrosexuality and homosexuality relate, as homosexuality and feminized masculinity are sometimes conflated. This is partly a function of the untranslatability of terms: identity positions, labels, and understandings of nonnormative sexual identity and gender presentation don't always traverse cultural contexts. While Kwon is attentive to matters of language, helpfully explaining the specific terms used in East Asian discourse around queer identity and nonheteronormative sexualities to highlight problems of translation, the text also bears some responsibility for the conflation of gender presentation and sexual identity. Kwon pays relatively scant attention to the impact of class and respectability politics—the salutary effects of new consumer marketing to cultivate male consumption—on the public perception of gay identity in the 2000s.

[10] *Straight Female Fans* presents much information that would be of interest to fan studies, communications studies, gender and sexuality studies, and Korean studies. However, readers looking for in-depth analysis of fan praxis may also find the text more focused on the status of its subjects as gendered consumers rather than as participatory fans. While the book offers ethnographic accounts of individual fans in chapters 1 and 2, the text does not broach the collective identity of FANtasy fans. Indeed, Kwon foregrounds this aspect of her analysis in the section where she defines FANtasy, noting her inability to make definitive statements about this subculture. This admission thus still raises the question of how women's appetites for nonnormative gender representation cohere into a fan culture or community, which they undoubtedly do. In lieu of extended engagement with FANtasy consumers' own analysis of their fan identity, Kwon foregrounds instead what she sees as their unique characteristic: the insatiable and omnivorous appetite that straight South Korean female fans who fantasize about an idealized male femininity have, seeking to fulfill their desire for the spectacle of soft masculinity across middlebrow cinema, Western TV, commercialized idol pop performance, and the subcultural space of fan fiction. This nondiscriminating appetite is at the center of Kwon's conclusions, as this guarantee of the group's attraction to gay-themed media is what convinces the commercial media industry to attend to it. Moreover, the association between Western humanism, globalization, and the embrace of liberalism in South Korea provides crucial context for understanding the significance of gay identity as an expression of Korean progress in matching a Western-cum-universal standard of human rights.

[11] The strength of *Straight Female Fans* is the way in which it conveys the complex specificity of the Korean case in fleshing out the comparison between BL/yaoi and slash as transnational phenomena that are coimplicated, not simply cultural analogs across regions. The text's linking of the media sphere to broader social currents, in order to provide insight

on the zeitgeist of what's been called "new millennium South Korea," is incredibly useful, as is the text's access to both fan and industry actors' voices in its treatment of the specifics of the film industry. Overall, *Straight Female Fans* is a welcome addition to work that delimits and challenges the Euro-American bias in fan studies, as well as the presumed legibility of mediated gay identity within mainstream LGBTQ discourse.