Preprint Version

For the final, published version (with minor changes), see Chapter 7 of *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media* (Editors Matt Ratto and Megan Boler). MIT Press, 2014.

Rethinking Media Activism through Fan Blogging: How Stewart and Colbert Fans Make a Difference-Catherine Burwell and Megan Boler

In this chapter we recount what happened when a project intended to analyze online political activism took an unexpected turn into DIY fan culture. Although we at first resisted this shift, we soon realized that an examination of digital public spheres could not overlook fans' processes of creation and community-building. In fact, we found that fan practices troubled – and in doing so deepened – our conceptualizations of political engagement. As theorists intent on rethinking notions of citizenship in the context of emerging social 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 pages that follow, we describe our encounters with the online fan sites that have sprung up around *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. We discuss ways of theorizing the relationships between these satirical texts, fandom and critical making, and apply these insights to interviews with two influential female bloggers. The work of Lisa Rein and DB Ferguson demonstrates the political possibilities of DIY fan production at the same time that it reveals many of its paradoxes, including corporate media's appropriation of fan labor and creativity. Adding to the work of media theorists like Liesbet van Zoonen, John Hartley and Noortje Marres, we argue that DIY fan culture provides significant insights into meaning production and civic engagement within mediated worlds.

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. Among the sites chosen for this investigation were online discussion boards and blogs devoted to *The Daily Show*. Although we had expected to find mostly "political sites" – a term we had yet to problematize – we quickly realized that much of the attention paid to the program took the form of celebrity gossip, entertainment news and fan production. The *Jon Stewart Intelligence Agency*, for example, which billed itself as "the biggest, unofficialest, scariest, funnest Jon Stewart fan cult club on the net," included a discussion forum, a space for fans to contribute fan fiction, and a "Jon News" mailing list. On *Commentary on the Daily Show*, fans could download screen caps, read transcripts, and skim pages of quotations from past shows.

These sites presented a conundrum for us. Our project was about online spaces for civic participation and the possibility for new modes of political activism. Yet most of the sites devoted exclusively to the show demonstrated more interest in cast changes than political change. 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." In the early stages of our research we did just that, choosing not to investigate fan production. Our oversight might be explained by the historical marginalization of fandom, for even as fan practices move into the mainstream, fans continue to be stereotyped as irrational, emotional, and peripheral to politics. Indeed, as van Zoonen has written, within modernist political discourse, fans and citizens are "constructed as involving radically different social formations and identities."[1]

Of fans and citizens, affect and activism

Our own separation of fans and citizens began to break down when our attention turned to *The Colbert Report*. Indeed, it is difficult not to connect fandom and citizenship within a program that assigns its audience the role of "Colbert Nation," and generates a flurry of fan activity that includes stuffing online ballot boxes, changing Wikipedia pages, and producing fan-made videos. These kinds of activity are not only generated by the program's producers, but also initiated by fans themselves, who have started several thriving blogs dedicated to *The Colbert Report*, organized protests in support of striking writers, and devoted countless threads to discussion of the show. Indeed, 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 interactivity.[2] Stephen Colbert himself has noted the role fans played in generating response to his speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, and has suggested that fans are essential to the *Report*, that they "are a character in a scene I'm playing."[3]

At the same time that fans of "fake news" were gaining visibility, our interviews with digital creators were revealing the role of affect within political expression. In 2006 and 2007, we undertook 35 interviews with video producers and bloggers addressing topics such as the war in Iraq, American politics, and mainstream media representations. 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 anger with US policies to the desire to build community and create belonging, interviews with online producers pointed towards the role of affect and imagination in constituting new kinds of counterpublics.

While the role of emotion in politics has long been undertheorized, perhaps because, as Brian Massumi notes "there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect,"[4] a number of scholars are now filling in that gap. In *Entertaining the Citizen*, van Zoonen explores the place of emotional investment in both fan communities and political constituencies. While emotional investment has long been associated with fans' commitment to particular texts and communities, it has often been *dis*associated with political constituencies, where it is seen as threatening to rationality. Yet as van

Zoonen argues, these distinctions between rationality and emotion are misleading. Van Zoonen argues that without "enthusiasm and anxiety, political interest and commitment would falter…just like fan communities would wane without the emotional input of their members."[5] In "There is Drama in Networks," Noortje Marres makes similar claims. She writes that it is the networked *relations* among organizations and individuals that present "the most interesting site for communication, collaboration, and contestation regarding political issues."[6] Marres forwards a notion of politics that sees political activity as spread out amongst multiple actors, locations and moments, and connected by the relationships and drama that make up political communication. Such a notion is echoed in John Hartley's conceptualization of citizenship not as a "static or definable condition," but as a "relational identity."[7] Within new media environments, Hartley writes, the practices of DIY citizenship that characterized the age of television are not only easier, but also increasingly mutual, enhanced by digital connectivity and social networks. This emerging understanding of politics and citizenship as relational, connected and performative resonated with our own nascent realization that politics were in fact being enacted through fans' communities and collaborative processes of making.

Given these developments, it was no longer possible to see fan culture as peripheral to our questions about the public sphere and citizenship. Clearly there were intersections between fan DIY production and political expression that could not be overlooked. This recognition led us to broaden the scope of our investigation and include interviews with digital makers whose performances of fandom provided insight into the changing forms of political activity and digital citizenship. 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. Through our interviews with these two influential bloggers, we wanted to analyze more closely the relationship between fandom and politics, activism and affect, and to think about how fans' practices of making might also *make politics happen*.

People have to see this: Building a DIY digital archive of *The Daily Show*

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, much of it available on her site. This archive is part of a larger and fascinating site dedicated to links and commentary on a wide range of issues, including anti-war protests, US government policy, popular culture, environmentalism 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, and like many critical makers, sees her work as a form of social and political intervention. What makes Rein's practices especially interesting are the way they combine motivations associated with both fandom and political activism. Her intense emotional investment in *The Daily Show* and a desire to create communities of affinity around this text co-exist easily with the intention to educate and create the conditions for political change.

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 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* were serving the function that real news was supposed to serve and they were the only people doing it," she remarks. Rein's critical appraisal of the function of *The Daily Show*, alongside her enthusiasm for the program, supports Jonathan Gray's description of "news fans" who combine a passion for news programs and personalities with rational argument, bringing together current affairs, politics and fandom in new combinations.[8]

Rein's own enjoyment of the show and her sense of its political significance quickly led her to want to share it with others. She 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.

From this moment until 2005, Rein regularly posted clips from the program. She appears to have two motivations for this activity. The first was to make an archive of a program she believed provided necessary context and critique, the second 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" and "to be like a library and let everybody have access to this stuff." 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* (2008). 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. 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 dialogic community – formed through comments and links – developed around her archived clips, helping like-minded people to find each other. "It was just nice know that we weren't all crazy," she explains. Rein also suggests that this community may have formed around her clips in part because *The Daily Show's* comedy provided a critical but also a playful, pleasurable space in which to engage in political discussion, gesturing towards

Hartley's suggestion that "purposeful play" may model new civic potential within mediated societies in which social networks are used to create "associative relations among strangers."[9]

The sharing of materials, and the creation of interpretive communities are certainly not limited to fan groups. Indeed, as van Zoonen argues, information-sharing and discussion are also at the core of democratic practice. Rein's work provides an illuminating example not only of the similarities between fan and political organizing but of their intersection, in the way that a pop culture text – and shared enjoyment in that text – sits at the center of this evaluative discursive community. As Gray suggests, emotional and fan-like feelings for a text do not preclude rational responses to that text. Indeed, a response that mixes delight in the program's comic elements as well as an appreciation of its political importance within the context of shrinking public journalism not only points to the program's successful integration of comedy and news, but provides a fuller and more representative picture of emerging forms of citizenship in which participation, sociability and affect are constitutive elements.

It is also worth noting 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 later notorious among fans for its heavy-handed "YouTube purges" does indeed seem remarkable. She explains this 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, 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." Rein's remarks here point us towards the complex relationship between the emerging user-producer and the mainstream media, and demonstrate the ways in which fan productions, made for free, amplify the commercial presence of multinational media corporations. Indeed, as Red Chidgey demonstrates in this same volume, DIY activities may be rather easily assimilated into corporate profit-making, even as they perform important affective, communal and political functions that may be at odds with corporate agendas.

I could create it myself: Making a space for fans of fake news

Where Lisa Rein identifies herself as an activist and archivist, DB Ferguson identifies herself as an "Uberfan." On her "Colbert-centric" blog *NoFactZone*, she describes herself through her active consumption of popular culture and her commitment to *The Colbert Report* and its fans:

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!

In July 2006, Ferguson began *NoFactZone*, a frequently-updated blog that includes detailed episode guides, links to Colbert-related articles, a comments section, contests and interviews. As her own description implies, part of Ferguson's motivation to create the site was her disappointment with other Colbert fan sites. Since its launch, *NoFactZone* has become one of the most-visited *Colbert*-related sites, and has been linked to by a number of well-known sites, including *The Huffington Post* and *MediaShift.* In July 2007, Ferguson began a "sister site" with the *Colbert University*, a website 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 a different set of themes and questions. Where Rein's passionate commitment to archiving, sharing and discussing *Daily Show* clips blurs the lines between 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 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… 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 Correspondents speech:

Colbert has said over and over: "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 [Bush] a little bit, I just don't think he realized how political the whole situation would become until after it was over.

Ferguson extends this apoliticism to Colbert's audience, remarking that "you'd be amazed at how unpolitical the Colbert fan community is." And yet for all of her rejection of political 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, as a 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. 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 series of "Open Letters" to Comedy Central executives concerning questions of centralization and copyright. Here, Ferguson draws on an established history of fans asserting their collective rights vis-a-vis media corporations, a history Jenkins refers to earlier in this section. For example, when the vice president of digital media at Comedy Central, Erik Flannigan, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the corporation wanted "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."[10] Ferguson responded by posting a letter on her site that critiques Comedy Central's digital media strategy, and in particular its official *Colbert Nation* site, which she compares unfavorably to her own, fan-run site. Two years later, when there is news that Viacom will sue bloggers who used unauthorized clips of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, she addresses Viacom in an open letter that reminds them that most fan bloggers do not make money from their labor, and are not only *not* redirecting profits from broadcasters but are in fact extending their audiences. She writes that she blogs about *The Colbert Report* "simply for the love and the passion of blogging about a man and a show that I have grown to respect and admire. We're more than a news site, we're a community." Through the letters, Ferguson demonstrates how emerging forms of digitally-mediated citizenship are produced through both acts of making (texts, relationships, communities) and rhetorical performances that seek to redress power imbalances built into technologically-mediated societies.

Making a difference

Visiting fan sites and talking to fan producers, activities that we initially resisted, ultimately complicated and broadened our own interpretations of political expression. It forced us to recognize the intersections between fans and citizens, and to see that citizenship might include elements of emotion, enthusiasm, participation and sociability. By thinking about fan *practices of making* (archives, blogs, websites, networks, communities) we also came to see that fans worked to *make a difference* (to other fans, to media power differentials, to untenable political situations) and to *make sense* (of technological

change, of unreliable media accounts, of a world gone mad). In a project dedicated to "rethinking" media, politics and citizenship, the questions that fan production generated constantly pushed us in new directions.

Endnotes

[1] Lisbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 56.

[2] See Jason Linkins, "Colbert: Content for It-getters," *Huffington Post* (April 20, 2007) online at www.huffingtonpost.com/eat-the-press/2007/04/20/colbert-content-for-itg_e_46416.html and Rachel Sklar, "Stephen Colbert's Web Dominance: How The Colbert Report is Fast Becoming the Leader in Web-TV Integration," *Huffington Post* (August 22, 2007) online at www.huffingtonpost.com/eat-the-press/2006/08/22/

[3] Dan Snierson, "Stephen is King!" *EntertainmentWeekly.com* (January 4, 2007) online at www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20006490,00.html

[4] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 27.

[5] van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen,* 66.

[6] Noortje Marres, "There is Drama in Networks," in *Interact or Die*, ed. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: NAI, 2007), 175.

[7] John Hartley, "Silly Citizenship," *Critical Discourse Studies*, 7 no. 4 (2010): 234.

[8] Jonathan Gray, "The News: You Gotta Love It," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 75-87.

[9] Hartley, "Silly Citizenship," 244.

[10] Dawn Chmielewski, "Building Community, Commerce for Viacom," Los Angeles Times (June 21, 2007), C2.