

**Calling on the Colbert Nation:
fan practices and resistance to corporate media powers
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October 2007

Presentation at Tactics of Resistance Conference, University of Western Ontario

Introduction: “If you want politics, go away”

In the fall of 2005 I joined Megan, Andrea and 4 other graduate student researchers on the “Rethinking Media and Democracy” project. At that early point, my task seemed straightforward: search for blogs, discussion boards and websites about the *The Daily Show*, and once found, analyze and code them. But I soon realized my work was somewhat more complicated. In part it was a question of quantity. The search term “daily show” yielded more than three hundred thousand hits on Google blog, over one million on Google. And how many references did a blog or discussion board need to have to be “about” *The Daily Show*? After my first few days of searching, I began to suspect that *every* blogger in Canada and the U.S. had mentioned *The Daily Show* at least once. Then there was the matter of content. The project was about online spaces for civic participation and the possibility for new modes of political activism. What did it mean if you blogged about *The Daily Show* because you happened to think that Jon Stewart was particularly hot? Or were more interested in cast changes than political change? What if, like one the most prolific *Daily Show* fans, you subtitled your blog “If you want politics, go away”? What was I supposed to *do* with that? While the other groups researching the Bush in 30 seconds videos and the political blogs surged ahead, I wrote on our discussion forum [slide]:

Daily Show Rant – November 10, 2007

Concerning *The Daily Show* blogs, it is not yet a question of how to code, or even which sites to code, but rather of discovering what's out there. There is simply a huge amount of material to wade through, and one needs to look at a number of sites just to understand the different ways the show is being referred to.

For the record, here are some of the types of sites that take up *The Daily Show*:

- Fan blogs and web pages (including those in the Jon Stewart Estrogen Brigade)
- Left-leaning political blogs
- Entertainment and TV blogs
- Fanlistings
- Discussion boards
- Official *Daily Show* sites

Although the fan and entertainment blogs interest me in the way in which they record, rework and remix the material of the program, I am not sure that they are relevant to the project. The political blogs often, though not always, engage the actual *content* of the show, and in that way may be more pertinent.

After writing this, I brought my aggravations to the next meeting. In particular I was vexed by the fan sites. If we wanted sites entirely dedicated to *The Daily Show*, these were the most likely candidates. But how was I to approach them? And were they really relevant?

I wouldn't say that during that meeting fan sites were dismissed outright. We discussed them for about five minutes. At first we laughed. Were women really dreaming about Jon Stewart *every* night? Then we got a little more serious. Someone mentioned fan fiction and the long history of conflict between fans and corporate media producers over intellectual property. We touched on fans' role in archiving and circulating material online. We considered whether there might be overlap between political activism and fandom. But soon enough discussion of the fan sites faded as we moved to what felt like more pressing matters.

In the end, in order to reduce the amount of material and focus on explicitly political reactions to *The Daily Show*, we decided to concentrate on responses to Jon Stewart's appearance on *Crossfire*. This took fan sites out of the picture for the next year or so. Soon,

though, our attention naturally drifted towards *The Colbert Report*, and right back into the territory of fandom. Because although Jon Stewart may have a lot of fans, Stephen Colbert has the whole Colbert Nation behind him, a nation that has been busy blogging, voting, remixing video, producing content and changing Wikipedia pages for the past two years. In fact, it's difficult to consider *The Colbert Report* without taking into account the role of fans. We were certainly not the only ones to notice this. Both fans and critics have written about the way in which the program incorporates audience input. Journalist Rachel Sklar (2006) 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 fanship; we're doing a tango with ours" (www.colbertnation.com). And Stephen Colbert himself noted the role fans played in generating response to his speech at the White House Press conference by creating and circulating images like this [slide]. 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, 2006). This time it became more difficult to set aside our half-formulated questions about the complicated connections between fan activity and activism.

Over the past few months, then, I've spent some time thinking about *Colbert Report* fan practices and even more time lurking on *Colbert Report* fan sites, blogs, and discussion boards. In this talk, I want to describe some of the activities, texts and interactions I've encountered there, and also outline some of the questions, as yet unanswered, that arise from my preliminary work with this material [slide].

What is the relationship between online fans and “citizen” activists? Is there overlap between their practices, productions and identities?

Can fan practices – which include remixing, customizing, tagging, discussing, archiving and circulating popular culture content – be expressions of “digital dissent”?

What are the implications of collective fan practices for citizenship and political organization?

(How) are big media corporations co-opting audience desires for participation?

How can we analyze the roles that gender, class and race play in fan productions and practices?

(How) does the genre of parody reframe fan practices?

And finally, why did our group appear to feel some discomfort in addressing questions of fan culture in a project devoted to “rethinking media and democracy”?

Fan studies, citizenship and democracy

Before I turn to some of the fan – and corporate – practices that have been generated in relation to *The Colbert Report*, I should make it clear that there is of course a large body of literature addressing fan culture, beginning from the 1980s. In their introduction to the new collection *Fandom*, Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007) suggest that there are three waves of fan studies. In the first wave scholars read fan activities and productions as the expressions of disempowered subcultures rewriting the scripts of powerful media corporations. The second wave of fan studies took quite another direction, suggesting that the interpretive communities of fans in fact reproduced social and cultural hierarchies (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). The third and most recent wave of fan studies, the authors argue, must contend with a change in the structure and status of fandom itself. With the rise of customization, narrowcasting and new media technologies, the fan, as a dedicated consumer, is at the centre of media marketing strategies. No longer equated with Star Trekish subcultures, fans are now wooed by the culture industries. Fan scholars have responded by linking their topic more firmly to contemporary

social trends, including the dialectic between the global and the local, the rise in spectacle, and the formation of publics and counterpublics.

Within this third, diversified wave of fan scholarship, one strand of thought stands out as particularly relevant to my questions today. That is the body of work that considers the relationship between fan communities and citizenship practices within deliberative democracies. Political scientist Liesbet van Zoonen argues that while fans and citizens are usually represented as radically different social formations, there are in fact a number of similarities between them. **[slide]** She writes “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” (p. 63). These, she argues, are the same customs that have been deemed necessary for democratic politics: information, discussion, and activism. The primary distinction appears to be the different subjectivities in which each role is based: affective relations in the case of the fan, cognitive processes in the case of the citizen. Yet even this distinction is false, she argues, for engaged citizenship within deliberative democracies must also include elements of imagination, identification and emotional investment, and she advocates that those interested in rethinking citizenship and politics look to the affective bonds and activities of fans.

Media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) similarly argues that fans’ networked interactions with popular culture have important consequences now and for the future. In the present, he writes, they are already acting as an alternative form of media power, changing the relationship between producers and consumers as media audiences try to capture new participatory powers. But he also suggests that these collective reworkings of popular culture are a kind of political training ground, where citizens can master skills in collaborative problem-solving and achieve greater levels of participation and less dependence on official expertise (p. 208).

Both Jenkins and van Zoonen not only identify the unique characteristics of fan culture, but also expand conceptualizations of political process and the construction of publics through their emphasis on imagination, emotion and performativity. Nonetheless, there are difficulties here which need to be addressed. For example, it is worth asking just *how*, more precisely, the collective intelligence and problem-solving that Jenkins sees at the heart of fan communities can be transferred to citizenship practices. We also need to recognize the profound tensions between consumer and political activities, and ask just what a politics shaped through and within cultural consumption might look like. Moreover, missing in both works is a serious effort to grapple with the ways in which the culture industries are not only managing audience activity through legal and technical mechanisms, but also, increasingly, by channeling and co-opting such activity [slide].

The Colbert Report

On the first broadcast of *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert, puffed up with his Bill O'Reilly persona, 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.

Since that time, however, fans have done much more than just watch TV. They have become actively caught up in the program. In some cases, this involvement has been initiated by fans themselves, in others it has been invited – and also limited – by the program's producers.

Because the range of fan participation is so large and introduces a range of crucial issues related to audience labor, intellectual property, centralization and the producer-consumer relationship in new media, I want to begin this section with a catalogue of relevant sites and activities:

- **[slide]** The Colbert Nation, despite its deliberately low budget look, is owned by Comedy Central. Along with ads, a blog and video links, the site also hosts the ...
- **[slide]** Colboards, the most active Colbert-related discussion boards on the web. The site is used as a place for fans to **[slide]** share fan fiction and art, discuss recent programs, and organize events such as the upcoming Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart Fan convention. **[slide]**
- Amongst the huge number of threads there, a few are dedicated to discussions of politics and media power. During the time I've spent on the boards, discussions of copyright have appeared to be some of the most passionate and informed. After Viacom ordered the video-hosting site *Daily Motion* to take down all Comedy Central material, fans began a thread – mixing both text and images – that included critique of Viacom's heavy-handed techniques, invective **[slide]** and advice on where to safely secure video clips. On another thread, fans entered into a discussion of the site's Submission Agreement, which declares that all user content is the unconditional and royalty-free property of Comedy Central.
- Along with the official site, there are also a large number of fan-initiated blogs. These include Feminists for Colbert, Catholic Colbert, Colbert University, and **[slide]** currently the most-visited unofficial site, No Fact Zone. No Fact Zone contains detailed episode guides, links to Colbert-related articles, a number of exclusive interviews, its own contests and quizzes, and an active comments section.
- The program's producers have also incorporated a number of audience challenges and contests into the program. The first of these was Colbert's suggestion that audiences prove the malleability of truth by changing Wikipedia entries **[slide]**, including the entry for reality, which he suggested should read "reality has become a commodity."
- Another invitation to the Colbert Nation came in the form of "The Green Screen Challenge." **[slide]** After seeing a fan video remix on YouTube, writer Peter Gwinn decided to incorporate user-generated content into the show. A video of Colbert jousting with a light-sabre was posted online, and audiences were invited to remix the piece and submit their creations to the program, where many of them were aired. While the producers were keen to receive submissions, they also posted instructions on the Colbert Nation to make sure that they received only the kind of content they wanted **[slide]**.
- Another Colbert-related event began with the announcement of Erik Flannigan as the Vice President of Digital Media at Comedy Central. In an interview with the *LA Times* (2007), Flannigan was quoted as saying that the company wanted *Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* fans to discuss the programs "in our world and on our pages." This prompted No Fact Zone blogger DB Ferguson to write an open letter to Flannigan, explaining why the official Colbert Nation site was often criticized by fans and how it could be changed, and supplying graphs to show how her own site was the more visited of the two **[slide]**. Ferguson's letter drew numerous supportive comments from fans, and a few months later, she was given a temporary assignment to guest host the Colbert Nation site.

To end, I want to look at one final example of audience participation, a phenomenon that has become known to fans simply as the Hungarian Bridge [slide]. In an August 2006 “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. Fans responded with computer bots that virtually stuffed the electronic ballot boxes. By the time Colbert called off the fans a few days later, 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 someone still alive, and the Hungarian ambassador to the US appeared on the show to “honor” Stephen Colbert while delivering the bad news.

The Hungarian bridge incident has a number of significant facets. It highlights the ambiguity of parody, an ambiguity that infuses not just this but a number of *Colbert* fan activities. Such invitations are of course, made in the name of satirizing the egotistical personalities of American right-wing media figures. If we read the Colbert Nation fans as Colbert himself suggests – that is, as playing a role in a scene he’s creating – then they become an extension of that parody. Yet the results are not so straightforward. What does it mean when the fans of an American television program stuff the ballot boxes of another country’s vote? Is making politics fun for America, in the words of the FANBLA poster, really making politics so fun for the rest of the world? Can the gesture be read ironically, or does it simply reproduce US-centricism?

Importantly, fans themselves reflected on the incident and its meanings in blogs and discussion threads. On the No Fact Zone, DB Ferguson worried about what she called the “jump-monkey-jump phenomena,” in which the Colbert Nation responds adoringly to all of Colbert’s requests; at the same time she named the challenge as just “a bit of fun for the throngs”. On one

YouTube comments thread, discussants used the incident as a jumping off place to debate the role of the US in world politics. On another thread, one fan interrupted a discussion about the unfairness of the Hungarian government refusing to name the bridge after Stephen Colbert with the exasperated question “Don’t you get that it was supposed to be a joke?!”

In fact, assessing the degree of joking-ness in the fans’ enthusiastic participation is part of the challenge of thinking about the Colbert Nation. Not long after reading discussion threads devoted to the Hungarian Bridge, I recounted the incident to Megan. “So it’s possible that some people aren’t interpreting the program as a parody?” she asked. “Or at least not considering the invitations as part of the parody?” I hesitated in my reply then, and still do. Do the citizens of the Colbert Nation see themselves as playing a part in an extended parody of the American media? Or are they simply enjoying the innovations of a program that seems to have learned how to incorporate – or perhaps exploit – their digital skills and their desire for involvement? Do they, as Jenkins suggests, see themselves as co-participants in the creation of media, who can, when necessary, speak “truthiness to power”? Just as important to me are questions about the role of the researcher in “interpreting” these discussions and activities. While my first short visits in the Colbert Nation convince me that fan and corporate practices are deeply relevant to a project devoted to “rethinking media and democracy,” the words “If you want politics, go away” are a pithy reminder not to enter that territory looking only to confirm my own definitions.

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