

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Rally to Restore Sanity, Prepoliticization, and the Future of Politics

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This essay explores the significance of the 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear. Our analysis and discussion is grounded in findings from 40 interviews conducted at the rally on October 30, 2010, and in our close analyses of news coverage published between September 2010 and February 2011, online discussions from Comedy Central fan forums, the Rally to Restore Sanity Facebook site, and Twitter. We argue for the importance of understanding “prepoliticization” as a key phase of contemporary politics, particularly within a mediated public sphere such as this one. The Rally offers unique insight into how the convergence of entertainment and politics gives rise to new modes of civic participation, particularly for citizens who do not see themselves as “political.”

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Weeks before the 2010 Congressional Election and on the heels of right-wing pundit Glenn Beck's *Rally to Restore Honor*, celebrity “fake news” anchor Jon Stewart announced the call for a “Rally for Sanity” on his four-times-nightly news show. In the buildup to and aftermath of the Rally, observers witnessed an extraordinary proliferation of news stories, magazine articles, blog, Twitter, and Facebook posts, threaded discussions, and airwave and radio content offering heated and diverse accounts of what the Rally should be, what it was, and what it purported to do. More than 2 million people watched the live television broadcast; a live stream of this happening attracted 570,000 views online; there were more than 120,000 tweets posted to Twitter and over 35,000 Rally photos uploaded to Flickr (Sniderman, 2010); over 130,000 users joined the organizer's Facebook page. This rally, convened by Stewart of *The Daily Show (TDS)* and Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report (TCR)*, was the largest to take place in Washington, DC, in 2010, and larger than the majority of marches and rallies in DC over the previous 10 years. At the time of writing, over 2,900 *Rally*-themed videos had been uploaded to YouTube alone, a #Rally4sanity

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Twitter search yielded approximately 90,000 hits, and an auto-tune mashup of Stewart's final speech ("The Sanity Song") had garnered over 3 million views.

We argue that the *Rally* provides unique insight into how the convergence of entertainment and politics is giving rise to new modes of civic participation, and into media's role in *prepoliticization*, that is, in the shaping of new political sensibilities and desires. Our essay bridges two simultaneous and overlapping phenomena: first, that consumers/viewers/fans of the "fake news" of *TDS* and *TCR* are constitutive of a broad audience diverse in demographics of age, gender, sex, class, race, and political affiliation; second, the *Rally* represents an important moment for challenging social movement scholars examining the convergence of old and new media, to rethink what exactly counts as civic engagement and democratic participation.

Arguably, by refusing to assign any explicit *political* meaning to the *Rally*, Stewart and Colbert incited widespread discussion and debate within various public spheres about the current state of U.S. political discourse and about the integrity of corporate news media. Here, we situate the *Rally* as a moment in popular culture that contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation about how popular media fandom opens up spaces for civic engagement. Specifically, we argue that the *Rally* demonstrates the power of the "prepolitical" act of being engaged *TDS* and *TCR* fans. Purely celebratory appraisals of the *Rally's* democratic potential must, however, be tempered: Although the event did prove an important agent in the mobilization and civic participation of otherwise apolitical actors, it would also trigger a wave of disappointment on the part of the more politically active participants. Thus, this essay also presents the strengths and limitations of comedy, parody, and satire in the realm of civic engagement. In this mixed-methods study, our analysis and discussion draws on 40 *Rally* interviews, news coverage, and analysis between September 2010 and February 2011, online threaded discussions from Comedy Central fan forums, the *Rally to Restore Sanity* Facebook site, and Twitter.

Doing citizenship

Despite some concerns that political apathy and cynicism are on the rise, more recent scholarly debates have begun to recontextualize these concerns. As Peter Dahlgren (2006) notes, the cultural turn in theorizing different kinds of civic engagement makes explicit the notion that there are numerous ways of "doing citizenship" (p. 267). We are witnessing "the emergence of a newer, informal politics" (Dahlgren, 2003, p. 168), most evident in the articulation of new social movements, activist collectives, Web 2.0 practitioners, and global-scale grassroots organizational politics, making distinctions between civic culture and the public sphere a crucial endeavor (Boler & Turpin, 2008). While the public sphere comprises the politically relevant communicative spaces in both media and daily life, civic culture denotes the sociocultural dispositions, practices, and processes that serve as the preconditions for the citizenry's participation in the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2003, p. 154). Dahlgren contends that

“the word ‘politics’ connotes *doing*, whereas ‘civics’ suggests the ‘pre-condition’ to doing” (Jones, 2005, p. 189). Thus, for Dahlgren civil society can serve as “a training ground that ‘grooms’ citizens, preparing them for civic participation and political engagement” (p. 272).

John Street (1997) argues that understanding of politics has moved far beyond “the formal boundaries of the constitution and the political processes” to the informal ways in which “people see themselves and those around them” through the production and consumption of popular culture (p. 42). Scholars are now looking for “possible democratic moments within political entertainment” (Warner, 2006, p. 432). These shifting dynamics may exert “an empowering, democratising effect” that does not undermine citizenship, but rather reinforces it “by supplying new kinds of awareness and expectations” (Corner & Pels, 2003, p. 5). At their most basic level, representations of politics in popular culture have made politics more accessible to segments of the population that would not otherwise seek out political information and, in some cases, to apolitical audiences that do not typically read, watch, or listen to the news (Baum, 2003; Prior, 2003). Van Zoonen’s (2005) research on emotion-based politics proposes that entertainment (broadly writ) is a crucial site for examining shifting conceptions of civic engagement and for questioning evolving notions of how pleasure can inform citizenship (p. 4). For Jones (2005), satire in popular (and political) cultures such as *TDS* in particular provides a “spark for drawing viewers toward greater discursive participation in politics” (p. 184).

The *Rally* additionally serves to explore Bennett’s (2008) paradigms of *engaged* and *disengaged* youth. The former emphasizes “the empowerment of youth as expressive individuals and symbolically frees young people to make their own creative choices. ... [all the while easing] the overriding duty to participate in conventional government-centered activities” (p. 2); the latter acknowledges “the rise of more autonomous forms of public expression such as consumer politics, or the occasional protest in MySpace, while keeping the focus on the generational decline in connections to government (e.g., voting patterns) and general civic involvement (e.g., following public affairs in the news)” (p. 3). This tension figures prominently in the *Discussion* section, for the event comprised both ends of Bennett’s spectrum.

Media convergence and mediated public spheres

The *Rally* was *not* initially catalyzed by grassroots populist interest or drive but announced by Jon Stewart and orchestrated by Comedy Central (one of the many subsidiaries of the Viacom corporation), in terms of timing, content, format, and delivery. In *Convergence culture* (2006), Henry Jenkins observes that “[it is the] interplay—and tension—between the top-down force of corporate convergence and the bottom-up force of grassroots convergence that is driving many of the changes we are observing in the media landscape” (p. 169). By convergence, we refer to the uneven outcomes precipitated by the give-and-take of bottom-up and top-down cultural production that have arguably fostered a more dialogic relationship between corporate and grassroots stakeholders. Because the *Rally* only truly began to take

shape and materialize through the massive grassroots and populist mobilizations that ultimately “made” this event (e.g., political news organizations like reddit.com, the fans on Facebook, self-organized Rally-goers, Ariana Huffington’s donated buses, Oprah Winfrey’s free airline tickets), there is further reason to examine this happening in terms of the relationship between corporate consumer culture and fans-as-citizens.

It is unclear whether media convergence has created a playing field that looks a lot more democratic or a lot more hegemonic. Debates regarding when and if viewing *TDS* has political significance continue to be hotly contested. Drawing on Warner’s (2002) definition of counterpublics, however, Boler (2006, 2007, February 20) argues elsewhere that *TDS* does in fact create a counterpublic of political significance. Dahlgren (2005, p. 149) proposes that the “public sphere has a very fluid, sprawling quality, a view that correlates with the third generation of reception research on the mass media, where studies move beyond the actual sites of media reception and probe the circulation of meaning in broader microcontexts of everyday life.” In sum, this Rally provides an excellent site for understanding how contemporary convergence of on- and offline social ties create the conditions for counterpublics formed through shared affinities, and increasingly, affinities likely to be cultivated through shared, in-common popular media such as *TDS/TCR*.

Prepolitical and “initiatory demonstrations”

The arguably new “sprawling quality” of the public sphere and the extension of media into everyday life are key to the notion of the “prepolitical.” Without a doubt, in the absence of the sense of counterpublic(s) developed by the fan communities of *TDS* and *TCR*, there would have been no Rally. Yet the fact that the *Rally* was more of an event or happening than a directed political message or call to action reinscribes the sense that these satirical programs are best understood as sites of “prepoliticization.”

Callahan (2010) outlines three useful categories for thinking about political rallies: *initiatory demonstrations*, *demonstrations of crises*, and *routine demonstrations* (p. xxii). In demonstrations of crises, demonstrators confront the state directly as political instabilities intensify. Routine demonstrations are generally less volatile and confrontational, and rely on both the political leadership and the rank-and-file membership to produce a disciplined representation of political demands. “Initiatory demonstrations,” perhaps best describe the *Rally*:

Initiatory demonstrations refer to the *embryonic stages of collective action for groups outside of the political process*. Typical of this form of protest are inchoate or weak groups and organizations that are future-oriented in their demands. The central objective . . . is to engage in a process that *leads to the recognition of the group and its political demands*. (p. xxii; emphasis added)

Indeed these “embryonic stages of collective action” resonate with the idea of the “prepolitical” as useful concepts in the study of modes of symbolic conflict

and communicative debates, as represented in the increasing forms and modalities of “digital dissent” made possible through “Web 2.0” technologies (Boler & Turpin, 2008).

In Raymond Williams’s categories of dominant, residual, and emergent culture, “emergent culture” refers to the “result of processes where new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created . . . The residual has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process as an effective element of the present” (1977, p. 122). Thus prepolitical is to political what emergent is to dominant and residual. Additionally, Williams’s concept of “structures of feeling” aptly describes the emergent sensibility of the prepolitical cultivated through critical awareness as “a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange” (p. 131). Williams’s description of embryonic feeling and thinking captures the sensibility of skepticism increasingly characteristic of North American citizens.

The emergent sensibilities of structures of feeling that characterize an era of civic skepticism resonate with Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “distribution of the sensible” (2004, p. 12). Rancière’s particular focus is on the “unheard,” those who have “no part,” those without a so-called “political” voice in democracies. Politics is the dynamic mode through which those without a voice in the dominant culture work to make heard or “sensible” what has been repressed or precluded or censored within political regimes: “Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (1999, p. 30). Following this definition, *TDS* and *TCR* have arguably created a new set of discourses that have interrupted the distribution of the sensible as determined by the coordinates of politicians and traditional news media. However, considering Rancière’s definition of politics as an effective intervention in the dominant regime, it is difficult to see the *Rally* as more than “prepolitical.”

Who rallied for sanity?

While the majority of those attending were White/Anglo-American, there was considerable diversity of ethnicity. The brief snapshot of the demographics represented by our interviewees, observations, identifying features of Rally signs and placards, and our close study of online-related discussions, evidences the broad and diverse fan base/Rally-goers: a wide breadth of age range (much broader than the stereotyped media-cited demographic for *TDS/TCR* as 18–35), with significant numbers of the crowd being decidedly older than 35; and diversity across the political spectrum, ranging from libertarian, social and/or economic conservatives to liberal and/or distinctly progressive. A majority of our respondents identified with a self-chosen nomination of “moderate,” a political identification arguably propelled forward by Stewart’s earlier

reference to the event as the “Million Moderate March.” The notion of being politically moderate was clearly embraced by attendees, both in the spoken interviews we conducted and manifest in the creative signage and placards that blanketed the Mall. One interviewee went so far as to credit his newfound interest in national politics to the emergence of what he called “a more moderate movement, as opposed to just the left and the just the right.” One sign captures this notion of moderation quite well: “What do we want? Moderation! When do we want it? In a reasonable time frame.”

In terms of contextualizing audience demographics more fully, Rally signs and placards provide further insight, cutting across a number of categories: age (“Confused senior citizens for sanity”), gender (“More women in politics but please no winking”), sex (“I masturbate and I vote, but not usually at the same time”), education (“I’m not threatened by your post-secondary education”), and race (“We are citizens, not terrorists”). The audience’s diversity is strongly reflected, however ironically, in the pageantry of signs and displays, lending the Rally the look (albeit not the feel) of a conventional Rally. In terms of demographics, the Rally certainly frustrates longstanding perceptions and assumptions about who comprises the Comedy Central audience. Even Stewart took the liberty of pointing out the audience’s striking diversity, suggesting that the “ten million people” in attendance represented a “perfect demographic sampling of the American people.” Stewart kicked off the event by illustrating the impossibility of generalizing the political views of individuals attending a Rally of this kind (and perhaps tellingly of who exactly watches the program): “Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to count off. Pass the mike around, and say your number and then identify your demographic—you know, like Native American/lesbian.” He then handed the microphone down to the crowd, and the count off proceeded through quite a number of the crowd, to great laughter. Playful banter aside, Stewart rightly gestured toward a greater appreciation of just how broad, diverse, and fragmented the Comedy Central audience has grown to be.

Thus despite the moderation proclaimed by many in the crowd (and reinscribed by virtue of the fact that any political sign or placard at the Rally could be read or intended as ironic), one easily identifies distinctly progressive leanings of a majority of Rally-goers. Further support of the progressive partisan stance of Stewart and Rally attendees lies in the fact the *Rally for Sanity* was mobilized in reaction to Glenn Beck’s far right rally.

Discussion

For all the debate generated on the part of journalists and media pundits, nowhere were the complexities of the Rally’s significance more visibly registered than in the online and offline discussions promoted by Rally-goers and other observers of the Comedy Central event.

Allow us to briefly review the recurring themes that emerged in our grounded-theoretical analysis of the 40 *Rally* interviews we conducted. Together, these interviews highlight the shared and diverse characteristics, perceptions, and hopes of the participants. Themes include desires:

1. to cultivate a shared set of sensibilities, to congregate amidst a crowd of other like-minded people (in spite of different political stripes);
2. to move beyond partisan binaries and cultivate the capacity to see both/all sides of issues;
3. to identify oneself outside of the limited parameters of existing political categories (e.g., identifying as politically “moderate”);
4. to create “a better future” and generate greater “awareness.”

Turning apathy into action, and hoping for a “better future”

In the weeks leading up to the *Rally*, over 230,000 Facebook users signed up as “going” to the Rally with 109,000 in the “maybe attending” category. The text for the FB Rally Page opens:

“I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take it anymore!” Who among us has not wanted to open their window and shout that at the top of their lungs? Are you one of those people? Excellent. Then we’d like you to join us in Washington, DC on October 30—a date of no significance whatsoever—at the Daily Show’s “Rally to Restore Sanity.” Ours is a Rally for the people who’ve been too busy to go to rallies, who actually have lives and families and jobs (or are looking for jobs)—not so much the Silent Majority as the Busy Majority. If we had to sum up the political view of our participants in a single sentence ... we couldn’t. That’s sort of the point.

Online conversation on Facebook ranged from coordinating travel arrangements to heated discussion about the *Rally*’s purpose and message. Thousands expressed their affiliation with the upcoming rally as an act of civic participation, however broadly defined. As one online commenter noted, “I’m flying in [to the Rally] from California. So excited!! This will be the first ‘activist’ thing I’ve done since having kids (and becoming a ‘responsible adult’).” In an interesting progression, another “responsible adult”/group member replied enthusiastically to this comment, speaking to the Rally as “a chance to show up and stand for something.” Given the secretive nature of the event (Stewart and company keeping a closed lid on the general content and structure of the Rally until days before it was staged), this kind of optimism surfaced in many places. Importantly, however, optimism is here linked to an activist sensibility and not merely to a consumerist appetite for comedic entertainment.

This brand of optimism is perhaps best encapsulated in a statement made by one of the young women we interviewed at the Rally who, when asked what prompted her to come, framed the event in these revolutionary terms: “I feel like this is really the spark for our generation to start a political movement because I feel like a lot of people our age [18–24] are not at all interested in the issues and I feel like this is getting it on the map.” In her view, the Rally not only proved an opportunity to express one’s civic responsibilities but also to inspire a larger political movement. Another interviewee echoed this sentiment more modestly when she suggested that Stewart and Colbert be credited for attempting to “turn apathy into action.” Several respondents

identified with the “progressive” nature of the Rally, noting that an event of this kind promotes, in the words of one interviewee, “the idea of thinking that the future will be better ... It’s not really cynical.” This vague hope for a “better future” arose numerous times:

Q: And what’s your hope of what will come out of the Rally today?

Whitney: Fun! It may be a restored sense of faith in humanity ... That maybe things could be better, yeah.

Here we witness the hopes and desires of inchoate or weak groups and individuals expressing future-oriented demands or aspirations, the Rally serving as a prepolitical gateway to future civic engagement.

“Cynical and apathetic couch potatoes”? Not!

Our interviews provide unique insight into the diverse counterpublic of Comedy Central fans—an audience too often dismissed as “stoned slackers” and “dopey college kids” (Millican, 2006). As our interviews and observations demonstrate, consumers/viewers/fans of the “fake news” of *TDS* and *TCR* represent a broad audience diverse in demographics of age, gender, sex, class, race, and political affiliation. Contrary to previous scholarly claims and stereotyping of *TDS/TCR* viewers, these diverse fans are by no means an apathetic audience wishing merely to laugh at current events from the comfort of their living rooms.

Not only does this event contradict previous scholarship suggesting that watching *TDS* may likely cause cynicism and discourage college-aged youth from participating in elections, but the noted creativity and political diversity (most evident in the unusually creative and diverse signs created by Rally-goers) of this historical turnout reflects a highly engaged citizenry. *TDS* is by no means a “cause” of cynical disaffection with voting or politics (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006); to the contrary, this mass turnout of nearly half a million North American fans willing to travel thousands of miles reflects a new kind of citizenry:

I think everybody came with their own agenda and even though most people didn’t hear what was going on or anything else they came and you can’t call them couch potatoes now, can you? ... They were on their feet! (MC, from Minneapolis, 78)

A number of those we interviewed experienced the *Rally* not as “prepolitical” but rather as being a call for particular kinds of civic action, such as voting. For such attendees, there was a legitimate sense that the Rally would serve as a fundamental rallying cry of democracy, to “get out the vote” in what was being described as a pivotal midterm election for the Obama administration. The clearest political message beyond having adopted the Rally cry to “restore sanity” was the importance of voting; as one of our interviewees stated emphatically, “I hope that a lot of the people that came would really go vote, that it would really activate them.” Voting was, arguably,

only on the collective radar because the national U.S. 2010 congressional election was taking place 3 days after the rally.

In further direct contradiction to claims that watching *TDS* causes cynicism and disaffection from electoral politics, many of those we interviewed at the *Rally* spoke to us about the importance of voting and were acutely aware of the stakes of the upcoming congressional election:

The main, core message [of the Rally] is going to be: vote, vote, vote. And I like that. I think that, you know, people need to get out there because it just seems like it's the Tea Partiers and it's the young Republican vote that's getting up, that are voting and there's so many of my generation that just doesn't seem motivated enough to, and we need to have that fire, we need to have that motivation to make ourselves heard. (Carolyn)

I hope it gets political, honestly, 'cause, like, I am here for the one fact that, like, you don't wanna take yourself too seriously and you're kind of here 'cause you feel like it's a once-in-a-lifetime thing that you're getting a part of, but also, like, the election is on Tuesday, and it is freaking a lot of people out, and so I hope that with everybody here mobilized—I'm sure a lot of people here are already voting but I hope there is a message that everybody needs to go out and vote because—we can't let the crazies take over. (Steven)

Thus, while we are arguing that the event was largely prepolitical, there were significant exceptions of Rally-goers who indeed read the event as political, or attended as persons already politically engaged in other realms of activism or organizing such as to “get out the vote.”

Prepolitical as actively seeking like-minded communities

As noted earlier, the *Rally* mobilized citizens to attend from all corners of North America, inspiring others to be copresent with other like-minded people. While indeed the best way to describe this Rally is as a “happening” at which people simply wanted to “be” (“I wanted to put my body where that was, and that's why I came”)—and while many were there because they are fans of *TDS* and *TCR*—few if any were present as fans thronging to see or meet celebrities. This was illustrated by the fact that people were content to simply “be” present; as one interviewee put it, “I don't know what the message is, but I'm glad I could be here.” In fact, a vast majority was not able to see nor hear the stage performance organized by Comedy Central due to a terrible sound system and because the crowd was so large that most were up to half a mile away from the stage. When responding to our question about why they had come, interviewees did not say, “to see Stewart or Colbert.” Rather, they spoke of *TDS* or *TCR* as being a highly valued, central, and indispensable part of their lives and media viewing rituals. It was, in the end, sufficient to be part of the happening as a way of embodying a loyalty, dedication, and respect for the media criticism and “sanity” they deem Stewart and Colbert offer on

a nightly basis. As one participant stated, “This is just like Woodstock, only with the clothes on.”

If the idea of congregating for political or civic reasons failed to capture the imagination, establishing a sense of “shared sensibility,” belonging, and community certainly did. Uncannily illustrating Williams’s description of structures of feeling, one attendee stated in a televised interview, “It’s amazing to be able to hear the words that you feel and that you think everyday, spoken to a large amount of people—and you know they’re agreeing with you, too” (“Should News Outlets”). Similar to the desire for shared or increased “awareness,” was the frequently cited hope or desire to experience up close the “shared sensibilities” of Comedy Central fans gathered together en masse:

John: We don’t have a whole lot of specific hopes. We knew there would be a lot of people who share our sensibilities and I think that’s the main reason that the three of us are here. *It is empowering to be with people that share my sensibility.*

Respondent 2: Yeah, *it’s nice to know you’re not alone.* (emphasis added)

The desire to be with others who share one’s “sensibility” also resonates with Rancière’s descriptions of the distribution of the sensible. For example, another man (attending the Rally with friends from Nebraska) described the pleasure of being with fellow fans: “Watching Colbert on the TV is one of my favorite pastimes in the evening and *it’s just getting a chance to see everybody that likes to watch it come together* and, you know, have, just, make a statement, you know?” “What I’ve enjoyed so far,” a Rally-goer from Florida told us, “is just *meeting all of the people who are of like minds.*” In an insightful comment, one respondent expressed his sense of belonging to an inchoate social group: “I have no agenda, I have no message. I’m just amazed that there’s so many ... I wouldn’t expect there’d be this many sane people in America.”

Hopes for “awareness” and transcending two-party politics

Stressing the hope of seeing beyond narrowly defined points of view, an older, educated New Yorker commented, “Well, I guess, the greatest hope is that the Rally will reverberate throughout the country so that other people will understand the importance of it and its potential effect ... that it will cause people to see other points of view.” This hope that people could come to see “other points of view” was channeled by others who hoped the *Rally* would lead to greater “awareness”:

Marlon: I’m glad that it’s being broadcasted on Comedy Central, still, but, like you said, it would maybe be a good step towards, like, awareness. A lot of people ... A lot of people here would, like, meet each other, form groups for, like, political groups, for further awareness outside of this small [gathering].

Another addressed our question about cynicism and countered, “I think that what they say is true that a lot of truths are said in jest and I think it’s only through humor that we can really acknowledge some of the more depressing parts in life. I think

it's actually *helping people be more aware of issues*" (emphasis added). Together these responses illustrate the *Rally's* role in acclimating those who have not felt "included" in civic debate by providing an undefined, yet civic space and place through which people's copresence expressed their political hopes and frustrations.

Related to this desire for seeing other points of view, another recurring theme to emerge was a plea on the part of attendees to rise above partisanship and to refuse tired and worn left/right categorization. Stewart elaborated the aims of the *Rally* during the event itself:

The image of Americans that is reflected back to us by our political and media process is false. It is us through a funhouse mirror. We hear every damn day about how fragile our country is, on the brink of catastrophe, torn by polarizing hate, and how it's a shame that we can't work together to get things done. But the truth is we do. We work together to get things done every damn day. The only place we don't is here [in Washington] or on cable TV. But Americans don't live here or on cable TV. Where we live our values and principles form the foundation that sustains us while we get things done. (Montopoli, 2010)

The binary of two-party politics was frequently criticized by interviewees who repeatedly noted their wish to transcend the either/or polarization of politics. As one Guy Fawkes-inspired respondent noted, "I don't really adhere to Democrat versus Republican and I don't really like how a lot of the debates go in this country, so this is a good way to show my 'Hey, we need to be a little bit more calm about what we're doing.'" Echoing this statement, another told us, "I think that it will let people know that [rally-goers are] not just a bunch of radical nutcases and that we actually do have opinions that maybe aren't so different than depending on whether you're Democrat or Republican 'cause I'm pretty sure there are a lot of both here." Another interviewee spoke to the power of "knowing that there's so many people of like minds that aren't necessarily on one side or the other, and [seeing] that there's a whole bunch of us that are right there in the middle and really want to be reasonable."

Post-*Rally* disappointments

The range of respondents' emotional registers — enthusiasm, optimism, pragmatism, and curiosity — inevitably came to include disappointments regarding the vision and outcomes of the *Rally* (or the lack thereof). In the days following the event, fans of *TDS* congregated on the Comedy Central-operated forums mostly to discuss the brilliant creativity deployed in *Rally* signs, slogans, and T-shirts (and to talk about the various modes of transportation used to move to and from the Washington Mall). Those who did have stronger political views were in fact frustrated and disappointed that Stewart had not defined a rallying cry or "cause," expressing a disconnect between the hopes they felt when the *Rally* was first announced, and the unrealized hopes of a shared political aim or goal that never materialized. This disconnect is best encapsulated in a post-*Rally* response posted on a Comedy Central/*TDS* message board forum: "The message was obscured with parody, and so not much time was

spent explaining their intent for the Rally... To call for a Rally means, a call for action, and that message was lost.”

Another thread of discussion that struck a chord with fans materialized after one woman posted a comment expressing her supreme dissatisfaction with the Rally experience as a whole (“Anyone Else Really Disappointed?”). She describes her costly travels from Seattle to Washington, DC, as well as her unsuccessful attempt to join Rally-goers on the Mall. Due to both traffic and pedestrian congestion, she was forced to watch the broadcast from her hotel room—the “unfunny comedy, lame music[al] acts ... and Jon’s stupid commentary at the end.” As her post makes clear, her disappointment stemmed from Stewart’s willingness to call out his audience as being part of the larger problem of political partisanship: By insisting that liberals are just as much at fault for “the insanity and the bullshit” of what counts as public discourse, she argues, Stewart is evading the real problem—the lack of accountability from “right-wing thugs.” Not mincing her words, she concludes: “So really: Fuck you, Stewart. Seriously. You’re a coward.”

Twitter users also echoed this sentiment; take, for example, this (re)tweeted post by @LasVegasJessica: “I’m still pissed at #Stewart & #Colbert for #Rally4Sanity. Promoted apathy & bullshit bipartisanship. #NEVERAGAIN.” What makes Twitter posts of this kind so interesting is that the dissenting perspective displayed here is easily searchable via hashtags (#Stewart, #Colbert, #Rally4Sanity”), making the comments more readily visible to already interested parties. For fans of Stewart and Colbert not normally presented with negative depictions of their heroes, these *TDS* forum comments and Twitter posts serve as perhaps unusual reminders of just how broad and potentially divided fake news devotees can be. The original “Disappointed” post is significant because it solicited a broader set of comments on the disappointments participants experienced following the Rally; the post would also incite *TDS* forum members to critically evaluate the event’s political shortcomings.

Overall, forum discussants quick to criticize the Rally were generally more tempered in the direction of their attack. “In a country of 300 million people,” begins another entry, “one Rally and one day of music wont [*sic*] do the job, and it never will.” Importantly, frustration also stemmed from a number of circumstances that were peripheral to the event: extended wait times at DC Metro stations, ineffective crowd management, and inconsistent telecommunications networks on the Mall, not to mention the near-nonexistent audiovisuals for the enormous crowd. Thus, it is worth noting the degree to which frustrations and disappointments hinged on numerous factors: political commitment (“Stewart is evading the real problem”), ideological (or nonideological) motivations and expectations (“promoted apathy & bullshit bipartisanship”; “one day of music [won’t] do the job”), and miscellaneous everyday factors (crowds, wait times). If the uneasy convergence of politics and entertainment produces conflicting outcomes for the players involved, it is also noteworthy that peripheral phenomena can just as easily influence perceptions of the event. Indeed, such comments serve as important reminders of the lived experiences of citizens negotiating the personal, the political, and the everyday, expressing the difficulties that are

inherently part of balancing these overlapping phenomena. In other words, this aspect of the Rally brings into sharper relief what Jones calls, “the interplay of everyday life and political consumption,” a complex intermixing of the personal and the political that produces “different meanings to be used in the construction of political reality by citizens” (2006, p. 373).

What is clear is that disappointed attendees had envisioned the Rally as an event that would express or enact some kind of political framework; the prepolitical Rally they attended, however, would ultimately materialize as an embryonic stage in the cultivation of critical sensibilities and awareness, emergent “practical consciousness” (Williams, 1977), and as an informal, initiatory training ground for future civic participation/engagement (Dahlgren, 2006) for everyday citizens operating outside of the political process (Callahan, 2010; Ranci re, 1999).

“Shouldn’t the people that don’t attend rallies have a Rally themselves?”

The notion at the center of this essay—the prepolitical engagement of watching *TDS/TCR* inspired or incited the act of attending a “Rally for Sanity”—merits further scrutiny. Rally-goers embraced the opportunity to congregate without having to pledge allegiance to any particular party, platform, or political bent. Lacking language to articulate this embryonic, prepolitical, amorphous sense of a desire for connection and togetherness with other “like-minded” people who share the frustration with existing electoral politics and poor media performance, attendees highlighted recurring themes of “moderation,” “awareness,” and “hope for a better future.” As such, they can be seen to represent the prepolitical sensibility of the “people that don’t attend rallies.” Evidencing this “prepolitical” consciousness, the majority of those we interviewed told us that this was the first time they had ever attended a Rally. Many expressed surprise at the fact that they themselves had elected to attend this Rally. The phrase “I’m not really political,” as crystallized in the words of one interviewee, would resonate with a number of our respondents:

I’ve never been to a Rally before, I’ve never done anything like this. I don’t think any of you guys have, but this got us off the couch and doing this sort of thing, so hopefully it’ll make some sort of impression. (Darrel, from Nebraska, mid-40s)

In line with Rally-goers’ self-descriptions as being “not political” and having “never attended a Rally before,” our discussions with attendees revealed the inchoate and prepolitical articulation of somewhat vague sensibilities regarding hopes and reasons for attending:

I really hope that, like, that’s what the next generation like my generation does instead of, you know, talking about the craziness of, you know, who called what who ... and actually sit down and be reasonable about the issues that we get that we have to deal with. And that’s why I’m here ... To promote the next generation of reasonable people.

With satire informing both the tone and mood of the day, some joked about the vagueness of their reasons for attending:

Q: And what brought you today to the Rally?

Mark: She brought me to the Rally.

Jenny: We hopped on a bus. Found our way here.

Mark (to Jenny): I think they mean more, like, a little bit more existentially what brought us to the Rally.

Jenny: I just wanna restore sanity.

Mark: And I wanna keep fear alive. Why did we come? *I don't know, just seemed like the right thing to do ... I don't know. Is that a bad answer?* (emphasis added)

However uncertain or ambiguous the reasons for attending, nearly half a million people showed up on the National Mall for this historically record-setting Rally turnout.

As we heard repeatedly from our respondents, and as Stewart himself made explicit in his concluding remarks, being there and/or showing up was the most important part. Speaking to the broader significance of being there, recall a previous respondent's view that "even though most people didn't hear what was going on or anything else [during the Rally], *they came*— and you can't call them couch potatoes, now can you? *They were on their feet*" (emphasis added). For a generation that has "never known effective social movements, or collective action" (Barbara Epstein, personal communication, 24 July 2011), the notion of being there or showing up is key to understanding how this Rally may prove an important touchstone in the elaboration of future political organizing. It is here that the event provides some measure for thinking about how a Rally organized by a powerful media corporation and orchestrated by political comedians may arguably serve as "the embryonic stages of collective action for groups outside the political process" (Callahan, 2010, p. xxii).

This was not, as Politico bloggers contended (Hohmann, Cogan, & Tau, 2010), a "largely apolitical" Rally that played out "in the most political of contexts," but an event that signals a potentially constructive cultural mode of engagement for politicizing and/or mobilizing citizens who would not otherwise explicitly participate in civic life. Representing a key phase of emergence within civic debate, the thoroughgoing critique of politics as a right/left spectrum of insanity makes visible the emergent demand for the redistribution of the sensible. When asked to describe any previous ties to political participation, a female respondent from Canada described herself as apolitical, with the caveat that while fake news had not previously incited her to any kind of political action, the Rally had "moved me to be here today." As she puts it, "I consider this [a form of] political action, even though its roots are in comedy and curiosity, I think that there's a political aspect to coming to this Rally." One group of male interviewees expressed genuine surprise at their own involvement, citing the Rally not only as an event noteworthy enough to "get us off the couch," but one that will "hopefully make some sort of impression." Summing up this point nicely, a man

in his early 60s (accompanied by a friend and their two wives dressed in expensive tailored conservative suits, none of whom looked the type you'd see at any Rally) confessed that, outside of what he deemed more "charitable pursuits," the Stewart/Colbert call to attend is "probably the most that anybody has ever caused me to move to this level." Another female respondent (from Annapolis, MD) reinforced the constructive nature of the Rally in these terms:

One of the effects is happening right now, from all the people that were sitting on their asses watching this TV show or watching it online at home came to D.C.

There are people from LA, there are people that fucking Oprah [I don't know if you can say that, sorry] flew, like, across the country to get here for two days. You know, I think, this is not going to lead to apathy whatsoever. Again, for our generation, this is the first time for us to come together for something.

Her comment that "this is the first time for us to come together for something" reiterates Epstein's point that "this is a generation that has never known effective social movements, or collective action" (Barbara Epstein, personal communication, 24 July 2011). Despite disappointments in the *Rally's* outcomes, we suggest that this prepolitical consciousness (as a demand for a redistribution of the sensible) constitutes not only a significant interruption of the dominant order but also an important facet of the emergent structure(s) of feeling for the 21st century. Epitomizing the *Rally* as prepolitical is the statement of one interviewee—who traveled to Washington, DC, from Nebraska with a group of five friends, all of whom never having attended a Rally before in their lives—who counters his friends' slightly political hopes, stating: "Me? I have no message." Yet, he insisted that such voices as his (those who "have no part") be allowed a space, a place, and a Rally, illustrating that this event's power (and future influence) lies in its capacity to provide a space for those considered "apolitical" to gather and express themselves. "Shouldn't the people that don't attend rallies have a Rally themselves? Shouldn't the people that never give voice to their politics . . . shouldn't they have a voice, too?" This comment, perhaps more poignantly than any other, reflects Rancière's conception of politics and the importance of recalibrating ethical and esthetic regimes so that "the people that never give voice to their politics" have a voice.

The *Rally's* influence and limitations

Given this essay's exploration of the prepolitical as a mobilizing force, discussions of analogous movements seem warranted. As such, it is worth asking in what sense this event may have served as a precursor to Occupy Wall Street (OWS), as a Rally presented in more "moderate" attire—less radical than OWS and perhaps "saner" than Glenn Beck's followers. Note the *Rally's* status as a prepolitical happening that hinged on a shared longing, sensibility, and desire for a better world, comprised of people who traveled in some cases thousands of miles to be with like-minded others who might cultivate the embryonic hope(s) of alternative political and civic possibilities. The qualities of this gathering potentially foreshadow, in some cases uncannily,

similar sensibilities and amorphous aims of the OWS movement, which was sparked within the coming year. Future studies would do well to investigate whether and how many of those who attended the *Rally for Sanity/Fear* became involved with the OWS movement. Similarities between the *Rally* and OWS include the following: the broad banners under which people came together (economic injustice; insanity of political debate); a critique of *how* contemporary politics is conducted; horizontal peer-to-peer organizing; the central role of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in mobilizing and informing participants; wide-ranging disappointments in outcome; a commitment to cultivating a culture and mode of participatory politics that provides relief from the insanities of existing modes of governance. Perhaps more significantly, we argue that this *Rally* reflects new forms and modalities of political organizing, which we suggest may become increasingly predictable within the context of the erosion of traditional modes of civic engagement. Namely, that social movements are likely to emerge and evolve via social networks of persons and social groups sharing political disenchantment, frustration, and anger through popular culture and media.

A further research question emerges from our findings: To what extent do disappointments about the *Rally* point to the inherent limits of satire as a mobilizing force? We suggest that many of the disappointments illustrate the limits of parody as a sufficient basis for activating politics or even for staging a successful political rally that seeks to impact the future. One *Washington Post* op-ed addressed to Jon Stewart aptly captures the limits of satire within this realm:

If satire is the art of saying something fake and pretending it's real in order to make a point, you seem to be doing the opposite with this Rally: Doing something real and pretending it's fake in order to make your point. We don't need you to hold a Rally to restore America's sanity. We go to that Rally every Monday through Thursday night, when we tune in to your show. We keep watching because you call out the enduring ridiculousness of politics and, for half an hour, you make us laugh about it rather than despair over it. We don't expect you to end it or fix it; no one can, and your naming it is enough. (Lozada, 2010)

This critique would seem to suggest that while the *Rally for Sanity* floundered as political commentary, the nightly work of the court jesters' shows do not disappoint. In other words, these satirists' sensibilities are for the most part *not* embryonic or inchoate; to the contrary, they potently interrupt the political distribution of the sensible with articulate humor. This raises the question of whether or not such infotainment is more than "prepolitical," and whether, according to the theoretical conceptions that inform our analysis, political satire may be able to catalyze "politics" in Rancière's (1999) sense of disagreement, in ways that a "fake Rally" cannot. If the *Rally* has anything to teach us, it is that the traditional political rally has been so effectively critiqued, subverted, and reimagined by this *Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear*, that a whole range of possibilities for civic participation has emerged. That the *Rally* also managed to capture the popular imagination of a vast, amorphous, and arguably

uncategorizable mass points to a heretofore hidden potential to mobilize what continues to be thought of as an apathetic population.

“Social activism” and convergent 21st-century politics

This *Rally* epitomizes an instance of *convergent 21st-century politics*: modes of political engagement that may not look or feel like traditional politics; an emergent phenomenon, arguably a new hybrid form of social activism that *blurs politics with the social, evidences the inseparable convergence of old and new media, and in this instance marks a profoundly engaged public debate about politics and media communicated primarily through web-based social media spheres as well as a traditional political rally*. It is this 21st-century North American modality of “social activism” (for lack of a better term) that we argue requires contemporary scholars of social movements and media to rethink traditional understandings of politics and participatory democracy.

By inciting the participation of a vague, amorphous mass of people, and by producing a veritable entertainment spectacle by way of musical performances, sketch comedy, a celebrity poetry reading, media critiques, and speeches, Stewart and Colbert created an event that invited a vast number of people into a new relationship to the public and political sphere, inciting new collectively debated notions of *what a rally could be and who it could serve*. While it remains to be seen whether this Rally will prove to be a catalyst in the mobilization of what Stewart has called “the distracted center,” the *Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear* represents a key moment for social movement historians, political theorists, and media/communication scholars to grapple with the very practices — and practitioners — that are now redefining politics as we know it.

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