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#FREEBRITNEY: STRATEGIES OF COUNTERNARRATIVES AND SELF-REGULATION WITHIN FAN ACTIVISM

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On November 12, 2021, the conservatorship of U.S. pop superstar Britney Spears was terminated, almost thirteen years after its institution in 2008. The conservatorship represented a complex legal and financial arrangement that placed severe restrictions on Spears' professional, medical and personal autonomy (Farrow & Tolentino, 2021); the legal arrangement was also at the heart of a growing activist movement that demanded a restoration of Spears' rights. Commonly known as the #FreeBritney movement, this primarily online group has worked since 2009 to raise awareness of and bring an end to Spears' conservatorship.

This paper situates the #FreeBritney movement at the intersection of fandom and digital social movements, highlighting the activist potential of fan communities (See Dym, 2020). Our analysis is organized around two key research questions:

- What are the constitutive norms, practices and communication strategies of the #FreeBritney movement?
- How can the #FreeBritney movement speak to the intersection of fandom and digital activism theories?

In the following sections, we briefly outline key background information, describe our methodological approach and present two high-level themes from our qualitative analysis. We conclude by pointing to key tensions within fan studies and digital activism that this paper helps to unpack.

Background and Method

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In 2008, as Spears publicly struggled with her mental health and personal life, her father was granted a temporary conservatorship (Stark, 2021). A conservatorship “is a court case where a judge appoints a responsible person or organization to care for another adult who cannot care for themselves or manage their own finances” (*Conservatorship*, n.d.). This legal arrangement quietly became permanent as Britney Spears returned to public life in late 2008.

While the #FreeBritney movement sprang up almost immediately after her conservatorship, their efforts gained significant momentum between 2019 and 2021, as fan claims about the conservatorship were confirmed in a series of leaks, popular documentaries and court testimonies (Stark, 2021). The movement has since enjoyed support from a variety of political and cultural actors, and played a precipitative role in ending the conservatorship (Villareal, 2021).

This paper relies on thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of 16 semi-structured interviews with self-identified #FreeBritney members recruited on Twitter. Interviews addressed topics related to the movement’s organization, core practices and values; affordances of digital platforms for organizing; tensions around organizing strategies; and next steps for the movement. The following sections describe key themes that surfaced from interviews: building alternative narratives and community regulation. In the full version of this paper, we expand on these themes, particularly as they relate to scholarship on fandom (e.g. Dym, 2020) and social movements (e.g. Jackson & Foucault-Welles, 2015).

Deconstructing, Rebuilding and Trending within #FreeBritney

While all pop stars negotiate a fraught relationship between public and private life, Spears’ conservatorship produced a particularly complicated relationship between fans and mainstream media portrayals. In the aftermath of her public mental health struggles in 2008, many interview participants were highly critical of Spears’ treatment by mainstream media. Thus, a primary objective of #FreeBritney members involved piecing together and promoting an alternative narrative of Spears’ career and conservatorship. In keeping with theorists who argue that hashtags constitute a digital counterpublic through the discursive and relational affordances of social media (Wimmer, 2016), interview participants recalled organizing “trending parties” to amplify #FreeBritney hashtags. Participants relied on trending hashtags to help increase the visibility and validity of resistant readings of Britney Spears’ conservatorship, as one participant noted that “the trends are the trends – there’s no denying them.”

Central to the formation of #FreeBritney’s digital counterpublic is the concept of fan reading. Fan reading describes how “individual interpretations [of popular texts] are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other [fans]” (Jenkins, 2012). Within the #FreeBritney movement, participants engaged in fan reading by creating alternative interpretations of social media posts, public events, interviews, gossip, artistic work and court documents that were connected to create a legible, resistant narrative of Spears as a victim of conservatorship abuse. Moreover, by (re)producing this narrative and distributing it among online networks, participants engaged in a larger

pattern of counterpublic activism that foregrounds virality as a strategy (Jackson & Foucault-Welles, 2015).

A ‘Self-Regulating’ Body

Researchers have critiqued the affordances of social media as an organizing tool, arguing that it centers the individual experience over collective identities (e.g. Milan, 2015). In the #FreeBritney movement, we see a balancing act of building a grassroots, largely leaderless movement, and maintaining a coherent political strategy of advocating for Spears’ autonomy. While certain factors like follower count and legal expertise gave some members prominence within the movement, #FreeBritney participants typically denied the existence of formal leadership structures. Interviewees described collectively forming internal codes around communication and demonstration activities, which one participant described as a “self-regulating body” of members.

Echoing de Kosnik’s (2012) theory of the “social innovations of fandom,” #FreeBritney members communicated with each other in group chats, direct messages and comments on social media posts, deliberating with each other on how to approach the movement’s obstacles. For example, interview subjects reflected on the labor of “calling each other out” and “standing by the truth” in limiting the conspiracy and misinformation activities of the movement. Using social media tools, members fought misinformation through conducting and presenting their own research, targeted disengagement from conspiracy accounts and amplification of aligned #FreeBritney members.

Conclusion

To the extent it reflects and diverges from fandom and digital activism practices, the #FreeBritney movement poses compelling questions about key tensions in both fields, specifically regarding building alternative narratives and self-regulation. In the full version of this paper, we continue our focus on the intersection of fandom and digital activism practices, demonstrating its implications in shaping political identities and outlooks. With this analysis of #FreeBritney, we interrogate fandom as a site of activist potential within the framework of a successful online movement, building on important work in internet, media, and feminist studies.

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