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*Calling on the Colbert Nation: Fandom, Politics and Parody in an Age  
of Media Convergence*

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Image retrieved on November 26, 2014, from <http://www.colbertnation.com/>

***Abstract:** In this article we consider the relationship between fandom, politics and parody through an examination of fan practices related to The Colbert Report. We begin by recounting the way in which a project intended to analyze online political activism took an unexpected turn into fan culture. We then undertake two case studies. In the first, we focus on one example of Colbert Report fan participation to demonstrate the ways in which audiences' online activities complicate theories of irony as simple acts of encoding and decoding. In the second, we revisit two interviews with prominent bloggers writing about The Colbert Report and The Daily Show to suggest that fan practices not only overlap with political practices, but demonstrate a convergence of imaginative performance, cultural consumption and collective engagement that blurs the boundaries between affect and activism. We conclude by suggesting that fan cultures hold significant insights into meaning production and civic engagement in mediated worlds, and that they cannot be separated from questions about contemporary modes of online political expression.*

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What is the relationship between fandom, politics and parody? In this article we recount what happened when a project intended to analyze online political activism took an unexpected turn into fan culture. Although we at first resisted this shift, we soon realized that an examination of digital public spheres could not overlook fans' readings, performances and communities. In fact, we found that fan practices troubled – and in doing so deepened – our conceptualizations of both ironic expression and political engagement. As researchers interested in the use of irony as a denaturalizing critique, we discovered that taking into account fan reception broadened our understanding of the way irony functions not only as a textual strategy, but as a complex social interaction between ironist and audience. And as theorists intent on rethinking notions of citizenship and democracy in the context of emerging new media practices, we found that fan-like feelings and values (including interest, affinity and sociability) intersected with and illuminated the more explicitly “political” activities we had set out to trace.

In the three sections that follow, we discuss a variety of fan activities related to *The Colbert Report*, which in a very short time has gathered a large fan following, known, collectively, as “The Colbert Nation.” We begin by describing our first encounters with the online fan sites and user-generated content that have sprung up around *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, and the kinds of questions these provoked for our work. We then focus on one example of fan participation – fans' attempts to name a bridge after Stephen Colbert – to demonstrate the ways in which interpretative practices complicate theories of irony as simple acts of encoding and decoding, and instead reveal the ways in which audiences “make irony happen” ([Hutcheon, \*Irony\* 118](#)). In the final section, we turn to two interviews conducted within our research project in order to examine fan practices such as blogging, archiving and discussing. Adding to the insights of recent theorists of both fandom and public spheres – including [Henry Jenkins](#), [Liesbet van Zoonen](#) and [Noortje Marres](#) – we argue that fan practices not only overlap with political practices, but also demonstrate a convergence of imaginative performance, cultural consumption and collective engagement that blurs the boundaries between affect and activism. Taken together, these observations suggest that fan cultures not only cannot be separated from questions about contemporary modes of online political expression, but that they hold significant insights into meaning production and civic engagement in mediated worlds. Writing in their introduction to *Fandom*, Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington suggest that within the third and most recent wave of fan studies, “fandom is no longer an object of study in and of itself”

but rather a means for investigating modern life (9). Here, we attempt to do just that, drawing on both our reactions to and insights into fan engagement to enlarge our understanding of contemporary political life.

## I. “If you want politics, go away”: Early encounters with fan culture

In the fall of 2005 we began the first phase of inquiry on [“Rethinking Media, Democracy and Citizenship,”](#) a qualitative research project designed to investigate political engagement through online networks. Our key questions included:

- How are digital media being used creatively to build communicative networks for political debate and social activism?
- What are users’ and producers’ motivations for engaging in online dialogue?
- Do online participants feel they have a public voice? Do they have a sense of political efficacy?

Four sites of online civic engagement were selected as spaces through which to explore these questions: MoveOn’s Bushin30seconds campaign, political blogs, independently produced viral videos, and most relevant here, online discussions and blogs devoted to *The Daily Show*. At this early stage, our work on *The Daily Show* appeared to be straightforward. We intended to locate websites, blogs and discussion boards dedicated to the show, and once found, analyze and code them. Within the first few days of searching, however, we realized that our work was complicated by issues of both quantity and content. The search term “daily show” yielded more than three hundred thousand hits on Google Blog, and over one million on Google. Not only were we surprised by how frequently *The Daily Show* was referred to, but also by the wide range of contexts in which it was mentioned. Blogs devoted to celebrity gossip, entertainment news, television reviews, and political commentary on both the right and left took up *The Daily Show*; discussions of the program appeared, predictably, on boards dedicated to comedy, entertainment, and politics, but also on forums designated for the discussion of sports, music and family. Also notable were a large number sites devoted entirely to the *Daily Show* and Jon Stewart, with titles such as the *Jon Stewart Intelligence Agency*, *The Jon Stewart Shrine*, and *The Stewart Supremacist Site*. Because we were looking for extended reflections on the program, these held special interest for us. But they also presented a conundrum. The project was about online spaces for civic participation and the possibility for new modes of political activism. Yet most of these sites devoted exclusively to the show demonstrated more interest in cast changes than political change, and in Jon Stewart’s “manliness” than his critique of mainstream media. As one of *The Daily Show*’s most prolific fans,

Anita, wrote succinctly in the subtitle of [her blog](#), “If you want politics, go away.”

We had, in short, entered the realm of Jon Stewart fandom, which included fan listings, fan forums, blogs and personal websites. Features of these sites are varied, and incorporate spaces for fans to interact with one another, contribute expressive visual and written content, read more about their fan object, and link to relevant sites and articles. The *Jon Stewart Intelligence Agency*, for example, which bills itself as “the biggest, unofficial, scariest, funniest Jon Stewart fan cult club on the net,” includes a discussion forum, a space for fans to contribute fan fiction, poetry and essays, and a “Jon News” mailing list. On *Commentary on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, fans can download screen caps, read transcripts, and skim pages of quotations from past shows. And on *The Jon Stewart Experience*, one of the most recent *Daily Show* fan sites, readers can participate in “The Daily Show Online Edition,” in which fans collectively write imaginary segments for program, including openers, fake news segments, interviews and moments of Zen.

The significance of these sites did not elude us entirely. In our field notes and meetings, we discussed the similarities between these sites and some of the political blogs, which were just as likely as the fan sites to relate gossip, such as the birth of Jon Stewart’s second child or the appearance of a celebrity guest. We also noted the important role that these sites played in providing public archives of televisual material. Despite the anti-political subtitle of her blog, for example, one of Anita’s many *Daily Show* pages provides [transcripts](#) of Stewart’s interviews with Howard Dean and John Kerry prior to the 2004 election, forcing us to ask questions about what might count as politically significant activity, and about how the political is defined, and by whom. Finally, we were pushed to ask just why Jon Stewart and a program which regularly critiqued the mainstream media and challenged the government might become the objects of such intense fan feeling.

But even as we were able to recognize these challenges, we were, at this early point in our thinking, unable – or perhaps unwilling – to make connections between these fan sites and the more overt political motivation apparent in the Bushin30seconds videos or the political blogs. This oversight might be explained by the historical marginalization of fans and fandom. Even as fan practices move into the mainstream and fans themselves become coveted audiences, fans and fandom continue to be stereotyped as irrational, emotional and most relevant here, as peripheral to the political sphere. As van Zoonen has written, fandom and citizenship are constructed within modernist political discourse as two very different entities:

Supposedly, entertainment brings audiences composed of fans into being, whereas politics produces publics composed of citizens. Audiences and publics, fans and citizens, are thus constructed as involving radically different social formations and identities (56).

This apparent division between entertainment and politics has recently been challenged by a number of scholars. Jenkins (*Convergence Culture*), like van Zoonen, notes the potential for political organizing within fans' collective activities, while Baym argues that the "discursive integration" of media genres such as news and comedy lead to potentially innovative formats and approaches to politics. Gray similarly suggests that the 'irrational' language of television parody can be used "to lodge rational complaints, and to inspire rational thought" (*Simpsons*, 104). However, by eventually making the decision to focus our searches and analysis on responses to Jon Stewart's appearance on *Crossfire*, a decision that both reduced the quantity of material and also yielded more explicitly political reactions, we effectively side-stepped *The Daily Show* fans and fandom – and its attendant questions around reception, pleasure, sociability and affect – during the first year of our study.

While our research and theorizing from the responses to Stewart's *Crossfire* appearance yielded both rich data about citizens' dissatisfaction with mainstream media and theoretical insights into the role of satire in political expression, our dormant questions around fan practices were awakened when our attention turned to *The Colbert Report*. Indeed, it is difficult to think about the program *without* taking into account fans, for the program has not only assigned its audience the role of the "Colbert Nation," but has also generated a flurry of fan activity. At the invitation of Colbert and the program's producers, fans have created videos featuring Colbert as a Jedi warrior, changed numerous Wikipedia pages, and stuffed an online ballot with 17 million votes in order to name a Hungarian bridge after the late-night cable host. Of their own accord, fans have also initiated several thriving fan sites dedicated to *The Colbert Report*, organized protests in support of striking writers, and devoted countless threads to discussion of the show. The level of audience input into the show, as well as the producers' public recognition of fans, have lead both critics and fans to remark on the program's online experiments and its high degree of interactivity. Journalist Rachel Sklar remarked in *The Huffington Post* "The people behind *The Colbert Report* may be the smartest minds in television: While everyone else frets about YouTube, web TV, and platform integration, Stephen Colbert & Co. are already galvanizing the online to action and integrating fan content into the show." Echoing a common feeling of audience empowerment and even

intimacy, one fan enthused “Other fandoms are just passively running alongside the limos of their objects of fandom; we’re doing a tango with ours” ([SailorPtah](#)). And Stephen Colbert himself has noted the role fans played in generating response to his speech at the White House Press conference by creating and circulating images and video. In more than one interview, Colbert has suggested that fans are essential to the *Report*, that they “are a character in a scene I’m playing” ([Snierson](#)), pointing towards a key role for the audience in the creation of parody.

Given the visibility of this fan activity, it was no longer possible to see fan culture as peripheral to our questions about the public sphere and citizenship. Clearly there were complicated relationships – including parallels, intersections and oppositions – between fan activity, political expression and activism that could not be set aside. Our decision to think about fan activity within the scope of our project led us in two directions. First of all, we began a discursive analysis of fan activities related to *The Colbert Report*, looking at official websites, fan blogs, discussion boards and the program itself, this time with the intention of tracing the relationships between fan activity, online political participation and the uses of irony by both fan audiences and producers. Secondly, we revisited a number of our interviews with bloggers and digital media producers, with an eye to identifying the role that fandom and fannish feelings for *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* played in their online and offline political activities. In both cases, as we describe below, our research into fan practices productively complicated our initial conceptualizations, and led us to an awareness of the possibilities inherent within a rethinking of parody and politics through a focus on the communicative, productive and pleasurable aspects of fandom.

## **II. Building a bridge from ironist to audience: How fans complicate ironic intentions**

On the first broadcast of *The Colbert Report*, host Stephen Colbert, puffed up with the Bill O’Reilly persona that would become his trademark, announced to his studio audience and viewers:

This show is not about me. No, this program is dedicated to you, the heroes. And who are the heroes? The people who watch this show, average hard-working Americans. You’re not the elites. You’re not the country club crowd. I know for a fact my country club would never let you in. . . . You’re the folks who say something has to be done. And you’re doing something. You’re watching TV.

In the same way that “truthiness,” also introduced in this very first episode, would become key to Colbert’s critique of mainstream media and politics, so too would his direct appeal to the television audience become a central mode of address within the program. Dedicating his program to the American “heroes” who watch TV, he mocks the right-wing media pundits who condescendingly celebrate a manufactured, one-dimensional representation of the “common people” while speaking from a place of elite privilege. Yet even as the opening address works as a parody of attention-seeking media personalities, it does, as subsequent shows and fan activities attest, have the very real effect of naming and creating an audience; it is, in the manner of postmodern parody generally, a “doubly coded” address, undercutting but also lending legitimacy to that which it parodies (Hutcheon, *Postmodernism*, 97) . As the program continues, Colbert and the show’s writers will refine their relationship to the audience, not only interpolating it as the Colbert Nation but asking it to take part in a number of online activities and pranks. But even in these very first moments, the writers’ invitation for the audience to participate in the parody is evident, a participation that will both extend the parody’s reach, but also risk reinscribing the cult of celebrity it intends to ridicule.

In his reading of the “Better Know a District” segment of *The Colbert Report*, Geoffrey Baym undertakes a thoughtful analysis of the program’s use of parody. Arguing against those critics who suggest that the program promotes a cynical attitude to politics by engaging in postmodern forms of theatrical spectacle and simulation, Baym demonstrates how the segment recasts politics as a form of play (9) not as mere indulgence, but rather as a critique of the right wing’s cynical cooption of postmodern skepticism and its consistent undermining of the deliberative process. Baym provides us with a useful and insightful interpretation of the program as “a satire of *provocation*” (9, *italics in original*) that uses parody and ironic inversion to stimulate questions, puncture certainties and denaturalize mainstream media representations. By focusing on the BKAD segment, Baym is also able to assess the program’s effectiveness as a resource for political knowledge. But for all that it accomplishes, such a focus sets aside the element of audience activity that fans, critics and the program’s producers all insist is not only unique, but crucial to the parody’s success.

Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon argues that the act of interpretation is essential to an understanding of the ways in which irony and parody (as a form of ironic representation) work. For Hutcheon, irony is marked above all else by its complexity. This complexity lies in part within irony’s ability to function in the service of a wide array of political interests, what Hutcheon identifies as its “transideological” status (*Irony*, 10). Employing irony, parody is similarly

politicized, particularly in the way it acts as a kind of “complicitous critique,” destabilizing but also legitimizing dominant ideologies (*Postmodernism, 104*). But the complications of irony arise equally from its “social and interactive dimensions” (*Irony, 10*). “With irony,” Hutcheon writes, there are “dynamic and plural relations among the text or utterance (and its context), the so-called ironist, the interpreter, and the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation; it is these that mess up neat theories of irony” (*Irony, 11*). Within such a conceptualization, audiences – always situated – do not simply receive or “get” irony, but rather “make it happen” (*Irony, 11*). This makes irony less a technique than an event or happening, one in which interpreter and interpretation play a central role. It also makes irony “risky business,” as Hutcheon suggests in the title of her opening chapter, for meanings are constantly in flux and always relational, neither prescribed nor guaranteed.

Hutcheon’s illuminating readings of irony and parody – of the always politicized scene of their work, where meanings are collectively and contextually generated – provides a crucial re-orientation that not only allows us to recognize the role the audiences play in making irony happen, but also help us to realize just how complex and unpredictable such interpretive activities and communities can be. For, as we have already hinted, many of the activities of the Colbert Nation are as like to reinforce hegemonic discourses as to provoke new insights and challenges to existing relations. Whether initiated by fans or encouraged by the show’s producers, Colbert Nation fan practices cannot be understood merely as additions to Colbert’s parody. Though the show’s producers may indeed consider the audience, to paraphrase Colbert himself, a character in a larger satirical scene, fans’ generation of ironic meanings can be neither guaranteed nor wholly directed by the program’s producers. Indeed, as Hutcheon reminds us, irony is an ambiguous communicative tool that can shift, change and alter understandings and actions, where the ironist’s intention is open to redirection from many sources, both interpretative and contextual. While there are any number of Colbert Nation fan sites and practices through which we might observe this instability, the complexity of ironic interpretation is particularly evident in one fan “event” in which audience members were encouraged to name a bridge in Hungary after Stephen Colbert. In the remainder of this section, we examine that event, trying to show the ways in which the interpretation of irony goes far beyond simply “getting it,” into acts and exchanges that throw both the double edge of parody and the situated nature of irony into high relief.

In August 2006, less than a year after Colbert first named his audience the heroes of late night television viewing, the parodist called on viewers to do

more than just watch T.V. In the “Tip of the Hat, Wag of the Finger” segment of his show, Colbert noted that Chuck Norris was currently winning an online contest to name a bridge in Hungary, and encouraged his fans to vote for him instead. A week later, with more than one thousand votes cast in his name, Colbert once again reminded fans to vote for him, and to “do this as many times as you can, from multiple computers if you have to. Carpal tunnel is a small price to pay for this gift to the Hungarian people.” Soon after, fans responded with computer bots that virtually stuffed the electronic ballot boxes. By the time Colbert called off the fans on August 22, 17 million votes had been cast to name the bridge after Stephen Colbert, 7 million more votes than the population of Hungary. The Hungarian government declared that the bridge could not be named after a living person, and the Hungarian ambassador to the US appeared on the show to “honor” Stephen Colbert while delivering the bad news. As an initial (ironic) invitation to participate and an ensuing series of social interactions, both played out within the context of American imperialism and converging media, this particular “call” on the Colbert Nation serves as a very real demonstration of the complicitous politics of parody, as well as the necessity of considering fan involvement in any assessment of the contemporary uses of irony.

We might begin by considering the invitation itself. Certainly the encouragement to cast votes for the Stephen Colbert *hid*, or bridge, must be seen as part of the comedian’s effort to ridicule attention-seeking right-wing media pundits and to critique the “mythification of the newscaster” (Gray, “[The News](#),” 101). In an [interview](#) at the Harvard Institute of Politics, Colbert stated that his work takes aim at the “cult of personality,” “megalomania,” and the “monolithic tone and shamelessness” that have arisen within the contemporary news aesthetic. This self-aggrandizement is a primary facet of Colbert’s character, from the portraits on the studio walls to his much-hyped run for presidency, and attempts to spread his name are part of this projected personality. In fact, Colbert’s suggestion that the audience vote for the Stephen Colbert *hid* is just one of several such requests. In the same episode that he encourages the audience to give the gift of his name to the Hungarian people, he also suggests a new name for the Saginaw Spirit hockey team's mascot - the Colbeagle. “It’s a good thing,” he tells the audience, “that there are so many things that can be named after me.” This “shameless” pursuit of fame through any possible avenue – from junior league hockey teams to international bridges – is part of the parody’s critique of a news media that relies more on personality, affect and bluster than deliberative discussion, and, as Baym ([“Representation”](#)) argues, ultimately functions as a “satire of provocation” that confronts right-wing spectacle.

But irony cannot be read as utterance alone; the dynamic interaction between the ironist's text and context must be accounted for. Certainly one significant aspect of this contextual framework is the conditions of production within which such invitations to participate are made, for it is here that we begin (but do not end) our encounter with parody's intense ambiguities. [Jenkins](#) provides a helpful gloss on present-day conditions of production in his reflections on media convergence, characterizing it broadly as the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the consolidation of previously separated media industries, the intersection of grassroots and corporate media, and the shift in roles of media producers and consumers. Such changes in industry structure, content and production are, of course, accompanied by shifts and renegotiations in the circuits of power and finance. Within the television industry, this means not only an effort to profit from new digital technologies, but also an effort to utilize emerging forms of audience participation (for example, the remixing, tagging, circulation and discussion of television texts). While we might see this, as Jenkins does, as a kind of exchange between producers and consumers, which occurs through both "top-down" and "bottom-up" processes ([257](#)), we must also, in assessing *The Colbert Report's* invitations to participate, keep in mind the ways in which large media corporations work to control and profit from audience desires to interact. [Avi Santo](#), for example, remarks on the way in which the television industry co-opts fan creativity and productivity by (re)framing fans not as "radical alterers of meanings" but as industry-insiders, and [Mark Andrejevic](#) similarly notes the way in which television audiences' labour is exploited by the industry as a means of generating interest, brand loyalty and increased profits. The vice president of digital media at Comedy Central, Erik Flannigan, himself signaled the profitability of audience participation around *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, when he stated in an interview "that we want to make sure if people are reacting to what's going on on the show, they're doing it in our world and on our pages" ([Chmielewski](#)). Within the context of this move to centralize and direct audience activity, Colbert's invitation to audiences to cast votes in his name – an invitation met with enthusiastic response – must also be understood as a move that creates brand loyalty and interest around the program. While this fan following may indeed suit the persona Colbert is creating, and provide a satirical response to the cult of celebrity, it also generates very real profit and promotion for Viacom and its advertisers. Still, as necessary as this insight into *The Colbert Report's* economic and institutional complicity may be, it does not negate the parody's subversive potential; as Hutcheon writes, parody "may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there" ([Postmodernism, 102](#)).

Nor does such an insight exhaust the interpretive possibilities of this particular event. In fact, we have still to take up the crucial matter of fans' response to Colbert's invitation, and it is only here that we come to the full realization that understanding irony and its effects is an elusive prospect, verifying Hutcheon's thesis that "irony can only complexify; it can never disambiguate" (*Irony, 13*). While some may argue that open online polls have little impact on offline decisions, and that stuffing the ballots of such polls has become almost a commonplace, the move by *Colbert Report* fans to inundate a Hungarian site with votes for their fan object – and the knot of interactions that attend that move – point towards irony's instable and proliferating meanings. We might, at first glance, consider the use of perl scripts and other strategies for casting multiple votes as simply overwhelming the ironic intentions of the text itself: rather than provide critical commentary on that other, *American* nation's voting scandals, the flood of votes might appear only to re-enact painful memories of vote fraud and stolen elections. Seemingly non-ironic commentary such as this post from a *YouTube* comments thread endorse that reading:

We did what we could.

We voted our little hearts out.

We outvoted all the others.

Sadly, the Hungarians decided to name it Megyeri Bridge.

But, we will always know in our hearts that the bridge really belongs to our number 1 hero: Dr. Stephen Colbert, D.F.A.

But while such a reading of the incident certainly holds some validity, it overlooks not only the difficulty of attributing ironic meanings, but also the plurality of conversations and debates that populated the web over the incident. Numerous fans claimed that stuffing the ballots was a joke, prank or novel form of pleasure. On the same *YouTube* thread, one poster replied to the admonishing question "You are aware that Stephen Colbert plays a role, right?" with "I voted for Stephen because it made for a funny joke," suggesting that the poster saw her contribution not in contradiction but continuity with Colbert's role-playing. On the *No Fact Zone* blog, another poster wrote that "it's fun to do something so odd." In this interpretation of the act of voting as play, fans see themselves much the way Jason Linkins describes them in his *Huffington Post* [article](#): as "the puckish id to their host's ballooning ego," an interpretation that brings to mind Dustin Griffin's argument that satire includes "play and display" (4). Other posters on the *YouTube* thread make explicit connections

between the bridge vote and American voting scandals that point towards their actions as ironic play: “Yay colbert won. It just goes to show we still find ways to steal and fraud votes. Bush, case and point” (“[Stephen Colbert Bridge](#)”). Admissions of this complicity also include the fifth place finish for the name “Perl-Script Bridge” or the [succinct comment posted on Digg](#) referring to Colbert’s win: “Good job, internet.” In the context of American voting scandals, Colbert Nation fan practices may indeed re-enact difficult moments from past elections, but they do so from a variety of positions: playful, ironic, earnest, critical and *uncritical*.

A second “complexifying” dynamic lies in the interaction between American fans and Hungarian respondents within the current context of US hegemony and the invasion of Iraq. In fact, fans themselves frequently bring this context to the fore. “If they don’t name it [the bridge] after Colbert. We will accuse Hungary of possessing WMDs and invade. Screw the UN” writes one poster on *Digg*, in a comment that demonstrates the almost too-sharp double edge and complicity of an irony that both upholds and undercuts American imperialism. Interactions between fans and Hungarian respondents (not always exclusive groups) provide both implicit and explicit reflections on irony’s ambiguous meanings and effects. On the *YouTube* discussion thread, a debate between the American poster quoted above (“We voted our hearts out...”) and two Hungarian posters touches on American imperialism, the war in Iraq, and the multiple effects of irony. One portion of the thread descends into name-calling and a trivia challenge (“Who was the 3rd king of Hungary?” is countered with “Who was the 18th president of the US?”), a banal exchange that threatens to redirect irony towards self-righteous nationalism, and that highlights the risks of a communicative strategy in which there is no singular relation between the signified and the signifier. Yet, nestled within that same thread, another Hungarian poster reflects on the potentially useful effects of American fans’ pranksterish enthusiasm:

Well, if the whole US wants it to be named after Colbert, Colbert bridge it should be... If that happens, perhaps my beloved country's minister of transportation, a certain Mr Janos Koka, who invented this voting where any silly idea counts and mass voting is apparently not problem, should perhaps resign. If that happens, this joke will have actually served a noble cause.

On the *No Fact Zone*, dialogue takes a somewhat different tone and format. Within the active comments section of the blog, American and Hungarian fans and critics respond openly to one another, and conversations range from encouragement to continue voting, to invective against the Hungarian

government, to discussions of American and Hungarian politics, with national political circumstances explained and sometimes compared. Interpretations of the event and its meaning vary, and many posts include their own ironic humour. In response to another Hungarian poster, for example, Hungirl writes:

I think it is funny in a way (or more like pathetic) to see there are people who think the result of this voting means anything in Hungary... [B]ut it's not you/us who will decide. Honestly? I don't really care. Why not name bridges like North Bridge, Long Bridge and Black Bridge, you wouldn't have to rename it with every regime:)

An American poster later adds that “if Stephen Colbert can bring down a stupid Hungarian politician, why, there is hope he can bring down stupid American ones too!” while another poster ironically comments on the vagaries and misuses of online voting by hoping that the Vatican might instigate an online voting system in order to name Stephen Colbert a saint. While the original invitation and fans’ ensuing ballot-box stuffing retain the capacity to “cut both ways” – to uphold and undermine American corruption and imperialism – they also proliferate beyond these binaries, acting as provoking tools that stir up playful performances, communicative exchanges and regressive debates in unpredictable and occasionally contradictory ways.

Without thinking about fans – their activities and exchanges, and the circumstances that frame their contributions – the significance of the Hungarian bridge event is almost entirely lost. More, the complications and complicities that riddle ironic expression, and that make it such a risky proposition, are left unexplored. As this event suggests, the “heroes” of the Colbert Nation do not replicate or even extend the ironic utterance, but rather activate its multiple meanings. In collective performances that reveal Hutcheon’s assertion that irony and parody are inevitably political, they *make irony happen*. In the final section, we turn to a re-reading of two of our interviews with prominent bloggers in order to analyze more closely this relationship between fandom and politics, activism and affect, and to suggest how fans might equally *make politics happen*.

### **III. Uberfans and activists: How fan practices problematize the political**

Between September 2006 and May 2007, we undertook 35 semi-structured interviews with video producers and bloggers addressing topics such as the war in Iraq, American politics, and the conservatism of the mainstream media. While our questions were designed to explore the possibility of political engagement and articulations of dissent through online networks, it soon

became clear that emotion, creativity and performance were as much a part of these producers' practices and motivations as the intention to correct dominant accounts or initiate public debate. From the need to express frustration and anger with US policies and mainstream media representations, to the desire to build community and create a sense of belonging, interviews with online producers pointed towards the role of affect and imagination in constituting new kinds of counterpublics online. At the same time we became aware of this affective dimension, fans of "fake news" were also gaining visibility through the actions of the Colbert Nation, and many of their activities – community-building, archiving, circulating – intersected with the practices of our interviewees. In our final section, then, we turn to interviews with producers of two of the most influential independent blogs related to *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*: Lisa Rein is a co-founder of Creative Commons and the writer of the popular and eclectic blog *On Lisa Rein's Radar*, while DB Ferguson is the creator of two Colbert-related fan sites, *NoFactZone* and *Colbert University*. Neither blogger can be "identified" simply as a fan or an activist; they enact the identity of both, albeit in different ways and as different modulations of those identities. But in their motivations and their practices, both prompt important questions about activism, affect and the naming of the political.

Long overlooked or dismissed by thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas or Max Weber, the productive role of emotion in citizenship, politics and the formation of public spheres remains undertheorized. In his ground-breaking work on *publics and counterpublics*, for example, Michael Warner outlines features of publics, including textuality, performativity, expressivity, and "poetic world-making," yet leaves out any explicit discussion of emotion, perhaps because, as Brian Massumi notes, "there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect" (27). Nonetheless, a number of theorists of both fandom and politics have begun to consider the central role that affect might play in political life. In *Entertaining the Citizen*, van Zoonen explores parallels between fan communities and political constituencies. One of these parallels lies in the role of "emotional investment." While emotional investment has long been associated with fans' commitment to particular texts and engagement with fan communities, it has often been *disassociated* with political constituencies, where it is seen as secondary or even threatening to rationality. Yet as van Zoonen argues, the distinctions between rationality and emotion, and between fans and citizens, are misleading. Drawing on George Marcus' *work* on "affective intelligence," van Zoonen argues that "without the affective investments resulting from enthusiasm and anxiety, political interest and commitment would falter ... just like fan communities would wane without the

emotional input of their members” (66). A second equivalency lies in the kinds of activities undertaken by the two groups, activities that combine rather than separate out rationality and emotion. As van Zoonen outlines, the activities of fans are remarkably similar to those practiced by ideal citizen groups. “Fans have an intense individual investment in the text, they participate in strong communal discussions and deliberations about the qualities of the text, and they propose and discuss alternatives that would be implemented as well if only the fans could have their way” (63). These, she argues, are the same “customs that have been laid out as essential for democratic politics: information, discussion, and activism” (63). Imagination, feeling, performance, sociability, discussion, action: all, according to van Zoonen, are necessary aspects of fan *and* political communities.

In “There is Drama in Networks,” Noortje Marres makes similar claims about the role of performativity and affect in politics. Marres’ analysis of social web networks offers a frame for understanding the shifting nature of political activities within an era of media convergence. She writes that:

... distributed relations among organizations and individuals as facilitated by networked media present perhaps the most interesting site for communication, collaboration, and contestation regarding political issues. At the same time, many commentators and politicians have ... declined to openly acknowledge networks as forums for politics, even if political networks continue to proliferate. In this context, *it seems especially crucial to ... reconsider the conditions on which we speak out in support of networks as sites for politics.* (175, **emphasis added**)

The proliferation of networks that she analyzes as the dramatic backdrop necessary for politics suggest the increasing difficulty of identifying “where” politics take place. Within a performative understanding of politics, Marres argues, agency is distributed amongst many actors, and cannot be limited to a specific domain, a claim that resonates with our own early realization that politics were in fact being enacted on fan sites and in fan communities. Drawing on John Dewey, Marres writes “if, as Dewey suggests, the entanglement of social actors in networks constitutes a prime source of political affectivity, then the configuration of these actors into political collectivities emerges as a crucial political event” (183). Such a notion of politics sees the possibility of political activity as distributed, spread out amongst a number of actors and locations and moments. With this potential in mind, then, we turn to the motivations, practices, activities and events of two prominent bloggers who have chosen to comment on the “risky” texts that are *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Our interests here are manifold. Through close attention to

each blogger's description of her own motivations and practices, as well as her analyses of the current mediascape, we hope to 1) explore the overlap between fandom and political activism, including the role of affect and sociable activities; 2) highlight the kinds of questions that attentiveness to fandom and fan-like feelings bring to the surface, and 3) consider each blogger's relationship as an independent producer to the corporation of Comedy Central, a relationship which returns us to issues of complicity and the complexities of ironic consumption, as detailed in the previous section.

Lisa Rein began her blog in 2001, a relatively early date, particularly in light of our findings, which show a dramatic increase in blogging on 2003 and 2004. [\*On Lisa Rein's Radar: Things on Lisa Rein's Fair and Balanced Mind Today\*](#) first came to our attention because of its huge archive of *The Daily Show* clips. In fact, Rein has a complete archive of the program since 2002 (6), much of it available on her site. This archive is part of her larger and fascinating site dedicated to links and commentary on a wide and eclectic range of issues, including anti-war protests, US government policy, popular culture, music, environmentalism, technology and hacktivism. Unlike DB Ferguson, whose "Colbert-centric" blogs we look at next, Rein does not identify as a fan, but rather as an activist. Although during [her interview](#) Rein jokingly remarks "what a great political activist I am sitting on my arse in front of the computer," her site and her own descriptions of her involvement at anti-war protests indicate her high degree of online and offline political activity. What makes Rein's practices particularly relevant here are the way they combine elements and motivations associated with both fandom and political activism; an intense emotional investment in a popular culture text – *The Daily Show* – and a desire to create communities of affinity around this text, co-exist with the intention to "educate" and create the conditions for political change, reinforcing van Zoonen's suggestion that the alleged distinction between fandom and political organizing may not be so great.

Rein describes her reasons for watching *The Daily Show* in both emotional and critical terms. She explains that she began watching in the summer of 2002, when it became clear to her that Bush was planning to go to war, a development that seemed to be overlooked by the mainstream media, but which was acknowledged – and critiqued – on *The Daily Show*. Rein explains that sometimes it "felt kind of like me and *The Daily Show*" were the only ones recognizing this "drumbeat to war." She describes the program as "a voice of sanity in a world gone mad," suggesting its role in alleviating a sense of alienation: "When Jon looks at the camera and just says, 'You know they're fucking insane, right?' it makes you feel better." At the same time, Rein saw

the program as fulfilling the “questioning” role that had been abandoned by the mainstream media. “*The Daily Show* was serving the function that real news was supposed to serve and they were the only people doing it,” she remarks. In a related essay “The News: You Gotta Love It,” Jonathan Gray posits the possibility of “news fans” – news consumers who, in their online discussions, combine passionate interest in news texts and personalities with rational argument – and suggests that such a fandom destabilizes conventional interpretations of news audiences, politic engagement and fan studies. Here, Rein’s critical appraisal of the function of *The Daily Show*, alongside her enthusiasm for the program, supports Gray’s suggestion that there may be a “more profound marriage” between current affairs, politics and fandom “than many would deem either existent or appropriate” (Gray, “The News,” 76).

Rein’s own enjoyment of the show, the relief it brought her, and her sense of its political significance very quickly led her to want to share it with others. Rein explains that she first started blogging about and posting clips from *The Daily Show* when Henry Kissinger was appointed to head up the 9/11 Commission:

Nobody said anything but *The Daily Show*. They were like, “Hey who better to head up the war crimes commission than the king of war crime”... And I felt, God, people have to see this. I had just gotten a new camera that had analogue inputs that allowed me to do my stuff. I can't get a digital signal out of the TiVo. So it's only because they have analogue RCA jacks that I can put into my camera, make a tape in my camera and FireWire from my camera to my computer... That's how I did it. So I put that up and then you know, people cared. Two weeks later he had to step down... And I think a lot of it was *The Daily Show* and the Internet (Rein, Interview, 5).

From this moment until 2005, Rein regularly posted clips from the program. She appears to have two motivations for this activity; first, to create an archive of a program she believed provided necessary information, context and critique, and secondly to create a community around that archive. Concerning her decision to archive, she explains that “what I meant to happen was to put together a collection of information that could be useful for people” (18) and “to be like a library and let everybody have access to this stuff” (Rein, Interview, 8). In fact, Rein’s extensive archive was put to use, not only via the web, but also in Dorothy Fadiman’s documentary *Stealing America: Vote by Vote*. Related to this desire to share important material, Rein also expresses a desire to connect with others who share a sense of alienation from mainstream news coverage and, correspondingly, to create and establish community. When asked whether she feels like she is part of a community through blogging, Rein

[replies](#) “That’s the whole point.” She elaborates by explaining that a community of discussion – formed through comments and links – developed around her archived clips, which helped like-minded people to find each other. “It was just nice know that weren’t all crazy,” she explains. Rein also suggests that this community may have formed around her clips in part because they reflected *The Daily Show’s* use of comedy, thus providing a critical but also playful and pleasurable space in which to engage in political discussion.

The sharing of materials, and the creation of interpretive and discursive communities are certainly not limited to fans groups; indeed, as [van Zoonen argues](#), these same activities are also at the core of democratic practice, and Rein’s work here provides an illuminating example not only of the similarities between fan and political organizing, but of their intersection. What is also important to recognize here is the way in which a popular culture text – and more, shared enjoyment in a text that helped participants to overcome feelings of isolation and create a sense of belonging – lies at the centre of this evaluative discursive community. As Gray (“[The News](#)”) suggests, emotional and fan-like feelings for a text do not preclude rational and critical responses to that same text. Indeed, a response that mixes delight in the program’s comic elements as well as an appreciation of its critical and political importance within the context of shrinking public journalism not only points to the success of the program’s discursive integration ([Baym](#)) of comedy and news, but more importantly here, may provide a fuller and more representative picture of political organizing and citizenship in which affect, sociability and networking are constitutive elements.

It is also worth noting here Rein’s relationship to Comedy Central and its parent company Viacom, as yet another manifestation of her complex fan-activist-archivist activities. As Rein herself comments, “there was this certain sense of disbelief that I was just taking those clips and putting them up and not being challenged.” The fact that Rein posted copyrighted material and was not challenged by the company that was later notorious among fans for its “YouTube purges” does indeed seem remarkable, and she explains it by suggesting that she thinks Comedy Central “secretly loved what I was doing.” This ties into the way that both Rein and Ferguson see their work as promoting the presence of their favorite shows. In both cases—without certain evidence but with all likelihood—each suspects that Comedy Central pays attention to her site, in order to gauge audience reactions and shape future content. As Rein says, echoing something they both express, “I believe that my blogging of their show brought them to a larger audience, increased their viewership... and got them carried in foreign countries. There was no way for anyone in foreign

countries to even see *The Daily Show* except for the Internet clips” (Rein, [Interview, 14](#)). Rein’s explanations here point us towards the complex relationship between the emerging user-producer and the mainstream media, and demonstrate the ways in which fan productions amplify the commercial presence of multinational media corporations and at the same time perform important affective, communal, and in Rein’s case political, functions that may be at odds with corporate agendas.

Where Lisa Rein identifies herself as an activist and archivist (amongst numerous other identities), DB Ferguson identifies herself as an “Uberfan.” On her “Colbert-centric” blog [NoFactZone](#), she describes herself and her motivation to begin blogging about *The Colbert Report* in the following way:

Since a very young age, I’ve been what one might consider to be an Uberfan. I subscribed to newsletters, I wrote letters to stars, I collected and I obsessed....The Web makes it possible to be an uberfan in ways that were impossible back in my teen years....

I’ve been a fan of Stephen Colbert for quite some time, but after seeing the rabid fan base of Colbert come alive after the 2006 White House Correspondent’s Dinner, I yearned to commune with others who had the same zeal and vigor for Mr. Colbert as I did. My quixotic charge became clear: to make a site for fans of Stephen Colbert that were as rabid as me. I could create that “ultimate” web site for Colbert fans myself! I could take this encyclopaedic (and otherwise useless) knowledge of the minutiae of Colbert and put it to use for the good of mankind.

In July 2006, Ferguson began *NoFactZone*, a frequently updated blog that includes detailed episode guides, links to Colbert-related articles, a comments section, contests, interviews and graphic features, such as a map that details where fans can buy Colbert’s Americone Dream ice cream. As her own description implies, part of Ferguson’s motivation to create the site was her disappointment with the Colbert fan sites at that time; in particular, she mentions *Colbert Nation*, a website that appears to be fan-run, but which, with closer inspection, is revealed to be owned by Comedy Central. Since its launch, *NoFactZone* has become one of the most-visited fan-run *Colbert Report* sites, and has been linked to by a number of well-known sites, including *The Huffington Post*, *TV Squad*, and PBS’s *MediaShift*. In July 2007, Ferguson began a “sister site” with the *Colbert University*, a website (rather than a blog) that houses much of the archived knowledge of *NoFactZone* under “pedagogical” categories such as “Core Curriculum,” “Electives,” and “Final Exam.” Ferguson writes that “the goal of Colbert University is to serve as a

permanent, accurate resource for those wishing to know more about the characters, terms, ideas, and world of *The Colbert Report*, and to inspire thoughtful analysis (as well as riotous enjoyment) of this groundbreaking experiment in interactive television.” Just as Ferguson claims a very different identity and relationship to her chosen text than Lisa Rein, so too do her practices, motivations and sites provoke quite a different set of themes and questions. Where Rein’s passionate commitment to archiving, sharing and discussing *Daily Show* clips blurs the lines between popular culture fandom and political activism, Ferguson’s insider-knowledge of fan culture, and her complex engagement with *The Colbert Report* both as a parody and as a corporately-produced popular culture text raise significant questions around the politics of fandom.

Like Anita, the *Daily Show* fan who subtitled her blog “if you want politics, go away,” Ferguson rejects what she sees as an overly-politicized reading of *The Colbert Report*. She identifies *NoFactZone* as an entertainment rather than a political blog, an identity that she upholds in her decision-making about the site. Shortly after the StewartColbert08 movement began, for example, she decided to remove their links from her site, feeling that they were pushing a political agenda she did not want to endorse. “On my blog I don’t really talk about political stuff... I talk about [Stephen’s] show, I talk about his appearances and every once in a while somebody will say something like, ‘Oh that’s so liberal of him or whatever’ but normally most of the really hardcore Stephen fans understand that he’s not trying to be uberliberal or uberconservative or uberliberal posing as conservative, he’s just trying to be funny.” In fact, Ferguson’s view of the program as comedy first and foremost mirrors Colbert’s own public representations of his work, as she notes herself when remarking on Colbert’s scathing White House Press Correspondents Speech:

Colbert has said over and over – and pretty much the only answer he will give when asked about the speech: “I was just trying to make people laugh. You guys can read into it whatever you want. I was just trying to be funny.” And I honestly kind of believe that. I think he was trying to roast him [Bush] a little bit, I just don’t think he realized how political the whole situation would become until after it was over ([Ferguson, Interview, 32](#)).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, she extends this apoliticism to Colbert’s audience, remarking that “you’d be amazed at how unpolitical the Colbert fan community is.” Ferguson’s insistence on the program, fans, and her own site as entertainment rather than politics might be read, in part, as an understandable need to make the interviewer (who at that point in the project was perhaps more

attuned to political activism than fandom) recognize the context and starting place for her own work. And yet for all of Ferguson's rejection of politic interpretations of *The Colbert Report*, her interview is nonetheless riddled with insights and questions into power and politics – the politics of fan communities, the politics of parody, and underlining both, the question of just what constitutes “the political.”

Indeed, and perhaps ironically, while she asserts the apolitical nature of her own site, as a longtime and self-identified Uberfan, Ferguson is extremely savvy to the power relations and hierarchies within fandom itself. She suggests, for example, that she chose the gender neutral name “DB” to write under because “I didn't want to lose credibility with my site by being pigeonholed as a fan girl.” She similarly chooses to “write as professionally as I can” and to prohibit sexualized fan fiction, or “slash,” from her site in order to keep it from being seen as a feminized and therefore denigrated space. Ferguson is also acutely aware of the circulation of power within the blogosphere, and she notes with pride her site's high Google rating, its links from well-known sites, and its impressive traffic. Ferguson's willingness to address yet another power dynamic – that which plays out between corporate media producers and user-producers like herself – is evident in her response to vice president of digital media at Comedy Central, Erik Flannigan. When Flannigan tells a *Los Angeles Times* reporter that the company hopes to move fan response onto corporation-owned sites ([Chmielewski](#)), Ferguson responds by posting an [“Open Letter” on her site](#) that critiques Comedy Central's digital media strategy, and in particular its *Colbert Nation* site, which she compares unfavorably to her own.

We might also, in recognizing diverse political moments, return to our considerations of irony as a transideological site. In the playfully exaggerated rhetoric that Ferguson occasionally uses in both her interview and the site – following mention of Colbert's name, for example, with the phrase “all praise and glory to his name,” Ferguson does indeed play a role in Colbert's parody, that of the adoring audience, and in that way activates Colbert's critique of mainstream media's megalomaniac personalities. And it is certainly not a role she is unaware of. Her [Colbert University](#) site, for example, includes the following analysis of the complex role the audience plays in relation to Colbert's parody:

Although observers often characterize the Colbert Nation as a monolithic mass, the audience—at least the it-getting part of it—actually has a certain schizophrenia. As explained by one fan, “During the WØRD, when Stephen says something completely bogus, we applaud and cheer, playing up our character as His Followers, but when the WØRD's Bullet makes a witty remark

and rips Stephen's logic to shreds, we choose to cheer it on as well, returning to (some twisted form) of reality and [acknowledging] the absolute ridiculousness of what Stephen is saying." A similar dynamic occurs in Stephen's interviews with guests, when the audience typically cheers both Stephen's ridiculous points and the guest's well-expressed counterarguments.

In a similar fashion, Ferguson claims the right to have her adoration read in more than one way: while it may indeed be the role-playing of a "follower" in a political parody, it is also the genuine response of a committed, passionate, hard-working and creative fan to her fan object. The double edge of irony, it seems, might also apply to irony's fans.

Underneath such observations, of course, is the troubling question of just what constitutes the political, and who names it. This is certainly not a new question in studies of fandom. As Henry Jenkins has suggested, in some fan studies there is "an attempt to pull back from the fan community at the end of such writing and say, right, now we can arrive at the truth that the fans don't yet recognise about their own political activity" (Jenkins, "Interview," n.p.). Yet that is not what we want to do here; in fact, we have no particular truths to claim about fandom. Rather, we want to suggest that visiting fan sites and talking to fans, activities that we initially resisted, ultimately complicated and broadened our own interpretations of ironic expression and political expression. Taking into account fan communities, practices and discussions meant that we had to approach responses to political parody with an understanding of irony not simply as a text that audiences "get," but as a collective, complex and sometimes contradictory event that audiences make happen. Listening to fans and the way that they describe their own work and motivations meant that we could not sit comfortably with an interpretation of political activism that set aside enthusiasm and emotional engagement with a text. And finally, attempting to record and grapple with the multiple identities, multiple points of resistance and complicity, and multiple practices that even a single fan might take on meant that we could not think about fans as a single or essential body. In a project dedicated to "rethinking" media and politics, the questions that fandom generated constantly pushed us in new directions.

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