

**FANDOMS AS POLITICAL COMMUNITIES: NEW POSSIBILITIES OF
BELONGING AND ACTING**

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In late May, early June 2020, while the COVID-19 pandemic raged through the globe, huge groups of people all around the United States took to the streets to protest the death of George Floyd, a Black man, by police officers. In the wake of the protests, the Dallas Police Department created a facial-recognition app to document alleged illegal activities taking place during the protests. In the app, the police would receive videos submitted by the users, using it to catalogue and probably prosecute the protesters.

The endeavour did not work. The app was flooded with submissions, but not of videos of the protests. Once the Dallas Police Department took to social media to ask for video contributions of the protests to the app, K-pop fans urged other fans to upload fancams of their favourite idols and groups to protect the identity of the #BlackLivesMatter protesters, and so they did (Morris 2020). Fancams are short, highly edited videos featuring snippets of concerts, TV appearances, music videos etc. of K-pop idols or groups. In the context of Twitter, fancams are used by fans to showcase their favourite idols; K-pop fans are known for 'kidnapping' viral tweets, filling the replies with fancams so people will watch them and get to know the groups the fancams are picturing.

However, in the case of the flooding of the Dallas Police Department app, the fancams became instruments of political action. This isn't the first time K-pop fans take to activism (Ohlheiser 2020) – K-pop fans are known for being a

highly engaged audience, and when the objects of their admiration are themselves engaged in social and political actions, such as the members of BTS speaking on topics such as climate change in the United Nations General Assembly (Lu 2021), they become even more passionate.

Fan culture itself is recognized in fan studies as being ripe with the ability to mobilize large groups of people for social causes. Bennett (2012) points out that fans have been widely successful in mobilizing their own communities to enact action in regards to the fan object – prevent a show from being cancelled, for example, but also through charity campaigns and other sort of social projects. This happens mainly because fan culture is a highly participative and transformative culture – in a fandom, the investment fans have in the fan object is something they all share, something they are all equal in.

Social media and the internet have played a very important role in the articulation and activities of fandoms, as Fraade-Blanar and Glazer (2017) and Bennett (2012) helpfully indicate. The internet has made it easier for fans to find each other and made it easier for them to engage with the fan object. Through the cyberspace, fans have connected with each other, even though they are geographically distant and scattered throughout the world.

So far, I have numbered two main instances that are intrinsic characteristics of contemporary fan communities: its passionate attachment to a fan object and its vast presence in social media and the internet. There is also, I'd like to argue, another extremely relevant feature of fandoms: its potential for exerting political action. In this paper, then, I will argue that fandoms pose interesting challenges to how traditional and mainstream International Relations theory is used to think about political communities.

Traditional IR theory, Bartelson (1998) tells us, is severely limited by its attachment to territoriality and nationality. That is, in mainstream International Relations theory, the political community is, by definition, the nation-state, a self-contained territorial unity in which all its members share a connection to the nation and its symbols and the government it supposedly represents. The nation-state is considered, by traditional IR theory, to be the only possible political community.

Agnew (1994) goes into deeper detail about the territorial trap that IR theory is subject to, arguing that the discipline's fixation on territoriality and in political communities being territorially bound are extremely constraining to the possibilities of other forms of community. The distinction between the domestic

and the international has contributed to the way IR has failed to understand political problems that do not acquiesce to these scales.

Therefore, both Agnew and Bartelson acknowledge that there are possibilities for international politics and political life beyond the nation-state. This paper builds upon this understanding, arguing that fandoms pose productive challenges to the ways traditional IR theories are used to understanding what are and how political communities operate. I argue that fandoms present a challenge through those of the two most prevalent aspects of statism, nationality and territoriality, and take as a starting point Jacques Rancière's (2004) work on the distribution of the sensible to guide my understanding of political communities.

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