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Article

## Points of Contact Between Activism, Populism, and Fandom on Social Media

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### Abstract

This article explores how music fans used social media to increase a social movement’s public support. Although initially dismissed as a conspiracy theory, the movement eventually gained widespread support and is motivating communities to engage in broader cultural conversations. The movement’s success, this article argues, is largely owed to social media’s networked communication affordances and how they facilitate fan-based citizenship and citizen journalism. Through a rhetorical analysis of social media communication related to the movement, this article examines how online fan-based citizen journalism can draw together seemingly disconnected ideologies and audiences to diversify and bolster social movements’ support.

### Keywords

celebrity; citizen journalism; digital publics; fan activism; fan studies; hashtag activism; popular culture; pop music; social media; social movements

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Following her conservatorship’s onset in 2008, a dedicated community of Britney Spears fans created the #FreeBritney movement and began calling for Spears’ conservatorship to end, citing corruption, sexism, and ableism. Then, in the summer of 2021, Spears spoke in court about enduring conservatorship abuse (Baer, 2021); later on Instagram, Spears acknowledged and thanked the #FreeBritney movement for the first time (Spears, 2021). Spears’ conservatorship ended in November 2021, and #FreeBritney is now being taken seriously as a social movement and contributing to broader public change. On September 28, 2021, for instance, the US Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing for conservatorship reform, and #FreeBritney supporters rejoiced. “Other fandoms are happy breaking music records,” tweeted Absolute Britney (2021), “but we are reforming laws and bringing order, we can be super proud! #FreeBritney.”

In this article, I explore how fans’ use of social media increased #FreeBritney’s support. Although initially dismissed as a conspiracy theory, the #FreeBritney move-

ment eventually gained widespread support and is motivating communities to engage in broader cultural conversations about sexism, ableism, abuse, and media ethics (ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, 2021; Bianchini, 2021; Heady, 2021; Limbong, 2021; smith, 2021). This movement’s success, I argue, is largely owed to social media’s networked communication affordances. Community is central to fandoms (Busse & Gray, 2011; Jenkins, 2018). Today, social media plays a significant role in fostering fan communities, as it helps fans more easily communicate with each other and with larger networks of people. This article analyzes how fans use social media to exert public influence, namely through fan activism and fan-based citizenship (Hinck, 2019).

I begin with a review of fans’ public influence, including with regard to activism and citizenship. Next, I examine a #FreeBritney supporter’s social media communication; I argue that this supporter’s content illustrates online *fan-based citizen journalism*, which can encourage other forms of fan-based citizenship and fan activism (Hinck, 2019). A rhetorical analysis of this content shows how it draws together seemingly disconnected ideologies

and audiences (e.g., feminism, populism, disability rights; fans, concerned citizens, public figures) to diversify and bolster #FreeBritney's support. I conclude by reflecting on some effects and implications of fan-based citizen journalism on social media, including its capacity to form ideologically diverse digital (counter)publics and to counteract echo chambers, as well as the challenges it faces regarding journalistic conventions and ethics.

## 2. Fans and/as Citizens

In her book *Politics for the Love of Fandom*, Hinck (2019) offers "four continua that defines one's experience as a fan," which Hinck summarizes as "affective ties, specialization of knowledge, community, and material productivity" (pp. 9–10). For instance, a fan's strong, positive attachment toward a character in a television show (affective ties) may motivate them to close-read the show for details involving that character (specialization of knowledge), which they may contribute to Wiki pages and online forums about the show (material productivity, community). Although I will engage with these continua throughout this article, here it is worth noting that fans' and fandoms' qualities, experiences, and activities are fluid and context-dependent (Hinck, 2019, p. 10; see also Jenkins, 2018). Additionally, *fans* and *fandoms* are not synonyms. Whereas a fan might be defined by their individual attachment to a fan object, fans' collective participation in a community creates a fandom (Jenkins, 2018, p. 16).

As fan cultures evolve, community remains a defining quality. By engaging in collective fan-based activities (e.g., close reading, creating fan texts, cosplaying), fans develop shared modes of communication and participation that signal ingroup knowledge and membership. Although these activities can foster community and create a sense of belonging for individuals, they can also be exclusionary, often for members of historically excluded communities (De Kosnik & carrington, 2019). In response, fans may work together to subvert these effects. For instance, Florini (2019, para. 1.4) shows how Black fans of the television program *Game of Thrones* creatively use digital and social media texts, platforms, and communication strategies "to create enclaved networked spaces where they can engage in fandom," such as creating and circulating hashtags.

Fans' activities can be deeply meaningful for individuals and communities. Walker (2019, para. 1.2) discusses how Black fans engage in "narrative extraction," or "the work of finding, creating, and translating identification—and meaning—when one is not represented," such as identifying fictional characters who are "racially ambiguous, nonracially defined, or even nonhuman" as members of the Black community. This form of fan labor differs from other, oft-discussed forms (e.g., fan fiction, cosplay) because "it is work that occurs in real time in order for marginalized fans to experience, identify with, and enjoy the non-POC-led work" (Walker,

2019, para. 1.6). Fans can also effect public change. As De Kosnik and carrington (2019, para. 1.3) note, cultural institutions cultivate "a cultural landscape that usually caters to majoritarian interests," but fans are persuading these institutions to expand and diversify their financial and creative priorities.

To describe how fans effect public change, two terms are useful. First, fans engage in *fan activism*, such as "deploy[ing] activist tactics like petitions, boycotts, and letter-writing campaigns" to influence media and cultural institutions (Hinck, 2019, p. 7). Moreover, fans are now engaging in what Hinck (2019) calls "fan-based citizenship," in which "fans take action on *public* issues that affect their experiences as *citizens*...resulting in civic action that is grounded in one's experience and identity as a fan" (p. 7).

Social media facilitates fan activism and fan-based citizenship, helping fans easily connect with each other and their fan objects. Research shows that celebrities' social media accounts increase their fans' sense of connection to the celebrity because the celebrity's account appears to offer a more direct, "authentic" line of communication to fans, as well as more intimate insights into the celebrity's life (Bennett, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Peterson, 2009). Consequently, celebrities have been able to leverage social media for mobilizing their fans into collective public action (Bennett, 2013; Click et al., 2017; Hunting & Hinck, 2017). Yet, this dynamic typically involves the celebrity—who holds power in the celebrity-fan relationship and as a public figure—influencing their fans to support public causes. #FreeBritney inverts this dynamic: Fans mobilized to support the celebrity, whom they perceive to be disempowered, and, by extension, larger public causes tied to this disempowerment.

In turn, tension emerges as #FreeBritney walks a tightrope between citizen journalism and conspiracy theorizing. I discuss this tension further in Sections 4 and 5, but for now I offer a brief overview: In recent years, Spears' behavior appeared increasingly more controlled (e.g., her interviews) yet unconventional (e.g., her Instagram posts), with rare moments that suggested Spears' distress. Thus, fans began to investigate and circulate their findings online (Spanos, 2021). Along the way, investigating Spears' conservatorship became no longer only a matter of advocating for Spears but also for those who may be similarly affected (e.g., conservatees, women, people with disabilities). Yet, without explicit confirmations or invitations to engage in this way, including from Spears, #FreeBritney supporters appeared to be conspiracy-theorizing fans. In the following case study, I explore how this tension—#FreeBritney as a conspiracy theory and/or citizen journalism—appears in one supporter's social media content.

## 3. #FreeBritney on Instagram

This case study follows one Instagram content creator who is prominent in #FreeBritney and who helped

increase the movement's audience uptake (hereafter referred to as "CC"). I chose this account for a few reasons. First, I was struck by CC's distinctive Spears coverage via Instagram stories, or posts that disappear 24 hours after posting. When I first discovered CC's account in mid-2021, I spent hours watching their pinned stories (i.e., stories "pinned" to the user's profile so they remain visible after 24 hours), which present a biographical overview of Spears' life alongside CC's research on Spears' conservatorship. CC combines sound, color, and words (e.g., gifs, "stickers," photos, videos, captions, text slides, sound clips, music) to deliver a multimodal, research-based narrative that plays like an Instagram-story documentary. To support their claims, CC cites an array of primary and secondary texts (e.g., interviews, video clips, photographs, screenshots of texts and emails, links to articles), as well as quotes from anonymous sources. Besides their creative use of Instagram to report about Spears, I was also struck by this content's other rhetorical features. CC doesn't simply report on Spears' situation; they also interpret, analyze, and argue with a distinctive voice and style. As CC reports on Spears, they also advocate *for* Spears and *against* specific people and institutions, namely those in elite, powerful positions. Evidently, people find this combination of rhetorical strategies to be persuasive; in the year since I began researching CC, their follower count has increased by hundreds of thousands of followers, and they often re-share audience members' Instagram stories that praise CC's distinctive approach to investigating and reporting.

CC's public account regularly indicates an aim to be circulated and can be considered communication within a public forum. Nevertheless, I do not name the account out of recognition of potential harm and risks that may arise for both social media users and researchers when this content circulates (franzke et al., 2020, p. 11). CC communicates about #FreeBritney primarily through stories. I archived this content via screenshots and screen-recording (stored locally), and I rhetorically analyzed this archive, paying particular attention to the ideologies within it. As Foss (2018, p. X) explains, ideology is:

A system of ideas or a pattern of beliefs that determines a group's interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world....In an ideological analysis, a critic looks beyond the surface structure of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests. (p. 237)

In such an analysis, a researcher analyzes all elements of a text, such as "stylistic tokens, power relations, stereotypes, and ideographs," then interprets how those elements communicate broader ideologies (Kornfield, 2021, p. 155). An ideologically-focused rhetorical analysis fits the present case study because it attends to "who has power (the elite) and how that power is used to shape and disseminate dominant ideologies" (p. 157).

#FreeBritney is a movement that resists power, including by resisting dominant ideologies related to women and people with disabilities. This case study explores one example of this resistance. In Section 4, I analyze how CC's fan-based citizen journalism communicates ideologies that appeal to multiple audiences, which broadens support for #FreeBritney.

#### 4. #FreeBritney's Fan-Based Citizen Journalism

CC's account functions as fan-based citizen journalism. Here, I am building on Hinck's concept of "fan-based citizenship" (2019, pp. 6–7). Although much of #FreeBritney aligns with fan activism, I present fan-based citizen journalism as a form of fan-based citizenship because citizenship is fundamental to citizen journalism. As Harcup (2011) explains, alternative media like citizen journalism fosters "a culture of participation" and can "constitute a form of active citizenship" that leads to "more inclusive" and informed public spheres (pp. 16–17). Generally, "citizen journalism" is "news content (text, video, audio, interactives, etc.) produced by non-professionals" (Wall, 2015, p. 798). In this article, I interpret citizen journalism according to Goode's (2009) more specific description:

Citizen journalism constitutes a complex and layered mix of representation, interpretation (and re-interpretation), translation, and, indeed, remediation...whereby news and comment, discourse and information, is reshaped as it traverses a range of sites and varying media platforms. (p. 1291)

Goode's description is useful for this article's case study because it acknowledges the investigative and interpretive aspects of journalism—which are featured prominently in CC's content—and the influence of media and audience. According to Ananny (2014), "readers have many opportunities to comment on and engage with news...but few opportunities to meaningfully impact the conditions under which it is produced" (p. 360). Social media is increasing these opportunities and creating new avenues for citizen journalism. Social media enables everyday people to instantly create and circulate their own journalistic content; moreover, online audiences' activities like "rating, commenting, tagging and reposting" can be considered "metajournalism" (Goode, 2009, p. 1290).

Definitions of citizen journalism vary, as do interpretations of its connection to similar terms like "alternative media" and "alternative journalism" (Atton, 2015; Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Harcup, 2011; Rosen, 2008). Although I use the term "citizen journalism" in this article, other terms align, too. For instance, *alternative journalism*:

Tends to be produced not by professionals, but by amateurs who typically have little or no training or professional qualifications as journalists: they write and report from their position as citizens, as

members of communities, as activists or as fans. (Atton & Hamilton, 2008, p. 12).

CC occupies these positions simultaneously, and they communicate with audience members who are positioned in one or more of these ways. Worth noting is that not all social media users in such contexts “[are] or even aim to be citizen *journalists*; but many of them...become citizen *experts* who inform and enrich debates” (Sandvoss, 2013, p. 273). CC’s content consistently signals an aim to be considered an alternative or citizen journalist. For instance, CC frequently posts “Breaking News” stories, in which “BREAKING NEWS” appears in red font atop a black and white photograph of Spears, while a siren sound plays. CC posts this slide before reporting developments related to Spears’ conservatorship, like a television channel broadcasting “breaking news” alerts.

Reporting news is an important but not totalizing quality of citizen journalism. Like Goode (2009), I am interested in how citizen journalism can be better understood if its definitions include more nuanced considerations of what constitutes journalism (p. 1290). Generally, journalism is valued for how it navigates bias and credibility, insofar as audiences expect the news to be a strictly factual report of information in the public interest (i.e., “the truth”). Yet, as Goode (2009) points out, “journalism is in no small measure a craft of *re-telling* stories rather than simply disclosing them” (p. 1290). A similar tension appears in discussions of news, as Ananny (2014) summarizes: “Some models emphasize the press’s informational and transactional nature...while others take a more expansive view, asking it to *check power, convene publics, mobilize social movements, and engender empathy*” (p. 363, emphasis added). Ananny’s description of news is helpful for thinking about the aims and outcomes of citizen journalism. An act of citizen journalism can be limited in scope, quantity, and frequency, such as “captur[ing] a single moment (e.g., witnessing an event)” and reporting on that moment through social media (Wall, 2015, p. 798). As the scope, quantity, and frequency of such content increase, the rhetor may shift from “content creator” to “citizen journalist,” wherein an everyday social-media user becomes someone who wields the public influence that Ananny describes.

This is the case with CC, who offers this “more expansive” form of news (Ananny, 2014, p. 363). Analyzing how they do so can improve understanding of how online fan-based citizen journalism can influence publics (e.g., formation, communication). I organize this analysis with the four qualities of “more expansive” news that Ananny lists above, though not in their original order: Engender Empathy, Convene Publics, Mobilize Social Movements, and Check Power.

#### 4.1. Engender Empathy

Fundamental to #FreeBritney is its success in persuading audiences to care about Spears. The obviousness of such

a goal should not be conflated with the ease of achieving it. For decades, Spears’ public life has been marked by aggressive public criticism and denigration. For the first several years of her life as a public figure, this criticism and denigration centered around her body, her sexuality, her gender, and her talent and skills. Generally during this period, the judgments about Spears were distinctly sexist. In the 2000s, as she began navigating life as a young adult woman, wife, and mother, the critiques began to combine sexism and ableism.

That Spears remained in the conservatorship and didn’t speak out against it for 13 years illustrates the essential role that social media played in engendering public empathy. First, social media provided insights into Spears’ life during a 13-year period in which Spears’ public persona was heavily structured and limited. Second, social media increased the public reach of concerned fans and everyday people like CC. #FreeBritney effectively used social media to reshape public perceptions of both Spears and the conservatorship (e.g., ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, 2021; Bianchini, 2021; Heady, 2021; smith, 2021), including by engendering empathy for her. I discuss how CC does so in greater detail in Section 5.

#### 4.2. Convene Publics

By pairing first-person plural language with commanding verbs and—to borrow CC’s phrasing—a “grim and urgent” tone, CC reifies their heterogeneous audience members as a more homogeneous public that shares internal and external characteristics, including “paying attention” to CC (Warner, 2002, p. 71). CC uses first-person plural language to summarize content they’ve shared, like “we can’t seem to get a straight story” and “considering what we know now.” Granted, addressing audiences as “we” isn’t unusual in itself. What stands out in CC’s usage are the verbs associated with “we.” In general, rhetors use “we” to guide attention (e.g., “as we can see here”). CC uses “we” in this way when they say things like, “we need to go over a couple things.” Yet, CC also frequently uses “we” in more commanding ways: “WE’RE LOOKING AT EVERYTHING with fresh eyes now...I’m telling you WE ARE GOING TO LOOK AT THINGS DIFFERENTLY.” This more commanding “we” extends beyond summary and into generalizations of the audiences’ thoughts and feelings: “We REALLY don’t like or trust”; “We believe”; “We’re fully not trusting...We were suspicious but now we’re ignoring”; “We suspect the plies of corruption run deep.” In short, one of the most effective ways in which CC convenes a #FreeBritney public is by addressing their audience as such, namely through first-person plural language.

#### 4.3. Mobilize Social Movements

CC also uses first- and second-person plural language to mobilize audiences. Throughout their #FreeBritney



content, CC calls out public figures for their associations with business manager Lou Taylor—allegedly “the devil in charge” of Spears’ conservatorship (CC)—and their lack of public support for Spears. For instance, after pointing out celebrity Kim Kardashian’s (a) apparent ties to Taylor and (b) apparent refusal to publicly support Spears, CC repeatedly urged followers to pressure Kardashian via Instagram:

Let’s play a game!...I’m asking every single one of you to simply tag @kimkardashian in the comments as swiftly as possible. To hopefully grab her attention. If she doesn’t speak up on this soon, we know why and....Well...we might be cancelling Kim too [devil emoji] This is a cut & dry issue. You stand with Britney and her freedom or you’re dust to us.

Part of this “game” could be interpreted as fan activism and/or hashtag activism, considering its place within a social movement: “Every time she posts something respond with the Britney hashtag” (CC). That week, *Insider* reported, “Fans have flooded Kim Kardashian’s Instagram comments urging her to speak out about Britney Spears’ conservatorship” (Dodgson, 2021), and CC credited themselves and their followers for this development. Sharing screenshots of the article, CC posted:

I want us to be collectively proud of ourselves for it [eight fist emoji] [.] This is all you! It’s not a coincidence—the timing of these headlines. Right after we pulled the trigger on our comment firing squad [raising hands emoji].

I note this example because it mobilizes audiences into collective action to support a social movement—a feature of citizen journalism. In other words, this example shows how fan-based citizen journalism can support fan-based citizenship and activism.

This strategy appears throughout CC’s #FreeBritney content, which often (re)circulates “#FreeBritney” and other call-to-action hashtags like “endtheconservatorship” and “investigate[PublicFigure].” The “#investigate[PublicFigure]” hashtag appears often, given how easily it lends itself to public call-outs: “The hashtag #investigateloutaylor is now trending on Twitter!! People are waking up [praise emoji] let’s make it so these monsters have nowhere to hide. Strength in numbers!!! Never underestimate the power. We’ve got this.” Strategies like these help CC mobilize audiences to support the #FreeBritney social movement.

#### 4.4. Check Power

These calls-to-action often function as call-outs, wherein the linguistic “we” stands in for a conceptual *us* who is checking a nefarious *them*’s power. Although Spears’ family is central in this group, even more central is Taylor; according to CC, Spears’ family evidently grew close

to Taylor shortly before the conservatorship’s establishment. CC summarizes in their “WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR” story:

We know that Lou Taylor is the devil in charge. Someone Britney was scared of and tried very hard to avoid but ultimately (with the aid of [Spears’] family) became the architect for this whole legal set up. Which she still profits from.

CC argues that Taylor has a pattern of attempting to put young pop-culture figures into conservatorships for financial gain. For example, CC writes, “Lindsay Lohan was more fortunate. She ended up a failed attempt,” and shares clips of Lohan’s father speaking publicly about how Taylor and Spears’ manager tried to put Lohan in a conservatorship. Below, CC checks Taylor’s power while also asking why advocates for women’s rights and the #MeToo movement are not more actively advocating for Spears:

Wondering where all the Me Too voices are rn. With an enslaved pop star begging to be free from the plies of the power and the greed. If Britney Spears can’t find justice after 13 years of suffering what makes us think any of us are any different. All the rage over [Harvey] Weinstein while another devil (who happens to be female) in the industry sits free and unbothered in Italian linen committing these crimes right in front of us. From the sports industry to the entertainment business and the church, her power remains guarded and limitless.

According to CC, “mafia-like” Taylor is coordinating the corrupt group who profits from Spears’ conservatorship, “from paid media to medical drs to therapists to lawyers all the way to the courts.” Overall, CC routinely checks the power of various influential people and groups.

## 5. Key Themes and Ideologies

In the previous section, I discussed how CC’s #FreeBritney content enacts fan-based citizen journalism. In this section, I analyze the themes and ideologies that are present in this content.

### 5.1. Human Rights

CC’s #FreeBritney content shows how larger ideological arguments can be conveyed to diverse online audiences, thereby expanding support for a social movement. Although #FreeBritney was once dismissed as merely pop culture (read “frivolous,” “superficial,” “low culture”), #FreeBritney content like CC’s increased the movement’s support by arguing that Spears’ conservatorship is an urgent case of human rights, particularly women’s rights and disability rights. This argument’s appeal is ideologically broad (human rights) yet nuanced (women’s rights,

disability rights), which helped shift public responses to Spears' conservatorship from passive acceptance and support to active concern and resistance.

The general public was well-primed to accept Spears' conservatorship at its onset, thanks to the media coverage and public discourse surrounding Spears in the mid-2000s. Moreover, given how much Spears began to act like the "old Britney" (i.e., late 1990s to early 2000s) after the conservatorship's establishment, it was easy to believe the conservatorship was necessary. Those who disagreed seemed like delusional fans. However, #FreeBritney supporters like CC used social media to shift public perception of #FreeBritney from a pop-culture conspiracy theory to a case of human rights activism. In one story, CC insists:

We've got to stop apologizing for being invested in this story. It's not a guilty pleasure or another trite pop side story. What we're seeing here is downright horrifying. The biggest pop star in the world is begging for her life after 13 years of being enslaved by her father, abused by the system and her family, overly drugged by the medical field and horribly neglected by an industry that made millions off of her stellar star power since she was 17.

CC proceeds to present three categories of "WHO SHOULD CARE" about Spears. First, CC argues that "anyone who ever stayed up late to watch her performances ignite an award show, or danced in a club or a kitchen or cried in a car or pushed harder on a treadmill because her music inspired it" should care. This alone is a powerful argument, considering the international impact of Spears' music. Yet, this first category relies on a point that has proven limited, historically: it requires the audience to care about Spears as a person, to have empathy for a woman who has been objectified, minimized, and mocked by *the public* for decades.

The next claim, then, may be more persuasive. We should care about Spears, CC argues, if we care about women:

Anyone who [believes] women should be free from their abusers, not policed for their trauma, [demoralized], dismissed or degraded when men like Bill Cosby can walk free while a 39 year old woman who never broke a law in her life is casually overlooked despite countless cries for help.

In other words: Spears is a woman; women are humans with human rights; human rights matter and need to be protected if they are in danger of or are being violated; Spears' human rights are being violated; Spears needs protection.

CC makes this point more explicit in quotes like:

To all the women who were so ready to riot over Weinstein leveraging power for sex, how about every

systematic branch in society working to collectively enslave a woman so they can profit off her estate while stripping her of the right to bear children, take a road trip, visit friends, choose her therapist, access her own medical records, have an untapped phone line, decline a tour, etc—where is your rage now?

As CC signals here and elsewhere, #FreeBritney should appeal to audiences beyond Spears' fans and pop-culture onlookers; #FreeBritney involves women's rights, which corresponds with broader ideologies and systems of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. Accordingly, feminists—many of whom may have once criticized Spears—may be more inclined to support her.

This second claim sets the audience up for the third:

Anyone interested in [human] rights.] Basically what Britney is living is all of our worse nightmare. Her Voice, power, autonomy, dignity stripped. Abandoned by family. Secluded from friends. Surrounded by wolves who are draining an empire that she built!!! by working tirelessly since highschool.

Again: Spears is a human with human rights; human rights matter and need to be protected if they are in danger of or are being violated; Spears' human rights are being violated; Spears needs protection.

CC's "WHO SHOULD CARE?" story alludes to what they make explicit elsewhere: #FreeBritney is also a matter of disability rights. After all, Spears was placed in her conservatorship based on a diagnosis of mental illness and, like other conservatees, remained in it because (a) those involved in the case argued that she needed it, and (b) those beyond it believed that argument. This is one of the biggest challenges conservatees face. If conservatees seem healthy and their life improves, the argument is that their success and well-being is owed to the conservatorship; if they continue to face challenges, the argument is that they still require the conservatorship. As Spears explained in 2021 about why she took 13 years to speak out against her conservatorship, "I didn't want to say any of this to anybody, to the public, because people would make fun of me or laugh at me and say, 'She's lying'" (Spears, as cited in Baer, 2021, p. 18).

Disability rights and women's rights are intertwined. Labeling women as "hysterical" and "crazy" is a centuries-old strategy for dismissing and denigrating women, including in relation to their mental health (Moore, 2021). Spears' case is paradigmatic of this combination of sexism and ableism. As CC explains, mainstream media has played a large role in Spears' conservatorship by combining the two. In one story, CC compares the different media framings of Spears versus male celebrities who have a history of abusing women: "Media framing: Men breaking down are 'going through something[.]' Women breaking down are just crazy. Chased hunted and judged till they actually break." However, #FreeBritney's ideological arguments—which supporters like CC made

and circulated via social media—contributed to the eventual recognition of Spears’ conservatorship as a case of human rights (ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, 2021; Anguiano, 2021).

## 5.2. Conspiracy and Populism

Thus far, we have seen how CC’s #FreeBritney content advances ideological arguments that bring together fans (and onlookers); people interested in popular culture; and people invested in women’s rights, disability rights, and, more broadly, human rights. Again, these are not mutually exclusive categories. Someone with no interest in Spears or popular culture could become invested in #FreeBritney because CC persuaded them that Spears’ human rights are being violated, which has broader implications for others (e.g., conservatees, women, people with disabilities). This dynamic extends far in #FreeBritney. As CC illustrates, #FreeBritney brings together communities that may seem somewhat at odds or disconnected by juxtaposing various ideologies (e.g., feminism, conspiracy, populism) and advocating for these ideologies through social media. This section focuses on how ideologies of conspiracy and populism surface in #FreeBritney.

Like other #FreeBritney supporters, CC’s effort to investigate and share findings with the public as an everyday community member and/or citizen journalist can come across as conspiracy theorizing. CC acknowledges but refutes this perception:

The things that are coming to light now are what the free Britney movement fans have been keen to for years. And dismissed by mainstream as extreme internet conspiracists. Though it’s looking more and more like they were all right all along. About everything.

Indeed, #FreeBritney is now largely free of its conspiracy-theory label. Still, it is important to attend to that element of #FreeBritney, given that the movement was once perceived to be a fan-driven conspiracy theory. This perception stems partly from fans’ behavior, which mirrors conspiracy theorists’. Hyzen and Van den Bulck (2021) explain, “The relationship between conspiracy theories and followers is similar to an affective bond between fan objects and fans. [For example, Alex] Jones’ followers demonstrate fan-like behavior in their detailed dissecting of Jones’ every word in endless—now removed—threads” (p. 185). Spears’ fans behave similarly, analyzing her captions, emoji, clothing, and more to decode what they believe are hidden messages (Reslen, 2021). When Spears’ Instagram account occasionally is deactivated, #FreeBritney supporters express concern that the deactivation was against Spears’ will and that she is being controlled and silenced; this response persists today, after Spears’ conservatorship has ended. In their analysis of #FreeBritney as a conspiracy theory, Smith and Southerton (2022, para. 13) describe this kind of “close

reading” as “the hallmark of conspiracy theorising,” in which people scrutinize “various texts to spot inconsistencies and gaps in authenticity that disrupt the dominant narrative.” Through their close reading of public texts like Spears’ Instagram, Spears’ fans and #FreeBritney supporters align with “conspiracy theory communities, creating a pleasurable affective atmosphere...that circulates in and through digital practices” (Smith & Southerton, 2022, para. 14). Prominent social media accounts like CC’s help foster an online network through which fans can engage in these digital practices together.

Conspiracy is also important to address in this case study because of its relationship to ideology. According to Hyzen and Van den Bulck (2021), “Conspiracy operates as an ideological lens and (belief in it) is not so much about a theory’s specifics but higher-order beliefs like distrust of authority. As such, conspiracy theories serve as smokescreens for an ideological-political agenda” (p. 181). In CC’s case, this ideological-political agenda becomes increasingly apparent, including in ways that align with populism. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012) define populism as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (p. 8). As discussed earlier, CC’s content regularly argues that a corrupt elite maintains Spears’ conservatorship.

Of note is how mainstream media appears in this argument. For instance, CC reports that US pop stars Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez were once at risk of becoming conservatees, when Taylor was ostensibly influencing people close to them. As CC explains, Bieber sought public support that was apparently suppressed: “during his ‘psychotic break down’ a recording of Justin...surfaced online—confessing the reason behind his career break was due to the evils he had seen and experienced in the music industry. He was crying, sobbing.” CC then shows a screenshot of a video called *Justin Bieber: Pedophiles Run the Music Industry*, but apparently “All evidence of this video (which I watched myself when it surfaced) has since been erased from the internet.” Again, there is the implication of a corrupt elite hiding the truth.

CC suggests that mainstream media helped maintain the pro-conservatorship narrative:

Justin was often in the news in 2016—for concerning antics and increasingly erratic behavior....Headlines began questioning his sanity...The Britney comparisons started rolling in...What the headlines didn’t [miss] was talks of an impending conservatorship that had quietly [been] ongoing between his family and the church since 2014.

This passage hints at an argument apparent throughout CC’s content: mainstream media is part of the corrupt



elite, obscuring and spinning the truth for financial gain. For example, CC repeatedly calls out *TMZ*, arguing that, “We know now *TMZ* is and always has been paid by the Jamie Spears camp to help shape the public narrative to gain support for her on going Conservatorship.” CC notes about their own investigation—necessitated by the apparent shortcomings of mainstream journalism—“The deeper we go the darker, more disturbing it gets. Forcing me to question everything and everyone I ever trusted.”

Trust is key; as a theme, it permeates CC’s content. Who should and shouldn’t “we” trust, CC continuously asks and explores (e.g., “we REALLY don’t like or trust [Spears’ mother]”; “we’re fully not trusting sam [Asghari]”). As CC’s #FreeBritney efforts continue, mistrust of corrupt elites persists, including of mainstream media: “Ground breaking journalism (on any topic) isn’t coming from mainstream media outlets. If there is anything we’ve learned here it’s that” (CC). In another story, CC writes:

New details emerging by the hour and it only gets crazier with each revelation. Let’s note: What you’re seeing here is how the trend of journalism over the past few years—so that breaking news and real investigative efforts to uncover these kinds of stories now come from everyday people working the magic of the internet instead of established “news” sources who seem to only report the surface level “safe” bullet points.

A chain of reasoning is at work in CC’s critiques of mainstream media: Corrupt elites hold power over the people; the mainstream media is part of the elites; these elites manipulate the people’s perceptions, including of Spears; we cannot trust the elites, including the mainstream media, to tell us the truth; we need to seek and share the truth on our own (e.g., through citizen journalism), which will help us hold the elites accountable.

Notably, there is also an element of mistrusting social media, though it is again associated with the elites. For instance, CC says, “We are also no longer debating or dissecting [Spears’ Instagram]” because they believe it’s “a decoy” used by Spears’ network to deceive the public and maintain power. Likewise, there is an element of mistrusting the platforms themselves, such as CC’s concerns about being shadowbanned by Instagram or having their account taken down because they post content that challenges the elites and mainstream media’s dominant narratives. Nevertheless, these concerns further support CC’s argument for social-media citizen journalism: *We can communicate the truth directly to each other through social media, even if They don’t want us to.*

### 5.3. Discussion

This study suggests that citizen journalism and/or conspiracy theory may appeal to—and draw together—a

variety of online audiences and communities because they share some form of populist ideology, despite other ideological differences between them. To trust CC’s content, audiences need to agree with its underlying ideological argument: an elite “Them” (Spears’ managers, lawyers, doctors; politicians; mainstream media) is maintaining corrupt power over Spears and “Us” (the general public). As I’ve shown, multiple ideological pathways may lead diverse audiences to agree with this argument. Consequently, people who might otherwise be disconnected become part of the same online community. In turn, community members who remain in that community may be continuously exposed to arguments and ideologies they might not encounter regularly. For instance, part of CC’s #FreeBritney advocacy stems from their broader belief in bodily autonomy, which includes their opposition to Covid-19 vaccination mandates. CC sometimes juxtaposes this content—#FreeBritney and Covid-19—by posting stories about both within the same day, which further expands the ideologies and audiences involved in their content. In this way, this account seems to have effectively created the opposite of a social-media echo chamber.

One reason CC might have achieved this result is because the core components of populism seem currently to be persuading many different communities, including those who consider mainstream media to be part of the corrupt elite. As recent polls indicate, people from the US are expressing remarkably low trust in mainstream media (Brenan, 2021; Edmonds, 2021). Thus, people may be turning to news sources that seem to be more authentically serving the informational needs of the general public, such as citizen journalism. Regarding trust, the element of conspiracy remains important, as well. When trust is low, belief in conspiracy tends to rise (Van Prooijen et al., 2022). When people feel disempowered—including because they feel manipulated and lied to by those with institutional power—they may be more likely to align with arguments that seem to empower them by telling them “the truth” (i.e., conspiracy, populism).

Frankly, this is incredibly nuanced subject matter. Conspiracy and populism have historically presented considerable social, cultural, and political challenges and consequences, and they continue to do so today. Yet, this study finds that #FreeBritney—a popular-culture, fan-driven movement—complicates both. As conspiracy theories sometimes do (Olmstead, 2018), #FreeBritney shifted away from the conspiracy-theory categorization as more evidence surfaced, thanks in part to #FreeBritney supporters like CC. In CC’s case, they cultivated a diverse online community of #FreeBritney supporters *and* account followers. In other words, even if the initial rhetorical event subsides, the network formed from the event can continue to grow; again, this opens up interesting possibilities for countering echo chambers.

This case study also raises questions about the relationship between social media and citizen journalism.

Journalism is a refined professional and scholarly field. Professional journalists receive formal training that helps them navigate bias, evaluate sources, and more; established news media venues (ideally) draw on this training to maintain the field's standards for journalistic ethics. For citizen journalism on social media, however, neither that training nor those checks are in place. Instead, it falls upon the citizen journalist's social media platform and audience to "check" them—both their reporting and their public power. A general audience (i.e., one who also lacks formal journalistic training) can leave a comment or send a direct message to the citizen journalist if they have concerns, and/or they can flag that person's account if its content violates the platform's terms and conditions of use, but these approaches have limitations. The citizen journalist might ignore comments and messages, or they may block or publicly call out audience members that express concerns or critiques; audience members might misuse a platform's reporting feature in an effort to silence someone with whom they disagree; and, of course, a platform's system for maintaining standards of communication is one established by the platform, whose priorities may lie more with profit than journalistic integrity and minimizing mis-/dis-information. Throughout this study, I have observed the above outcomes in various ways. For instance, I have seen: CC post screenshots of Instagram warnings they were receiving because audience members were reporting CC's Covid-19 content; Instagram temporarily take down CC's account; and another prominent content creator (unrelated to #FreeBritney) express concerns about critiquing CC's approach to citizen journalism because that person didn't want to be publicly called out or harassed by CC's followers. Thus, another tension emerges: Online fan-based citizen journalism may suggest a promising capacity to counteract echo chambers as its network grows, but that network's online communication practices and structures could also limit this capacity.

## 6. Future Directions

Like Spears herself, the #FreeBritney movement was long dismissed as pop-culture frivolity. Yet, Spears—an international pop-culture icon—attracts an immense, diverse audience. This case study illuminates how #FreeBritney achieved similar results. Through their strategic use of social media, CC helped increase #FreeBritney's public influence. Yet, CC's content is especially compelling because of the tightrope it walks between citizen journalism and conspiracy theory, which suggests significant rhetorical possibilities for online fan-based citizenship and activism.

Future work in this area could further investigate the relationship between online fan communities, citizen journalism, and populism. As Miro (2021) notes, "Fandom can...inform studies examining populist movements because fans circulate ideas through technological networked structures and employ their empower-

ment to challenge dominant narratives" (p. 64; see also Jenkins, 2006). #FreeBritney content creators exemplify this, drawing together an ideologically diverse online community of fans, citizens, and activists. Along these lines, researchers should also consider pop-culture and/or fan-based online communities' capacity to counteract echo chambers. Whereas social media has undergone substantial scrutiny for contributing to echo chambers, #FreeBritney seemingly produces the opposite result to some extent, given the movement's layered, mainstream appeal and accessible entry points. Relatedly, researchers might focus more on how audiences engage with fan-based citizen journalism and how it influences them. Ultimately, I argue that #FreeBritney illustrates how the broad appeal of popular culture combined with the broad reach of social media can enrich and complicate online communities' formation and communication, as well as our opportunities to research both.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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