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From Fan Citizenship to “Fanspiracies”: Politics and Participatory Cultures in Times of Crisis?

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In 2020 and 2021 the ‘meme stock’ phenomenon rattled the US stock market. Meme stocks are shares of a company that become volatily popular against all market expectations. They are driven, in part at least, by amateur investors on platformized trading apps, coordinating in participatory forums like Reddit, and often drawing on memes and other spreadable media techniques to encourage others to buy and hold stocks at these unusually high prices against traditional investment advice. In so doing, investors speculatively seek to drive the prices of stocks beyond what a traditional market might value them as, gamifying the stock market in the process. It is no co- incidence that many of the stocks caught up in the phenomenon – Gamestop and AMC Entertainment – had pre-existing fannish connections, but the relationship between fandom and meme stocks goes much deeper.

Though of course many involved were seeking to make a quick dollar, many user practices have crystallised into an underlying conspiracy belief about their role in confronting an all-powerful Wall Street via ‘the mother of all short squeezes’ or MOASS. In practices that are reminiscent of several similar social phenomenon in recent years, perhaps most notably QAnon, such users seek out and ‘decode’ hidden meanings, drawing those interpretations into ever-more complex narratives about how and when the hypothetical MOASS will take place. The CEO of AMC Entertainment, Adam Aron, continues to playfully engage these communities. In February 2023, he, likely accidentally, tweeted the letter M. The tweet caused widespread speculation in forums like r/wallstreetbets about its potential meaning and implications for the stock market. He later replied:

On a lighter note, earlier I said the number of movie releases in 2023 will be 35% more than in ‘22. That’s SO important for AMC’s path to eventual pandemic recovery. But

then, I tweeted a cryptic M, which some of you are ‘decoding’. It means nothing, I didn’t knowingly tweet it! (Aron, 10/2/23, @CEOAdam).

This denial initiated further decoding in related forums, requiring a follow-up the next day:

Yesterday I tweeted an ‘M’ by mistake, but many of you thought I was being less than candid in the denial, and that the M must have meant something. Nope, just a tweeting error. But today I am tweeting this, and it does mean something: ‘Y’ (Aron, 12/2/23, @CEOAdam).

The deep, significant interpretations applied to a single letter published by accident, and its ability to move the stock price of a large multinational, offers a snapshot of a much broader set of practices that are embedded in contemporary life. Increasingly, something resembling ‘fandom’ – highly active and ludic interpretation in bounded social spaces; affective and repeated engagement; creative textual productivity – has come to contribute to shaping virtually all aspects of social, political, cultural, and economic life. Meme stocks are but one example. QAnon is probably the most pertinent example of this, where social media users collaborated to solve ‘puzzles’ posted by Q in a similar way to how fans attempt to unpick what will happen in future episodes of their favourite TV shows (see Reinhard et al., 2022).

Similarly, social media users took to platforms like Reddit, TikTok and Twitter to ‘investigate’ the disappearance of Gabby Petito, a 22-year-old influencer, in 2021, analysing Instagram posts, Spotify playlists and Fitbit data to trace her footsteps and ultimately conclude that her fiancé had killed her (Jones, 2023). And the Johnny Depp vs. Amber Heard court case also saw audiences watching the trial live on streaming platforms as well as offering analyses on YouTube, producing memes, and selling merchandise in support of – or opposition to – the stars (Cai, 2022). Thus, we see evidence of a broader platform of popular media fan-like engagements with a range on non-fiction texts in multiple arenas.

These phenomena speak to a fundamental point made by Henry Jenkins at the dawn of web 2.0: ‘cyberspace is fandom writ large’ (2006: 138). For all the criticisms levelled against Jenkins over the years, fair and unfair, this fundamental point underpinning his work on participatory cultures remains the pithiest and most prophetic. It would be churlish to criticise Jenkins for failing to predict quite how profound and uneven those consequences might be in an environment where ‘cyberspace’ shapes or intersects with almost every aspect of our existence. Yet two decades later that is the challenge confronting us. Social media platforms

are machines for converting interpretations into textual productivities, and the networked affordances of the internet increasingly place those productivities into spaces of community and/or conflict. The continued rise of reactionary populism, the ongoing consequences of climate collapse, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic have all given a degree of urgency to making sense of fanish practices, dispositions, and behaviours.

The urgency and anxiety surrounding this level of audience and user activity reverses an older model of anxiety about the passivity of audiences. Media and communication studies was forged in the mid-20th century with the aim of proving and demonstrating the fundamental assumption that mass media audiences were alienated, and vulnerable to behavioural influences and effects. In many regards, the discipline has since attempted to complicate and reverse these assumptions. When researchers went out to speak to the ‘masses’ they found an extraordinarily rich and diverse set of responses to media texts: audiences spoke back to the media, challenged it, and rooted their responses in their own textual and social networks.

One of the biggest challenges to the notion that mediated popular cultures produced ‘passive’ audiences were in spaces where audiences were obviously engaged in the production and distribution of their own mediated texts and/or in communities that clearly adopted and adapted mediated texts (see Falero, 2016). From community media experiments to alternative media formats like subcultural zines, scholars increasingly came to stress things like ‘creativity’, ‘community’, and alternative public spheres. These theories did not dismantle media effects arguments, but they did provide some of the richest discursive weapons against those assumptions and curtailed some of its worst tendencies.

Celebrations of these aspects of audience participation and creation soon followed in theoretical work, particularly theories focussing on fans and fandoms. In framing audiences as ‘active’, fans served as useful case studies for exploring how audiences interpreted texts in creative, productive, spectacular, and visible ways (Bacon-Smith, 1991; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). Through playful productivity, some audiences could ‘write in the margins’ and produce texts that (re)enforced extra-textual meanings, often refracted through the subcultural and social identities and subject positions of the reader. Both inside and outside of the academy such activities – like fan fiction (Busse, 2017), art, and vids (Coppa, 2008; Turk and Johnson, 2012); cosplay (Lamerichs, 2011); conventions (Woo et al., 2020); forums, wikis, and message boards (Mittell et al., 2013) – came to serve as the bread and butter of contemporary definitions and understandings of fans and fandom.

No doubt these studies were interesting, rich, and innovative, yet studies of fans very well might have stayed as a reasonably niche subfield had it not been for three overlapping trends.

First, as early adopters of technology; notably visible participants in emerging shared interest online spaces; enthusiastic research participants; and often occupying overlapping social coordinates with academic researchers, fans made for useful case studies in burgeoning internet and social media studies (Baym, 2000; Pearson, 2010). The types of activities that fans had been theorised as doing at an earlier conjuncture proved to be useful for optimistic researchers trying to make sense of emergent forms of creativity, DIY culture and communities in early web spaces. This hinge has been most apparent in Henry Jenkins and colleagues' concept of 'participatory culture' which was first theorised in relation to fan cultures and then expanded to users of the world wide web and then web 2.0 (Jenkins et al., 2016). Participatory culture, and participation more broadly, has since become a 'paradigm' for understanding users in internet cultures (Mario and Daria, 2016; Tomblinson and Wolf, 2017).

Second, what once might have been considered minority audience practices have become adopted across audience segments and all users and audiences are increasingly interpellated as fans by the media industry regardless of whether they take up those positions (Ford, 2014; Stanfill, 2019). Indeed, the business models of social media platforms are fundamentally predicated on such forms of participation. This is a set of processes that some scholars have described as 'the mainstreaming of fandom' (Jenner, 2017: 305). If fandom might once have been considered a type of 'resistant' or 'alternative' reading practice it might now better be understood itself as hegemonic (Hills, 2005). Audiences are encouraged to produce, participate, and engage as fans as a political, economic, moral, and social good.

Third, 'fans' and 'fandom' have been utilised as a useful lens for understanding a range of modes and forms of engagement with mediated content beyond 'popular culture', a process described by Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington as 'fanization' (2017: 22). Fandom, or at least something resembling it, is everywhere: in news (Gray, 2007), politics (Sandvoss, 2013), health (Speck, 2023), criminal and police investigations (Jones, 2023), business and investing (Stanfill and Salter, 2021), environmentalism (Amann and Doidge, 2022), and humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2013). Fan spaces, moreover, are increasingly the central sites of decoding the news. In this reading, 'fans' and 'fandom' are critical for synthesising ideas about the types of affective relationships audiences have with mediated texts in a deeply mediated world (Gray et al., 2017).

There are two distinct approaches to making sense of fandom's centrality in the contemporary public sphere. One perspective is concerned with citizenship and suggests that the pleasures of popular and political culture have always co-mingled, and that popular culture can reconcile or even be a useful arena for the cultivation of 'civic virtues' (Van Zoonen, 2005: 63) more commonly associated with 'traditional' political participation (Hinck, 2019). Following Jenkins's arguments that fannish participatory cultures might provide a training ground for civic participation, work has centred 'fan activism' as a space in which fandom might be brought to bear on contemporary political issues (Andini and Ghaziah, 2021; Bennett, 2014; Jenkins, 2012; Numerato, 2018). Elsewhere, political activists deploy the symbols of popular culture in protests and the logics of spreadable media in the design of political campaigns. Increasingly, audience's own fannish engagements operate in a model of consumer-citizenship characterised by 'ethical cultural consumption' whereby fannish engagement is negotiated by decisions about social, political, and environmental 'good' (Wood et al., 2020).

Another approach is concerned with exclusion, reactionary politics, inequality, and conspiracy. Scholars have been keen to point towards fandom as spaces structured by racisms, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of oppression (Bury, 2008; Goward, 2019; Pande, 2018; Wanzo, 2015). Relatedly, in the contemporary environment popular cultural fandoms related to film, television and video games have often been at the forefront of the mobilisation and mainstreaming of wider social and political tensions and have frequently provided the template and playbook for on and offline harassment campaigns: 2014 saw the loosely organised, anti-feminist Gamergate campaign which targeted women in the video game industry including online harassment, doxing, rape threats, and death threats (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2017). Global populist political leaders have also interpellated their followers as fans, and a generation of reactionary micro-celebrities have cultivated a small but loyal following by saying controversial and cruel statements positioned in opposition to 'the mainstream media' (Lewis, 2020).

An emergent but significant body of literature working in this vein deploys fandom as an explanatory tool to make sense of culture(s) of mis/disinformation, particularly in relation to conspiracy theories. Certainly, aspects of science fiction fan culture and conspiracy culture have comfortably overlapped in convention halls and science fiction zines for decades; certain forms of popular tabloid culture have often encouraged the pleasures related to conspiracy 'news'; and there is a long and rich history of conspiracy theorists utilising community and alternative media ecosystems long before social media. Conspiracy theorists might even be

understood as a type of fan community in and of themselves, with their own community norms and dispositions. But these connections are more entwined than merely sharing social and cultural spaces. As Mark Fenster has suggested, conspiracy theorists engage in practices of intense interpretation and decoding – something he calls ‘hyperactive semiosis’ (2008: 95) – directed towards history, news, and politics. This hyperactive semiosis is put into the service of constructing ‘alternative’, ludic narratives that operate outside of traditional, hegemonic interpretations of the world. As scholars have noted, there are remarkably similar practices shared between ‘classic’ definitions of fandom and conspiracy theorists (Aupers, 2020; Marwick and Partin, 2022). This is what we playfully call ‘fanspircy’: the way that fannish and conspiracy dispositions draw on similar techniques, pleasures, and practices for interpreting the world in a culture where the boundaries between popular and political communication are blurrier than they have ever been.

It’s important to not fall into ahistorical traps: conspiracy theories have always had an impact on the wider political system and have underpinned racism and antisemitism for as long as there have been printing presses. Belief in conspiracy, moreover, at least in America, seems to remain stable even if, at times, adherents had to share their theories in more private, subcultural spaces (Butter, 2020). Moral panics about how social media are responsible for the prevalence of conspiracy thinking will likely seem as quaint as those linking conspiracy theories to the ‘video age’ in the 1990s (see Fenster, 2008: 118). But the centrality and visibility of conspiracies in recent events, as well as the speed by which they bleed into and impact wider media, economic, political, and social institutions, are new, and need to be taken seriously.

Though it might be alluring to construct ‘citizenship’ and ‘conspiracy’ approaches as binaries, it is important we resist these temptations. Citizenship and conspiracy are two sides of the same coin, and one’s own categorisation of what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of participation will no doubt be shaped by one’s own political and affective and, indeed, fannish investments. Taking seriously the practices of fans of ‘low’ popular culture and refusing to conceptualise them as naïve cultural dupes was, no doubt, much easier than doing the same for white nationalists and anti-vaxxers. But it is important that we avoid reproducing older anxieties about passive audiences being manipulated by shadowy, undefined forces such as algorithms while guarding against new anxieties about overly active audiences who were safer hidden away and quiet in the unknowable mass. Cultural studies, as Nick Couldry has observed, has always placed ‘a value on representing the social world in terms that are adequate to the complexity each of us would accord to ourselves’ (2006: 59). The methods, theories and approaches developed in fan studies – of patient and ‘slow’ qualitative research; of treating

research subjects as complex and sometimes contradictory individuals; of the importance of emotions, feelings and experiences in user audience research; on the need to take meaning, pleasure and community seriously – remain more important than ever for making sense of this cultural terrain.

The special issue

The contributors to this special issue offer a range of interdisciplinary voices which contribute to understanding this cultural terrain. Some, such as Line Nybro Petersen, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, Anthony Dannar and Natalie Le Clue, deal with the more visible aspects of the ‘fanization’ turn and how fan studies can be used to make sense of this. In ‘New territories for fan studies: The insurrection, QAnon, Donald Trump and fandom’ they offer a discussion of the main issues that might guide future fan studies research in terms of fandom, complicity and politics. Taking their point of departure as the US insurrection on January 6, 2021, they suggest it is no longer useful to distinguish between fan practices and participatory culture. Rather, understanding this amalgamation of fan practices into other social domains can help us make sense of current phenomena in the seeming growth of conspiracy theory communities and right-wing movements alike.

The popularisation and normalisation of conspiracy theories is the topic of the next article, by Lars de Wildt and Stef Aupers. ‘Participatory conspiracy culture: Believing, doubting and playing with conspiracy theories on Reddit’ addresses how people participate in online conspiracy culture through an ethnographic study of the r/conspiracy subreddit. de Wildt and Aupers demonstrate (Aron, 2023a, 2023b) that discussions are heterogeneous, and participants relate to each other primarily through conflict thus arguing that, on r/conspiracy at least, participatory conspiracy culture is not a homogenous echo chamber of radical belief, but a heterogeneous participatory culture in which belief is fundamentally contested.

David Moon and Peter Allen’s article, ‘“Huge fan of the drama”: Politics as an object of fandom’ turns its attention to British politics and the drama surrounding the Conservative party’s 2019 leadership contest.¹ They argue that despite politics having a profound impact on our everyday lives, many of those who pay the most attention to it do so from a fannish positionality, engaging with it in the same way that others might engage with sport or TV shows. Rather than examining the fandom – or otherwise – of individual politicians, however, they explore the construction of politics itself as an object of fandom and argue that constructing politics as an object of fandom ultimately affects politics itself.

Moving across the pond, American politics is the subject of Natalie LeClue's paper, 'The new normal: Online political fandom and the co-opting of morals'. By analysing the discourse surrounding the Twitter hashtags #CrookedHillary and #LockHerUp as used throughout the 2016 Presidential Election, she argues that previously 'normal' and 'acceptable' types of discourse have been co-opted into what can be termed toxic fandom. Previously studied in relation to intra-fandom relationships, toxic rhetoric and behaviour is also displayed on platforms such as Twitter and in instances beyond media, sports or music fandom, pointing to an acceptance by fans of being immersed in toxic practices.

Christine Tomlinson takes up this discussion in her article 'Community Grievances, personal responsibility, and DIY protection: Frustrations and solution-seeking among marginalised Twitch streamers'. Online spaces can place users in positions where they encounter hostility, toxicity, and gatekeeping, and users of the online streaming platform Twitch frequently encounter hostility based on identity. Tomlinson examines the ways that social media is used to try to organise against discriminatory cultures toward marginalised streamers, but highlights that that much of the onus is placed on streamers themselves to keep themselves safe, feeding into the structures and cultures that allow racist and sexist hostilities in online and gaming spaces.

Of course, racist and sexist hostilities exist in offline and non-gaming spaces, as Anthony Dannar points out. His article, "'Every adventure begins with a cup of coffee': Black rifle coffee company, reactionary fandom, and the tactical body' examines the Black Rifle Coffee Company brand and how its merchandise is adopted and used as wearable symbols of white supremacy and reactionary politics. Theorising the tactical body as a fannish embodiment of white supremacist conspiracy theories and a playful form of political engagement designed to actualise a revenge fantasy of insurrection, Dannar demonstrates how capitalism provides a permission structure for white masculine supremacy and how tactical brands can profit from white male grievances and political tribalism.

Ashley Hinck and Carolyn Hardin bring the discussion back to what we might think of as 'traditional' fandom in their article 'Civic culture in the Supernatural fandom: Misha Collins, Destiel, and the 2020 US presidential election'. They examine how fans made sense of Supernatural star Misha Collins' political action during the 2020 Presidential election. Through undertaking interviews with fans they found fans were ambivalent about Misha's endorsements but enthusiastic about how he went about doing politics, and argue that fandom should be read as an important site of civic culture building – with implications for how fan cultures influence contemporary notions of citizenship, civic values, and political outcomes.

The final article in this special issue comes from Simone Driessen who explores how fans negotiate their fannish position and practices after the cancellation of their idol. ‘The participatory politics and play of cancelling an idol: Exploring how fans negotiate their fandom of a cancelled “fave”’ draws on interviews with twelve Dutch fans of Marco Borsato and an analysis of online fan comments, and shows the complexity of being a fan of a cancelled artist. Driessen argues that understanding the motivations behind the fans who reject Borsato, as well as those who can enable researchers to better understand polarised views in society at large and how such processes play out on a macro-level.

Taken together these articles explore the different aspects of citizenship and conspiracy that are evidenced within and beyond what has traditionally been thought of as fandom. From politics to material culture and the affective relationships between fans and celebrities, this special issue examines what participatory culture means and how it is enacted in times of crisis.

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