Imagining the Fan Democracy

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1 author:

Liesbet van Zoonen
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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Imagining the Fan Democracy

▌ *Liesbet van Zoonen*

ABSTRACT

▌ In this article, the author takes issue with the common understanding of television as a medium detrimental to the maintenance and encouragement of political citizenship. Starting from the immense popularity of participatory television genres such as *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*, she examines in the article whether there is any relevance in these zeniths of audience activity for understanding and advancing political activity and involvement. The author argues that there is a three-dimensional similarity between the fan communities around entertainment 'genres' (whether they are stars, programmes or styles) and the political constituencies around candidates, parties or ideologies. The analogy between the two is structural to begin with: both come into being as a result of performance. Second, fan communities and political constituencies resemble each other in terms of activity: both are concerned with knowledge, discussion, participation, imagination of alternatives, and implementation. Finally, both rest on similar emotional investments that are intrinsically linked to rationality, and lead – in concert – to 'affective intelligence'. The representation of politics on television, while generally thought to be dismally and destructively entertaining, can be seen as provoking the 'affective intelligence' that is vital to keep political involvement and activity going. ▌

Key Words   citizenship, democracy, fandom, politics, popular culture

Over the past five years, television audiences across the industrialized world have massively engaged in discussion, participation, activism and

Liesbet van Zoonen is Professor of Media and Popular Culture, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands. [email: E.A.vanZoonen@uva.nl]

voting around their favourite programmes. The latest peak in these genres came in 2002 in the form of *Pop Idol*, a British format that has a national talent contest at its core (titled *American Idol* in the US and *Idols* in continental European countries). The reality soap *Big Brother* had managed earlier to get audiences to vote in large numbers for or against their most detested candidates (Hill and Palmer, 2001; van Zoonen, 2001). Such audience participation programmes make visible what reception research has claimed extensively: that audiences are not the passive couch potatoes, the mindless dupes or the vulnerable victims that television critics often contend they are. Digital interactive technologies have now given audiences a possibility to *act* on their involvement with a programme and to *intervene* in its course. These processes resemble traditional civic requirements so much that various kinds of political actors have taken them as a sign that it is still possible to interest people in 'public affairs' on a massive scale, and have tried to transport the appeal of *Pop Idol* and *Big Brother* to the domain of politics. In Argentina, a Buenos Aires television channel programmed a reality show in autumn 2002, which enabled people to choose their own candidate for the 2003 congressional elections. It had a similar format to *Pop Idol*, with a jury deciding on who of the many people that came forward was allowed to campaign in the programme ('Reality TV Search . . .', 2002). The programme did not fare too well; it was quickly rescheduled due to disappointing ratings. Finally, it was cancelled altogether and it ended on the year's list of biggest television failures ('El fracaso . . .', 2003). The reasons for this fiasco are unclear, however; the programme looked like an average political talk show embellished with brief reports of the candidates' everyday lives. It seemed to lack the spectacle and excitement of its prototypes.[1] In the US, FX network, a division of Fox, has seriously considered a similar idea: *The American Candidate*, a format proposed by R.J. Cutler, the documentary maker who made *The War Room* about the 1992 presidential elections. It was meant to find a grassroots political candidate who would run as an independent candidate in the 2004 race for the White House. The programme would start on the Internet, where the applicants could build their support base and debate their opponents. A selection from these people, elected by a professional jury, would end up in the television show competing for the audience vote ('All Hail . . .', 2003). The extensive publicity and preparation notwithstanding, FX cancelled the programme because it turned out to be too expensive and logistically demanding ('FX Won't . . .', 2003). In the UK, *Big Brother* inspired the Hansard Society, an independent non-party organization, to explore possible lessons that the Big Brother house could teach the House

of Commons (Coleman, 2003). The report suggests, on the basis of a survey among political 'junkies' and *Big Brother* fans, that the *Big Brother* experience shows the desire of audiences for three indispensable but currently marginal dimensions of political culture: transparency and authenticity; interactivity and control; and respect for diverse episte-mologies.

Predictably, these articulations of entertainment with politics have met with fierce disapproval. On account of *El candidate de la gente*, Argentine philosopher Sergio Marelli (2002) claimed already before its breakdown that:

> Los lazos de representación entre el pueblo y los políticos no se reconstituirán mágicamente. La única manera devolverle a la politica la credibilidad quie la resulta indispensable como herramienta de transforma-ción social, es asociándola a la ética, no al espectáculo. Objetivo que está muy lejos de las intenciones y las posibilidades de un programa de televisión.

The American Candidate received a similar comment:

> 'Leave it to Fox to find a way to further diminish politics and public life in America', said Thomas Mann, a political analyst at the Washington-based Brookings Institution. 'It's a sort of antiparty, anti system, celebrity based approach that reinforces the worst tendencies of our politics. It's sad – but not surprising.' (Cernetig, 2002)

Stephen Coleman, author of the British Hansard report, writes that he encountered derisive laughter and snobbery when discussing the research and its outcomes. Asking a group of people profoundly interested and conversant about politics how *Big Brother* could inform politics, the more common reply was 'staggeringly hostile' (Coleman, 2003: 23). Citing one of his interviewees:

> 'The best thing an MP could do about this "voyeurism" telly is to push through a Private Members Bill putting a stop to the whole degrading, pointless, imbecilic trend. I really don't care if that makes me undemo-cratic or not. . . . It's for the good of the nation.' (Coleman, 2003: 24)

In these three comments, older and more general views on the articulation of politics and entertainment resonate, with Neil Postman's (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death* probably the best known and most influential expression of it. While Postman does not condemn enter-tainment per se, he does consider it as a different domain from which politics should keep well away. Such a construction of politics and entertainment as separate spheres is the common denominator in the many analyses of entertainment and politics that have succeeded

Postman's work and which have singled out television as the nemesis *in essence* (e.g. Elchardus, 2002; Gitlin, 2003; Hart, 1994; Meyer, 2002; Scheuer, 2000). These authors have produced a coherently apocalyptic vision of the many harmful roles of television in politics: television does not produce adequate knowledge and it does not inform citizens satisfactorily; it alienates us from the political process and diminishes our sense of citizenship; it weakens rational public debate and fails to provide an awareness of political and social variety. It is a medium that is firmly located in the domains of leisure and entertainment, inviting emotional, intuitive, social or aesthetic reactions from its audiences much more than rational, informed or political ones. Yet, *Pop Idol*, *Big Brother* and a variety of other genres have been capable of activating audiences into discussion, participation, creativity, intervention, judging and voting. These are activities that would qualify as civic competences if they were performed in the domain of politics. In the domain of television entertainment, however, their existence, as Daniel Dayan (2001: 761) has claimed, is 'accompanied by a suspension of seriousness'. Like Postman *cum suis* who perceive a strict distinction between the spheres of entertainment and politics, Dayan observes an equivalent difference between 'audiences' and 'publics'. Denouncing the usual downbeat interpretations of audiences as the passive atomized 'dark doppelgangers' of active, sociable and deliberating publics, Dayan asks the question whether and according to which conditions television audiences could become publics. The two kinds of 'almost publics' he sees emerging from television are fan communities that are engaged in 'make-believe subjects' and publics that temporarily develop around media events. The lack of seriousness and the volatility of these publics make Dayan conclude: 'I have apparently to concede defeat. I have certainly found audiences, but no publics' (Dayan, 2001: 754).

Public and academic debate thus maintains that television entertainment and politics are separate spheres whose requirements and qualities do not travel well. Supposedly, television brings audiences consisting of fans at best into being and politics produces publics composed of citizens. Audiences and publics, fans and citizens are thus constructed as involving radically different social formations and identities. The political actors who consider *Pop Idol* and *Big Brother* an inspiration for the revival of political culture and commitment obviously do not take that position. Their claim that there are useful parallels between the involvement of people in *Pop Idol* and *Big Brother* and the commitment one would want people to have towards politics has, however, not been theorized other than the observation that both require

a commitment to candidates and a willingness to vote in elections. That parallel is only the superficial expression of more profound analogies between the fans of these programmes and the citizens involved in politics. I develop three of these analogies in more detail in order to advance the understanding of the role of entertainment and fandom in politics; not as detrimental to democracy but as necessary and useful in contemporary culture. I demonstrate first that fan groups are social formations that are structurally equivalent to political constituencies; second I show that they make use of and value similar repertoires of activity; and third I argue that the strength of their respective relations to their 'objects' is built on corresponding emotional investments. Together these analogies show the relevance of television entertainment for politics.[2]

The political constituency as fan community

The social and cultural fragmentation considered so typical of the postmodern condition is also evident in the instability and unpredict-ability of political constituencies. In the decline in political membership, diminishing of party identifications and the increase in the number of undecided, floating voters Clarke and Stewart (1998: 363) see 'the characteristic signatures of an era of partisan dealignment'. Mulgan (1994) argues that we witness a crisis of *modern* politics, which is characterized by, among other things, the erosion of 'clearly defined class interests by changing economic, occupational and social structures, and by a loss of much of the cultural homogeneity that bound class movements together in the past' (Mulgan, 1994: 12). There is an obvious parallel here with the crisis that emerged in marketing when social positions and economic status no longer predicted consumer behaviour and media use, and the allure of specific products in itself turned out to be the decisive factor in consumer behaviour. Similarly, political parties and candidates now have to *produce* their constituencies on the basis of their appeal rather than being able to rely on already existing social commonalities. Adherents of political parties seem to share no more than their appreciation of the performance of that party and its candidates; they may have social factors in common but that does not sufficiently explain their alliance with particular politics. An intermediate process of identification takes place, which is evoked and mobilized through the particular appeals of parties and their candidates.[3] The cognitive rational bias of political theory notwithstanding, these appeals also include

emotional, affective, moral, aesthetic and probably yet further compo-
nents (e.g. Marcus, 2002). The politician, claims Mulgan (1994: 33), has
a different role to play in these processes, not one of representation but
one of mobilization: 'What will make them representative and legitimate
will not be election so much as their ability to define constituencies and
common interests, representing them to others and to themselves.'

The structural relation of a party and its politicians, with their
constituency as a community that materializes and thrives as a result of a
party's various performances and appeals, has an obvious equivalent in the
articulation of mass media with their audiences. 'Performance is central to
the construction of audiences', Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 43)
say in a comment much similar to Mulgan's assertions about con-
stituencies. This analogy has not gone unnoticed of course, and the
concept of an 'audience' and 'spectator' democracy which resides
primarily in the mass media who show political leaders as the telegenic
embodiments of particular ideals, has been used, among others by Manin
(1997). Whereas such a term may capture the reality of contemporary
politics as a mass mediated phenomenon, it assumes audiences as
relatively passive bystanders and does not at all address the dynamic and
complex relations of individuals and collectives with the mass media and
among themselves. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) have developed a
continuum of audience involvement which ranges from consumers on the
one hand and petty producers on the other, with fans, cultists and
enthusiasts in the middle. Paraphrasing their understanding of the three
middle categories in political terms, we can see how they capture the way
constituencies are called into being by (mass mediated) politics:

- '*fans* are those people who become particularly attached to certain
  programmes or stars within the context of a relatively heavy
  media use' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 138). These could
  be considered, in other words, the voters of a party for a party or
  a candidate;
- '*cultists* are more organized than fans. They meet each other and
  circulate specialized materials that constitute the nodes of a
  network' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 139). The political
  parallel here are the members of a political party;
- '*enthusiasts* are, in our terms, . . . based predominantly around
  activities rather than media or stars' (Abercrombie and Longhurst,
  1998: 139). Enthusiasts would be analogous to party representa-
  tives in various governing bodies.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 141) add that their continuum may also be read as an audience career path, as it were, in which – again – lies an analogy with politics: starting as a relative indiscriminate consumer of politics, one may become a fan and then travel through the phases of cult and enthusiasm to that of the political professional.[4] Structurally then, electorates are similarly positioned to parties and politicians, as fans are to programmes or stars. They also share internal distinctions based on different levels of interest, commitment and activity. Nonetheless, even if electorates are structurally similar to fan communities, they may engage in totally different kinds of activities. If that were the case, the analogy between fans and electorates would not be very thorough.

Fan activity and political activity

Given the common appreciation of fans as mindless followers of their heroes and citizens as responsible political participants, it is probably more necessary to dwell on the existence and nature of fan activities, than on the reality of political activities. A detailed account of fan activities can be found in Nancy Baym's (2000) case study of the Internet community that evolved around the American soap *All My Children.* Baym, herself a fan of day-time soaps, participated in the Usenet news group and observed the interaction between its participants between 1990 and 1993.[5] She returned to the group in 1998 to see whether the development and greater availability of the Internet had changed the practices in the group. The conversations between the participants (mainly women) were primarily concerned with the interpretation of soap stories and characters. Fans process the soaps, for instance, by relating them to their own lives or by speculating about future events. As Baym shows through extensive quotes from the multitude of postings in the group, these interpretations emerged in dialogue and deliberation, which have both a playful and an emotional component. Part of the pleasure of the news group is in the common evaluation of the quality, realism and underlying messages contained in soap texts. The participants prove to be a highly competent audience expressing critical assessments of the show that often surpasses the knowledge of the producers. Some long-time fans feel they know the characters and their fictional community better than the writers and are struggling – as it were – with the writers about the ownership of the series. Baym shows how participants come up with new and better storylines, which they exchange among themselves in a humorous display of creativity and wit. The deliberation around these new stories is conducted in a general sphere of friendliness and consensus

seeking. The fact that these participants are mostly women certainly contributes to the group's atmosphere, according to Baym. However, it is not gender alone that is an explanatory factor here, but its articulation with the specific textual features of the soap operas that call for diverging meanings and interpretations. The passionate involvement found by Baym is not limited to soap fans, but is characteristic of all fan communities and has been found among the fans of such diverse programmes and stars as *Dr Who*, *Star Trek*, *Casablanca*, Madonna, *Inspector Morse*, *Betty Blue* and Elvis (see Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Rodman, 1996; Schwichtenberg, 1993; Thomas, 2002).

Such practices of community building are part of a social process that concerned observers have seen disappearing from social and political life in recent decades. Robert Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone* has become the almost proverbial reference in this context. On the basis of a vast array of miscellaneous social indicators, ranging from participation in voluntary organizations to going out for a picnic with the family, Putnam argues that such social capital has declined considerably. Since Putnam considers social capital to be the backbone of people's capacities and willingness to engage in public debate and participate in political activity, its demise represents not only a serious threat to social cohesion but to democracy as well.[6] 'Voluntary associations, from churches to professional societies to Elks clubs and reading groups, allow individuals to express their interested demands on government and to protect themselves from abuses by their political leaders' (Putnam, 2000: 338). Weakening social capital can therefore be considered as the root of political degeneration in the US, as expressed in declining political knowledge, falling turnout rates and other signs of decay (e.g. Galston, 2001). It is tempting to extemporize Putnam's claims, and propose fan activity as a contemporary locus of social capital: in fan communities then, important capacities and conditions for democracy would be seen to arise and mature. However, rather than construing fan activities as an embryonic step to acquire more relevant civic qualities and virtues, I would argue for the equivalence of fan practices and political practices; an equality that facilitates an exchange between the domains of entertainment and politics that is commonly thought to be impossible. Fans have an intense individual investment in the text, they participate in strong communal discussions and deliberations about the qualities of the text, they propose and discuss alternatives which would be implemented as well if only the fans could have their way. These are, in abstract terms, the customs that have been laid out as essential for democratic politics: information, discussion and activism (e.g. Fisher and Kling, 1993).

Maybe then, the only difference between fans and citizens is located in the different subjectivities on which they seem based; affective relations in the case of fans, cognitive processes in the case of citizens. Is this difference bona fide though?

Fan investments and civic investments

As is clear from various accounts of fan engagement, the relation of a fan with his or her favourite object is primarily based on affective identifications. Baym's (2000) work on the fans of the soap *All My Children* shows that their dialogues are typified by playful and emotional interactions, the latter occurring in particular when participants in the news group relate the televised stories to events in their own lives, and use the alternative storylines to make meaning of their personal experience. Other genres invite other kinds of emotional investment, sometimes with a much nastier face: soccer fans, obviously, are infamous for their hostility towards the fans of other teams or nations (e.g. Brown, 1998), pop music has also been seen to produce rather passionate divisions between fans (e.g. Frith, 1978). Such hefty emotional investments do not seem easily reconciled with a civic subjectivity that is supposedly based on knowledge, rationality, detachment, learnedness or leadership. Nevertheless, emotions have not been denied their proper place in politics. Although Max Weber (1918) typified the state of affairs existing at his time as a 'dictatorship resting on the exploitation of mass emotionality', he also observed that if politics was to be a genuinely human action, rather than an intellectual game, 'dedication to it can only be generated and sustained by passion' (Weber, 1918). Marcus (2002) disentangles the emotional prerequisites – devotion, veneration and well-confined passion – that the American Founding Fathers formulated in their blueprint for the country's government. In current political research, emotional political motivations have found their way into the widely used concept of party identification, which has been defined as an affective orientation towards a group or party that results from early life socialization processes that mainly take place in the family (Campbell et al., 1960). In everyday political practice emotions have been ritualized in characteristic political ceremonies, which evoke fan behaviour rather than civic behaviour among their participants. Election nights, for instance, are invariably staged as a theatrical climax with ear-splitting music heightening expectations and exaltation. When the party leader arrives, the scenes of crowds yelling and cheering are not so different from the sight of fans shouting for their favourite sports or movie star. While the

privileged party members who are allowed entrance to election nights can otherwise be considered classic citizens in *optima forma*, at such occurrences they seem only too eager to throw off the yoke of rational cognitive citizenship: they yell and cheer, admire and love, or cry and mourn with the leadership. They behave, in other words, like highly ecstatic or deeply bereft fans. The significance of such political rituals is evident: party leaders and active members and – at a televised distance – passive members and voters are, however volatile, forged into harmony, briefly united in joy or sorrow. The indispensable affective ties contributing to the communality in political parties are forcefully addressed and temporarily tightened (see also Edelman, 1964).

Despite the commonplace occurrences of affect in political processes, the ritualized display of emotions, and the significant research tradition about psychological processes among politicians and voters (e.g. Lodge and McGraw, 1995) emotional investments have hardly been *theorized* as indispensable, desirable and commendable components of political involvement that are as relevant as information processing, cognitive evaluations and rational assessment of alternatives. Rather, emotions have theoretically been understood as a secondary component of politics, accepted for strategic reasons at best, but worrisome and undermining when taking central stage, as observers as long back as Weber have feared. American political scientist George Marcus (2002: 5) summarizes these positions succinctly by saying that emotion is considered 'a troublemaker, intruding where it does not belong and undermining the undisturbed use of our deliberative capacity'. His alternative theory of affective intelligence counters the common case against emotion in politics by showing how it is – on the contrary – the key to good citizenship because it enables the use of reason (see also Marcus et al., 2000). Following the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1995) about the affective neural bases of social judgement, Marcus proposes that emotions function as a trigger for our cognitive capacities. In the context of politics, feelings of 'enthusiasm' (all is well) and 'anxiety' (something is wrong) are particularly relevant, because they produce the cognitive state of mind that enables the acquisition of information, the analysis of the situation, the assessment of alternatives and development of new routines. The kind of cognitive work that is encouraged by enthusiasm and anxiety differs, says Marcus. A sense of all being well results in habitual judgement, whereas anxiety would produce deliberative judgement. Without the affective investments resulting from enthusiasm and anxiety, political interest and commitment would falter, according to Marcus, just like fan

communities would wane without the emotional input of their members.

Entertaining politics

Having thus constructed a three-dimensional equivalence between fan communities and political constituencies, we can now return to the relevance of entertainment for politics. The relevance of the main entertainment medium, television, should not be sought in its informative qualities, its appeal to cognitive capacities or its encouragement of rational deliberation. Its capacities in these realms, as has been shown *ad nauseam*, are highly limited. That does not automatically mean that it is a medium irrelevant or even detrimental to politics, as many authors keep claiming. Current television genres that invite audience participation have shown for the widest audience possible that television is extremely capable of creating short- and long-lived fan communities. Such fandom has been an intrinsic feature of audience behaviour, even before participatory genres and interactive technologies intensified its manifestations. Since fan communities and political constituencies bear crucial similarities, it is clear where the relevance of television for politics lies: in the emotional constitution of electorates which involves the development and maintenance of affective bonds between voters, candidates and parties. This does not preclude political discussion and activity, as the research on the practices of fandom shows, nor does it forestall the use of cognitive capacities and consideration, as the work discussed of Marcus and his co-researchers points out. On the contrary, the representation of politics on television, generically entertaining, may be seen as inviting the affective intelligence that is vital to keep political involvement and activity going. This, then, is the result of systematically working through the consequences of *Pop Idol* and *Big Brother* for politics. One can only hope – tongue in cheek – that in upcoming elections, politicians will withdraw into a Big Brother house for the duration of the campaign period and will have themselves evicted from the race by audience vote, thus providing a real-life experiment to put this position to the test.

Notes

1. My sincere thanks to Marcelo Cohen of Endemol Argentina for sending me a tape of the programme.
2. For a more general treatment of this topic, see van Zoonen (1998).

3. This process of identifying should not be confused with the idea of party identification as commonly used in political science. This points towards relatively stable individuals' affective political orientations resulting from early life, primarily familial socialization, occupational and social networks, and exposure to politics (see Zuckerman et al., 1998). The concept is less dynamic than the process we want to identify here as the result of the way political parties 'construct' their electorate.
4. Other career paths identified in politics are the horizontal or expert ones.
5. The summary provided here is taken from van Zoonen (2000).
6. Putnam also argues that social capital is a prerequisite for health and happiness, an argument that I do not go into at this point.

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