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Anonymous, QAnon, Tik-tok teens, K-pop fans

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Abstract

This essay examines online rumors concerning K-pop fans' transitioning group affinity from one of media fandom to one of progressive political organising against white supremacy and police brutality in the US context. Rather than aiming to confirm or debunk these rumors, I instead argue that they are worthy of attention in their own right, as a window into the importance of social media rumor as 'improvised public opinion' in today's media environments. I assert that one particular set of rumors – comparing K-pop fans and Anonymous – promotes timely reflection on anonymity's affordances for the politics of fandom and processes of knowledge production in transnational media ecosystems. Doing so, I argue, confirms anonymity's importance toward building solidarity, while also revealing the key epistemological function of rumor on Twitter.

Keywords: platforms, fandom, Twitter, activism, rumor

A June 21, 2020 Breitbart story 'AOC Praises Teens and Korean Pop Fans for Allegedly Using Chinese App to Meddle with Trump Rally' attempted to deflect attention from the humiliatingly low attendance at a Trump rally by feeding its readers a chain of terms with negative associations. In keeping with Breitbart's right-wing ideology, the story declared NY Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – already a reviled figure in conservative camps – a security threat who shamelessly touts her compromised interests. According to the story' s lead, 'AOC openly cheered reports of teenagers and Korean pop music fans using the Chinese-owned app TikTok to sign up for President Trump's campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and inflate RSVP numbers.' This linking of identity markers deemed nefarious by association with the foreign (China, Korea, and

AOC) also launched a broad generational attack against 'teenagers' and K-pop fans, while suggesting that these categories are mutually exclusive.

Breitbart's spin was based solely on a Twitter thread in which the congresswoman replied to a tweet by then Trump campaign manager Brad Parscale. Parscale claimed that attendance projections for Trump's Tulsa campaign rally had been manipulated by 'radical protesters', invoking the right's favorite scapegoat: Antifa (Fig. 1). Replies to Ocasio-Cortez's threaded tweet, wherein she praised 'Zoomers' and 'K-pop allies' in 'the fight for justice', predictably decried 'foreign' meddling in American politics by K-pop fans, who were presumed to be Korean or Chinese nationals.

Fig. 1: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's tweet that spurred the Breitbart report and AOC's response to Trump campaign manager Brad Parscale.

Attempts to verify *who* was responsible for the massive pranking of Trump's campaign yielded few reliable leads, since TikTok users had reportedly taken down their posts encouraging followers to sign up for tickets to the Tulsa rally in order to keep the prank a secret. Despite this disconnect between allegation and evidence, the rumor concerning K-pop fans' anti-Trump leanings and their status as online activists has had lasting impacts in both rehabilitating the image of K-pop fandom on a variety of platforms as a force for collective good and conjuring an updated specter of yellow peril in cybersecurity discourse and right-wing propaganda.

The Breitbart story exemplifies gossip – defined by anthropologist Niko Besnier as 'the negatively evaluative and morally laden verbal exchange concerning the conduct of absent third parties' – about a rumor, that is, unverified information.[1] It sought to capitalise on the instability of public knowledge about K-pop fans in order to malign

Ocasio-Cortez, a political foe. However, by the same token, Ocasio-Cortez's hailing of 'K-pop Allies' made use of that very unstable public knowledge for opposing political ends. In what follows, I focus on the rumor of K-pop fans' progressive political turn to ask: what is the role of rumor in the informal communicative acts that produce knowledge on digital platforms? In what ways is rumor productive for generating powerful displays of collective organising and solidarity? I will argue that rumor – especially a positive or favorable rumor – affords some of fandom's most powerful impacts. Moreover, rumor preserves spontaneity and produces shared enjoyment in fandom through play, humor, and irony, against mediating forces that reify fan identity within the circuits of platform capitalism.[2]

In the context of social media rumor, K-pop fandoms' politicisation has transformed fan group affinity from one of shared media fandom into one of progressive political organising against racism and police brutality in the US context.[3] The rumors range from speculations that K-pop fan accounts were primarily bots to a revival of Anonymous to 'woke' zoomers to sophisticated cyberwarriors capable of disarming QAnon. Rather than aiming to confirm or debunk these rumors, I instead argue that they are worthy of attention in their own right, to examine the importance of social media rumor as 'improvised public opinion' in today's media environments.[4] I approach rumor non-moralistically to consider how it produces knowledge about emergent phenomena. Instead of tracking 'K-pop Allies' as an identity category using quantitative data analysis, my method is to examine how social media users engage with the figure of the K-pop fan as anti-racist activist within the discursive sphere of K-pop stan Twitter. Despite seeking to analyse online rumor's interpellating effects, I thus try to resist the datafication of fan activities as well as social media platforms' own positivistic dependence on quantification.

Further, I assert that one particular set of rumors offers surprising insights: comparisons between K-pop fans and Anonymous. Claims that K-pop fans have literally joined Anonymous en masse or that K-pop fans are an analogous network of progressive actors show anonymity to be paramount to knowledge production on transnational platforms. Taking seriously the rumor of K-pop fans' affinity with Anonymous also reveals the key epistemological function of rumor on Twitter.[5]

In what follows, I detail the feedback loops of journalistic media and fan discourses on K-pop politics, drawing a key distinction between spontaneous acts of progressive trolling and organised fan philanthropy. I will discuss two video examples that circulate the claim of K-pop stans as activists, one that brings the rumor under the purview of

influencer culture and another that animates the rumor using pop culture allegory. I assess reactions to K-pop fans' hypervisible yet hard-to-decipher mass digital interventions to ask how anonymised affective flows enabled by platforms translate fandom's mediated intimacies into political solidarity. I consider the implications of this case for the ways in which specifically minoritarian fandom identities like K-pop stans claim rumor as a tool of solidarity on social media platforms.

The invention of 'K-pop Allies'

When the Black Lives Matter movement garnered renewed media attention and public support after the police-perpetrated murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, K-pop fans became flashpoints in online, pro-BLM activism. Online organising supplemented on-the-ground demonstrations, as both activists and law enforcement agencies took to social media to frame the images of protests spreading across North America and Europe in the midst of pandemic lockdown. A repertoire of 'attention-jacking' practices developed among K-pop fan-identified accounts on Twitter, where they posted gifs and 'fancams' – short video clips of stage performances of K-pop idol groups – labeled with hashtags like #whitelivesmatter to drown out anti-BLM tweets. Fans also flooded snitch apps and law enforcement hashtags that solicited citizens to upload video recordings of protesters' purported wrongdoing.[6]

The first report of K-pop's involvement in antiracist protest arose when K-pop fans crashed iWatch Dallas, an app operated by the Dallas Police Department, by spamming it with fancam videos. According to reporting by *Teen Vogue*, *Buzzfeed News*, *Nylon*, and *The Washington Post*, a Twitter user with the handle @7soulsmap sent the original tweet on the afternoon of 31 May 2020, enlisting K-pop fans to send their fancams to the Dallas police. In the threaded replies to their original tweet (in which they retweeted the Dallas Police's call to snitch on protesters), they assert, 'The only reason to post fancams in 2020 is to protect the identities of BLM protesters.' As of February 2022, @7soulsmap has changed their handle to @telepathyfor7. Fans of BTS will recognise both as references to the group's 2020 album *Map of the Soul 7* and the track 'Telepathy' from the group's 2021 studio album BE. BTS fans like @telepathyfor7/@7soulsmap soon became metonyms for K-pop fans as anti-racist warriors. Sara Delgado's remarks in *Teen Vogue* exemplify the media's celebration of K-pop fans thwarting police surveillance through platform manipulation:

> people took the opportunity to leave one-star reviews on both the Google Play Store and iOS App Store, on top of seemingly crashing the app. They also flooded the review comments demanding

> justice for George Floyd and amplifying the Black Lives Matter movement. If this proves one thing, it's how big and powerful a role fandom can play when you look past fan wars.[7]

Later, this view was tempered by accounts of anti-Blackness within K-pop fandoms and the hostility Black K-pop fans face when calling out acts of appropriating Black cultural forms within the K-pop industry.[8] In October 2020, journalist Nnehkai Agbor presented a more nuanced portrait of K-pop fans' heterogenous identity positions and racial politics, complicating the media's narrative of K-pop fans as a force of vigilante justice by drawing attention to the backlash voiced by some Black K-pop fans and culture writers. Agbor tracked down fans linked to the iWatch Dallas fancam incident, including @ngeleve, another Twitter user who was credited as an early amplifier of @7soulsmap's iWatch Dallas tweet. According to Agbor's reporting, @ngeleve turned out to be a 13-year-old girl named Jiwoo, whose experience in K-pop's online participation in BLM transformed her fandom into a political project:

> Jiwoo says her bond with K-pop became tighter in her activism and hopes stans can continue to help in future movements. As an ally to *Black Lives Matter*, she looks forward to supporting in more situations.[9]

It is important to distinguish the spontaneous platform manipulation by K-pop fans described above from a different mode of collective action that similarly uses platform affordances for mobilisation. I refer here to K-pop fandoms' longstanding practice of organising humanitarian projects such as environmental cleanups and charity fundraising campaigns for the sake of elevating the public image of their favorite K-pop celebrities. Within transnational K-pop fan communities, pro-BLM activism became such an arena, even though calls to support BLM were controversial among certain fan groups. Many non-North American fans defended Korean artists and labels that stayed silent about BLM, arguing that Korean artists should abstain from political debates that do not concern them as South Koreans. However, several artists and agencies did eventually issue public statements of support for anti-racist action. In particular, Big Hit Entertainment (now HYBE), the management company for the K-pop group BTS, became the industry leader for anti-racist philanthropy when it made a million-dollar donation to BLM organisations.[10]

A fan-organised campaign to match Big Hit's donation quickly spread among ARMY on Twitter, raising the funds through the hashtag #MatchAMillion in just over 24 hours.[11] This garnered BTS and ARMY heightened media attention as the representative K-pop fandom in the US, as well as seeming to substantiate the rumor of K-pop fans' broader

identification with anti-racist activism. When North American media outlets discussed K-pop's progressive political bent, they often conflated ARMY – the fandom of a single K-pop group – and K-pop fandom at large, a slippage that continues to occur in media reporting on K-pop fans and their roles as political actors.

While K-pop fans rarely used the moniker 'K-pop Ally' to describe themselves, the concept gained traction after its use by Ocasio-Cortez and by journalists like Agbor after the successful fundraising campaign. What is clear about the repeated attribution of activist intent to K-pop identified Twitter accounts is that many did take action in the name of anti-racism. Correspondingly, there were also those who took action in the name of K-pop fandom – answering a call to post fancams or donate to BLM as an act of fandom unity. In the case of @ngeleve, their retroactive labeling as a K-pop Ally points to the interpellating force of social media rumor, troubling the common view in scholarship on rumor that negative rumors are those most likely to circulate. Indeed, as Ralph L. Rosnow argues, positive rumor can be spread in order to precipitate the rumored reality: 'when people pass a rumor that they feel is comforting or exhilarating, this could be an attempt to validate their positive fantasizing or wishful thinking in order to savor the anticipation of a satisfying event'[12]. The figure of the K-pop Ally, doling out vigilante justice, arose at much the same time as the rumor of K-pop fans' radicalisation into Anonymous, to which I turn next.

The new Anonymous? #OpFanCam

In early June 2020, amidst widespread rallies and protests across North American cities, I first began to see comparisons between K-pop stans and the hacker collective Anonymous. In searching for Anonymous' influence on K-pop fan Twitter, I found mysterious clues like an incongruous image of Anonymous' iconic Guy Fawkes mask edited with pink hearts and sparkles (Fig. 2). I also saw the network effect of the hashtag #OpFanCam, which sought to channel the common fan activity of posting fancam clips into a coordinated operation or 'op', to urge K-pop accounts to engage in 'hacktivism' through their already existing follower networks. Whether most of the fans engaged in hashtag-jacking were also incited by Anonymous is unclear. However, the overlap of fan and activist networks on the platform that led to this convergence of interests undeniably drove these instances of spontaneous collective action.

Fig. 2: The 'K-pop filter' adapts the aesthetic of snapchat filters to overlay hearts, rainbows, sparkles, and other cute sticker effects onto photos of idol pop performers. Here, Guy Fawkes gets the same treatment.

Gabriella Coleman's insightful account of Anonymous' history establishes the group's genesis on the infamous online discussion board 4chan. Anonymous' trajectory of political activism credits trolling as a consciousness-raising activity, despite its association with the worst excesses of illiberal internet behavior. Coleman's account focuses on the transformative period encompassing Obama's first term as US president, the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, Wikileaks and the trials of Julian Assange, and the whistle-blowing of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. In it, she highlights the affective register of 'lulz' – the shared sensibility of mordant humor, always at another's expense – that many Anons claimed to be their fundamental basis of affinity.[13]

Though initially connected through humor, Anonymous soon convened in righteous indignation. Thus, Coleman offers a coming-of-age story for an entity that bridges unity and multiplicity through the principle of anonymity:

> No single group or individual can claim legal ownership of the name 'Anonymous,' much less its icons and imagery … It has now become the quintessential anti-brand brand, assuming various configurations and meanings, even as it has also become the popular face of unrest around the globe.(16)

As the story goes, Anonymous is a self-reflexive internet trickster and an infra-human swarm of digital commands that gradually began to grow up and take the lulz seriously.[14]

Like Anonymous, the digital swarm of K-pop stans who ostensibly brought down Trump's rally and foiled attempts at police surveillance also seems to have done it, at least partly, for the lulz. And, as in Anonymous' case, there is a K-pop stan conversion narrative that also reads as a bildung trajectory. Yet, mature civic-mindedness does not supplant juvenile humor in K-pop stan interventions; instead, they co-exist in activities like deactivating #whitelivesmatter by using it to label posts of winking or pouting Asian pop performers. Fans offer fellow fans shared laughs at the imagined racists scrolling through the misleadingly tagged posts. In this trolling fantasy a stream of mugging pop idols thwart white supremacists who similarly seek affirmation on the platform. K-pop fandom's structures of feeling center on shared delight, catalysed by the pop celebrity, fusing this element with lulzy humor in a polyvocal gesture fueled by rumor's spreadability.

Mediating minority identity

The #OpFanCam hashtag originated in the early days of protests catalysed by George Floyd's killing, when @YourAnonNews – once described as a 'mini-media institution' that 'at one time boasted over twenty-five contributors who were required to follow a style guide'[15] – tweeted several calls to mobilise K-pop stans for #OpFanCam (Fig. 3). A self-introduction statement pinned to the account feed states @YourAnonNews's fidelity to fact against conspiracy, as well as an endorsement of relativity in matters of cultural dispute:

> We want to get as close to the facts as possible, that is why we don't support conspiracy theories. […] When dealing with cultural (emotional) issues, there are no facts. This can be related to race,

> religion, political preference, etc. In this case we can't strive for an objective truth. We think democracy is very important, this is why we will always be accepting of people regardless of their background. [...] To quote the hackers manifesto: We exist without skin color, without nationality, without religious bias...

Linking a commitment to objectivity in matters not deemed cultural (or emotional) with an ethos of tolerance signals @YourAnonNews's liberal stance – pro-democratic, secular, multiculturalist, post-racial, cosmopolitan. Indeed, this banner of post-identitarian politics – without skin color, nationality, religion – serves to harmonise Anonymous' contradictory positions: fighting for privacy (from surveillance), but against private property (especially copyright); elevating individual rights and civil liberties as paramount values, yet rejecting individualised recognition in favor of anonymity.

K-pop fans generally tend to hold liberal views, but do so in ways that reject the abstract humanism of postracial politics. While often driven by the desire to promote the IP of their favorite groups rather than to protect privacy, freedom of information, or free speech, K-pop fans embrace a minoritised identity that is symbolised by Korean pop groups' racialised images. The drive to identify with minority status – to assert it as a majority experience, especially online – defines the ethos of K-pop fandom, regardless of particular K-pop fans' individual racial or ethnic identities. Just as Anonymous conjures the image of disaffected young white men hacking government and corporate data systems, K-pop fans bring to mind enthusiastic young women – especially Asian, Black, and Latina – whose collective adoration of their favorite idols puts them at odds with the nerd-hacker paradigm.[16]

To the surprise of Anonymous' observers, including Coleman (who tagged me in Twitter responses to those asking her to confirm whether we were witnessing the revival of Anonymous impersonating K-pop fans), @YourAnonNews's #OpFancam tweets jumped the tracks of what are usually understood to be discrete discourse networks on Twitter. As @YourAnonNews rapidly gained follows from K-pop stan accounts (which many on the platform and in tech media circles conjectured were bots[17]), some K-pop fans began to use the #OpFanCam hashtag to underscore the political motives for their culture-jamming antics. Since K-pop fans were already known to insert fancam gifs or photos of their favorite K-pop idols in all manner of unrelated contexts, this recast a customary fan activity into coordinated political intervention. However, it seems that the desire to affiliate with Anonymous just as quickly dissipated, and #OpFanCam faded into obscurity even as the fancam posts continued.

Fig. 3: Tweet from @YourAnonNews crediting K-pop for trolling the Trump campaign, using the hashtag #OpFanCam.

This network convergence of K-pop Stan Twitter and Anonymous, however fleeting, nonetheless gave rise to journalistic speculation on the terrorist implications of K-pop fandom, as in Forbes journalist Davey Winder's piece, 'Meet the New Anonymous – 100 Million BTS ARMY and K-pop Stans, A Cyber Force To Be Reckoned With?' Winder interviewed a suite of cybersecurity experts to assess K-pop fandom as cyberthreat. It is clear from the article that none of the interviewees has any idea how K-pop Stan Twitter actually operates. Quoting 'expert' Chris Groves, Winder writes, '[a]t the end of the day, organizations are facing a challenge to keep operations up and running, regardless of who is at the other end of the attack… be that a cocky hacker, criminal extortion gang, K-pop fans, terrorists, or nation-state actors'[18]. Groves warns, 'When groups of people work together to commit the crime of attacking computer systems, they're no longer music fans… they become criminals at that stage.'[19] The slippage between fan and criminal is at once laughable and alarming, as the mere act of coordinated activity as an affinity group – a collective in the most basic sense – is judged anathema to so-called democratic norms. Groves' and Winder's sensationalist rhetoric of criminality here

exemplifies the scare tactics often used by the cybersecurity industry, a multi-billion-dollar enterprise that markets its services – in the shadowy zone of professionalised hacking – to both corporate and government clients. To call the equivalent of plastering the walls of the internet with posters of your favorite band 'attacking computer systems' suggests that, for these men, platform mastery necessarily corrupts – that the mere ability to harness platform affordances is itself a nefarious use of power.

Rumor and consensus

It is not just cybersecurity contractors and tech writers who find K-pop's foreignness and K-pop fans' numbers as a digital mass unsettling. Other Twitter users and social media influencers have expressed frustration over K-pop's outsized influence over Twitter's snapshot of the world's conversations. While K-pop fans do not launch DDoS attacks like Anonymous to shut down websites, they drown out other content, simply by crowding others' viewpoints off the platform. For instance, in taking over the hashtag #Kpopstansareoverparty – again, by deploying fancam videos and gifs – K-pop stans can use even coordinated criticism of their community to amplify their platform presence. The original intent behind the hashtag #Kpopstansareoverparty was to 'cancel' K-pop stans, i.e. diminish their power on the platform. By effectively cancelling cancelling, K-pop Twitter, in cahoots with the platform's amplification of trending hashtags, curtails others' 'rights', not to expression but to visibility. In this way, K-pop stans have garnered a reputation as trolls – drunk on 'clout', and barging uninvited into all manner of internet conversations.

In a YouTube video titled '#KpopStansAreOverParty', 23-year-old Black American influencer D'Angelo Wallace voices the animus that 'all of Twitter' has towards K-pop stans:

> Oh boy. K-pop stans are super fans of various Korean pop groups, or at least that's what most K-pop stans would tell you. But if you ask literally anybody else, then you'll quickly discover basically nobody likes them. They're known for attacking people, hijacking Twitter threads. It's a very different picture than your average K-pop fan would give you.

Wallace is a self-described 'internet person' with 3.9 million combined subscribers across his two YouTube channels and about 175 million combined views on the platform. Wallace specialises in the video essay form, presenting opinionated takes on other influencers and celebrities, memes, and platform trends.

High on Wallace's list of K-pop stans' negative traits is their anonymity:

> Now, there's nothing wrong with being anonymous, everyone on the internet has varying levels of anonymity. Then you have people like your average K-pop stan and they give us nothing. Now, some people will use their real name or their real picture, but I think the majority of these stans grab a screenshot of their favorite artists and then slap it over a bio with no identifying information, no identifying information that can be used to hold them accountable for the legitimately terrible things that they then proceed to do. Dox people, send death threats, and they do all this disgusting stuff while having a profile picture of, like, Jennie from Blackpink.

For Wallace, K-pop stans' anonymity underwrites their trolling behavior and shields offending fans from accountability. Wallace indicts K-pop fans for exploiting anonymity as a disinhibiting feature of online interaction, portraying K-pop fans in much the same way as Winder's article – as bad actors who 'dox people' and 'send death threats'. For political scientist Hans Asenbaum, anonymity is a core element of political participation in democratic societies. He defines anonymity as 'a context-dependent identity performance expressing private sentiments in the public sphere by negating some aspects of the legally identified and/or physically embodied persona'.[20] In Asenbaum's view, anonymity is not only identity negating, but just as importantly, it is identity creating, and both of these axes have 'inherently liberating effects'.[21]

What Wallace promotes here is the notion of K-pop fandom's hegemonic power vis-à-vis the platform, despite the fact that individual fans like himself (a self-professed Blackpink stan) come from minoritised groups. Later in his video, however, Wallace recounts the positive impacts of K-pop stans on Twitter, especially their advocacy work in support of BLM and their anti-racist hashtag-jacking campaigns. Thus, Wallace's vlog lands on the side of promoting K-pop fans' activist image, despite initially confirming the shadowy cyberthreat caricature. Wallace's video doubles down on the consensus-building function of rumor by deploying both the negative rumor of K-pop stans as bad actors and the positive rumor of K-pop stans as social-justice heroes, in order to displace the former with the latter. In the process, Wallace targets his video to audiences attracted to either rumor. As internet culture expertise is the bedrock of Wallace's influencer brand and YouTube channel, Wallace often aims to 'settle' social media rumors, promoting his informal authority as an authentic source of truth.

Like Wallace, other fans represent K-pop fandom's group character as the solidarity between minoritised subjects who have mastered social media platforms, as explained in a *Rolling Stone* piece on K-pop fans' activist transformation. The piece quotes Sarah

Jimenez, a 20-year-old K-pop fan from California: 'Although K-pop fans are using a very unique and interesting approach, we show our support in this way because social media is our forte and we know we have the ability to make things trend easily,' she says.

> It's important to show support because the BLM movement is about bringing justice to all the innocent lives lost at the hands of racist police officers. It is something that myself and countless other K-pop fans believe in, because many of us, including myself, are POC. At the end of the day, we are human before we are K-pop stans.[22]

For Jimenez, being ethnically marked does not diminish K-pop stans' humanity – 'we are human before we are K-pop stans'. There is thus no need for K-pop fans to promote a post-identitarian position like that of @YourAnonNews.

Default publicity, context collapse, and fan anonymity

To consider what conclusions we might draw from K-pop stan Twitter's extreme visibility and obscurity, I turn now to scholarship on social media platforms and the peculiarities of networked publicity. Questions of the durability and effectiveness of online social activist networking are common in studies of internet-enabled participatory cultures. A number of media and communications studies scholars have critiqued the lack of privacy, protection, and control of information that diminishes platform users' agency, especially on social networking sites like Facebook, which are uniquely antagonistic to users' desires to contain what they share within closed user networks. For example, Alexander Cho has analysed queer youths' preference for Tumblr over what he calls the 'default publicity' of Facebook, which may endanger queer youth when information that they need to keep hidden from their families gets 'outed' by app features that share the user's activity without their knowledge. Twitter, on the other hand, is actively chosen by users for the ways in which it facilitates 'public' address. Whether used by individuals managing their personal or professional identities as micro-celebrities, or by fans/stans who engage in fannish activity through accounts that are anonymised and thus bounded off from their offline identities, the point is to address an imagined audience that can exceed the bounds of offline relational networks.[23]

At times, this imagined audience is thought to be the public, at large – sometimes a national public, and other times, a transnational one, as in the case of K-pop fan activism. The US context for Twitter's elevated status as a broadcast medium and current events portal is closely connected to the platform's use as a communication tool both in direct

action politics and citizen reporting, especially of police brutality in racialised, urban settings. Historian Ashley Howard attributes the growth of the BLM movement directly to the capacities of social media platforms to publicise eyewitness accounts that refute police or legacy media outlets' exculpatory narratives about police killings of unarmed Black citizens. Howard notes,

> [i]n 2007, it took bloggers almost a year to make the plight of the Jena 6 widespread in mainstream media. By 2012, the use of social media made Trayvon Martin's death headline news in three weeks; Mike Brown's in one day. Freddie Gray's death became international news overnight.[24]

Twitter's epistemological function of circulating knowledge in dangerous, fast-moving circumstances was summarised by The New York Times reporter David Carr in 2014, in response to the role of unofficial news-sharing on the platform in Ferguson:

> For people in the news business, Twitter was initially viewed as one more way to promote and distribute content. But as the world has become an ever more complicated place – a collision of Ebola, war in Iraq, crisis in Ukraine and more – Twitter has become an early warning service for news organizations, a way to see into stories even when they don't have significant reporting assets on the ground.[25]

Sarah J. Jackson, co-author of Hashtag Activism, centers her claim that 'Twitter Made Us Better' in a *New York Times* end-of-decade opinion feature on the point that 'Twitter has fundamentally altered the ways many communities interact with the media, as users feel empowered to challenge harmful framing'.[26] Jackson's argument lands on the side of Twitter's positive impacts, despite the spread of disinformation or uncivil discourse that the platform also enables. Like David Carr, Jackson outlines the ways in which the belief in Twitter's truth function grounds its default publicity: 'While most Americans do not have Twitter accounts, journalists and politicians often do, and they have turned heavily in the past decade to the activists, scholars, and people of color on Twitter to inform their coverage and policies.' In *Twitter: A Biography*, Jean Burgess and Nancy K. Baym also point to the ways in which Twitter's impact as a platform relies on the belief in its status as a broadcast rather than social media platform: 'Many journalists, academics, and politicians are virtually dependent on [Twitter] as a social listening, professional dialogue, and public relations tool, and it is widely considered an essential component of civic infrastructure for emergency communication.'[27] Burgess and Baym describe pundits' embrace of Twitter's rebranding as civic infrastructure as 'Twitter's "debanalization"'.[28] But 'debanalization' is a mysterious and partial process – one might consider the lingering impacts of Twitter's reputation as an essential facet of

public interest discourse on legitimating even the most banal statements and interactions.

Moreover, as Jackson continues, 'Film producers, television writers, and advertisers have changed the way they create content to respond to fans who express their views online.' Jackson draws attention to the potentially ameliorating effects of Twitter's outsized influence as an arena of public discourse, which is not an effect of actual usage, but is largely the result of media industry professionals who regard it as such, for example in the growing genre of media reporting that offer tweets as evidence of broad trends in public opinion. While the conditions of Guy Debord's spectacle-enthralled society have undoubtedly changed in the decades since his assessment of consumer capitalist media worlds, it perhaps deserves renewed consideration when it comes to the common reality effect attributed to Twitter's representation of that which is newsworthy or eventful. While it is true that Twitter has fundamentally changed the relationships between publics and counterpublics, as Jackson asserts, it has also reinforced the conflation of the social worlds in which we live and the territorialisation of the social by social media.

Another feature of Twitter that follows on its default openness is its overarching condition of context collapse. Context-dependent communication governs the modes of self-presentation characteristic of offline interactions. As elucidated by Erving Goffman's classic study of social life as the alternation of contextually dictated roles, we tailor our modes of self-presentation to various audiences and contexts.[29]According to Marwick and boyd, 'the potential diversity of readership on Twitter ruptures the ability to vary self-presentation based on audience, and thus manage discrete impressions'[30]. It is for this reason that many fan users present themselves on the platform without identifying information, in an attempt to mitigate context collapse.

This anonymity can secure context – fan engagement – however, as discussed earlier, anonymity is also a powerful mechanism of resisting the individuating mandate of most social media technologies in favor of a collective identity. Eschewing the neoliberal, self-commodifying subjectivity of social media self-promotion is a political act, whether in fandom or in activism, as affirmed by the comparison between Anonymous and K-pop stan Twitter. Although anonymity compromises the performance of authenticity that is seen as fundamental to social media's self-making project (fueling suspicion and distrust – e.g. K-pop stans are bots and terrorists), it facilitates the shared affective force of networked sociality. As a networked counterpublic, K-pop stan Twitter negotiates context collapse to strengthen rather than weaken intersubjective affinities. Anonymity

allows users to address some of the problems of context collapse when it comes to the dramaturgy of self-presentation, and it makes possible a different kind of authenticity.

To illustrate this point, I offer the case of a viral fan edit of the climactic battle scene from the Marvel film franchise installment *Endgame*. The video was initially circulated on Twitch, the popular streaming platform for gamers, and was picked up across several fandoms and promoted on Twitter by journalist Jemele Hill on 5 June 2020 (Fig. 4). The fan video edit turns the film scene into an allegory for the widespread pro-BLM protests; each superhero character or group that assembles for battle is labeled as a corresponding social group that forms the broad coalition supporting calls for accountability and justice (Figs. 5-8). Together, they form an idiosyncratic catalogue of participants, illustrating the view of the world (and the protests) from within social media.

That the video resonated so strongly across Twitter signals that other Twitter users recognise this world image and appreciate its lulzy humor. On one side of the battle, Thanos is labeled 'Police'. The Avengers are variously labeled: 'Protesters', 'Amish', 'celebrities using their platform and protesting', 'elmo', 'safety advisors', 'joker', 'white people using privilage (sic) as a shield', 'lawyers', 'Doctors and Medics', 'Other Countries Helping', 'Exposing Trump', 'TikTokers', 'Twitter Awareness', 'Donators', and 'Petition Makers'. A crowd of warriors from Wakanda is labeled 'BTS and K-pop Stans', and Giant-Man is 'Anonymous Out of Hibernation'. Finally, a long shot of the battle scene is labeled 'World coming together to take down the police and racists'. This synthesis of Twitter and offline publics into the same social justice battle is enabled by a coalition of unlikely, 'strategic "part-nerdships" with other political actors', as John Postill puts it in *The Rise of Nerd Politics*.[31]

The author of this fan video edit was identified by a small watermark of their Twitter handle – @vantaeotsvn – on the video posted by Jemele Hill. This allowed the author to be identified as BTS ARMY, as @vantaeotsvn refers to a nickname of one of the BTS members followed by the popular fan slogan 'One True 7', or dedication to all seven members of the group. Discovering the BTS fandom identity of the video's author linked its mapping of coalitional politics to the sentiments and perceptions of K-pop fans discovering their political agency. The way that the video portrays Anonymous 'coming out of hibernation' offers a window into ARMY's interpretation of Anonymous' impact (colossal, according to the battle scene) and its status as a powerful teammate in the large-scale battle for justice.

Many viewers tagged @vantaeotsvn in their replies to Hill's tweet, praising the video and thanking the author for the edit. In response to the video's traction on the platform, however, the author declined credit, stating that they wanted to remain lowkey and anonymous, replying to those who tagged her, 'Thanks for everyone mentioning my @ but I would prefer to stay on the low for this, I recently just deleted the original but thanks for liking my edit (high five emoji).' @vantaeotsvn's Twitter bio offers little identifying information besides a profile drawing of a young Black woman and comments about their BTS fandom (Fig. 9). Just as Coleman describes Anonymous' opacity as the mechanism for its 'striking vision of solidarity', @vantaeotsvn remains characteristically masked by their fan identity, in order to rally others around the stirring cause of the 'world coming together to take down the police and racists'.[32]

https://twitter.com/jemelehill/status/1268999177536585728?s=20&t=umKV3Y9yKp0UomeLbQ_CzA

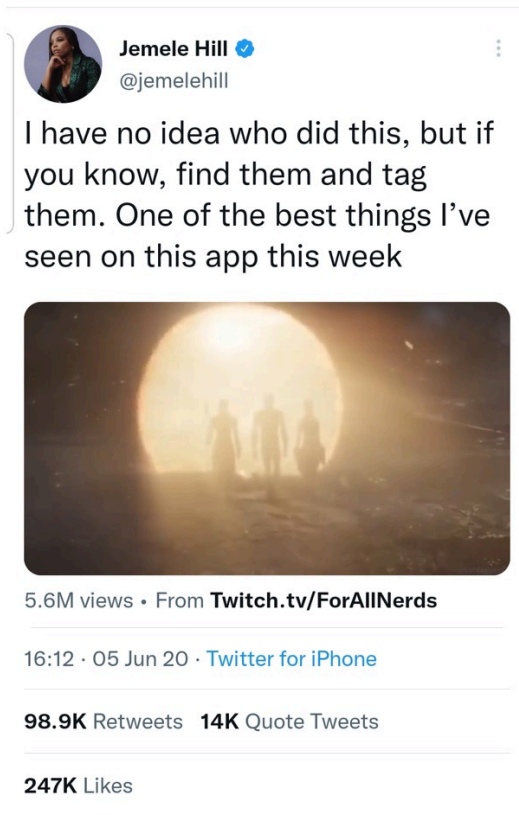
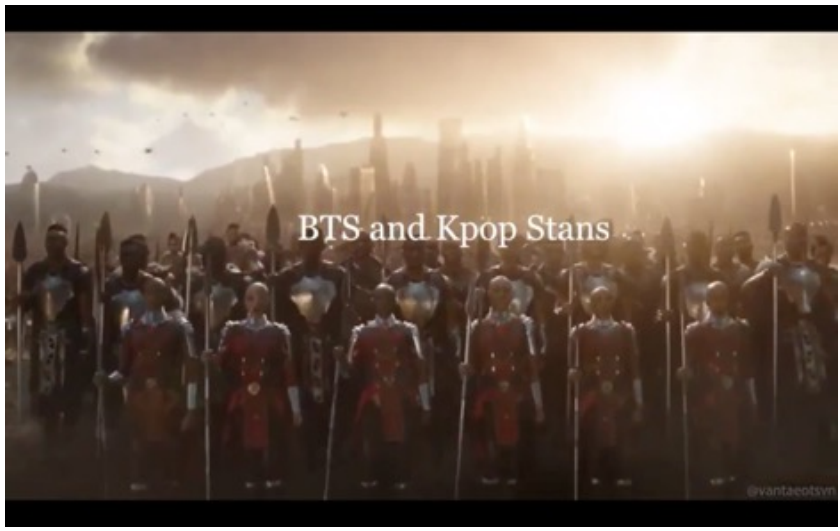
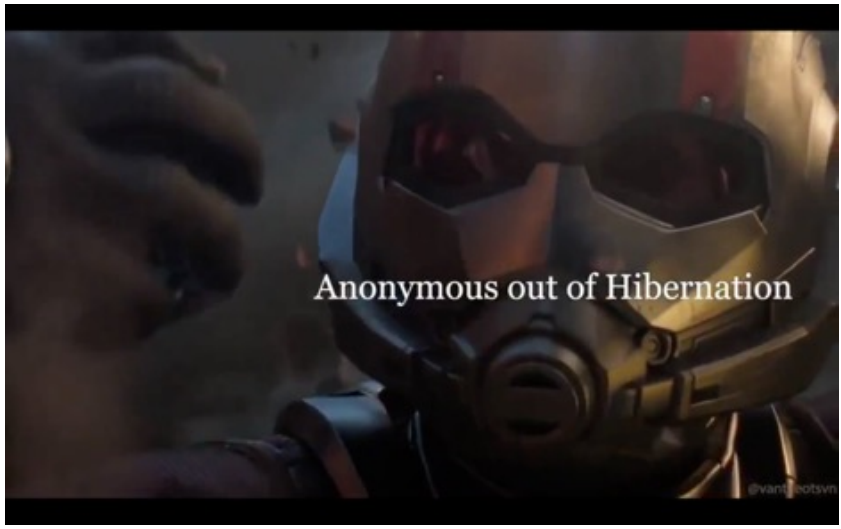


Fig. 4: Avengers Endgame fan edit video goes viral.


Donators
Twitter Awareness
Petition Makers


BTS and Kpop Stans



Figs. 5-8: Screenshots from Avengers fan edit by @vantaeotsvn.

Fig 9: Twitter bio page for @vantaeotsvn, author of the viral Avengers Endgame edit.

K-pop fans' rehabilitated image on Twitter from an annoying platform presence to allies in the fight for racial justice points to an ever-evolving relationship between digital platforms, unstable knowledge, and the politics of fandom. Beyond social media's networked publics, we must acknowledge the growing significance of fandom publics – as fandoms' emphasis on co-feeling begins to activate, overlap with, or strengthen political affiliations. The fact that flashpoints of fan activism happen sporadically without necessarily shaping up into a durable politics are not grounds for discounting coalitions organised by fan identities; indeed, they importantly envision political horizons beyond the nation state as well as nonteleological notions of progress. As K-

pop stan Twitter, like Anonymous, uses plurality as a form of power without identification, K-pop itself becomes a platform for mediating minoritisation as a majority experience, further drawing attention to the hierarchies of capitalist heteropatriarchy that K-pop fans seek to question.

In this context, the insecure knowledge mobilised by rumor, as well as the mysteries of scale and identity that K-pop fandom activates as an unruly mass phenomenon, work in favor of fan empowerment, even as the fandom returns to its duties to promote their celebrity idols through platform manipulation for the sake of K-pop industry profit. Ferocious, organised, and tech-savvy, on one hand, and teenaged, fickle, and manipulable, on the other, K-pop fans manage these contradictory projections through humor and platform ubiquity. Above all, K-pop stans display a 'dynamism and multitudinous quality' – terms that Coleman uses to describe Anonymous.[33] Against the individuating function of social media platforms as agents of self-commodification, anonymised K-pop fans revel in rumor as a vehicle for solidarity.

Authors

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Notes

[1] Besnier 2009, p. 13.

[2] See Srnicek 2017 and Dean 2009. Dean's more recent analysis of fandom in the essay 'Faces as Commons' seems to signal a revised perspective on the possibilities of collective 'commoning' of platforms through participatory action.

[3] The *geopolitics* of the K-pop industry have been studied by many scholars of Korean culture industries and communications, often in terms of cultural promotion and soft power. In the latter case, the use of K-pop music and other forms of popular media as liberal-democratic propaganda in North Korea most concretely fits with Joseph Nye's original theorisation of soft power as an accessory to 'hard', military power. See Nye & Kim 2019. For another perspective on the politics of K-pop as an arena of South Korean cultural policy and cultural diplomacy, see Jin 2016.

[4] This phrase comes from sociology and communications literature on rumor, starting with the 1966 book *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* by American sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani and adapted as 'improvised public opinion' by Kwon et al (2016). In the latter study, social media rumors are viewed as spontaneous expressions of public opinion, especially in relation to changing sociopolitical contexts. They write, 'spontaneous and often less-than-rational communication activities…account for a nontrivial portion of public responses to social or political affairs, especially in times of crisis. Rumor sharing via social media is one such improvised public response.' (p. 217)

[5] As this essay goes to press, the news of billionaire Elon Musk's purchase and promised privatisation of Twitter has been a point of much public debate. Many critics of Musk point to Twitter's importance as a de facto broadcast news medium. See *The New York Times* Opinion Columnist Tressie McMillan Cottom's piece, 'The Real Twitter is Not for Sale', 3 May 2022.

[6] Ohlheiser 2020.

[7] Delgado 2020.

[8] This hostility is expressed as protectiveness towards idol celebrities and is usually fodder for intra-fandom flame wars. The lines of antagonism cross racial, ethnic, and geopolitical lines. Black K-pop fans' ostracisation within online fan spaces, specifically on the fan chat platform Curious Cat, was reported on in 2018 by *Buzzfeed* and *Teen Vogue*. See Dodson 2018 and Dahir 2018.

[9] Emphasis added. Agbor 2020.

[10] Benjamin 2020.

[11] Zaveri 2020.

[12] Rosnow 1988, p. 20.

[13] Anons whom Coleman interviewed credited a shared sense of humor rather than a shared political ideology as their initial point of connection. In this way, Anonymous's shared lulz may be comparable to fandom's structure of shared delight. Coleman 2014, p. 30.

[14] In her conclusion, Coleman writes, 'Anonymous has matured into a serious political movement, so much so that many of the trolls from the "Internet Hate Machine" [as Anonymous was described as it emerged from 4chan] days would 'not recognize' the Anonymous of today…' (p. 392).

[15] Coleman 2014, p. 373.

[16] John Postill 2018 calls digital activists 'technopol (techno-political) nerds', defining them as 'people who operate at the intersection of technology and politics, and who care deeply about the fact of democracy in the digital age' and 'hackers, geeks, lawyers, bloggers, and others interested in issues of internet freedom and "peer-to-peer" forms of cultural production'. (pp. 1-2).

[17] The claim that the sheer volume of K-pop related Twitter engagements indicate that some number of K-pop identified accounts are bots is a common refrain of Twitter analysts. However, when exploring K-pop Twitter accounts, I did not encounter a single account that I suspected not to have an actual fan behind it. Abby Ohlheiser 2020, MIT Technology reporter, corroborates my assessment based on her reporting with K-pop fans. She writes, '[K-pop fans] are so good at manipulating the metrics of social media that people who are new to watching K-pop in action can, on first glance, mistake the account for bots.' Travis M. Andrews echoes Ohlheiser in a humanist vein: 'But, of course, they're not bots. They're a body of people, and people are far more complex than a hashtag.' Andrews 2020.

[18] Winder 2020.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Asenbaum 2018, p. 459.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Chan 2020.

[23] For a discussion of the 'imagined audience' of online communication, see Litt 2012.

[24] Howard 2017, p. 125.

[25] Carr 2014.

[26] Jackson 2019.

[27] Burgess & Baym 2020, p. 4.

[28] Ibid., p. 22.

[29] Goffman 1959.

[30] Marwick and boyd 2011, p. 116.

[31] Postill 2018, p. 3.

[32] Coleman 2014, p. 399.

[33] Ibid.