

## **“Rush, I Love You”: Interactional Fandom on U.S. Political Talk Radio**

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This article analyzes the openings in host-caller interactions in three leading U.S. political talk radio (PTR) programs. Conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis are used to describe how fandom is achieved in these shows. Callers present themselves as fans in the first possible position in the interaction, using various practices ranging from uttering the word *ditto* to creating extended discourse structures. The hosts usually perceive these practices as compliments and appreciate them and the callers. PTR is a prime example of a fan-public, since its host harnesses the fans to achieve his political (and commercial) agenda. The hyphen in *fan-public* deserves attention, because this notion is rooted in infotainment, combining the relationships of the entertainment business, fans, and stars with the realm of politics, which would assume some critical notion and individuality in the decision-making processes.

*Keywords:* political participation, fandom, talk radio, conversation analysis, compliments, stardom, infotainment

Fandom has received much attention ever since Jenkins (1992) described the way fans appropriated their fandom object. Similarly, radio, that persistent and neglected medium (Lewis, 2000), increases its listenership by moving from terrestrial to online streaming. Yet research that combines both fandom and radio is rare. Fandom scholars tend to overlook radio. For example, in their edited book on

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fandom, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007) barely mention radio, and the term is not indexed. In radio scholarship, Douglas beautifully exposes radio's role in the American 20th century, but she mainly discusses short-wave radio fans. Commercial radio fans have received little attention since Katz (1950/2012) wrote his master thesis on them by reading their letters to the hosts. Much has changed since Katz's thesis, and one relevant change to fandom is listeners' ability to call in and talk with the hosts. This study focuses on these interactions and their usefulness for facilitating fandom. Since this fandom is achieved in a political environment, I discuss its larger implication to political life in the United States.

This study examines host-caller interaction openings in U.S. political talk radio (PTR; Lyons, 2008). Host-caller interactions have been researched from conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis perspectives in the United Kingdom (cf. Hutchby, 1996) and Australia (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002). The phone-in programs studied in the United Kingdom and Australia and U.S. PTR are not the same: unlike the U.K. phone-in programs, PTR programs in the United States are talk-back radio shows whose hosts are the center, the show is theirs, and the callers reinforce the hosts' positions (Dori-Hacohen, 2012a). Despite these differences, we have much to gain from researching PTR and its similarities to other phone-in programming. This research reveals social categories in the U.S. PTR that have not been described elsewhere. Additionally, these categories connect the interactional micropractices in the openings with the macrosocial level of politics (Chilton, 2004). Hutchby (1991) focused on the openings of phone-ins, and I follow in his footsteps to study their equivalent, heretofore unstudied, interactions in the United States. As Schegloff (1979) argues, openings are where social relations are established. Fitzgerald and Housley (2002) found that the roles of host and caller are established in the beginning of phone-ins. This article discovers two categories: the "fan" for the callers and the "star" for the hosts. Hence, this study discusses fandom, as exercised by ordinary people, and its significance to PTR and to political participation.

Fandom in these programs is a channel for the creation of the "fan-public." Van Zoonen (2004) argues that the fan-public resembles the political public, and the media is its center. Studying fandom in PTR indeed highlights the existence of a fan-public around the programs in an arena that is more overtly political than the one Van Zoonen studied. The fan-public concept is useful, but it is not without its problems. The fan-star relationship is rooted in the entertainment field, from which most theories divorce the public. Therefore we illustrates that the interactions contribute to the hybridity of PTR, which is central to infotainment. Thus, although a beneficial reading of PTR fandom may see it as a positive development in public participation (creating a "public of passion"; Dori-Hacohen, 2012a), a more critical view will see it as another step in the infotainment process, where politics and entertainment cannot be distinguished.

To present this argument, I use conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis. Due to space limitations, I do not summarize these theories<sup>2</sup> here but only note their relevance to the findings. This article is part of a larger project studying the discourse of U.S. talk radio, mainly the leading PTR shows in the United States, all of which are hosted by conservative pundits (detailed in Table 1).

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<sup>2</sup> Conversation analysis is the better known theory of the two. On membership categorization analysis, see Stokoe (2012).

These shows were chosen because of their popularity, which may suggest that they play a significant social role. Dozens of programs were recorded, and then random interactions were transcribed and analyzed following the conversation analysis methodology (cf. Sidnell, 2012).

This article addresses the following questions: How are the identities of the fan and the star achieved by callers and hosts through interactions on PTR? What is the significance of the fan and host categories in the wider political phenomena of PTR (and the U.S. public of which they are part)? After discussing the history and importance of PTR, I move to the larger notion of the public. Then I present the practices through which being a fan is achieved. To a lesser degree, I present the interactional establishment of the host as a star. The discussion relates these categories to the fan-public and to infotainment. Although the focus is on the United States, U.S. PTR may be a model for other countries (Dori-Hacohen, 2012a), making this discussion relevant elsewhere, a topic that deserves further exploration.

**Table 1. The Programs Researched and Their Features.<sup>3</sup>**

<b>Program name and abbreviation</b>	<b>Host</b>	<b>Broadcast</b>	<b>Audience size</b>
<i>The Rush Limbaugh Show</i> (RL)	Rush Limbaugh	12:00 to 3:00 P.M.	15 million
<i>The Sean Hannity Show</i> (SH)	Sean Hannity	6:00 to 9:00 P.M.	14 million
<i>The Savage Nation</i> (SN)	Michael Savage	7:00 to 10:00 P.M.	8.5 million

### **The Importance of U.S. Political Talk Radio**

PTR can be seen as following the programs Katz studied (1950/2012); both PTR and the programs he studied devote time to audience participation. Defining PTR as "call-in shows that emphasize discussion of politicians, elections and public policy issues," Barker and Knight (2002, p. 151) focus especially on Rush Limbaugh's show, trying to find evidence of his program's influence on voters. Barker (2002) states that the strong relationship between listening to the show and listeners' high levels of public participation is due to the "environment in which conservatives are joined by 'kindred spirits' in the personage of Limbaugh callers" (p. 261). Herbst (1995) similarly described how communities are created around PTR, although they are not necessarily strong communities. This community is evident in the fan-star relations discussed below.

Jamieson and Cappella (2008) discuss PTR as part of their research on the rise of conservative media outlets in the United States. They discuss the similar discourses created by the op-ed section of the *Wall Street Journal*, Rush Limbaugh's radio show, and Sean Hannity's television show: the presentation of nonconservatives as the enemy; praise of President Reagan and his ideology; and the belittling of

<sup>3</sup> The audience sizes are weekly estimates. The quoted hours are from a Northeast region. The decision to study these PTR programs does not mean the author supports these shows' agendas. NPR's "Talk of the Nation" has no host-caller interactions, but host-guest-caller interactions; therefore, it is not researched in this project.

President Roosevelt's "socialist" achievements. Using various methods, Jamieson and Cappella find that the U.S. conservative media, including PTR, is based on the different outlets' influence on the public. This influence stems from the resonance between the different outlets' messages, the shared emotional discourse they use and promote, and the polarizing effect this conservative echo chamber has on U.S. political life. Despite this polarizing effect, Jamieson and Cappella acknowledge the potential benefits of these outlets: They motivate the people consuming them to take political action.

Jamieson and Cappella describe Limbaugh's radio show as follows: "The host talks mostly about politics, government, and public affairs. Sometimes listeners are invited to call in to discuss these issues on the air" (2008, p. 86). Yet, as Barker and Knight's (2002) aforementioned definition of this genre, listeners are *always* invited to participate in the shows, as hosts give the phone numbers every hour, and callers participate daily. Although Jamieson and Cappella devote three chapters to Limbaugh's show, they do not discuss in depth the structure of PTR or civic participation in PTR. The notion of civic participation relates to the idea that these programs are or can be a part of the public and the public sphere (Habermas, 1989, 2006), as has been argued before (cf. Dori-Hacohen, 2012b; Hutchby, 2001). The public sphere is based on a community (Habermas, 1996), and combining this notion with Baym's (2000) argument that communities can be organized around fandom, I argue that fandom can play a central role in a community, which is the premise of a public sphere. Thus, the callers—especially the fan-callers who talk on PTR—take part in building a community of like-minded people. This community forms the power base of PTR. Although a PTR audience can create its community online, or in physical locales, such as "the Rush room" (see ex. 6:9–10 below), many community members can and do participate in the activities in PTR's primary medium, radio. Moreover, the callers' fandom echoes and fosters the conservative values expressed by PTR hosts, an aspect that awaits future research.

Radio fandom may share characteristics with other fandom communities. As Kligler-Vilenchik, McVeigh-Schultz, Weitbrecht, and Tokuhama (2012) suggest, fan communities are based on a shared media experience, a sense of togetherness, and an urge to change and improve the world. In the same way, an audience listening to the same host is involved in a common media experience, and the host urges the audience to think and act in ways that he believes will improve the world. Moreover, radio fandom can be taken as a contemporary public (Van Zoonen, 2004). In discussing reality TV, Van Zoonen notes that fandoms are socially structured, they use and evaluate social actions in homogeneous ways, and they base their social force on shared emotion. She argues that the combination of these features resembles that of a public, and therefore these communities should be taken as publics. She demonstrates how these groups revolve around one person, the star of the reality show, and the public is emotionally mobilized to vote for the star to remain in the show. She termed these communities "fan-publics," and the current research demonstrates how callers to PTR perform their fandom and therefore create a fan-public. Yet Van Zoonen does not discuss the hybridity in the notion of the fan-public, because it is rooted in the entertainment and political realms, a point explored below.

As mentioned, fandom research rarely discusses radio, and, despite its recognized significance, research about PTR in the United States by discourse analysts has been scant. Nicola (2010) connected Limbaugh's shows to the wider U.S. political scene by describing the racial elements in Limbaugh's performance. From a functional approach, Haspell (2001) discussed how callers start the interactions by

presenting their credentials regarding a topic. Although Haspell focuses on interactions in the U.S., she studied public radio and not the commercial, more popular, PTR. The current article fills the lacuna in the research on conservative PTR interactions in the United States. It suggests one function for host-caller interactions on PTR: enabling callers to be part of a fandom community by participating in the programs and performing their fandom, which at times act as their credentials.

The next section presents standard PTR interaction openings, which are the backdrop for the practices callers use in performing being a fan. Following the sections that present the fandom practices is a discussion of the hosts' responses. The categories of fan and star contribute to the social significance of these shows by facilitating the construction of fan-publics. Yet, at the same time, the categories demonstrate that the programs combine political topics with entertainment participation structures to create hybrid infotainment shows.

### Ordinary Openings

The openings of host-caller interactions in PTR are similar to those Hutchby (1991) described in the United Kingdom. Hosts introduce callers by their first names, mention the caller's place of residence, and then open the airwaves to the caller. However, U.S. PTR mixes host commentary with call-ins and thus requires a specific transition to a phone-in segment:

1. *RL070410*<sup>4</sup>
1. H: *but I want to go to grab a couple of phone calls*
2. *here, we'll start (0.4) i:n S:andy Springs*
3. *California. (0.4) And Mark. (0.5) Great to have you*
4. *here sir. Hell:o.*

As shown in this example, Limbaugh moves the show from his talk to the phone-in segment (1:1). Then he presents the caller's place of residence, introduces the caller by name (1:2-3), and ends his turn with a greeting—"hello" (1:4).

Another way hosts begin interactions with callers is to solicit the caller's opinion, and at times they reference the caller's place of residence to elicit the caller's opinion:

2. *SH042910*
1. H: *a::: anyway let's get a back to our bu::ssy*
2. *telephones here. A:::s we:: check i::n (0.6)*
3. *with a::: let's see here. **Kim in Arizona next,***
4. *on the Sean Hannity show. What's up Kim. **Your***
5. ***state is under fi::re.** What's going on.*

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<sup>4</sup> The transcriptions are presented in the conventions of conversation analysis (Jefferson, 2004). H: host, C: caller. If only a part of the excerpt is used in the analysis, it is presented in bold type. The names of the excerpts (RL, SH, SN) are the acronyms of the shows (see Table 1), with their date of broadcast.

6. C: (0.5) *haha. Tell me about it. .h i::: I:-*

Hannity shifts the program to the phones (2:1–2) and presents the caller and the show (2:3–4). Then he asks the caller to express her opinion (“what’s up” 2:4) and mentions that her state, Arizona, is in the news (2:5). This prepares the ground for the caller’s talk, as she agrees with him (2:6) and continues to talk about her state, which at the time, had passed controversial immigration regulations.

The openings discussed so far present the following pattern: The host shifts the show to a phone segment, presents a caller, identifies the caller’s place of residence, greets the caller, and begins to interact with the caller. A host may use a “how are you?” greeting as a way to elicit the caller’s talk. Some callers initiate “how are you?” questions, which, according to Schegloff (1979), are signs of long-term relations in phone conversations. Other callers use the openings to establish a different type of long-term relation—that of the fan or admirer, a topic I explore next.

### **Practices for Being a Fan**

The practices for achieving the membership category (Stokoe, 2012) of fan are diverse, yet a remarkable number of them are used in PTR interaction openings. First, the creation of a fan category serves as a preferred action, functioning as an organizational device within the entire interaction (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, pp. 300–302). A preferred action may be construed as one that is carried out in the first possible position in the interactions. In privileging the preferred action, this action pushes other actions to later stages. Practices through which being a fan is achieved fit this model by occurring in the first position possible for callers to do so; at times the action of being a fan delays the on-topic talk.

These openings differ from findings of phone interactions in other settings. Hopper (1992) found that, in other institutions, callers usually move directly to the reason for their call. However, in PTR, several callers prefer to first construct a fan identity and only then move to their topic, suggesting that performing fandom, rather than discussion of the topic at hand, is the real reason for the call. Practices for constructing fandom also may be found later in the interaction, but these are rarely present without being initiated in its opening, because this is the most relevant spot to establish the social relations between the participants.

### ***Simple Practices for Being a Fan.***

The range of practices for performing being a fan is broad. Some callers use simple practices, some of which consist of uttering only one word. Limbaugh’s callers have a specific word for presenting themselves as fans—*ditto*, short for *dittohead*—Limbaugh’s term for his fans (Douglas, 1999, p. 315):

3. *RL040510*
1. *H: Aaron in Chicag- I'm sorry chi- Chico California. Aaron*
  2. *welcome to the (.) EIB network. Sir.*
  3. *C: (1.1) Rush. Free to loving. **Loving ditto.** How are you*
  4. *today, sir.*
  5. *H: very well. Thank you very much.*

The host presents the caller and corrects a mistake about the caller's place of residence (3:1). The caller responds with the expression "loving ditto" (3:3), and then starts a "how are you?" sequence (3:3-4). The host answers ("very well") and thanks the caller, presumably for presenting himself as "ditto" (3:5).

Some callers use terms of respectful address to demonstrate their fandom. Callers might use official names or a professional title:

4. *SN100509*
1. *H: Florida, Gloria you're first up this hour. Go*
  2. *ahead plea::se.*
  3. *C: yes. **Doctor Savage.** I'm so gla::d that I talk*
  4. *to you,*

This caller addresses Savage as "Doctor Savage" (4:3), not incorrectly. Michael Weiner, known as Michael Savage, holds a PhD in nutritional ethnomedicine from the University of California, Berkeley. Although the relevance of his dissertation to his political credentials is unclear, the honorific "Doctor" is taken up by many of his callers as a sign of respect.

This caller (4:3-4) also expresses her delight in talking with the host. Such expressions require no special address term and serve as a practice in their own right.

5. *SH042910*
1. *H: Joanna is next. In a: Jacksonville Florida, WOKV,*
  2. *what's up [Joanna?*
  3. *C: [((picking up the phone)) hi::,*
  4. ***what a ple↑asure to talk to yo:u?***
  5. *H: What a pleasure to talk to you. How are you.*

In this passage, the host summons the caller by name, and the summons is answered when the caller picks up the phone. The caller states her pleasure at talking to the host (5:4) and stresses her delight at the interaction with a dramatic change of pitch upon uttering the word *pleasure* (5:4). The host reciprocates the caller's spoken sentiment and moves to a "how are you?" sequence.

### **Achieving Long-term Relations.**

As part of creating sociability in radio discourse, hosts have reasons to create a facade of long-term relations with their callers, which explains Hannity's "how are you" (5:5) above. Callers can suggest

long-term relations by using practices other than “how are you?” exchanges. Sometimes callers explicitly state their long-term relations:

6. SH030810
1. C: *.h well long time listener first time caller.*
2. H: *yes sir. [Welcome aboard sir.*  
RL050410
3. C: *(0.3) Hi::. Thank you for m- uh taking my*
4. *cal::l. [first ti::me*
5. H: *[yes Ma'am.*
6. C: *(0.4) call, **twenty:: yea::rs over twenty years***
7. ***trying to get on.***
8. H: *there here you are.*  
RL072610
9. C: *a long time listener, since the days of the*
10. ***Rush Room.** [A first time caller.*
11. H: *[thank you sir. Very muc:h.*

The first caller identifies himself as a “long time listener” (6:1), and the host welcomes him to the community with a “welcome aboard” (6:2). The second caller not only presents herself as a long-time listener but demonstrates some frustration for not being able to talk with Limbaugh until now (6:6–7). This caller has been trying to talk with Limbaugh for more than two decades and remained a follower despite failing to get through. The third caller demonstrates his prolonged fandom by referring to “the Rush Room” (6:9–10), a 1990s restaurant that operated as a real-world meeting place for Limbaugh’s radio fans (Douglas, 1999, p. 314). In doing so, the third caller presents himself as both a long-time listener and a devoted fan—one who took the initiative to participate in the more traditional fan club format of the Rush Room. Only after presenting himself as such a fan does he continue to mention that he is a first-time caller (6:10).<sup>5</sup>

Whereas some callers encounter difficulties gaining airtime with the host, others succeed in interacting with a host more than once. These callers make a point of expressing this type of long-term relation with the host and fandom community.

7. SH080310
1. C: *he::y Sean, it's great to talk to you **again.***
2. H: *great to talk to you. **Welcome back.***

Using the word *again*, this caller makes it clear that this is not her first time talking with Hannity (7:1). The host acknowledges this assertion by welcoming her “back” (7:2).

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<sup>5</sup> The self-presentation of fans as “a first-time caller long-time listener” counters a perception that they are novices in this community (Dori-Hacohen, 2012c).



### **Expressing Appreciation of the Host's Work**

Callers can use other utterances to show their fandom. These utterances may be less formulaic.

8. RLO40710
1. C: (0.6) *as a student in the: ya::: (0.2) **Limbaugh***
  2. ***institute for advanced conservative studi::es,***
  3. *(0.5) I think **I've figured out** why they are*
  4. *targeting the American cleric in Yamane.*

This caller presents himself as a student in Limbaugh's academy (8:1-2), although such an institute does not exist outside of Limbaugh's talk (Douglas, 1999, p. 316). For this caller, Limbaugh's talk and ideas are equivalent to an advanced institute that promotes his knowledge. This particular construction of appreciation reinforces Limbaugh's status, and at the same time it establishes the caller's credentials (Haspell, 2001) as a regular, avid, and erudite listener of Limbaugh's show.

Another, more direct way fandom is expressed is for callers to tell the host he is appreciated:

9. SN051009
1. C: *yea mister Savage. I wanna (0.3) thank you for*
  2. *what you do::, (0.4) and ah, you are very appreciated*
  3. *down here at the heartland. I Just want you to know*
  4. *tha:t.*

This caller thanks the host for the work he is doing and stresses that this appreciation is something he wants the host to know.

### **Extended Demonstrations of Fandom**

Some callers begin the interactions with extended discourse structures to present their fandom. The extended structures I exemplify here are narratives, arguments or explanations, and lists. The following is an example of the construction of fandom through narrative:

10. RLO12810
1. H: *to Miami we go, this is Abb:y, (0.3) you are*
  2. *up next on the Rush Limbaugh program. Hi:.*
  3. C: *(0.4) hi:. (0.8) **Rush Hudson Limbaugh, I am so***
  4. ***pleased to talk to you?***
  5. H: *(0.9) thank you very mu:ch.*
  6. C: *uh:m, I have three quick points. A: first of a:ll*
  7. *I've- i- I started listening to you after? (0.5)*
  8. *closely ah **berating my husband,** for listening to*
  9. *your talking points? (0.7) and I- **once I'd started***
  10. ***listening*** to you I became such a **wild fan,** I- you

11. *know, everywhere we go when >we are on the road?<*  
 12. *(.) we're always scanning the airwaves for stations*  
 13. *carrying Rush Limbaugh.*  
 14. H: *(0.4) well, thank you very much. I am flattered*  
 15. *and honored.*  
 16. C: *(0.7) .h yea, three quick points. A: first of all,*

As the host makes his usual move to the phone interactions (10:1–2), the caller reciprocates his greeting and addresses Limbaugh by using his first, middle, and last names (10:3). This address shows her knowledge of him, because middle names are not typically used in casual address, and therefore the knowledge of a middle name suggests intimacy or the caller's purposeful investigation of the host's name. The caller then expresses her delight in talking with the host (10:3–4).

The caller uses canonical fan identifiers in her discourse, but does not stop with these relatively simple practices. Following Limbaugh's response of thanks (10:5), she sets up a list, seemingly moving on to her topic ("I have three quick points," 10:6). However, before making her first point ("first of all," 10:6), she initiates a repair and then tells a story (10:7–13). This repair shows that being a fan is a preferred action, which in this case pushes the caller's topic to later in the interaction.

Abby describes how she came to listen to Limbaugh. Her husband exposed her to Limbaugh's opinions when, as a fan, he listened to Limbaugh's talking points to her dissatisfaction ("berating him," 10:8). Yet, after she had started listening to Limbaugh directly, she became not just a fan, but a "wild" one (10:10). Abby's story shows her conversion from critical non-PTR participant to fan; she was not happy with her husband's reciting Limbaugh, but after listening to the source, she was convinced by Limbaugh's opinions. This conversion story flatters Limbaugh's performance as well as his opinions.

To demonstrate her fandom, the caller brings her story to the present in reporting the extraordinary efforts she and her husband make to listen to Limbaugh. They not only listen on their local station, they also search the radio spectrum to find his show whenever they are out of their familiar broadcast area. They follow Limbaugh everywhere they go.

After finishing the story and getting the host's response (10:14–15), the caller returns to her on-topic talk by repeating that she has three points (10:16). This repetition marks the end of the insertion (compare 10:16 to 10:6). The repetition frames the fandom story as a closed unit and highlights its importance as a preferred action. In sum, this caller uses several practices—the special address term, the expression of gratitude, and an elaborate stand-alone conversion narrative turn—to express her fandom.

Whereas Abby follows the host throughout her travels, the next segment is an example of a fan following Limbaugh throughout Limbaugh's travels. This call occurs a few days after Limbaugh has returned from an unspecified place. The caller treats Limbaugh's destination as a puzzle and solves it using both tidbits from the show and his personal experience. His correct solution serves as proof of his devotion:

11. RL040710
1. C: *thank you for having me on the show.*
  2. H: *you bet.*
  3. C: *(1.0) **how was the Czech Republic?***
  4. **(2.6)**
  5. H: *how did you know.*
  6. C: *(0.8) we:ll, you gave us some hints, and I put two*
  7. *and two together and figured out where you went?*
  8. H: *(1.0) wh↑at were the hints.*
  9. C: *(0.6) .hh well **you told us** how far you were flying.*
  10. *Out and back.*
  11. H: *yeah.*
  12. C: **and you told us you are looking for health care.**
  13. H: *yeah.*
  14. C: **a::nd from my personal experiences** I know that the
  15. *Czech Republic .hh offers afor- (0.3) affordable*
  16. *health care, (0.3) for foreign customers?*

The caller first thanks the host for having him on the program (11:1) before asking him about his trip to the Czech Republic (11:3). Following this question there is a silence, which is considered anathema in radio production (Goffman, 1981: 265). This silence, following a direct question, indicates that the host was taken aback. Limbaugh does not answer the question, but asks the caller to explain the reasoning behind his (correct) guess (11:5). In his explanation, the caller stresses that he realized it by listening carefully to what Limbaugh said ("you gave us some hints," 11:6), and by connecting this information (11:9–10, 12) with his personal experience (11:14–16). This caller not only follows the show content (health care) closely but is willing to link what he hears with his personal experience to follow the host's travels. The caller makes the show part of his life both by listening to it and through incorporating his experiences with the show's values. The caller's devotion initially surprises the host, but later Limbaugh compliments the caller for reaching his conclusion, calling him brilliant (not shown here).

Later in their interaction, the caller explains why he guessed where Limbaugh had gone, which also demonstrates his fandom:

12. RL040710
1. C: *Mark Stein who was filling in for you, (0.3) uh:m,*
  2. *(0.4) talked a lot about (.) your trip, and I was*
  3. *a little surprised tha↑t you didn't .hh (0.2) uhm*
  4. *(0.4) fill us in when you got back on Friday,=*
  5. H: *=wel::[I I:*
  6. C: *[but he also said that whoever figured out*
  7. *(0.5) who:: (0.3) o fo- sorry whoever figured out*
  8. *where you **we:nt**, .h **would get to be a guest on***
  9. ***your show?***

10. H: (1.3) a:: (.) no. no. no.

The caller states that he listened to the show even when a replacement was hosting it (12:1–3). Since the sit-in host had promised an appearance on the show as a prize (12:7–9), the caller's guesswork becomes framed as motivated by his fandom. Being a guest on the show is an honor few people receive, and the caller hopes to be one of these fortunate few. However, Limbaugh rejects the caller's request (12:10).

A final example of extended fandom exhibits multidimensional aspects of fandom. This is so much the case that, of the several turns the caller has to speak, only one is an on-topic discussion; the other turns discuss her fandom. This is the caller's second turn of talk:

13. RL073112
1. C: *Just le me- I- I kno:w you that you have (0.2) many*  
 2. *people waiting for you, but .h I just briefly have to*  
 3. *say this before I go into (0.5) what I called for. Ehm*  
 4. *sorry I: .hh I just came from treatment, I am dealing*  
 5. *with cancer so:, I hate Obamacare. Number one. Uhm*  
 6. *number two, I'm married to SFPD police officer? (0.3)*  
 7. *.hh number three, I have a daughter wh(h)o is an intel*  
 8. *in the army. .h and number four I have a daughter that*  
 9. *is half bla(h)ck. .h and number five, my: (1.2)*  
 10. *grandfather .h sorry the chemo is kinda killing me.*  
 11. *Number five .hh he was the mayor of Rio Linda for two*  
 12. *terms and (.) till the day of their death they adored*  
 13. *you, they listened to you, they idolized you, they*  
 14. *loved you. They: they: they made me what I am today,*  
 15. *with your help and Mark Levin.*

The caller admits the host's popularity and long waiting time, but she moves to tell him something as a first thing, before moving to her topic ("before I go into what I called for," 13:1–3). Thus, she prepares an expression of fandom, which stands as a preferred action that pushes her on-topic talk to a later stage. Moreover, she presents this part as something short ("just briefly," 13:2) before beginning a list ("number one," 13:5), suggesting her preface will most likely not be very short, as lists tend to be long.

The caller uses her cancer treatment to begin her list of admiration (13:4–5). This item shows she admires Limbaugh so much that, even after experiencing a difficult medical treatment, she finds the strength to call and talk with him. This first item foreshadows her performance of fandom; she frames various parts of her biography within the language and rhetoric of Limbaugh's show. Her medical situation is the basis for her first expressions of admiration: her contempt for Obamacare. This term echoes Limbaugh's term, so she joins his stance toward President Obama's health care reform. The second item on the list sides with Limbaugh's law-and-order position by noting her husband's occupation as a law

enforcement officer. Third, she mentions her daughter who is in the army, thereby aligning herself and her family with Limbaugh's nationalist views regarding a strong military. Fourth, she mentions that she is the mother of a daughter who<sup>6</sup> is "half black," the implication of which is that she cannot hold anti-Black racist views. Here she joins Limbaugh in promoting the color-blind view of U.S. politics (see Nicola, 2010).

Then the caller moves to her fifth point. Yet, before actually stating this point, she again conveys a sense of battling tough odds to accentuate her fandom. As she admitted of having cancer (13:4), the caller states, "the chemo is kinda killing me" (13:10). This utterance, which might explain her difficulty in speaking (as opposed to being excited), uses alliteration (the sounds of K, N, and M, in KiMo, KiNda, KilliNg, and Me) and is inserted in a dramatic position between the fifth item listed and its content (the repetition of "number five," 13:9, 11), the climax of her fandom list. Moreover, the length of the list, having five items, is exaggerated, as three-part lists are sufficient for rhetorical goals. Thus, despite suffering, the caller succeeds in producing a longer-than-needed list to persuade Limbaugh (and the audience) that she is a true fan.

While most of the items on the list are intelligible to the general public, the climactic fifth item (13:11–15) is obscure to non-Limbaugh fans. The caller says that her grandfather was a mayor of Rio Linda—a small town in the Sacramento, California, area. Limbaugh started his career in that area, and he made Rio Linda famous after wandering into town and offering to become a resident if it named a street after him (which the town declined). Then the caller culminates her fandom: "till the day of their death they adored you, they listened to you, they idolized you, they loved you. They: they: they made me what I am today, with your help and Mark Levin." These utterances of admiration are attributed to her grandfather and other Rio Linda residents. The caller tops this admiration by attributing her identity ("what I am today" 13:14–15) to Limbaugh and Mark Levin, a fellow right-wing host. The caller demonstrates that she not only knows the story but has a personal attachment to part of Limbaugh's history, as she has strong ties to the town of Rio Linda and to the town's admiration of Limbaugh. This item and the utterance closing it are the grand finale of the caller's fandom list.

In the remainder of their talk, the caller and Limbaugh talk about her list, working together to unpack its values. The caller has one on-topic turn, during which she refers to her half-Black daughter to dismiss research connecting Obama with the first known American slave. In this dismissal, she maintains a racial discourse while simultaneously asserting Limbaugh's opinion that race is not important. She and Limbaugh celebrate this agreement, which leads to the following conclusion:

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<sup>6</sup> As one student noticed, the caller uses the word *that* (13:8) to refer to her half-Black daughter and uses the word *who* to refer to her other daughter (13:7). The different reference terms in these consecutive utterances indicate that the caller knows the grammatically correct way to refer to people (*who*), yet uses *that* to refer to the second daughter. This choice might suggest her preference of one daughter, or it might be rooted in a racial stance. Further research is needed to explore the implications of using *that* instead of *who* to refer to people.

14. RL073112
1. H: you got fifteen second. Go:.
  2. C: (0.8) I love you. I love Mark Levin. Thanks you
  3. for bringing [him. You guys are my heroes.=
  4. H: [thirteen
  5. C: =and God bless you always.
  6. H: thank you very much. I appreciate that Kris.

After the host tells the caller that she has 15 seconds left in her call, the caller ends with her ultimate expression of fandom: she thanks the host, expressing her “love” to Limbaugh and to his colleague, Mark Levin, and finishes with a religious blessing (14:5). Here she connects Limbaugh to the often strongly religious (especially evangelical Christian) beliefs of the U.S. right wing. After starting with a list of five items of admiration for Limbaugh, she ends her call with an admission of love. The caller has achieved her goal in talking with Limbaugh, emphasized by a difficult health situation (cancer and chemotherapy), conveying her deep knowledge of Limbaugh and his opinions, her admiration, her indebtedness to him, and her love for him and his causes—all signs of a true fan.

In sum, these fans use extended discourse structures: a narrative, an explanation (Blum-Kulka, Hamo, & Habib, 2010), and a list (Schiffrin, 1994) to show their fandom. The first caller used a narrative to present herself as a devotee who tries to tune in wherever she travels; the second caller uses explanation to demonstrate that he follows the host’s travels; and the third uses a list to demonstrate her following, admiration, and love for the host. Following hosts with such devotion and love is the highest praise hosts can get, and it is a sign of enthusiastic fandom.

### **Host Responses to the Practices of Fandom**

As callers demonstrate membership in the category of the fan, they inevitably create its “standardized relational pair” (Stokoe, 2012, p. 281), the star. The standardized relational pair denominates two categories—such as mother-baby or doctor-patient—who have various social ties, including normative ones. Because social categories have bounded activities (i.e., activities that are connected to them), in creating a fan category, callers also create its standardized relational pair, the star, for the host. Moreover, the fan creates the star by the practices demonstrated above, which can be grouped together as praise or complimenting.

Pomerantz (1978) has described compliment sequences. She argues that compliments serve as positive support moves or assessments. Similarly, Shaw and Kitzinger (2012) studied positive assessments in a birth help line, a phone environment with one caller and one call taker, similar to radio call-in programs. On the help line the call taker gives the positive assessments, and the caller, the woman calling in, needs to respond to them. On the radio, the callers give the praise, and the call taker, the host, needs to accept it.

In mundane life, as in talk radio, compliments and praise pose the same problem: as a caller compliments a host, the host, by accepting the praise, could be construed as arrogant. Pomerantz (1978),

therefore, suggests that the common response to a compliment is appreciation—that is, a thank you of some sort—as a way of agreeing with the compliment without exaggerating its positive elements.

Hosts use various responses to the compliments they receive. In excerpt 14 above, Limbaugh responds to the lavish praise once with "thank you very much. I appreciate thatn Kris." (14:6)<sup>7</sup> This response is typical (see ex. 3:6, 6:11, 10:5) and consistent with the customary response to a compliment in the United States. Abby (ex. 10), who continued with the extended fandom narrative after using Limbaugh's middle name and expressing her happiness about talking with him, poses a bigger challenge; because she complimented him twice in an extended way, accepting these compliments may be seen as too self-aggrandizing. On top of repeating the "thank you," Limbaugh uses another way to accept her fandom narrative: "I am flattered and honored." Being flattered shows a sort of unexpected compliment, and being honored means that you do not take the compliment lightly; in taking the compliment seriously, Limbaugh is showing that he is not conceited (ex. 10:14–15). This passive turn shows appreciation of the compliment without adding to it. The slight pause and the turn initial "well" (10:14) suggest that Limbaugh has difficulty responding to the compliment, which is consistent with adequate responses to compliments (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 101).

Hosts may use other responses to deal with compliments, as Michael Savage responds in the next excerpt:

15. SN051009 (ex. 9 extended)
1. C: I wanna (0.3) thank you for what you do::, (0.4) and
  2. ah, you are very appreciated down here at the
  3. Heartland. I just want you to know tha:t.
  4. (0.8) and a::h,
  5. H: **well I::, I know that I am not appreciated in my hom::e**
  6. **a home city though.** (0.3) I am appreciated in the
  7. heartland where real Americans live. .hh ah- not where
  8. the **perverts** of America live.

Savage delays his response, after a long silence and an empty unit from the caller (15:4). He starts his response with "well" (15:5), suggesting that he has difficulty responding to the caller's fan practice. Instead of responding to the praise directly, Savage uses it to promote his agenda of attacking liberals, whom he terms "perverts" (15:8), in San Francisco, his hometown. He takes the caller's utterance as a statement of fact that needs no response (15:6–7). This response is consistent with a practice called "shifting of reference" (Pomerantz, 1978), as Savage talks about something different than the topic (p)raised by the caller. Limbaugh used a similar response to the five-item list of fandom (ex. 14) when, instead of responding to the caller's fandom, he discussed the specifics of her list.

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<sup>7</sup> The interaction with Kris was unique: 20 minutes later Limbaugh remarks on it. He recalls the mayor of Rio Linda and explains he had to cut the interaction short due to the break. Then he hopes Kris will talk with him again, acknowledging her health condition and wishing her the best (RL073112).

Hosts also can reciprocate some practices. Hannity, who is the object of fewer fandom practices overall, tends to reciprocate the pleasure the callers express when talking to him (ex. 5:5, 7:2). Yet this reciprocity does not exaggerate his stardom, as all hosts accept the compliments with due humility.

### **Fandom as a Building Block of PTR**

The interactions on PTR enable callers to use practices for achieving their category of a fan. These fans create the symmetrical category, the star. The fan-star relations are different from the relations Katz (1952/2012) described. The fan who wrote the letters aspired to create friendship with the radio host (Katz, 1950/2012, pp. 44–46). Host-caller interactions do not achieve friendship, they achieve fandom. This fandom is different from fandom directed at film actors, in which stars usually see fans as a nuisance (Ferris, 2001). PTR hosts appreciate their fans, accept their fandom, and treat them as an important part of their shows.

The fan-callers are an important part of PTR. Fans are highly motivated social actors, and hosts harness fans' enthusiasm for political and commercial causes.<sup>8</sup> The host's stardom is indebted to active fans speaking in their own voices in front of the audience. The fans validate the host's stardom via various practices, such as expressing their appreciation of his work (ex. 9), following him (ex. 10, 11), or expressing their love to him (ex. 14). The host, as the star, is the center of these communities, and the community, socially structured around him, is partially produced in the phone-in interactions. From the audience's and callers' perspectives, the fan-callers create a sense of a community. Talking with the host, having long-term relations with him, and following him create this community for the caller. Listeners know that others act in similar ways when they hear the fans in the calls. This is best illustrated with the long-time listeners who call for the first time (recall ex. 6 above).

Fandom has an emotional element to it (such as love, ex. 13–14). Fans share and evaluate social actions similarly to the host, a fact they state through their interactions, and the foundation of these shared positions is their fandom of the host. Moreover, the fans show how devoutly they follow their hosts (recall the callers' extended discourse structures: a story [ex. 10], an explanation [ex. 11], and a list demonstrating love and admiration for the host [ex. 13–14]). A host's ability to mobilize fans is enhanced when listeners are able to hear these followers. The content of what the hosts urge the audience to do, as resonated in the callers' words, creates the will to make changes in the callers' and audience's world—a topic that deserves future research.

These elements resonate Van Zoonen's (2004) discussion of the fan-public. Stardom is the center of the fan-public, and it is based on having an active community that displays emotions in a structured way and that is motivated for social action. Unlike Van Zoonen's fans, the PTR fan-publics act in the political realm (Barker, 2002; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Therefore, PTR creates a more politicized fan-public than the fan-publics Van Zoonen discussed, and PTR should be taken as a more sophisticated example of such a fan-public. This fan-public, as demonstrated in the examples above, rests upon the

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<sup>8</sup> The high level of mobilization explains PTR's popularity on commercial radio stations (Dori-Hacohen, 2012a).



emotional attachments that Marcus (2002) put at the center of the new citizenry. Therefore, the host-caller interactions on PTR—the social situation that enables callers to present the fan-star relations—are central to the creation of the fan-public around PTR.

The fan and star categories are created by the participants. Membership categorization analysis does not stop at discussing the categories, their bounded activities, and their relations. As Sacks (1972) argued, categories are organized according to "devices," the social institutions that facilitate the classification of the categories. For example, the categories of mother and baby (from Sacks' famous example) are part of the device known as family. Fan and star are part of a larger device of entertainment—a field in which fans love their stars, follow them fervently, appreciate their work, and at times wait for years to interact with them (all of these can be found in the excerpts above).

The entertainment device problematizes the fan-public argument presented by Van Zoonen. Because publics are part of the political realm and fans are part of the entertainment realm, the hyphen connecting them cannot be taken lightly; it places PTR programs in the world of infotainment. These relations and social institutions are different from what traditional politics and a public are thought of, Van Zoonen notwithstanding. This article cannot delve into a discussion of the problems and benefits of infotainment (cf. Baym, 2005), both of which exist in the PTR fan-public and its interactions. On a positive note, PTR's interactions present an engaged, passionate public (Dori-Hacohen, 2012a) whose devoted callers connect their personal experiences and knowledge with the host's point of view (ex. 11, 13). These fan-callers also can acknowledge initial criticality as part of presenting themselves as having the ability to change (ex. 10). These fan-callers are part of a larger cultural change that widens civic engagement and does not leave it to the social elite, and thus increases participation in civic life.

Examining politics as wider cultural phenomena and the opening of civic engagement to include fan-public is not without its problems. For example, a community whose members idolize a star (ex. 13) for more than 20 years (ex. 6) is problematic when it comes to the political decision-making processes, because this process might be based on worshiping, which eliminates the individual's ability to think for herself or himself. Similarly, politics used to be considered more important than entertainment with regard to decision making, so turning politics into infotainment seems to cheapen politics, as hosts sell politics like any other product (Dori-Hacohen, 2012a) and fans buy the products uncritically. This cheapening of politics may lead, in the long run, to either cynicism toward the political process or apathy toward it. Moreover, this fan-public has such strong ties to the host that they accept his information without challenging it, which skews their views of social and political life (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). These features of the fan-public devoid of the political process of the critical citizen that the democratic process demands, transforms politics to a fan-star relation (e.g., the "Obama girl"). Studying PTR fan-star relations leads to similar conclusions as studying political blogs: political fandom, or fan-publics, is problematic to civic engagement within traditional representative democracy (Sandvoss, 2013). These arenas for civic participations—call-in shows, online commenting, and blogs—while widening ordinary people's participation in public discussion, cannot be perceived as substituting the traditional public without taking into account their hybridity and entertainment elements.

### **Conclusion**

This article reports on some practices that achieve a fan membership category in U.S. political talk radio. Analyzing the opening of the host-caller interactions, fandom was identified as a preferred action, achieved in the first possible position, before moving to the business of the call. We might argue that being a fan is the main business of the call and is the caller's credentials (Haspell, 2001). The hosts respond to these practices of fandom as stars, appreciating the compliments (Pomerantz, 1978). It is argued that these micropractices facilitate the significance of PTR in U.S. politics, its fan-public, and its part in the infotainment media. Future research may study other fan interactions and may connect fandom with specific features of the star—such as gender dynamics (as in the excerpts in this article where the women use extended discourse structures based their fandom on a husband [ex. 10] or a grandfather [ex. 13]), especially because the hosts are typically White men.

This article is limited mainly to the opening of interactions and to the specific types of membership categories of fan and star. These categories can be claimed and demonstrated throughout the interaction and may achieve other membership categories, such as that of "conservative." Additionally, these categories of U.S. PTR have not been discussed or illustrated in radio call-in interactions elsewhere. These venues are left for future research, yet the discursive basis of the phone-in interactions, regardless of their place, ensures that other membership categories similar to or different from those of the fan and star may be found and connected to the wider world of politics and entertainment in the media.

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