

Toward an understanding of political enthusiasm as media fandom: Blogging, fan productivity and affect in American politics

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Abstract:

Blogs, alongside being an increasingly visible part of the contemporary public sphere, are spaces of communication that offer insights into the motivations and practices of political enthusiasm. Based on the analysis of the one hundred most commented on, most recommended and most 'hotlisted' blogs per week on the popular progressive blog *Daily Kos* during a 22 week period from September 2012 to January 2013, this paper argues that political enthusiasm is best conceptualised as a form of media fandom, in which blogging and commenting on blogs constitute forms of enunciative and textual productivity motivated by the affective bond between citizens and politicians as fans and fan objects. This study offers no support for recent suggestions that blogging leads to general political polarisation, and instead indicates that polarisation effects vary among different political fan cultures and across the political spectrum. However, its findings suggest that the affective basis of political fandom – fans' self-reflective investments in given symbolic forms (such as politicians and parties) rather than substance (values and beliefs) – problematises the efficacy and legitimacy of indirect, representative democracies in the digital age.

Keywords: *Daily Kos*, Blogging, Fandom, Antifandom, Political Communication, Election Campaigns.

Introduction

Less than a decade since former Vermont governor Howard Dean's anti-establishment bid for the nomination of Democratic party was fuelled by online activism (Kerbel and Bloom 2005, Meraz 2007, Shaw 2012) and destroyed by television¹ (Jenkins 2006) user generated content in the form of blogs (weblogs), video clips, or comments on social websites have become an integral part of electoral campaigns and, more broadly, the public sphere.

To understand the causes and consequences of these transformations of mediated political discourse, political sciences, sociology and media and communication studies have dedicated much attention to the exploration of the three fundamental components of such change: technologies (convergence media), new forms of textuality (such as blogs) and people (users). Notably, in the analysis of the latter group, the labels frequently attached to those engaging with such new technologies and textualities either discursively frame them in reference to these technologies – such as netizens (Hauben and Hauben 1996), producers (Bruns 2008), or simply bloggers – or in reference to their role in political and communication systems as ‘citizen journalists’ (Atton 2009) or ‘citizen communicators’ (Reese *et al.* 2007). Yet, many studies building on such terminology underplay the continuities between contemporary media usage and the history of media audiences. While citizenship and technology are important dimensions in understanding the transformations of political communication, so is an understanding of the historical interplay of audienceship and participation. Those writing and reading blogs maybe be citizens², some might even be considered journalists, but they engage in an activity of domestic media use that in its practices, rituals and everyday life framing is first and foremost situated in the mould of media consumption that developed as key aspect of twentieth century domesticity and ‘mobile privatisation’ (Williams 1974, see also Silverstone 1994).

This interplay between audienceship and participation has been explored and conceptualised in the increasing orientation towards the study of fans in the field of audience research (see Fiske 1989, 1992; Jenkins 1992; Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Hills 2002). As fandom has become an increasingly ubiquitous mode of media consumption driven by ever greater access to and choice between different media texts are fuelled by both media deregulation and media convergence in the digital age, these same forces have also eroded the boundaries between spheres of political and popular communication. Reflecting the shared platforms – television, magazines, the internet – through which both popular and political texts are accessed and commented on, contemporary political leaders are often represented and read in ways not dissimilar to celebrities drawn from the world of show business. Our relationship with politicians has thus become more intimate (Stanyer 2013; see also Corner and Pels 2003), while figures from the world of entertainment frequently endorse political parties and candidates or - deliberately or inadvertently - signify wider political movements (Sandvoss 2012b). From the early study of youth and subcultures (Hebdige 1979) to fans of popular music, soaps or Reality TV (Van Zoonen 2005), X-Files (Jones 2012) or Harry Potter fans (Jenkins 2012), sport fans (Ruddock 2005, Sandvoss 2003, 2007, 2011a; Sandvoss *et al.* 2012), or, indeed, fans of political drama (Williams 2011a, 2011b), many studies have analysed and highlighted political dimensions of engagements in popular culture.

In contrast to this wealth of work on political fans, few have actively considered the converse phenomenon of fans of politics. Coleman’s early work (2003) considering the parallels between those with a high interest in politics and fans of the Reality TV show *Big Brother* in Britain, was followed by Jenkins (2006: 245), who, illustrating how activists

‘generate the same levels of emotional energy challenging the current Powers That Be in Washington that fans routinely direct against the current Powers That Be in Hollywood’, observed the ‘range of different ways that activists mobilised popular culture to encourage voter awareness and participation in the 2004 presidential campaign’³. There is little to disagree with Jenkins’ thoughtful analysis of political activism as a form of fandom which is supported by further studies on the mobilisation of popular culture in political activism (see for example Jones, *et al.* 2012; Street 1997, 2012; Hartley 2009) – other than the scope of its evaluation. To Jenkins awareness and participation appear as objectives in and for themselves, whereas I will argue below that they are components of, but not by themselves indicators of, a functioning democracy.

Further nuancing his position, Jenkins (2008: 291) later warned against equating grassroots media with *a priori* means of resistance: ‘online parody’, for example, ‘often embraces racist, sexist, and xenophobic humour’. It of course only underlines the ubiquity of fandom in the age of digital media (cf. Jenkins 2007) that fan practices and attachments can be found across the spectrum of political fandom. In addition to Jenkins’s work (2006, 2008) this paper thus seeks to take up the thread of recent contributions which explore how fandom itself, not the politics of individual fans, may impact on democracy, including Laurie Ouellette’s study of Sarah Palin fans and branding, to whom I will return below, my work on the erosion of trust in mediated politics as fans’ attachment to given political parties and politicians is tested over time (Sandvoss 2012a), and Jonathan Gray’s (2007: 86) work on news fans who, ‘far from being somber, rational conversationalists, [...] were emotionally involved, exhibiting many of the emotive, playful qualities in fandom in the ways in which they consumed, processed and discussed the news’, leaving Gray to call for further research on how fandom offers ‘paths through the wilderness of facts, policies, movements, issues and spin’. Building on these findings this paper sets out to explore how fan-like attachments to politicians and political parties shape citizens’ participation in political debate and democratic processes alike. Hence, the aim of this paper is twofold: firstly to explore to what extent conceptual and theoretical approaches in fan studies offer meaningful frameworks to analyse and contextualise forms of political enthusiasm, and, more specifically, how such political enthusiasm as fandom shape forms of online communication such as blogs, online diaries and comments. Secondly, it explores not only how political enthusiasm as a form of fandom fuels practices of participation, but how participation in politics based on the affective bond between fan and fan object (a given political cause, party or politician) impacts *on the substance* of participation and political support. If mobile privatisation was at the heart of the changes to everyday life that made fandom a common and significant identity resource to many of us, then it is time to ask what role it plays in the process of participation in public discourse that, to invert to Raymond Williams’s words, is equally well described as ‘private mobilisation’.

Methodology

In contrast to many recent quantitative studies of political blogging, explorations of fan audiences, which have remained overwhelmingly interested in questions of how affect, attachment, participation and community are built and maintained within fan cultures, have drawn on the qualitative methodological traditions of audience research, commonly through participant observation, interviewing, the analysis of fans' written or artistic output, or a combination of such methods. The advent of online spaces accommodating discussion and exchange between territorially dispersed fans has been a natural focus of many recent studies given their accessibility and simultaneous centrality to many fan cultures (see Sandvoss 2011a), albeit with the important limitation that study designs excluding additional qualitative interviews do not account for the majority of fans who use the internet primarily in its archival function, rather than as a means of textual production and distribution through, for example, commenting or blogging (cf. Sandvoss and Kearns, forthcoming).

In the realm of political communication a number of sites have developed since the mid-1990s that in their structure and types of interaction closely resemble the use of blogs and fora in other fan cultures (cf. Booth 2010), and that in the political communication and journalism research have been described as 'blogs' or 'alternative media'. In contrast to interactions between fan groups on newspaper comment pages, or video sharing portals such as YouTube, these sites offer a clearer focus to those sharing a common fan object. Given the inevitable close association between nation states and most political parties such sites have a stronger, though not exclusive⁴, national focus than other fan sites online. Drawing on the wealth of work on blogging in the United States over the past decade and the focus in Gray's, Jenkins', and Ouellette's work as well as my own past research on Obama fans, I selected a US American site for this research that matched the description of a political online fan community, blogging site and alternative medium alike: the website *Daily Kos*. *Daily Kos* is a rallying point for many supporters of progressive, centre-left political causes which in the two-party, majority voting system of the United States has come to be overwhelmingly associated with the Democratic Party in the post-war era. The site was founded by former Marine and Republican-turned-Democrat Markos Moulitsas Zúniga in May 2002 who maintains ownership of the site, reserving the right to delete entries (particularly conspiracy theories) and to set site rules.⁵ Today, the site is the largest and most popular among American political blogging sites, claiming to reach 2.5 million viewers per month.⁶ While the site has often been studied as a political blog, it in fact combines blogging functionality with an overall architecture similar to social networking sites: each registered user has its own profile and users can follow other users, subscribe to their blogs and see which blogs and stories they recommend, as well as bookmark ('hotlist') individual blogs they wish to return to later. All users can publish their own blogs, called 'diaries', and comment on and recommend any other blogs across the site, allowing given blogs and bloggers growing exposure through snowballing recommendations. This structure allows for a plethora of different groups of contributors on *Daily Kos* that range from a

number of high-ranking politicians associated with the Democratic Party officials (including Jimmy Carter, Barack Obama, Harry Reid, Al Franken, Nancy Pelosi, and independent Vermont senator Bernie Sanders) and other public figures such as filmmaker Michael Moore, the site's founder Moulitsas Zúniga and other senior editors and writers for the site, to thousands of regular and tens of thousands occasional contributors with no professional involvement in journalism or politics.

Describing itself as an 'online political community', the site features various sections including a diary section in which all users' blogs are listed chronologically, a section detailing and listing tags, a list of users, user's profile page, as well as subsections titled 'Labor', 'Comics', 'Elections', 'Economy' and '*Daily Kos* Radio'. The front page is reserved for blogs written by senior editors and contributors as well as a number of guest bloggers which are selected from the non-professional user community; yet, the site is keen to stress the contribution of 'the hundreds of thousands of regular Americans that have used *Daily Kos* to shape a political world once the exclusive domain of the rich, connected, and powerful'.⁷ This architecture inviting multi-authorship and community is – while one we can observe in other fan cultures beyond politics – a hallmark of progressive political blogs. As Shaw and Benkler (2012: 473-5) suggest based on their analysis of the top 155 American political blogs: 'the left adopts technical platforms that enhance participation in the blog's primary discursive space. The right emphasizes sole-authored blogs and constructs blogs in which the modes of participation of users are separated rigidly from the main content and largely set to the side of the main discursive space' (see also Wall 2005).

In addition to Shaw and Benkler's work, *Daily Kos* has been the subject of a number of academic studies over the past decade (Adamic and Glance 2005; Reese *et al.* 2007; Scott 2007; Feld and Wilcox 2008; Baum and Groeling 2008; Leccese 2009; Ekdale *et al.* 2010; Wicks, *et al.* 2011; Shaw 2012), many of which are based on the quantitative analysis of posts and URLs featured on the site. Building on this work, but taking a qualitative approach, I conducted an online participant observation and thematic analysis of both diaries (blogs) and user responses for a 22 week period from 3rd September 2012 to the end of January 2013, covering the two months leading up to the 2012 presidential and congressional elections on November 6th 2012 and its aftermath. Given the volume of posts on the site, usually featuring a few hundred blogs per day (cf. Shaw 2012), I selected front page posts and comments, as well as the 100 most commented, 100 most recommended and 100 most hotlisted posts per week as measured by the end of each Sunday night for further analysis⁸. While there was significant overlap between these three categories, this allowed for the inclusion of a wider mix of diaries from featured, regular and less regular contributors. The volume of texts necessitated a mix of participant observation (and detailed field notes on each week's topical and phenomenal themes). The subsequent selection of a smaller sample of 187 blogs and comment threads, which reflected the most frequent themes on the site, revealed levels of affective attachments and their premises and included main threads on major current affairs developments.

Topics across both samples ranged widely and correspond with the news agenda of the day. The weeks leading up to the elections were marked by the election campaign, including the three television debates, polling, Senate and House Races, and GOP candidates' controversial statements about rape. The main themes emerging after the election were critiques of mainstream media and the Republican Party, the Sandy Hook School massacre and gun control, the 'Fiscal Cliff' compromise and bipartisanship in the House. In addition, the introspective themes of site conduct, etiquette and community attracted continuously high attention. The focus on elections, policy issues, the work of the president and congress, and the state of both the Democratic and Republican Party and their representatives, and the *Daily Kos* community itself also reflected the most frequently used tags on the site over the past decade⁹.

As is the case with forms of offline participant observation in public place, it is not feasible to seek prior consent from the vast number of users frequenting the site. However, all diaries and comments included in the analysis are on the publically accessible parts of the site, can be viewed without registration and, crucially, were intended by users for public consumption. Full usernames have been included in the analysis as all quotes can be easily located via search engines, but given that no further consent was sought from participants, this paper does not identify personal information on the users cited here, although many offer biographical notes on their profile pages on Daily Kos.

Bloggers, Citizen Journalists, Activists or Fans?

A number of different terms have been used to describe non-professional textual producers online: 'bloggers', 'citizen journalist', 'activists', or even 'political junkies' (Coleman 2003). There are a number of issues with all of these terms and their associated conceptual approaches. While 'bloggers' serves as a useful umbrella term, it does not allow for a more nuanced distinction between those who have become paid media professionals or even entrepreneurs, such as *Daily Kos* proprietor Moulitsas Zúniga, and infrequent posters of an online diary, nor does it capture the substantive presence in online debates of those who do not write weblogs themselves but regularly comment on them. Moreover, it tells us little about authors' motivations or ethos. 'Citizen journalism', in turn, by framing the production of user generated content as a deliberately journalistic effort implies precisely such a set of motivations and a given ethos. Recent quantitative analyses of the site and other political blogs, however, suggest that most bloggers do not engage in practices of primary information gathering and reporting but focus on the redistribution, commenting and remixing of mainstream media content. Most users actively contributing to the site, as I will argue below, also do not aspire to be journalists or even engage in an activity that finds its point of reference in professional journalism; and often share Lewis *et al.*'s (2005: 141) assessment of news media that in their representation of ordinary citizens, are 'part of the problem, rather than part of the solution' (see also Hartley 2009). The term 'activist' implies a form of active engagement in local party structures and offline campaigning that many *Daily Kos* users take part in, but that does not constitute an *a priori* condition for the

participation in online debate – indeed, one of the common themes on the site are debates about lacking offline engagement and the need to get involved in local party organisations to promote progressive candidates and ensure nationwide presence to roll back Republican gerrymandering strategies. What in their sum all these different terms capture, however, is that users of political blogs are highly participatory, have acquired specialised knowledge, and, while ranging widely in their practices, share a level of motivation that indicate an emotional relevance of their engagements. They care passionately about politics to an extent that we may call them enthusiasts, albeit that often they are less than enthusiastic about the political *status quo*. In fact their enthusiasm is such that I want to suggest that we can most meaningfully understand their practices and motivations by defining and conceptualising them as fans (cf. Sandvoss 2012a).

Elsewhere I have defined fandom as the ‘regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given narrative or text’ (Sandvoss 2005a: 8) – a definition matching the practices of many *Daily Kos* users. The regularity of engagement with the site is evidenced by the frequency by which many users participate in debates and comments. In its ten years of existence, 866,032 blogs, an average of over 220 per day, have been posted on the site by 46,527 individual bloggers, who in turn constitute around a fourth of all registered users and one in fifty among monthly visitors to the site. Many of these visit the site frequently, often daily. Just over 7000 of these bloggers have written more than 1,000 comments; 889 have written more than 10,000 comments; one (one-time) blogger accounts for over 130,000 comments. In total, individual blogs/diaries have attracted over 42 million¹⁰ comments from fellow bloggers (an average of more than 11,000 a day), translating to an average of 911 comments per blogger (with a median of 63).

In addition to such regularity of participation, many diaries and comments document the emotional significance that participation on the site – and the political causes associated with it – holds for many users. On a rhetorical level, this is evident in the language used by bloggers, such as the frequent use of First and Third Person plural pronouns such ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘they’. Similarly, user names convey a realm of emotions and emotional involvement: from the negative such as ‘one pissed off liberal’ or ‘angrydem’ – an emotion widely shared (with 75 users choosing screen names conveying a sense of anger or annoyance) - to the inspirational, informing screen names containing words such as ‘hope’ (62 users), ‘change’ (58), or ‘better’ (22). Others use their screen name to express party affiliations with over 950 usernames indicating Democratic Party support.

On a narrative level the emotional and personal significance of many of the subject matters discussed on the site is illustrated even more powerfully. Following the massacre at Sandy Hook School in which 27 people, including 20 elementary school-age children, were killed by a gunman in the New Hampshire Town of Newton in December 2012, Wayne Lapiere, CEO of the National Rifle Association, called for a national registry of sufferers of mental illness and armed guards and teachers in schools. In response one frequent blogger decided to offer a distinctly personal account and to ‘tell a story – the story of my life in a way – and the story of what heroes in my life have looked like’. The diarist (tmservo433)

outlines the struggles of his brother suffering from a rare brittle bone disease and his mother's fight for his education, his own fate of suffering a brutal, homophobic attack as a student, his fundraising activities for the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network and the support he has received in these from singer Tori Amos of whom he calls himself a 'huge fan', and the love for his wife and his son who is suffering from autism. He concludes his highly personal testimony as follows:

I would encourage you Mr. Lapierre, to come with me to a special education event and watch some of the kids who have the biggest hearts of anyone I've known find their way through the world. And then you tell me: what gives you the right to paint a target on their back?

So you ask me, which kind of teacher do I want... the kind of teacher that works with my special needs child, loves him, hugs me and roots for him to be the best, or a teacher who feels comforted by someone who has him on a list of dangerous people and keeps a gun on a hip holster?

I can tell you what love is, Mr. Lapierre. It isn't money. It isn't things. And it sure as hell isn't a gun.

(<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/12/22/1173161/-The-War-for-the-Disabled-My-Soul-and-the-Heroes-I-ve-Known>)

Fellow users were quick to share the emotional impact this post had on them:

Every single time, I stumble across a diary like this or a random act of kindness in the comments, and I'm once again as gobsmacked as I was when I first came here. I would not have missed this diary for anything. (by KelleyRN2)

Today, you are my hero for sharing your story. Thank you for touching our hearts with yours. (by WakeUpNeo)

Thank you for the beautiful diary. It brings back memories of my mother's fierce defense of my sister, who had autism almost before it had a name. (by Monsieur Georges)

I don't know what to say. I have tried several times to put into words the impact your story had on me and the many levels at which it touched me. Can't do it. At some point the words may come, but for now I am overwhelmed with raw emotion, so just know that I am overawed by your strength and the

strength of your family. Thank you for sharing. I am telling everyone I know about this. (by lartwielder)

I am still wiping tears away, and after a very hard time recently have found reason again to be grateful to be a human being. (by oslyn7)

These reactions are one of many examples in which participants on *Daily Kos* express the profound personal significance the site and its causes have for them. They are, I believe, a powerful illustration of the parallels between participation in political discourse and political activism and fandom in popular culture, both of which have become important identity resources (cf Sandvoss 2005a). If fandom is the most personal, most dedicated form of media consumption and production –articulating a sense of who we are and strive to be through our fan engagement with the object of fandom from television shows and musicians to sports teams, as much literature in the field suggests (see for instance Cavicchi 1997; Sandvoss 2003, 2005a, Harrington and Bielby, 2010) - then political discourses, causes and politicians appear to offer equally meaningful textual spaces for being a fan. To the above blogger, fighting for gun control and opposing compulsory registration and thus stigmatisation of those who have special needs is both an intrinsically personal and political quest. He displays a passion about his political engagement that is typical of many bloggers on the site, to whom their engagement in the political process is an important aspect of their identity. Some, while being aware of the connotations of the term as primarily used in the context of participation in popular culture, even call themselves ‘fans’.¹¹ Yet the range of those expressing how much they were touched by the above cited diary spanning from one user who has posted over 24,000 comments to a newcomer who had not yet published on the site, illustrate that while categorising political bloggers as fans may help to reveal shared affective investments, it also point to the need to differentiate between the widely varying practices of the wide spectrum of people ranging from the tens of thousands of visitors on *Daily Kos* who never post themselves, to those who participate in the site while holding national office.

Bloggng, Commenting and Fan Productivity

These polar ends of the range of contributors to the site are important to our understanding of whether to understand blogging and commenting through the frame of professional media practice, such as journalism, or media use, such as fandom. Here, again, audience studies offer suitable conceptual tools to explain and predict variations among different participants, through a combination of typologies of fan groups mapping the transitional spaces between media consumption and media production (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, see also Longhurst 2007) with the three main types of fan productivity as outlined by Fiske (1992). Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) distinguish between three fan types on a continuum spanning between ordinary consumers and (petty) producers. The groups of fans

closest to ordinary consumers tend not to make connections with fellow fans, have a broad, unfocused media use, and their fan objects tend to be equally broadly defined. In our case, this would translate to a supporter of the Democratic Party, who is an interested follower of television news, newspapers and also reads *Daily Kos*, but is unlikely to be part of a social network arising from his political affiliations. At the other end of the spectrum – and following a second group who have a more specific fan object, lean more towards niche media and engage in some degree of social organisation in their fandom – we find enthusiasts whose object of fandom shifts from the mediated object to their own (textual) activity such as, in our case, blogging. Elsewhere (Sandvoss 2011a) I have suggested to add a fourth category in distinguishing between these groups to this typology reflecting fans' varying degrees of productivity drawing on Fiske's (1992) distinction between semiotic productivity (the act of reading and meaning construction), enunciative productivity (verbal or written interactions about their fan object) and textual productivity (the creation of new texts in relation to the fan object such as fan fiction, music remixes, or fanzines). 'Ordinary fans' (cf Sandvoss and Kearns, forthcoming) are likely to be only semiotically active, i.e. visit *Daily Kos* without posting on the site, the in-between group of fans will visit the site more regularly and also be enunciatively active by (regularly) commenting on other users' blogs and most enthusiastic fans will be those to whom the focal point of their fandom shifts to their own textual activity and who are frequent bloggers themselves. While the last group is naturally the most visible – and the one most frequently studied – past studies of other fan cultures indicate that the by far largest group are more casual fans (Sandvoss 2011a).

A pyramid-type structure in which more casual fans far outnumber enthusiasts is confirmed in the closer analysis of user profiles on *Daily Kos*. Out of over 46,500 users the 5,000 most active account for over 81% of all comments¹²; the 100 most active account for 11.2% of all comments, while the 100 most active bloggers account for 16.6% of all blogs. Similarly, out of 46,527 bloggers, 34,014 (73.1%) have published ten or fewer diaries on the site, only 1,454 (3.1%) more than 100 and 42 more than 1,000. Over 150,000 registered users have not written a blog themselves. There was some variation between textual and enunciative productivity with the correlation between writing diaries/blogs and writing comments being lower than expected. A number of users who had authored less than ten diaries were among the most active posters of comments.

Such figures suggest that the frequently studied 'elite' group of political bloggers represents only a small section of the spectrum of political enthusiasts with which it shares important affective investments to which we turn below, but that is distinct in its levels of activism-based social capital, specificity of interest, textual productivity and media usage. Ekdale *et al.* (2010) identify motivations of political bloggers that are consistent with that of enthusiasts in Abercrombie and Longhurst's model who shifting their focus to textual productivity out of dissatisfaction with mainstream media, further reflect the negative correlation between trust in professional journalism and political knowledge that Kaufhold *et al.* (2010) observe. According to Ekdale *et al.* (2010: 230) political bloggers 'see great

value in offering a point of view that they believe is otherwise missing in the mainstream media’.

This critical stance towards media industries combined with bloggers’ textual productivity has led some scholars and commentators to describe blogging as a form of citizen journalism, with some implicitly acknowledging its root in (political) fandom as borderland between media consumption and production. As Goode (2009: 1293), for example, suggests, ‘citizen journalism [...] can to some extent be seen as an extension of this active audience engagement as opposed to a sudden rupture in a previously settled producer-consumer dichotomy.’ However, the typology of political fandom suggested here, illustrates, I think, that such equations of blogging to journalism are mistaken and that such textual productivity is better understood as a practice that arises out of – and is structured through – fandom. Political bloggers themselves often reject the label ‘citizen journalist’ with the following blogger cited by Leccese (2009: 582) explaining her blogging (textual productivity) as a natural progression of what I have described here as fans’ enunciative productivity:

But is blogging a new form of journalism? Frankly, no. I am not practicing journalism when I link to a news article reported by someone else and state what I think --I've been doing something similar around the water cooler for years.

This lack of self-classification as citizen journalists is indicative of a broader pattern of orientation and aspiration that is revealed by applying Abercrombie and Longhurst’s audience continuum to the study of political enthusiasm. If we conceptualise fandom as the space between media production and consumption, the fan object that structures fans’ practices is located at the production point of this spectrum. The closer to this end fans are located, the more they engage in (amateur) practices of textual productivity that replicate the (professionally) produced fan object. Yet the object of fandom, the professional practice towards the most enthusiastic political fans strive, is not journalism; it is politics itself. As quantitative surveys of political bloggers’ motivations and quantitative analysis of blog posts alike suggest, bloggers ‘do neither subscribe to journalistic norms’ (Eksdale *et al.* 219), nor do they commonly regard the purpose of their activity as reporting. Instead they much more frequently engage in commenting, relaying and ‘remixing’ mainstream media sources as part of a wider activist agenda which includes portraying one’s own point of view, fostering critical debate and broadening support for chosen causes, fundraising efforts and voter mobilisation (Wallsten 2008; Sides and Farrell, 2010; Shaw and Benkler 2012). Based on a survey of 142 political bloggers McKenna and Pole (2008: 106) suggest that ‘90 percent of bloggers use their blogs to perform activist activities, such as encouraging their readers to contact elected officials or to attend rallies’ – an activist approach devoid of journalistic ambition reflected in the words of *Daily Kos* founder Moulitsas ‘We’re trying to organize. We’re trying to fundraise. We’re trying to win elections’ (cited in Kline and Burstein 2005:

17). In the case of political fans our audience continuum thus spans from users/citizens on one end to professional politicians on the other - not between users and journalists.

Affiliation, Identification and Self-Reflection

While in their textual productivity and campaigning bloggers are closest to professional political actors, they nevertheless share patterns of attachment to a given cause built on the same mechanisms and affective attachments as less textually active political fans. The above extracts surrounding the question of gun control and the stigmatisation of those labelled as mentally disabled, point towards the depth of feeling and emotional significance that debates have for many users on *Daily Kos*. Yet, emotional investments in a given cause alone do not qualify us as a fan. They might be a sign of particular passion about a cause. However, on *Daily Kos* as well as other political blogging and discussion sites we find more than a passion for causes and content; we find, as in popular culture fandom, passion for the *form*. Partisanship and identification overwhelmingly focus on an object such as a party or politician that signifies a given cause or interest, but over time become the focus of fandom in and for itself. As much as sport fans don't tend to be foremost fans of a 'given style' but of a given team (which may have signified such style initially), political fans are clearly motivated by an initial set of values and beliefs, but also develop an affective attachment to political parties and politicians – in other words their fandom shifts at least partially from *substance* to *form*. As a result we find notable parallels in the articulations of identification and partisanship among fans of both sports and politics. I have already noted the use of first person plural pronouns in *Daily Kos* user names above. Similarly, fans of team sports reveal the depths of identification and attachment between themselves and their fan object through the common use of a collective 'we' (Miller and McHoul 1998, see also Sandvoss 2003; 2007b; 2012b) when discussing their favourite team.

Among sport fans, this use of first person plural pronouns is often employed within a competition frame in which the object of fandom is seen competing with rival objects/texts and as part of discourses which focus on strategy suggestions to ensure victory of the fan object (form). Similar use of language and discourses can be observed among political enthusiasts. In the following, for example, *Daily Kos* users respond to a brief diary in which the author speculates that had 'Republicans confirmed [newly elected Massachusetts senator] Elizabeth Warren as the head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau [as was suggested by the Obama administration], odds are they would still have [Republican] Sen. Scott Brown to help gum up the Senate'¹³. Many users' responses echo the discussions among sport fans in both their use of a collective 'we' as well as the understanding of their object of fandom as being in competition with others (emphasis added):

2012 saw Dems running better candidates across the board. Where we didn't, e.g. Bob Kerrey, we got appropriately slammed. (by Vince CA)

We won, as the cliché goes, fair and square. Our opponents' defeat did not share those qualities. *They* lied. *They* cheated. *They* stole. *They* broke laws and standards of decency. We won fair and square and they lost foul and crooked.
(by *Crashing Vor*, emphasis added)

Well, it is a winning strategy to be able to take advantage of Republican screw-ups. Like a football team that can score after a turnover. The points are on the board no matter how they got there and winning is winning either by luck or skill or a combination of both. (by ahumbleopinion)

We need a concerted effort across this nation to counter Republicans on the local and state level: elect Attorneys General, and Secretaries of State....so that we don't have to every goddamn thing ad hoc, and not have to rely on the Republicans to be idiots. (by nanorich).

Excellent example of losing the battle, but winning the war... (by legalchic)

The identification between political enthusiasts and their party of choice and sport teams and their fans thus follow remarkably similar lines. Both articulate and perform a strong association with the fan object built upon a partisan identification that in turn is reflected in the presence of a strong competition narrative in fans' discourses. A common theme among both sets of fans is the membership to an imagined community of the fan, the fan object and fellow fans (cf. Sandvoss 2005a) that is in competition with other such groups. *Daily Kos* users frequently resort to sporting metaphors ('like a football team that can score after a turnover') and war analogies ('losing the battle, but winning the war') reflecting this competition frame. This framing of political and in particular electoral processes as a competition reminiscent of contemporary professional sport is equally reflected in a wide range of mass media representations of politics in the United States and beyond. The coverage of politics and election campaigns in both newspapers and television news has been demonstrated to follow a 'game frame' (Aalberg *et al.* 2012, Lewis and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005), or 'horse race frame' (Semetko and Boomgaarden 2007). Even if we distinguish between a game frame and a strategic frame as Aalberg *et al.* (2012) suggest, both are equally prominent in political coverage, and promote narratives, dramatic forms and visual representations which echo and resemble the dominant conventions of sports coverage in both print and electronic media, from pre- and post-match punditry to computer graphics and soundtracks. As election coverage closely resembles the representation of spectator sports, supporters display similar emotions and levels of elation in celebrating victory. Take, for instance, the following examples of reactions by users on *Daily Kos* to Barack Obama's re-election on 6th November 2012:

Pointing and laughing at my fellow Idahoans: SUCK IT FUCKERS. It's over. Say hello to four more years of the socialist, Kenyan, Marxist black dude. You deserved Mitt Romney. I didn't. AND I FUCKING WON!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! P.S. I am not a crackpot. (by BoiseBlue)

Many users similarly celebrated the success of the fan object as profoundly personal ('I FUCKING WON!!!!'). It should be noted that this narcissistic bond between fan and fan object is in the first instance not a form of egocentric self-love or withdrawal from public discourse, but rather, as I have argued in reference to Marcuse (1956) (Sandvoss 2005b), a libidinal investment in aspects of the cultural, and in this case political, environment that facilitates a meaningful and affective bond between self and object world. This bond – whether in political enthusiasm or other forms of fandom – reflects central aspects of the fan's identity and her values and is therefore both political and personal. Political fandom thus articulates both ideology and identity; and hence functions as a form of discourse as much as distinction. Political preferences thus match Bourdieu's (1994) description of taste as a structuring and structured structure. Fans' choice of fan object – or in our case of the political party and candidates they support is thus shaped by a combination of social, cultural, economic and educational capital as well as a number of demographic factors such as age, class and gender, all of which are of course frequently shown to be important factors in determining party affiliation in pre- and post-election opinion polling. Yet, taste, as Bourdieu (1984: 6) reminds us, 'classifies and it classifies the classifier'. It is thus through our preferences as much as our dislikes that fan identities are performed, and enunciative and textual productivity are motivated.

As in other fan cultures, the textual field of mediated politics thus serves as a cultural language in which meaning is signified through its antonyms as much as through its positive affirmations. As much as in sports the self-reflective construction of a fan's favourite team is reaffirmed through the simultaneous construction of a rival team as anti-fan object (Theodoropoulou 2007), political opponents are important markers of meaning constructions in political enthusiasts' identity. Here the distinction between non-fans and anti-fans that Gray (2003) makes is important: the opposite of being a fan is taking a lesser or no interest in a given text, object or person. Anti-fans, in contrast, demonstrate high levels of commitment to following and the object of their dislike, with which they are highly emotionally engaged, although in this case through the projection of negative attributes onto the object. *Daily Kos* users thus articulate their values, identity and sense of self not only through their support of progressive candidates, but also in their negative readings of GOP and Tea Party candidates and supporters. Many diaries and comments are thus motivated by antifandom, explaining the high frequency of tags such as 'George W. Bush', 'Mitt Romney' or 'John McCain'. *Daily Kos* users' reactions and comments on election night further highlight the strength and frequency of such anti-fandom

Goodnight Gracie. And FUCK YOU Mitt Romney/Paul Ryan. Pardon my French.

(by earicicle)

Yep, Mittens is a sore loser. Fuck off asshole jerkface (by ThatPoshGirl)

And, true to the disconnected dick that he is, Romney refuses to concede Ohio.
What a fucking douche. (by RenaRF)

In line with the anger and frustration with the political opponent these comments express, other comments suggest that rather than a by-product of the bond to the fan object, the antipathy towards the object of anti-fandom can be self-motivated and on occasion an even stronger factor in users' emotional investment in the electoral process:

COME ON DEM CHALLENGERS - UNSEAT MICHELLE BACHMANN AND ALLEN WEST. I'M BEGGING YOU! (by Eric0125)

Such scorn was frequently directed at two figures who played supporting roles in the Republic campaign: the first being billionaire, Reality TV personality and once possible GOP nominee, Donald Trump:

My first comment of the night. A great big congratulations to the President and Vice President on their re-election. A virtually equal big thanks to everyone who helped make it possible. Oh, and fuck Donald Trump. Also. A lot of other media figures also deserve the big FU tonight but I'll leave those for another day.
Well done, folks. (by Paper Cup)

This is one is for you Donald Trump..Your [sic] fired! **Bwahahahhahaaaa Jerk !**
(by NanaoKnows)

Up Yours Trump. Donald, you are an embarrassment to the United States of America. You should be hauled into court for your inflammatory (and childish) rhetoric. It may come as a shock to you rich dudes that think that you can buy anything you want, but apparently, the Presidential office can't be bought with your money. (by OgrePlimpton)

Trump called it. Our nation is totally divided. thanks to f***tards like Donald Trump. What I am enjoying most is that the sheer amount of dark, untracked money that flooded into the repub coffers and it only made things worse. Please, by all means, keep throwing your ill-gotten gains at a lost cause. (by minidriver)

Similarly vitriolic sentiments were also reserved for the man behind the American Crossroads Super-PAC and architect of the George W. Bush presidency, *Fox News* contributor Karl Rove:

Karl Rove just said that Obama should have won by more votes. ROFLOL! Karl, you lose. Go home, asshole. (by Ekaterin)

The focus on Trump and Rove was motivated by particular factors beyond their role within the GOP. Both became targets of ridicule by *Daily Kos* users following their highly-publicized reaction to the unfolding election results via twitter. Trump called for a revolution and a march on Washington as 'We can't let this happen. [...] Our nation is totally divided!' while on *Fox News* Karl Rove sought to dispute the broadcaster's call of Obama winning Ohio:

Karl Rove has LOST IT on FauxNews. He is BLASTING his colleagues for "prematurely" calling Ohio. He is in hardcore denial and is forcing the anchors to interview the geeks in the numbers room. This is crazy! (By nicejoest)

HAHAHA! Karl Rove on Fox complaining that Obama refuses to compromise and likes to call his opponents unpatriotic. Is there even an ounce of self-awareness in this clown? (By jb101)

These comments attracted a high number of recommendations (56 and 70 respectively), highlighting how common a sentiment they expressed. Here anti-fandom found its particular manifestation in *Schadenfreude*:

They are running around to their "decision desk," Karl Rove whining mightily about Ohio, Romney campaign crying about the early call. Yet *Fox News* "decision desk" saying it's over. Fucking love it. Love it. Love it. (by Flush the Nutbase)

Might just have to DVR it, and file under The Superbowl of *Schadenfreude*. (by earicicle)

Fox News is better than sex right now. It's just ridiculous how entertaining it is. Once again, Republicans show there is no fact that they feel the need to learn. (by MeMeMeMeMe)

Such *Schadenfreude* was thus as close to the subversive pleasures of the subordinate and disempowered groups to whom Fiske (1992) attributes fandom as we can find: a group of citizens, who felt marginalised and confronted with a (mainstream) media landscape they perceive to be overwhelmingly unbalanced and a political opponent who is seen to have

been determined to achieve electoral victory by operating levers of power such as supreme court (in the disputed 2000 presidential election result in Florida) to voter suppression, here finally witness and celebrate how the alternative discourse Rove seeks to mobilise in a last stance effort collapses under the weight of reality – Rove, who is widely believed (cf Danner 2007) to have been the unnamed senior advisor cited in Ron Suskind's (2004) *New York Times Magazine* article describing his administration's strategy by claiming 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out'. It is easy to see, how the moment of inescapably public failure of Rove's and Trump's (who had been a leading figure of the racially motivated 'birther' campaign, claiming that Obama was not born in the United States) efforts to construct such a reality offered supporters of Obama and the Democratic Party a moment of overwhelming joy and pleasure, albeit more a moment of *plaisir* than *jouissance* in the Barthian (1977) distinction of the terms.

Schadenfreude and, more broadly, humour and satire are thus important and frequent strategies of textual and enunciative productivity among political fans to address situations in which they are disenfranchised. In response to what many *Daily Kos* users experience as a hostile media landscape and undemocratic practices by the GOP supported by Big Money interests, they utilise the destabilising capacities of humour and satire to disrupt dominant discourses through techniques of humorous *Entfremdung* to unveil what they perceive as essential truths about, for example, Mitt Romney's disingenuous rebranding and rhetorical limitations or *Fox News'* inherent bias:

I imagine Romney's going to have to make 3 concession speeches: severe conservative, conservative, and moderate. (by Retroactive Genius)

Watching Republicans trying to be introspective on FOX. It's like watching a paperweight trying to speak Swedish. (by JasonRoberts)

Similarly, in a recent discussion about Florida Governor's Rick Scott's poor polling numbers, one user commented that Scott at least enjoyed the support of Satanists who were planning a rally in support of the governor's bill allowing students to pray at school events¹⁴, while another quipped yet more succinctly:

Aw, Bless His Heart. Oops, I forgot. He doesn't have one! (by bigforkgirl)

Fans' textual practices here mirror the analysis of the importance and significance of political satire in US American political discourse (Baym 2005; Gray *et al.* 2009; Jones 2009; Jones *et al.* 2012) and beyond¹⁵ in the sphere of user/citizen generated content. Yet, humour not only reveals, it also affirms. In *Schadenfreude* and satire the fan object – and by extension the self-image articulated through it – is partly defined by its negative: objects of

anti-fandom. The high degree of *Schadenfreude* that informed comments about both Trump and Rove was users' attempt to draw lines of distinctions, affirming their own social and economic status and associated value positions vis-à-vis what they saw as the interests of the ultra-rich seeking to buy influence. Comments recommended by a high number of other users summarised such positions:

Tonight America said Fuck you Koch Brothers and Sheldon Adelson! (By spyguy999, 67 recommendations)

On top of the great re-election of Pres. Obama...the fact that all those fucking millionaires and billionaires poured so much of their money into trying to get one of their own elected president and they FAILED makes me extremely happy. (by madmsf, 14 recommendations)

The horse-race or game frame of political coverage, which in turn is shaped not only by journalistic conventions and media ownership and commercial interests but also informed by the rules of different electoral systems¹⁶, thus foster a discursive field of binary oppositions that facilitates the duality of fandom and anti-fandom in which beliefs of political enthusiasts are expressed through the grammar of binary oppositions.

The analysis of such forms of partisan affection and antipathy in turn offers important insights in assessing the legitimacy and sustainability of political systems including both the communicative realm and citizen participation – the space that Habermas (1989) describes as public sphere – on the one hand, and electoral systems and structures of governance on the other. Partisanship and participation appear closely related: many *Daily Kos* diarists report on the various local, national and global causes they participate in. Yet, participation is of course only a necessary, not sufficient condition of democracy. Dictatorships from fascism to Soviet communism have successfully utilised forms of mass participation. It is easy to see how racially motivated antifandom by, for example, Tea Party activists is altogether less palatable than netroots activists' *Schadenfreude* directed at affluent funders of Super-PACs. My interest here, then, is not only in participation but in the quality of participation – the question of how fandom as a particular reading position shapes media use and thus informs participation in the public sphere. It is this question of the interplay between political texts, media technologies and fans that I turn to in the remainder of this paper.

Political Discourse and Interpretative Communities

Beyond individual figures such Karl Rove and Donald Trump, *Daily Kos* users also had a broader target for their *Schadenfreude*: mainstream media and journalism. Some of the above cited comments already revealed the strength of feeling against *Fox News* – a broadcaster whose economic and 'journalistic' model hinges on embracing the partisan enthusiasm and political fandom of its own constituency on the far right of American

society¹⁷. These comments were echoed by many users and were among the most popular comments:

Just tuned into Fox. I had to gloat. They're not accepting the results. Hilarious!
(by poleshifter)

Take a look at the pearl clutching white people on Fox. They can't believe it. The people won. What a hoot! (by Publius2008)

Fox is making fools of themselves. Nothing new, mind you! (by pointsoflight)

I never watch FOX but seeing them in utter denial and chaos is priceless. (by Kairos)

Or as one other user (farleftloon) in a much recommended comment put it in reference to one of the centre-left movement's favourite satirists: 'Quick, everyone turn on Fox! It's the greatest episode of the Colbert Report I've ever seen!' Indeed, Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart were among the few broadcast media figures generally praised in users' blogs which even included frequent transcriptions and links to particular segments of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Their critique of the mass media, however, extended far beyond *Fox News*.¹⁸ Many fans expressed their profound dissatisfaction with the entire spectrum of mass media.

I've never seen a reelection of a president be received so negatively by the media. Like they didn't want him to win and want him to fail. (by JohnAdams999)

In a similar vein, another user wondered whether 'perhaps one day the Fourth Estate will take their jobs seriously' (Anthony Page aka SecondComing). A particular focus of criticism was Time Warner's CNN, which many users felt to be displaying a right-wing bias resulting out of a lack of journalistic competence. CNN was often identified in users' blogs and comments as easily falling for rightwing political spin and lacking the basic ability to penetrate issues beyond the most superficial level. As one user noted:

CNN tool claims we're 'center right country' based on county map showing lots of red. Well, duh. Sparsely populated counties are generally rural and red. (by Dr Erich Bloodaxe RN)

In particular the network's insistence on a knife-edge race at the same time as those more versed in psephology¹⁹ confidently predicted an Obama victory, and its presenters' extreme caution in repeatedly calling significant leads of the Obama camp in different polls as 'within

the margin of error' and 'too close to call', was a common target of ridicule. One user (vidanto) suggested in relation to heavily Democratic California, 'California is "tied" according to CNN', while another resorted to an analogy from popular culture 'CNN has called it: Luke Skywalker vs. the Death Star is a tie!' (by GOPGO2H3LL). Again, such humour served to critique dominant mass media discourses.

In this respect these quips are consistent with the majority of comments and blogs, across the site in that they mirror the frequent critical evaluation and dissection of mainstream media. As noted above, quantitative studies of links and stories used by political bloggers confirm that the majority of enunciative and textual productivity on the site is not aimed at reporting. In his study of four political blogs, including *Daily Kos*, in the run up to the 2004 election Scott (2007: 50) found that original reporting was limited to 12.2% of all blogs (excluding comments which I have included for analysis here), resulting in a blogosphere which 'relied heavily on professional news sites and stories by journalists associated with professional media organizations' (Reese *et al.* 2007: 257). In an analysis of links posted during one week in January 2008, Lecceccse (2009), for example, found 42% of all links on *Daily Kos* were to mainstream media sources²⁰. Yet, much of this frequent engagement with mainstream media was from a profoundly critical perspective. As Baum and Groeling (2008: 352) note somewhat exasperated: 'in some cases, outlets selected these stories not to propagate them, but rather to attack them. In particular, both *Daily Kos* and Free Republic [a right-wing blog] produced heavily edited and skewed presentations of a wire service story, often choosing to criticize their reporting or emphasize only the most negative dimension of the story'²¹ – though Baum and Groeling fail to offer any supporting evidence demonstrating how they are skewed presentations²². Rather, I would suggest they constitutes forms of fan activity which – like fans in popular cultures – as Fiske suggested (1992: 30) takes mediated texts and appropriates them 'into the culture of a self-selected fraction of people'. Just like other fans in textual forms such as parody, vidding, remixing or slash writing, bloggers on *Daily Kos* juxtapose, commented upon, contextualise, evaluate and critically dissect mainstream media content. Hence, in the words of Reese *et al.* (2007: 257) they weave 'together citizen and professional voices in a way that extends the public sphere beyond the boundaries policed by traditional news media' – or as Meraz (2011:110) suggests 'reframe the news of the day for their new-reading publics'.²³

Whether we follow Reese *et al.* in describing such textual productivity as an extension of the public sphere or as Meratz suggests separate publics, these forms of critical readings of mainstream media facilitate what literary theory and audience studies alike have described as 'interpretative communities'. While fans also engage critically with texts through semiotic productivity on an individual level, the sharing and debating of mainstream media content invites collective reading positions and interpretations. The joint efforts of bloggers and commentators in the distinctly collective, network based structure of *Daily Kos* offer users a wide array of (linked) mainstream media news, comments, local reports and personal experiences from those who share similar political concerns, forming a textual space that like the online fan community Jenkins (2006) studies evoke echoes of

Pierre Levy's notion of collective intelligence. In the network-based structure of *Daily Kos*, a multiplicity of voices is heard, the process of interpretation is shared and opened up to debate in lively comment threads and different mainstream media stories are triangulated by those with particular insights or experiences – such as working in particular professions concerned by stories, living locally or having other forms of personal experience relevant to topics of debate such as the above discussed blog by tmservo433. *Daily Kos* users might not, as I have suggested about, be or even aim to be citizen *journalists*; but many of them, at different times and in different contexts, become citizen *experts* who inform and enrich debates.

While this appears to echo Jenkins's (2006) enthusiasm for interpretative communities as a space of collective intelligence, the blogosphere has been met by substantive scepticism by many political scientists and communication scholars alike. Conceptualising interpretative communities of political enthusiast as fan cultures, I think, enables us to assess the relative merits of these conflicting positions. What we have described as a 'second wave of fan studies' drawing on Bourdieu's sociology of consumption to analyse the distribution of power and the formation of hierarchies within fan cultures (Gray *et al.* 2007) reminds us that fan cultures' spaces of discourse may be near universally accessible, particularly so online, but this does not free them from internal hierarchies. In this sense, the consensus reached in such spaces are not formed in what Habermas (1981) postulates as an 'ideal speech situation'. Despite its networked structure, gate-keeping is visible on *Daily Kos*. Site founder Moulitsas Zúniga retains overall control of the site, of agenda setting and the banning of users. Over the years he has proceeded to, for example, ban blogs propagating conspiracy theories²⁴, banned users announcing they would temporarily leave the site²⁵ or exercised power of agenda setting by endorsing Barack Obama over Hilary Clinton during the 2008 primary and declaring Clinton's campaign as irreconcilable with spirit of *Daily Kos*.²⁶ Similarly, the internal hierarchies that in many offline subcultures are evident, yet implicit, are formalised on *Daily Kos* through the division of different participation ranks reflecting the fan typology discussed above – namely, site elites, trusted users and registered users – and different 'Mojo levels' attributed to users, a combined measure of 'citizenry', 'engagement' and quality of blogs.²⁷ Mojo levels, similar to other indicators of frequency and quality of participation in many fan fora online, are a formal reflection of what Thornton (1995) has termed 'subcultural capital': a recognition within a given fan culture or interpretative community based on 'being in the know'. Those who are not and fail to recognise the spirit and broad interpretative consensus, such as users aggressively promoting Clinton's candidacy and supporting her attempt to secure the democratic nomination via unelected super-delegates, quickly find themselves marginalised. As Shaw (2012:370) observes, 'the interactions between *Daily Kos* participants involve more than just discussion. The interactions also entail identifying and categorizing behavior in accordance with formal and informal standards. Hierarchies of status and identity become operationalized in these acts of categorization, which in turn reproduce boundaries of legitimate discourse and practice'. Such findings underscore the utility of conceptualising

political enthusiasts as fans and thereby acknowledges that participation in political discourse inevitable structures and is structured by identity positions within and beyond given fan cultures.

A more frequent critique of blogs as interpretative communities is not directed at their discursive dynamics within such groups, but their position within wider public discourse and hence shifts the analytical focus from Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1979) to his earlier work on the public sphere (1974). A number of scholars have argued that the rise of political blogs and other alternative media have led to a fragmentation of the public sphere which has in turn fuelled political polarisation and 'cyber-balkanisation'. The suggestion here is that rather than a space of collective intelligence, as we might suggest in reference to Levy (1997), or a 'Hayekian means for gathering dispersed knowledge' (Sunstein 2008: 87), the popularity of blogging creates silos of (online) discourse in which objectivity and truth fall victims to partisanship. The blame in most of these accounts is apportioned squarely to the community aspect of 'interpretative communities'. Leccese (2009: 588), for instance, claims that the self-referentiality of blogs 'creates an "echo chamber" effect that diminished the range of shared experiences'. According to Sunstein (2007:44) the problem of fragmentation derives 'from the creation of diverse speech communities whose members talk and listen mostly to another [...] diverse groups will tend to *polarize* in a way that can breed extremism and even hatred and violence' (see also Davies 2005). Baum and Groeling (2008: 359) go as far as to claim that if 'hearing both sides of the story helps Americans make better decisions, the increased reliance of many politically attentive Americans on partisan sites such as *Daily Kos* and *Free Republic* could potentially pose a significant challenge to American democracy'.

On the surface, the notion of an echo chamber reverberates with my own work on the relationship between fans and outer world (see in particular Sandvoss 2005a, 2005b, 2007a) in which I have suggested that the affective attachment between fan and fan object is based on the high level of semiotic control the fan exercises over the fan text. The ability of the fan object to accommodate fans' self-reflective readings lies in the degree to which it can instantly be normalised (cf. Iser 1971): 'as all experiences found by the fan in the fan text coincide with his or her horizon of expectations, the fan text takes on the role of mirror, and thus becomes the banal object of a narcissistic perspective' (Sandvoss 2005a: 145). This position shares with scholars such as Sunstein a concern over the degree with which political enthusiasm facilitates discursive challenges. However, by exploring the affective foundations of political enthusiasm and the qualitative nature of discourses among bloggers and users, important distinctions emerge.

Firstly, there is the question of causation. Sunstein (2008) interprets polarisation as a result of the membership to a political community which with reference to a number of experimental studies he identifies as always leading to 'more extreme' collective positions than individuals held previously. This ignores, however, the motivations and affective premises for becoming active in such interpretative communities. In contrast to the studies Sunstein resorts to, they are self-selecting. Some scholars have noted the absence of

'politically moderate blogs' (Meraz 2011, Adamic and Glance 2005), which has in itself been pointed to as further evidence of polarization. However, in the binary American party political system, being 'moderate' equates to little more than not having a firm, let alone affective attachment to either political party or the causes they represent. If blogging and commenting on blogs, as I have suggested here, are expressions of fans' enunciative and textual productivity, it is only natural that moderates, i.e. non fans, are unlikely to engage in activities reflective of political enthusiasm.

Secondly, studies such as those by Sunstein, Leccese and Baum and Groeling frequently draw on the epistemologically questionably and ideologically highly laden assumption of truth and objectivity being located in the middle of any given spectrum, an assumption that is shared with much of the American mainstream media. The problem here is almost too obvious to point out. Even if we subscribed to a Galtonian idea of truth as the midpoint of all opinion, the midway point between any given two points has no bearing to its truth value or objectivity.²⁸ Anyone who subscribes to the principles of scientific enquiry and methodology, political scientists included, ought to reject the notion that truth can be located halfway between, for example, the overwhelming scientific consensus on climate change or evolution and those advocating 'intelligent design' or deniers of anthropogenic climate change (see Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, 2007). The false doctrine of balance that has given equal exposure to positions which are of fundamentally different empirical value is in fact one of the most common themes in the critique of mainstream media by *Daily Kos* users. To them, equidistant reporting is a fallacy in a political system in which they see a political opponent tilting towards extremism, unwilling to compromise and act fairly or even democratically²⁹ while expecting such behaviour from the other side. In this spirit a number of users were rejecting calls by some network pundits that the time following the election should be marked by bipartisanship:

Whenever the Dems win, it's all bipartisan, bipartisan. When R[epublican]s win, ooh ooh, we're too principled to compromise. Assholes. (By sharman)

Others returned to sarcasm in commenting on what they perceived as a rapidly escalating asymmetry in American politics by mimicking and caricaturing the discourses of right-wing mainstream media. As one user snarked in response to a diary ironically entitled 'Communists at Financial Times Endorse Obama' citing the endorsement of the London based paper-of-choice of the financial services industries: 'FT endorsement? Wow, foreigners sure hate Freedom', lampooning the xenophobe efforts of media outlets such as *Fox News* and its right-wing commentariat to question the patriotism of any political dissenters. Far from being a sign of, rather than response to, polarisation, this critique resonated with expert voices assessing the current state of American politics such as those of Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein (2012a, 2012b; see also McCarthy *et al* 2006), the latter being a fellow of the conservative American Enterprise Institute. In an op-ed for *the Washington Post* in April 2012 entitled 'Let's just say it: The Republicans are the problem'

they formulate a critique of the Republican party and its coverage in the news media that closely echoes prevalent discourses among *Daily Kos* users.³⁰

The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition. [...] “Both sides do it” or “There is plenty of blame to go around” are the traditional refuges for an American news media intent on proving its lack of bias, while political scientists prefer generality and neutrality when discussing partisan polarization. Many self-styled bipartisan groups, in their search for common ground, propose solutions that move both sides to the center, a strategy that is simply untenable when one side is so far out of reach.

Mann and Ornstein’s analysis is of twofold importance for our purposes here: it helps to contextualise the success of *Daily Kos* as a response to, not driver of, polarisation in American politics, particularly since the turn of the century. The fact that the site has achieved greater levels of participation and popularity than any of its right-wing counterparts may be indicative of a greater need for an alternative space of discourse outside the mainstream media which through their balance doctrine have shifted substantively to the right. Beyond this, however, it also problematises the distinction between mainstream and alternative media upon which the thesis of the blogosphere as a vector of polarisation rests. Mann and Ornstein’s op-ed was published in a major national paper, and also received attention in other media such as NPR, *The Daily Show*, MSNBC, although both Froomkin (2012) and Savan (2013) note that their presence in other broadcast media declined sharply after the publication of their critical assessment of the state of the GOP.

This is evidence of the fact that polarisation, ideological affirmation and hatred based on misinformation, as demonstrated in the rise of the Tea Party, are developments that might be evident among those frequenting the blogosphere³¹, but that from this we cannot conclude that blogging is the cause of such developments, which just as likely might be driven by the ideological branding of mainstream media outlets in particular on the political right such as *Fox News* and extremist talk radio. Mann and Ornstein’s work and its subsequent publication further illustrates the limited value of the distinction between mainstream and alternative media much of the analysis of linking patterns on political blogs rests upon. Both the blogosphere as well as mainstream media are far too diverse and widely varying in its application of empiricism and reason in their reporting for this categorisation to constitute a meaningful criterion that would allow us to assess the health of public discourse from their relative distribution. In its discursive practices, orientation, and ethos, *Daily Kos* is arguably closer to some mainstream media outlets such as *NPR* or *New York Magazine* or on this occasion the *Washington Post*, than to many conservative blogs which in turn are closer to *Fox News* and right-wing media outlets. Moreover, as we

have observed above, active participation in online discussions through blogs and comments does not generally result in a disengagement from mainstream media sources (see also Rauch 2007).

This leads us to a third important difference between my reading of political enthusiasts as fans and theories of blogging as driving force of political polarisation. While I sympathise with the sentiment at the heart of Sunstein's work, and would indeed maintain that the pleasures of affirmation and self-reflection in (political) enthusiasm and fandom mitigate against media users' willingness to seek out texts that challenge their beliefs, convictions and identity positions – and that the ready normalisation of debates from ecology to economics to preconceived ideas is a fundamental concern to any democratic project – such dangers are in no way intrinsic or limited to user generated content and alternative media; nor can its urgency be assessed through simplistic notions of balance. Instead, the key to understanding the conditions leading to the erosion of a reflexive citizenship which embraces debate and contributes to forms of democracy based on collective intelligence, crowd wisdom and equality, lies not in the collective aspects of (left-leaning) blogging sites, but in the inter- and intrapersonal framing of the ideational activity of reading, and the particular reading position of the emotionally invested fan. In other words, it is not the community aspect, but the *interpretative* element of 'interpretative communities' that ought to concern us and that is in need of further analysis.

Constructing the Political Fan Object

A further methodological and conceptual complication in analysing how political enthusiasts' engagement may adversely impact on the quality of political discourse and democratic decision making is that fact that scholars need to address two variables in enthusiasts' strategies of meaning construction. Fans construct and create their objects of fandom and anti-fandom through a dual strategy of *interpretation* and *selection*. Interpretation as a form of semiotic activity built on texts' polysemy means that which media are read by a given audience has for itself little analytic value. As the above examples illustrate, many enthusiasts actively seek out texts of which they have an oppositional, often humorous readings. What is significant here is that such texts are as instantly 'normalised' by corresponding to their expectations and pre-existing views of the media outlets behind such texts. They pose, in Hans-Robert Jauss's (1984) words, no challenge to our 'horizon of expectation or experience'. The hundreds of blogs and discussions I examined which focused on the most frequently discussed media outlet on the *Daily Kos – Fox News*³² – overwhelmingly confirmed, rather than challenged, users' horizon of expectation and thus served as reaffirmation of their political allegiances.

Yet, and in this respect my findings confirm Baum and Goering's (2008), in terms of frames, narrative and storylines across the site, such horizons of expectations are also maintained through strategies of textual selection. The networked structure of the site with hundreds of blogs published every day necessitates users to engage with some texts and stories while relegating others. And while the dialogue may tend to facilitate collective

consensus among participants, it is worth remembering that the vast majority of 2.5 million monthly *Daily Kos* users do not engage in textual or enunciative activity. To these users the site serves less as an interpretative community in which they enter a dialogue with others, than as what Kearns and myself (forthcoming) have described as '*interpretative fair*': a space in which fans select between a vast array of narratives those that correspond with their expectations and that support their affective reading of the fan object. It is in this process of seeking to maintain the horizon of expectation through textual selection that underpins the affective bond of fans' investment in a given fan object, that, I think, the real impact of fandom on the political process can be found.

Textual selection is central to the construction of fan objects. Whether they are political parties, politicians, sports teams or musicians, fan objects do not correspond with a single, clearly defined text, but rather are constructed in a textual field of gravity (Sandvoss 2007a) between a plethora of different texts and 'paratexts' (Genette 1997; see also Gray 2010). The fan object, in political fandom thus resembles the vague textual formation we also describe as 'brand' – a notion whose significance in political marketing has attracted increased attention over the past two decades (cf. Scammell 2007) and which more recently has been identified as central in the formation of political fan cultures. As Laurie Ouellette (2012: 190) observes in reference to former Republican Vice-Presidential nominee Sarah Palin:

Palin's successful mobilization of media platforms confounds any clear distinction between politics, entertainment, and profiteering. What's more, her constituents have a lot in common with media fans. More than any political figure to date, Palin translates the traditional voter-politician relationship into the logic of fandom and branding. She invites her rightwing political constituents to track and consume her appearances and products across print, electronic, and digital media, and she thus directly profits from their participation in convergence culture. Even political websites organized by Palin supporters embrace integrated branding and a vision of active citizenship based on niche media consumption.

It is through the transmedia narrative of 'Palin the brand' that fans can select texts and paratexts that facilitate their individual readings of Palin in which she signifies her supporters' beliefs and values while in turn becoming a marker of their identity; much, coincidentally, as Palin to others serves as an object of antifandom drawing on yet a different combination of the texts, images and stories through which the Palin brand is constructed. In light of Palin's close association to the Tea Party movement, it is easy to see how processes of textual selection can contribute to the formation of a communicative bubble; a bubble, in which supporters of a given party or politician engage only with texts affirming their horizon of expectation to a degree that their beliefs become largely uncoupled from wider discourses and, potentially, collide with empirical realities such as in the widespread surprise among GOP supporters about Mitt Romney's decisive defeat in the

2012 presidential election that stood in sharp contrast to the predictions of a Romney victory in the media sources they had carefully selected during the campaign. The dangers of the emergence of such communicative silos are only underlined by the fact that other than in the numerical realities of elections – though even those can be subject to interpretation as the 2000 presidential elections remind us – political discourses, like those in other realms of fandom, are marked by only few verifiable facts and truths. The inherent polysemy of mediated texts and their elastic boundaries between the point of production and point of consumption mean that most of the content that political fans engage with are better described by the notion of ‘myth’ which Rodman (1996) uses in his analysis of the different readings of Elvis Presley and his stance on questions of race and ethnicity. They, ultimately, remain matters of interpretation, interpretation that to the observer may appear more or less balanced or thorough, but that is rarely contradicted through immediate experience or occurrences. Through the dual strategy of interpretation and selection those supporting a given political cause can thus, in Karl Rove’s words ‘create our own reality’, one that is disjoint from “the reality based community” in which people ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality’ (cited in Suskind 2004) – a world in which GOP supporters confidently predicted a convincing Mitt Romney victory and 17% of registered voters in the US misidentify Barack Obama’s denomination as Muslim almost four years into his presidency according to a Pew poll from May 2012.

However, it is important to distinguish between fandom as form of reading, interpretation and textual selection (i.e. semiotic productivity) and enunciative and textual productivity here: proponents of the thesis that blogs fuel polarisation insufficiently account for the fact that fan generated content in the form of blogs and comments are only one of many resources across the spectrum of alternative and mainstream media. Even in the absence of detailed empirical evidence, it appears highly likely that, for example, some Tea Party members who do not write or even read blogs are also perfectly able to avoid any challenges to their horizon of expectation through the consumption of traditional right-wing media alone. Hence, it is not blogging *per se*, but political fandom at large that facilitates detachment from wider public discourse.

The rise of the Tea Party is of course multifactorial and rooted in the specific historical, social, cultural, economic and technological conditions of the United States of which the communicative environment is only one aspect. Moreover, the differences in both organisation and ethos I have documented here (see also Shaw 2012 and Shaw and Benkler 2012) mean that in their pluralist orientation *Daily Kos* users, who attach particular value to empiricism and science³³ and consequently traditions of critical, multidimensional enquiry and methodological reflection are far less likely to suffer from a debilitating lack of engagement with different perspectives and opinions. As I have illustrated here, they are passionate, partisan and emotionally involved in many of the debates in which they participate, but that does not as such render their contributions ill-informed or unconsidered. On the contrary, despite the partisanship of the bloggers and commentators

as fans, the networked architecture of *Daily Kos* facilitates a range of thoughtful, well-researched voices.

However, while the impact of political fandom on polarisation and disengagement thus appears to vary from fan culture to fan culture depending on the dominant value systems of such fan cultures, there is a second consequence of political fandom for democratic processes that is more immediate and that even the more participatory fan cultures are unable to escape. In building and maintaining identification and affective attachment to a given party or politician, political enthusiasm utilises the 'interpretative fair' of digital media environments. In selecting between different texts from blogs to network news, they inevitably shift from conviction to identification, from substance to form. This is an insight not lost on political advertisers and consultants. The efforts of branding in the political marketing of Sarah Palin that Ouellette documents aim to facilitate such identification by offering a transmedia brand that is as polysemic as possible, so the greatest possible group of readers can appropriate the brand in a manner that allows for the self-reflective readings upon which political fandom rests in much the same manner as political branding operates across the political spectrum³⁴. Political brands as fan objects, thus, are realised through practices of media consumption and selection.

On this point, there are two final important observations to be made for our purposes here that return us to the question of the interplay between substance and form. Firstly, in carefully choosing between different media texts, political enthusiasts, like other fans, draw boundaries around their fan object in a concise fashion. *Daily Kos* users in their vast majority support the Democratic Party and President Obama. When grading his first term in a online poll with over 10,600 participants, more than 36% of users awarded an A grade, 48% a B and 10% a C, indicating a generally positive, but not uncritical, attitude towards the president. Other Democrats were seen in a yet more critical light, in particular conservative and Blue Dog democrats who were regarded as doing little, if anything, to oppose a radical rightwing agenda by the GOP and hold Republicans to accountability:

Because we unfortunately have spineless Dems who won't do anything other than issue "sternly worded letters". Rove still being around is on us, same with the war criminal Cheney - he is still around because the Dems are too chickenshit to prosecute him. (by skyounkin)

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid was a frequent criticised for its too soft stance towards what *Daily Kos* users perceived as undemocratic Republic obstructionism in the senate. The comments of many users reflect how Reid was placed firmly outside their reading of the Democratic Party and thus fan object: In response to the marginal filibuster reform in January 2013 a blog citing Ornstein's work on GOP senate tactics, expressed its author's anger at Reid:

This is why I'm so angry with Harry Reid and the Dinosaur Democrats in the Senate who are too timid to do a fucking thing to reform the way they do things in the upper chamber. (by CleverNickName)

In response, many users rushed to agree:

Harry Reid is a terrible Senate leader. I just don't get why the Dems allow such a lilly livered sap sucker (there I said it) to be in charge. We may as well have my grandma running that circus – and she passed away 10 years ago. (by TheFlipster)

Harry should be voted out as Majority Leader. I am totally sick of his caving, over and over and over. I am sick of the fact that he will block true gun control. I am sick of gutless, spineless, cowardly leadership amongst Dems. I am disgusted that Mitch McConnell will still be running the Senate. Harry needs to go. (by flitedocnm)

Other users sought to quite literally remove Reid from the fan text by proposing to mount a primary challenge in 2016. Similarly, 'conservaDems' frequently found themselves at the receiving end of calls for primary challenges, such Tennessee Representative Jim Cooper after voting against federal relief funds for areas affected by Hurricane Sandy:

Given Cooper's record and that he has a Democratic-leaning district, if there's a local challenger who looks serious, I say primary this wanker. (by ericf)

He is a worthless representative for the progressives in the Davidson County area. How he can call himself a democrat is beyond me. [...] he's more of a neutered lap dog for the republicans. (by Cassandra77)

Yet, such calls were not the collective tenor on behalf of an interpretative community but rather reflected the individual construction of users' fan objects, in turn reflecting their own values and beliefs. Other users, for instance, intersected in the above debate that Cooper was 'actually not THAT conservative' and defended more conservative leaning Democrats in other discussions across the site. Such acts of textual selection in which given textual episodes are included or excluded from the object of fandom can be observed across fan cultures from *Dr Who* (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995; Mc Kee 2001) to *Batman* (Brooker 2000) or sports fans (Sandvoss 2003). However, if fans select between different media, texts, episodes, and actors in constructing the textual boundaries at relative ease initially, a greater challenge is posed by textual developments over time, which often challenge an initial (self-reflective) reading of the fan object. Hence, a gap between political enthusiasts' expectations and retrospective assessments of given politician emerges; only four days after

the above mentioned poll in which 36% of participants rated Obama's first term as A, 83% awarded an A to the inaugural address outlining his policy aims for Obama's second term in office, indicating how over time interpretations of a given party or politician are tested by events and actualities, all of which are in turn subject to recognition, meaning construction, and negotiation, but which on occasion inescapably challenge fans' readings.

One such event occurred in the shape of the Sandy Hook school massacre on 14th December 2012, followed by White House Press Secretary Jay Carney's statement that 'today is not the day' to engage in debates about gun control. While many users' anger focused on the National Rifle Association's role in having successfully lobbied against any form of gun control, a sizeable number of users, many of whom had a history of being broadly supportive of the Obama administration on other topics, expressed their outrage:

Is there ANY issue on which Obama's willing to take a tough and uncompromising stand without first considering the optics, both real and imagined? (by kovie)

Unacceptable, Mr. President. I am sick and tired of having a god damned business trade group telling me I can't even talk about what killed 18 little kids!? Now is not the time? When Belcher went off wasn't the time? What is the time, dear God? When? How! [...] HOW MANY MORE INNOCENTS HAVE TO DIE? (by Dana Blankenhorn)

Now is the time to discuss gun control. Right now! I'd like to see President Obama express righteous indignation about this, about the withdrawal of the nomination of Susan Rice (by telling McCain and Graham to fuck off!), about a whole host of things. Use the presidency--the bully pulpit and righteous anger--don't cower under your desk because of political calculations. I'm so mad I can barely type... (by Prute Advisory Board of California)

He's probably inviting the NRA over for lunch as we type. (by stevej)

Notably, however, most users directed their anger at Carney, rather than the president himself, even though, as some users suggested, it seems unlikely that the central message of the press conference was not agreed by the president himself:

Today is the day we must stop the killing. Today is the only day we can ever do anything. [...] Fuck Carney. (by FishOutOfWater)

To Jim Carney: Which NRA members are you afraid of offending? Maybe they'll vote for Pres. Obama in the next election. (by smokey545)

Fuck Jay Carney sideways with the broken stock of an AK-47. [...] These are Democrats? Where the fuck do I go to vote for a liberal? Jesus fucking christ on a hood ornament. (by FrY10cK)

To anyone with a megaphone like Carney and the administration have, who react to an incident like this by saying "let's not talk about it", I say "seriously, FUCK YOU, you cowardly piece of shit." (by itsbenj)

Total Fail for Carney. I'm sorry, Jay, but there was never a better time to discuss the subject. Think about your 2 kids, Jay. (by koNko)

Such responses again demonstrate the strategies by which enthusiasts maintain their affective attachments by constructing the textual boundaries around the fan object, and placing Carney and his statement outside the fan object. While responses across different diaries and comments in the days following the massacre indicated a large majority in favour of significantly stricter gun laws and unease about the administration's failure to have achieved any progress on the issue since 2008, many remained unwilling to criticise the president directly. While their fandom was motivated by what I have summarised as substance here – a set of values, beliefs and political convictions that reflected the identity positions of individual users – it is invested in the form a given party, movement or politician, in our case the Democratic Party and Barack Obama. The form gains affective significance by accommodating the initial self-reflective reading by the fan. However, once this affective investment has been made, the fan surrenders an element of control to the fan object. When semiotic productivity and textual selection cannot fully negotiate textual developments that conflict with the initial self-reflective reading of the object by the fan, fans are prepared to adjust the content or substance – their *Weltanschauung* initially expressed in their fandom – to a degree. They become, as I have argued in reference to McLuhan's (1964) analysis of media and Narcissism (Sandvoss2005a: 122), 'perceptible to function as servo-mechanisms to their own reflected image, incorporating changes to the object of fandom in their own beliefs and performances' as they seek to protect their affective investment and its role in fans' sense of self. While recent examples in Britain such as the dramatically collapsing popularity of former Prime Minister Tony Blair (Scammell 2007) or Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg (Sandvoss 2012a) illustrate that there is a breaking point at which former fan objects turn into 'failed objects' (cf Elliott 1999) and thereby become the focus of former supporter's anti-fandom, there is little doubt that even limited effects of such servomechanisms translate to real political power. Hence fans' affective investments in a given form, what in the world of (political) marketing we would call brand loyalty, matters and inevitably has a distorting effect on the formulation of the democratic will in indirect, representative democracies that necessitate matters of substance to be expressed through form.

Such distorting effects are amplified by enthusiasts being co-opted into the dominant operating logic of contemporary political culture and thus ultimately limited in the scope of their critique. Different studies ranging from music fans (Baym 2011), computer games (Milner 2009) to television fans participating in online forums (Andrejevic 2008) illustrate how enthusiasts are integrated into processes of cultural production and, as Andrejevic argues (2008:40), thereby internalise and perform the logic of industries which on the surface they seem to critically assess: 'the danger, in a savvy era, is that the goal of self-reflexive knowledge is not so much to reshape the media – to imagine how things might be done differently – as it is to take pleasure in identifying with the insiders. The next best thing to having power, on this account, is identifying with those who do'. Those who sought to defend Carney and Obama did indeed do so almost exclusively by engaging with reference to questions strategy, tactics and process:

I'm gonna cut Carney some slack on this. The news was just coming in as the regularly scheduled briefing was starting. There was not time to prepare a considered response. If you read the comment threads on any of the corporate media coverage of this you'll be sickened, but you'll also be reminded how intractable and seriously warped so many people's attitudes are about guns. I think it's best for the administration to take a bit of time to think about how best to respond. There's no particular reason why Carney had to make any sort of a policy pronouncement off the top of his head. I think that would have been a mistake. (by therealcervantes)

If I were the administration, I would not begin the public discussion about gun policy right now. [...] The reason I wouldn't do it is because as soon as I start the discussion, the right wing is going to pounce on the attack, and Obama will be blamed for politicizing the situation. (by otto)

I understand Obama's reluctance, based on the vitriol unleashed if the subject is even broached. The NRA is much too powerful and I really don't trust some of the more violent of their followers. Look at the propaganda put out in their journal for the really hard line that Obama is coming for all their weapons and that assault rifles are just the start. You can't easily argue with crazy! (by Desert Scientist)

While Andrejevic's framing of such identification as pleasurable too narrowly defines the affective qualities of fan attachments, these comments further highlight the power of the form, and its associated discourses, over substance. Even among users who disagreed with Carney's comments, some made their arguments primarily within an overall strategic, rather than moral frame:

There are no future elections in which the NRA can lavish millions upon their GOP opponent. There are no longer any risks in speaking up on this (literal) life and death issue. There are no longer any excuses for consciously choosing to duck it. (by RFK Lives)

Obama is still crippled by his “guns & religion” comment, he’s spent his entire presidency proving he won’t touch gun control. He needs to realize, no matter what he does, the NRA types will *always* think he is going to take away their guns. So he might as well take away their guns. (by lawstudent922)

Yet, what these comments also demonstrate is that such process-immanent critique contains elements of the moral substance that motivates bloggers’ fandom in the first instance, and, that, as I have noted in response to Andrejevic elsewhere (Sandvoss 2011a: 57), heightened identification in fandom not only leads to internalisation of industries’ logics, ‘but also facilitates spaces of reflection, rejection and resistance’, not least through ‘overidentification’, the ‘overdrawn imitation of the dominant system’ that eventually ‘lays bare [...] underlying, hegemonic structures’. Indeed while some users who expressed their discontent with Obama in the immediate aftermath of the Sandy Hook killings remained supportive of the president in subsequent discussions, a small, but noteworthy number of users expressed that their affection for Obama had largely been eroded over the past four years and that they now considered him only ‘the lesser of two evils’.³⁵ Such statements lead us to a final observation: In seeking to understand the role that fan-like attachments play in contemporary political processes, and in assessing the opportunities and risks they pose for democratic processes, the interplay between the micro forces of the intrapersonal identification, affection and attachment need to be contextualised by the macro conditions of political systems. In the two-party system of the United States, the symmetry of fandom and anti-fandom limits users’ ability to move beyond a binary framing of most issues which would create political forms more closely reflecting the substance of their convictions – as summarized succinctly in the words of one of the two users cited above (RFK Lives): ‘I voted for Obama in 2008 and against Romney in 2012’.

Conclusion

This paper examined whether we can meaningfully understand political enthusiasm, including its associated forms of user generated content such as blogs and user comments, as a form of fandom. The practices of bloggers and users I have illustrated here confirm this hypothesis: political enthusiasts are emotionally committed, regular media users who utilise a digital media environment to source stories and narratives from a wide variety of mainstream and alternative media. They also become textual producers by sharing their experiences, observations, views and indeed often emotions ranging from elation to disillusionment, which I have documented here in depth. Such emotions reflect the affective attachments between voters and political parties and politicians that shape the degree and

quality of participation in public debate and political processes. In applying Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) typology of fan groups to different groups of bloggers, users and visitors on *Daily Kos* this paper documents how conceptualising blogging and user comments as forms of fans' textual and enunciative productivity respectively reveals correlations between media consumption, specificity of fan objects, levels of participation and wider identity positions. Moreover, positioning fans and their varying levels of productivity in a spectrum between audiences and production identifies the point of reference of such textual activity in political action, not journalism. If fandom occupies the borderlands between consumers and producers, then in the case of political fandom they span from citizens to their elected representatives. Much as music fans identify with, frequently want to be and sometimes become musicians, in the same way sport fans often practice their favourite sport and their textual activity surrounding their fandom talking on-field tactics and transfer strategies, or television fans adopt the logic and position of the professional producer, practices of fans of politics are not an attempt at journalism, but at non-professional, grassroots politics. Political blogging hence ought to be understood not as acts of citizen journalism, but citizen politics.

While there are important differences to which I will turn below, there are thus also important parallels to other areas of everyday life media consumption. In a world that for many offers unprecedented choice of and access to mediated content (as well as commodities) at the same time as traditional markers of identity such as employment, marriage, or nationality are increasingly ephemeral or marginalised, being a fan is an important means for the articulation and reaffirmation of individual identity positions. Alongside the music we choose to listen to, the films we watch, the novels we treasure, the political parties and politicians we support constitute no exception here. Indeed, the mainstream media sources *Daily Kos* users avidly discuss from the ideological infotainment of *Fox News* to the political-satire-turn-journalism à la Stephen Colbert or Jon Stewart render any *a priori* distinction between politics and entertainment meaningless.

Two questions follow: the first – how political fandom compared to other forms of fandom serves an expression of the structured and structuring structure of the habitus and informs wider identity positions and everyday life interactions – has only been examined within an online context here, highlighting the depth of partisan identification and the prevalence of a dichotomous system of fandom and antifandom. Expanding such research to account for offline interactions within and across specific political fan cultures constitutes a key area for further research. The passions, group identifications and antagonisms among *Daily Kos* users documented here, as much as the frequent observations of diverging political affiliations becoming insurmountable barriers to friendship and even kinship in popular (Glass 2013) and academic discourses (Jenkins 2008), underline the significance of future research in this field.

The second is the need to examine how blogging and user comments as fan activities, and political fandom more generally, impact on representative democracy. *Daily Kos*, as many other online spaces, constitutes a discursive environment that is distinctly

shaped by the reading position of the fan: users engaged in practices of sharing and filtering content, individual and collective interpretation, debate and textual production, all through the prism of fandom, structured through affective investments in their fan object, and, as any other sub- or fan culture inescapably subject to formations of subcultural capital, hierarchies and consequential inequalities of access, albeit that they are mitigated by a strong ethos of inclusivity on the site. Textual productivity in particular emerged as a powerful tool in the critical assessment of other media sources. While such assessments were clearly informed by the identification of fans with given political causes, they nevertheless, often through the use of satire and parody, offered critical, reflexive evaluations of the methodological and epistemological soundness of given media sources, thus identifying acute shortcomings in contemporary American news journalism, such as a simplistic dogma of bipartisan balance. Degrees of textual productivity thus appear to correlate to levels of empowerment of given users vis-à-vis mainstream media discourses (cf Sandvoss 2011a).

At the same time the relative proportions of active bloggers, occasional commentators and users who only visit the site but do not post themselves, illustrate that *Daily Kos* is part of a digital media environment that I have described as ‘interpretative fair’ here: a plethora of textual choice in which fans’ habitus function as the central mechanisms structuring engagements in the public sphere. Given that fans, in seeking to maintain existing self-reflective constructions of their object of fandom, shuns away from challenges to their horizon of expectation, there may be a danger of the emergence of communicative silos as scholars such as Sunstein (2008) have suggested. However, such strategies of entropic textual selection by no means solely rely on user generated content and blogs, and - at least if of a right-wing orientation - are perfectly sustainable through mainstream media consumption alone. The collective, networked nature of *Daily Kos* and other progressive blogs (Shaw and Benkler 2012) appears to further minimise the risk of polarising communicative isolation. Similarly, the high level of referencing of mainstream media and the persistence of key mainstream media frames such as the horse race frame (informed by the United States’ electoral system) on *Daily Kos* suggest that alternative media spaces do not constitute separate publics but are located within the wider public sphere.

In this sense, acknowledging fans’ affective investment in politics and its resulting partisanship ought not to be misread as a plea for the elite-controlled news journalism of the era of mass communication - a return to such a system is neither feasible in the age of convergence media, nor is it, as among many others Chomsky and Herman’s work (1994) reminds us, desirable. Yet, propelled and increasingly necessitated as a means of media engagement by the scope of choice offered by digital media, fandom as vehicle of political engagement also comes at a price.

The affective attachments of fans to their fan object documented appear as key motivational factors facilitating participation and activism. Frequently, users report on a range of offline activities either under a Democratic Party banner or other forms of community activism. Online political discourse also has immediate and material effects on

the success of election campaigns through its fundraising capacity – what Sides and Farrell (2010: 12) have described as the ‘Kos bump’ – ‘a statistically and substantively significant association between mentions of candidates on the *Daily Kos* and donations to these candidates’. However, for all its participation in the political process it stipulates, fandom is no neutral means of engagement. This paper demonstrates how political enthusiasm and fandom are fuelled by users’ values and convictions – yet this substance is invested into the symbolic form of the fan object – in the case of *Daily Kos* users president Obama, progressive politicians or the Democratic Party at large. Where form and substance diverge over time through actions and decisions by political actors in conflict with the values that motivated fans’ affective attachment initially – or through the selective reading of highly polysemic objects were only believed to represent such values – a distorting effect occurs as fans maintain an affective bond to and support of the fan object; a bond (and thus distorting effect) that is only strengthened by the strong prevalence of antifandom in the realm of American politics illustrated here. In other areas of mediated fan culture such misinvestment might matter little: whether fans’ readings of the New York Yankees, Bruce Springsteen or the X-Files are selective or projective is of little immediate consequence. In the case of political enthusiasm such affective misinvestment raises questions over democratic legitimacy and in particular practices of political marketing which seek to foster affective investments through branding. The scope of my investigation here was limited to the comparatively small group of textually and enunciatively productive enthusiasts. Further qualitative and longitudinal research into the affective bond between political fans and fan objects is thus required to help determine the degree to which other audience segments are perceptible to distorting affective investments in fan objects as symbolic form and its impact on trust, participation and disillusionment.

Ultimately, then, the study of political fandom not only raises questions about identity construction and the condition of the public sphere in the digital age but also about the interplay between digital media and electoral systems (cf. Lewis *et al.* 2005; Sandvoss 2012a). The conflict between substance and form is one that originates in the very structures of indirect democracy. In representative democracies we vote for the form over the substance, hoping that they coincide to the largest possible degree. Political fandom is thus an inevitable condition of representative democracies – one that demonstrates its opportunities for participation and activism in a digital world as much as its inherent limitations, deficits and potential sources of disappointments and disenfranchisement.

Biographical note:

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Notes:

¹ Howard Dean's speech following the 2003 Iowa caucuses in which, due to broadcaster's sound editing filtering out the crowd noise, he appeared to be overenthusiastically 'screaming' at supporters – later dubbed the 'I have a scream' speech – was widely replayed by networks and was seen as instrumental in mass media portrayals of Dean as unsuitable for the country's highest office, fatally undermining his campaign.

² Given the transnational access to blogs, shared citizenship with the reader of a blog cannot automatically be assumed.

³ Similar to Jenkins' focus on the use of Photoshop as a form of fan activism through parody, Wilson (2011) studies political enthusiasts creating spoofs in the form of running fake twitter account of prominent Australian politicians.

⁴ A notable number of user names indicated that some participants on the site were of a different nationality and lived outside the United States. According to google ad planner 500,000 of the 3.3 million unique monthly visitors are from outside the United States (data from January 2013). Their interest and even activism in American politics is indicative of the global significance of American politics and the extent to which nation-state based democracies fail to reflect international and transnational power relations and independencies.

⁵ See: http://www.dkosopedia.com/wiki/Welcome_New_Users.

⁶ While Shaw puts the number of visitors as low as 600,000 in October 2011, data taken from google ad planner confirms the higher estimate by suggesting 3.3 million unique visitors for the month of January 2013, translating to around 2.6 million actual users visiting the site. Similarly, Baum and Groeling suggest a daily audience of 500,000, ahead of mainstream media such as CNN *American Morning*.

⁷ <http://www.dailykos.com/special/about>.

⁸ This sampling technique mitigates against diaries posted towards the end of the week, in particular on Sundays, but during the course of the research no indication of significantly different themes across weekdays could be found.

⁹ Barack Obama with close to 140,000 tags dwarfs the second and most frequently used categories, 'community' (48,000) and 'economy' (40,000). These, notably, are followed by tags on causes and politicians opposed by the overwhelming majority of contributors, George W. Bush. Iraq, the Republican party, and past GOP nominees Mitt Romney and John McCain as well as a Barack Obama's 2008 primary adversary, Hillary Clinton.

¹⁰ This excludes comments written by registered users who have not posted diaries/blogs themselves.

¹¹ In, for example, the words of one user in a debate concerning the former Massachusetts senator's nomination as secretary of state: 'I'm a Kerry supporter even, some might say, a Kerry fan.'

<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/02/01/1183953/-Scott-Brown-will-not-run-in-Massachusetts-Senate-special-election>.

¹² Data based on membership profiles on 2nd January 2013.

¹³ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/01/04/1176160/-Thanks-GOP-for-SENATOR-Elizabeth-Warren>.

¹⁴ <http://rt.com/usa/news/rally-support-florida-satanic-151/>.

¹⁵ See the Popular Communication (2012) special issue to Global Approaches to New Parody and political Satire, guest edited by Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey Jones.

¹⁶ The United States' 'first-past-the-post' electoral system, as its name suggests, strongly invites a horse-race and competition frame.

¹⁷ Jones (2012a: 185-5) implicitly confirms *Fox News* role as a fan text to its followers when he notes that 'Fox confidently creates and dramatizes all sorts of contestable and debatable ideas about public life using the codes and conventions of established journalistic practice. And through this confluence of niche audiences, feelings of community, ideological performance, and news genre, Fox has established itself as the most successful cable news operation in the United States [...] such performances [...] are directly related to its economic success, its importance to partisan politics, and its newfound role as a constructor of political reality'.

¹⁸ Fox News has frequently been described as the broadcasting wing of the Republican party - although, as Jeff Jones (2012b) has recently suggested the GOP might be better understood as the political wing of *Fox News* instead.

¹⁹ Such as *538*-creator and *New York Times* columnist Nate Silver who called all 50 states correctly ahead of the election or Sam Wang's similarly accurate prediction on behalf of the Princeton Electoral Consortium.

²⁰ Leccese classifies the remaining links as to 'other blogs' (6.6%), 'internal' (25.4%) and 'primary sources' (26%).

²¹ The fact that many mainstream media stories are selected to be refuted is supported by the fact that *Fox News* is the most frequent media tag on the site with over 8241 tags by January 2013, followed by *Daily Kos* itself with 5685 tags, CNN (4286), the *New York Times* (4156) and MSNBC (3715).

²² Their concerns also illustrate the limitations of quantitative approaches based on link analysis which insufficiently account for way in which any cited sources are contextualised.

²³ As I have argued elsewhere (Sandvoss 2007b), the term *publics* constitutes a misnomer in that it constitutes a mistranslation of the German word *Öffentlichkeit* in Habermas's work which constitutes a state rather than a place and fails to account for precisely connections between mainstream and alternative media highlighted by such critical evaluations of mass media content.

²⁴ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2005/07/08/128811/-The-conspiracists>.

²⁵ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/01/28/1182765/-TTFNs-new-rule>.

²⁶ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/03/17/478498/-The-Clinton-civil-war>.

²⁷ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2010/12/15/929012/-Mojo-and-DK4>.

²⁸ It should also be noted that in comparison to parliamentary democracies outside the United States, it is hard to describe *both* major political parties in the US as anything but to the right of the political spectrum.

²⁹ Many blogs focus on Republican efforts to suppress ethnic minority votes and its gerrymandering efforts leading to the GOP's defence of the majority in Congress despite a clear loss in the popular vote.

³⁰ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lets-just-say-it-the-republicans-are-the-problem/2012/04/27/gIQAxCVUIT_print.html.

³¹ I did not observe the latter among *Daily Kos* users, but it may be evident in other parts of the blogosphere.

³² *Fox News* was tagged over 8241 times on the site by January 2013, followed by *Daily Kos* itself with 5685 tags, followed by CNN (4286), the New York Times (4156) and MSBC (3715).

³³ At the time of writing *Daily Kos* featured nearly 14,000 diaries tagged under science and 24,600 focusing on environmental questions.

³⁴ The ideal brand is thus so polysemic, it becomes what I have described as 'neutrosemic' – incorporating so many possible meanings it has no objective meaning at all (Sandvoss 2005b, 2012a, see also 2011b). Political actors' desire for neutrosemy explains a number of common phenomena in contemporary politics from the emphasis on 'soft politics' (Scammell 2007) to the prevalence of negative advertising, aimed at defining not the own brand, but the political opponent. All of the campaign videos for the 2012 presidential election featured on the website of Karl Rove's SuperPac American Crossroads, for example, focused on the incumbent president. His Republican challenger Mitt Romney, who the American Crossroads campaigned for, appeared in only one of the 11 ads. This stands in marked contrast to the post-ideological nature in which Rove has sought to portray his own candidates. As Klein (2006: 144) summarizes 'the essence of the campaign' Rove ran for George W. Bush in 2000', in which political issues were aimed to be avoided as much as possible, was the presentation of personality, not policy'.

³⁵ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/01/13/1178654/-Salon-re-CPI-outraged-progressives-are-organizing-in-advance>.