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Kayfabe, Smartdom and Marking Out: Can Pro-Wrestling Help Us Understand Donald Trump?

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Abstract

Donald Trump has enjoyed a nearly 30-year relationship with World Wrestling Entertainment as a business partner, fan, in-ring performer and 2013 Hall of Fame Inductee. Noting this long running involvement, it has become a widespread contention that Trump's style as a political campaigner owes a debt to his experiences within the world of professional wrestling. Taking such claims seriously, this article argues that an engagement with concepts developed within professional wrestling studies would benefit political studies by offering new analytical approaches for the study of the political phenomenon that is Donald Trump. Providing a brief introduction to professional wrestling studies, this article outlines how the concepts of kayfabe, smart fandom and marking out help address a key question for political scholars: how to explain a cynical American electorate's engagement with and emotional investment in the campaign of such an obvious political fraudster.

Keywords

Donald Trump, professional wrestling, ideology, political campaigning, US President

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Introduction

Donald Trump is the first occupant of the Oval Office to also be an inductee into the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)[1] Hall of Fame, an honour bestowed upon him in recognition of his nearly 30-year relationship with the company. The idea of 'President Donald Trump' was itself floated during his Hall of Fame induction in 2013, when long-time friend Vince McMahon, Chairman and CEO of the WWE, declared 'second only to me, Donald might very well be a great President of the United States'.[2] A President with an interest in professional wrestling (aka pro-wrestling) is nothing new; Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush were all reportedly fans (Kelly and Wetherbee, 2016a: loc.65). Trump, however, is the only President to have hosted two WrestleManias

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(1988 and 1989, both in Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey), attended six and appeared on WWE television more than a dozen times, playing a leading role in two storylines and getting physical (albeit to a small degree) in the ring itself (Margolin, 2017).

Significantly, Trump is also the only President whose engagement with the world of pro-wrestling has been widely advanced as key to understanding his success as a political campaigner. Naomi Klein (2017), for example, claims '[i]t's hard to overstate Trump's fascination with wrestling' and that he 'picked up tips' for his presidential campaign from his 'side career in pro-wrestling'. Journalistic comment pieces both during and after the election campaign made similar statements, labelling Trump 'the WWE candidate' (Moon, 2016) and the WWE 'Trump's Presidential Training Ground' (Wilson, 2016; cf. Kelly and Wetherbee, 2016b; Oster, 2016). For some, in fact, American politics as a whole has since become analogous with pro-wrestling, with assertions that 'when Trump left the wrestling ring to become President the entire American public sphere turned itself into one big wrestling arena' (Schjørring, 2017: 23). As one *The New York Times* headline asked, 'Is Everything Wrestling?' A question it posed above a photograph of Trump grinning in a WWE ring, about to shave Vince McMahon's head (Gordon, 2016). In short, the idea that Trump's 2016 campaign for the Presidency – and his Presidency since – is to some extent understandable through the lens of pro-wrestling has been widely mooted within the media.

This article takes this idea seriously, going so far as to set out the case for an interdisciplinary engagement with the burgeoning academic field of professional wrestling studies (cf. Castleberry et al., 2020). The operationalisation of concepts developed within this field, it argues, can provide additional analytical purchase upon the political phenomenon that is Donald Trump. Specifically, the concepts of 'kayfabe', 'smart fandom' and 'marking out' help address a key question for political scholars studying Trump: how to explain the engagement with and emotional investment in the campaign of such an obvious political fraudster by a cynical American electorate? An answer to this thorny question is central to understanding the 2016 Presidential election result.

This is not the first article within political studies to draw linkages between pro-wrestling and politics. Previous academic analyses have studied the political campaigns of pro-wrestling personalities Jesse Ventura and Linda McMahon (Adams, 2011; Bruss, 2010; Conley and Schultz, 2000; Gray and Spano, 2000; Hausser, 2002; Isaacson, 2000; Jannack, 2006; Lentz, 2002; Schultz, 2001; Thimsen, 2010; Walker, 2012). Within these studies, however, an involvement with pro-wrestling is simply a variable to be factored into the campaigns' analyses. Analyses of Trump specifically have also raised the possibility his WWE pedigree influenced his political campaigning style: Theye and Melling (2018: 331) claim Trump's 'many performances on television shows like WWE helped him develop his boisterous, over-the-top political style'; Mendes (2016: 72) argues his insults and crass remarks 'make perfect sense in the context of Trump the WWE entertainer' – a link also identified by Hall, et al. (2016: 83), while I myself have argued (Moon, 2020: 150–151) that pro-wrestling's role in creating Trump's celebrity persona helped produce his image 'as a "no bullshit" straight talker' – a view Schneiker (2020: 9) echoes in passing.

As explained, this article offers a different approach, arguing for an interdisciplinary engagement with concepts developed within professional wrestling studies. This argument is also not in itself unique. Shannon Bow O'Brien's (2020) recently published *Donald Trump and the Kayfabe Presidency: Professional Wrestling Rhetoric in the White*

House embraces the pro-wrestling concept of 'kayfabe' – defined and discussed in detail below – in her analysis of Trump's rhetorical style. Trump, O'Brien (2020: 3, 52, 39) claims, 'appropriates' and 'exploits wrestling attributes and has integrated them into his persona, campaign, and presidency', accusing him of 'utiliz[ing] the vernacular and mannerisms of wrestling' to 'pull language and tactics from modern professional wrestling . . . deploy[ing] them into the political sphere'.

O'Brien's work supports this article's proposal for cross-disciplinary conceptual fertilisation between political studies and professional wrestling studies scholarship; however, the argument presented here is quite different. In contrast to both O'Brien and other articles cited above, this article does not investigate whether Trump's pro-wrestling pedigree practically influenced his style or reception as a campaigner. The focus is instead upon the relationship between Trump supporters and his campaign, here viewed as corresponding to that between pro-wrestling fans and performers. Such an approach, it argues, explains how a cynical public can invest in a political show they know to be, at some level, artificial, and how this relationship further facilitates the transmission of politicians' political ideology to supporters.

To this end, the article opens by introducing political scholars to the academic field of professional wrestling studies, emphasising its interdisciplinary nature and the political focus of much pro-wrestling-related research, including recent papers similarly addressing the Trump Presidency through a pro-wrestling lens. It subsequently delineates how kayfabe, smart fandom and marking out can be applied to the analysis of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, concluding by reflecting upon the viability of further engagement between the fields of political and pro-wrestling studies.

A final point of clarification at this point, pro-wrestling is not a monolithic entity. The performance styles and culture found in local indie wrestling and a mega-corporation like the WWE are far from interchangeable (Smith, 2014). Moreover, pro-wrestling is a global art form with different styles and attached cultural values in different countries – be it Mexican *lucha libre*, Japanese *puroresu*, or US 'sports entertainment' (Levi, 2008; Platt, 2018). Readers should be aware, therefore, that in this article pro-wrestling is treated as analogous with the WWE's product specifically – the dominant international producer of 'sports entertainment' for the past 30 years, and company into whose Hall of Fame Trump is inductee.

Professional Wrestling Studies

As an entertainment form, pro-wrestling is popularly perceived as 'trash culture' (Shoemaker, 2013: 9) – a 'low-brow diversion' (Walker, 2012: 13) that is 'a joke to most people' (Schiavone, 2007: 485). As Laine (2018: 84) notes, '[t]o pay attention to professional wrestling, even critically, is a step too far for many'. Nevertheless, while it 'still struggles for acceptance in academic circles' (Castleberry et al., 2020: 69), professional wrestling studies have developed its own burgeoning field of interdisciplinary research. From Roland Barthes' (2009 [1957]) essay 'The World of Wrestling', which 'helped set the foundation' for navigating the 'hybridity' of the entertainment form (Castleberry et al., 2020: 67), professional wrestling studies have gone on to produce a significant corpus of edited collections, monographs and research articles, alongside the recent formation of the Professional Wrestling Studies Association and journal.

The interdisciplinary nature of the field reflects the composite nature of pro-wrestling itself. Academic analyses of pro-wrestling have separately described it as 'a simulacrum

of grappling and combat sport practices' (Chow and Laine, 2014: 44), 'an exciting, stimulating, beguiling form of performance' (Nevitt, 2010: 322), and 'a hybrid form of sport, street fight, ballet, spectacle, and soap opera' that 'defies easy categorisation' (De Garis, 2005: 195). What these various descriptions emphasise is the performative nature of pro-wrestling, the genre-defying nature of said performances and the subsequent liminal space it occupies beyond traditional academic disciplines (Litherland, 2018: 5).

Unsurprising then, academics from a range of fields have studied pro-wrestling, including gender, communication, rhetorical, fan, cultural, media, drama, convergence, sociological and performance studies – a list to which political studies is now being added. There is thus a 'range of theoretical discourses that may be applied to wrestling' (Mazer, 1998: 7), importing concepts such as Brecht's idea of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect) in epic theatre (Koh, 2017) or Bakhtin's notion of Carnival (Campbell, 1996), for example. Yet, for all this theoretical plurality and a self-conscious identity as a field still seeking legitimation (Castleberry et al., 2020: 67), professional wrestling studies has also produced its own conceptual tools, drawn either directly from industry terminology – kayfabe, smart fans, worked shoots, crowd pops, heat – or, as with Barthes' (2009 [1957]) specific conceptualisation of spectacle, developing out of direct analyses of pro-wrestling itself. It is such pro-wrestling specific concepts that this article reviews for their political studies potential.

Pro-wrestling's ability to speak to contemporary sociopolitical concerns is already a central interest in professional wrestling studies (Chow et al., 2017, 5; cf. Horton, 2018; Jansen, 2020). Existing academic analyses cover such politically charged topics as racism in America and the legacy of slavery (Hughes, 2017; Maguire and Wozniak, 1987); Mexican nationalism and politics (Levi, 2017; cf. 2008); British nationalism and post-colonialism (Porter, 2017); America's response to the Iranian Revolution, US wars in the Middle East, Islamophobia and the 'War on Terror' (Mirmalek, 2018; Nevitt, 2010); Japan's post-war international politics (Thompson, 2007); the Occupy Movement (Canella, 2016); workers' rights and political economy (Schiavone, 2007); free-speech and censorship (Lowney, 2003) and queer and gender politics (Bradbury, 2017; Soulliere, 2006).

The contrasting lack of engagement with this literature by scholars of politics (hitherto, O'Brien alone) is in one sense understandable; Naomi Klein's (2017) claim that pro-wrestling is 'invisible as a cultural force to most liberal voters' is presumably also true of most readers of political science journals. Yet, as Litherland (2018: 180) observes,

> key theoretical approaches developed [in studies of pro-wrestling] seem vital in understanding the metamodern politics of contemporary celebrity cultures and politics. This is all the more vital in an era where Donald Trump, a former character in professional wrestling . . . is the President of the United States.

Professional wrestling studies scholars have been quicker than those in political studies to recognise this potential. Writing in the inaugural issue of the *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal*, for example, Michael Scibilia (2020: 1) draws out the 'political and cultural lineage' between Vince McMahon and Donald Trump, identifying in the latter a 'fusion of politics and professional wrestling [that] took McMahon's brand and persona to the highest level of politics in America'. The most significant interventions, however, involved a debate within the theatre and performance journal *TDR: The Drama Review* between Mazer (2018a, 2018b) and Warden et al. (2018). Provocative and valuable, these papers set out competing normative visions of a politics imbued with the 'ethos of wrestling'.

For Mazer (2018a: 195, 175–176), 'the pro-wrestling-ification of Donald Trump's presidency and the American body politics' is troubling; identifying similarities between Trumpian politics and the worst of pro-wrestling, she worries that 'Spectacle trumps truth' with 'the unreal violence of the game now the all too real brutality of the current regime'. Warden et al. (2018: 202), in response, repudiate the equation of Trump's politics and pro-wrestling, identifying within pro-wrestling 'a means of challenging current political discourse'. If, they argue, we watched politics like pro-wrestling fans, approached work as pro-wrestlers do and celebrated the recent rise of women's wrestling and diversification of the 'sport', then 'we wouldn't have a Trump presidency . . . we would have a stronger opposition in a political sense . . . [and] we could challenge the misogyny and bigotry that are all too prevalent in political discourse and everyday life'.

As outlined, this article offers no normative judgement about pro-wrestling as a political influence. Rather, it argues that the operationalisation of concepts developed within professional wrestling studies within the field of political studies can provide useful analytical tools. This argument is developed across the following three sections, focused upon the application of kayfabe, smart fans and marking out, to Trump's 2016 election campaign.

Kayfabe and Smart Fandom

It is difficult to discuss pro-wrestling without utilising the industry's own specific jargon (Kerrick, 1980), a form of slang developed among the workers at the travelling circuses, carnivals and county fair venues that once hosted wrestling events. This slang has in turn birthed a rhetoric of analysis, as fans and academics (and academics who are fans) have, in the words of Ford (2019: 121), 'incorporated much of the carny parlance of wrestling and of the vernacular theory of wrestling performers that underpins it, in how they understand and talk among themselves about these performance dynamics'. The most important concept within this professional argot is 'kayfabe'.

A Pig-Latin-esque word for 'fake', in pro-wrestling kayfabe refers to 'the performance of staged and 'faked' events as actual and spontaneous' (Chow and Laine, 2014: 46); or, in O'Brien's (2020: vii) appropriation for her analysis of Trumpian usage, 'the illusion that everything is utterly sincere and authentic when it is all just an act'. In a now lost world in which wrestling competitions were meant to be 'shoot' fights (real contests), kayfabe was the noble lie that excluded outsiders from the industry secret that the 'sport' was, in fact, a 'work' (predetermined). It was also the basis upon which 'bookers' (the promoters who 'book' matches) could generate 'heat' (hype and investment in a wrestler, whether positive or negative) with audiences by pushing 'worked angles' (scripted events), which built financially successful 'programs' between wrestlers. Wrestlers took on 'gimmicks' (characters), playing either 'heels' (bad guys) or 'faces' (good guys). In this world, wrestlers lived their gimmicks inside and outside the ring to avoid 'breaking kayfabe' by letting the public know that the fights were predetermined and the conflicts constructed.

Pro-wrestling has long since 'reached an understanding' with its fans (Lowney, 2003: 435). Starting in the 1980s, the 'worked' nature of pro-wrestling was increasingly acknowledged by pro-wrestling promoters and fans alike and with this shift, the term kayfabe has taken on a different meaning. It now describes a new form of audience engagement that involves, in the first instance, a willing suspension of disbelief within which performers, promoters *and the audience*, all 'keep kayfabe' (Chow, 2017: 75). For

the latter, keeping kayfabe involves the active choice to participate in 'performance conventions' such as cheering the face and booing the heel (Chow, 2017). In doing so, fans do not simply pretend to be fooled by the 'game'; rather, in the new kayfabe, everyone is invested and involved in the *playing of the game* itself. It is the unique nature of this relationship between audience and performance that almost all contemporary analyses of pro-wrestling engage with.

Working within the new kayfabe, pro-wrestling audiences increasingly require 'an autodidactic mind-set' (Koh, 2017: 460) to interpret the actions being performed in front of them. As Jansen (2018: 637) argues,

> To refer to the 'real' of wrestling today is to refer to backstage politics, writers' rooms, booking decisions, and corporate judgements about who has star potential, who is popular in the locker room, or who is unpopular with management. It is a kind of real that, strangely, even contradictorily, embraces the fake.

Specifically, fans must not only be aware of such inner workings of the business (the off-camera, backstage processes) but *also* able to construct hypotheses about them when they lack knowledge. This is an active, collaborative relationship, a co-production (Hill, 2015: 176) wherein fans both create and sustain kayfabe while simultaneously dissecting it, parsing the elements that construct the performance with a discerning eye on how well performers 'follow the rules of the performance practice and play their role' (Chow, 2017: 74; Henricks, 1974) and 'read *through* the fiction to glean . . . hidden truths' (Jeffries, 2019: 10). In doing so, they participate in what Nevitt (2010: 323) describes as 'a game of prediction and interpretation to which they apply their understanding of wrestling techniques, character histories, performers and WWE as a company'. Why did the bookers decide upon that outcome? Does the fact that the wrestler is 'selling' the leg (acting as if it is injured) mean the match 'finish' will involve that limb? Did an aggressive 'promo' signal a 'heel turn' by a 'face'?

For fans, the game of interpretation is not about what is 'real', but about what the intention of the 'fake' is. With everybody in on the game, promoters and performers have responded by using this engagement to manipulate audience, weaving real issues (e.g. an injury or backstage disagreements) into kayfabe, or scripting 'worked shoots' (Koh, 2017) that blur the boundary between what is false and real, driving fans to specialist websites to pour over backstage news and gossip, revelling in 'inside' information (O'Brien, 2020: ix). Simultaneously, audiences directly drive content, their cheers and boos altering not only physical interactions in the ring but also the direction of longer term storytelling as well. As Mazer (1998: 7) notes, 'The pleasure peculiar to wrestling is the way in which it engages its audience directly in its play, in affirming and challenging cultural norms and in believing and disbelieving what it sees at the same time'.

Unsurprisingly, signifying as it does a blurring of lines between fake and real, image and reality, the concept of kayfabe has already been deployed as a useful metaphor for contemporary, 'postmodern' politics, with Mazer (2017: 202) introducing the concept of 'kayfabe creep' to describe an increasing sense that power in society operates in a similar manner to pro-wrestling. Mazer quotes *New York Times* theatre critic Ben Brantley's description of a contemporary world in which:

> It's hard to hear a pop star's hit record now without thinking of the technology that smoothed and sweetened the vocals, or to listen to a politician without imagining a team of speechwriters, or to watch special effects in an action movie without wondering about green screens. As much

> as we may be amused or even enthralled by such spectacles, it's become a point of honor to know they're only illusions (Brantley, quoted in Mazer, 2017: 204).

It is here that the concept of kayfabe may initially prove useful for political scholars struggling to explain why, in a world increasingly experienced at a distance once removed and plagued by mass cynicism[3] and politics itself is seen as a 'dirty word' (Hay, 2007: 1), people *still* pile into political rallies to cheer for the speeches of a politician like Donald Trump, excitedly following and investing emotionally in his political campaign? This question is arguably of particular interest with Trump, where the aforementioned illusion is not exactly hidden; in her introduction to *Why Irrational Politics Appeals*, Mari Fitzduff (2017: 17–18) reflects upon an April 2016 event, in which:

> . . . a top Trump aide disclosed to a group of leading Republican officials that his candidate was just 'projecting an image' during the early phases of the election campaign. He reassured them that the part he portrayed was not Donald Trump's real self and that come the general election, Americans should expect to see a more 'presidential' act. It is difficult to imagine any other political candidate who could retain their reputations by blithely noting that what they say or do at different times is just them displaying their acting abilities.

Simply put, a 'kayfabe approach' offers an explanation for such an 'irrational' phenomenon by viewing the relationship between wrestling-fans and WWE programming as analogous to the relationship between the politician's supporters and their political campaign: the same active suspension of disbelief and simultaneous production of belief present across both fields of activity. This is a fundamentally different employment of kayfabe than authors like O'Brien (2020: 11, 6) who describe Trump 'utiliz[ing] the wrestling concept of kayfabe to forge his own reality', asserting his 'usage of kayfabe tactics to champion manipulated truths'. Such depictions deploy the term to identify a particular performance form strategically adopted. This article's usage of kayfabe is *relational*, conceptualising the relationship between fans/supporters and performers/politician(s). Such an approach, it argues, can explain how a cynical public can invest in a political show they know to be, at some level, artificial and how this relationship further facilitates the transmission of the latter's political ideology to the former. Thus, when a politician stages a rally in a particular city, voters realise they do so for specific ends on the basis of particular calculations about its effect (e.g. 'we need to carry the 'rust belt' so a rally here will increase turnout'); nevertheless, as Thimsen (2010: 49) describes,

> those who attend it choose to participate in the spectacle of the campaign as though it were unmediated by political machinations, all while recognizing and accepting the presence of those machinations – or even taking the machinations themselves as the object of interest, as many celebrity watchers do.

Adopting kayfabe as a conceptual lens explains why. Pro-wrestling fans, as Mazer (1998: 7) writes, 'are always in the process of becoming insiders', learning the 'rules' of the game, getting 'smart' to how the business works – the very process that sustains kayfabe. In the realm of political campaigning, there is a similar process at play. We do not merely interact with the event naively; we actively interpret it as an 'insider' would. We know the candidate's declaration of love for our city is made with the intention of winning votes. We know the public eating of our local delicacy is staged, that the babies kissed are not *necessarily* the cutest, as claimed. We know that behind the candidate is a

team of script writers, campaign managers, brand consultants and personal stylists, all of whom help shape the candidate whose speech we cheer. Moreover, we actively interpret such elements; we know a lot happens 'off camera', but either discount it as unimportant or produce hypotheses about what it may be and how it is shaping what we can see. After all, we've read the blogs, listened to the podcasts and know how things 'really work'. Our interest, as such, is not in distinguishing between *real* and *performed* actions, but the intention behind the choice of performance itself: Why campaign in these cities? Why raise this issue in the speech? Why *not* raise this issue in the speech? Yet, even as we ask these questions, as supporters we still suspend disbelief and, like the audience at a pro-wrestling match, 'we cheer and boo *as if* we are affirming something real' (Chow and Laine, 2014: 47).

Smartdom and Ideology

Nevitt (2010: 324) describes spectators of pro-wrestling as

> divided, in their own minds, into smarts [fans who know pro-wrestling is a 'work'] and marks [who do not], but the marks are always other people. Mazer's process of 'becoming insider' is a progression from smart to even smarter; the state of being a mark is always, for the fan him – or herself, in the past.

This depiction is backed up by ethnographic work interviewing fans at pro-wrestling events who, as Ford (2016: 40–41) relates, 'wanted to ensure I was aware that, while they realised the show was staged, many of the others who attended wrestling matches didn't (even though my interviews indicated that must be an extreme minority)'.

This conceptualisation is remarkably similar to Žižek's (2008: 28, 30, 185–186) idea of 'enlightened false consciousness' or 'ideological cynicism', in which one 'believes through the other': as Sharpe and Boucher (2010: 55) summarise,

> Although I am not taken in by the ideological 'bullshit', I *believe through the Others, whom I suppose do truly believe.* These Others are the dupes; I keep my inner distance. The paradox is not simply that I act as if I did not keep such a distance. It is that *these others also maintain this position regarding me.* So, for them, *I* will figure as such an 'Other supposed to believe'. And so social conformism is maintained, even though privately, each person keeps their 'inner distance'.

So, it is that at post-election rallies, Trump was able to level with his voters about the manipulative nature of his campaign tactics. Referencing the ubiquitous 'Lock her up!' chants at his election rallies, Trump now laughed at supporters, telling them: 'You people were vicious, violent, screaming, 'Where's the wall? We want the wall!' Screaming "Prison! Prison! Lock her up!" I mean you are going crazy!'. The chants, he told them, contemplatively, 'plays great before the election. Now we don't care' (Parks, 2019: 1168). Far from undermining their enthusiasm for his Presidency, Trump supporters can laugh along – after all, only *marks* truly believed that stuff. . . even if, while self-conceived smarts, they too chanted along.

The latter point is key, because – returning to pro-wrestling – despite differentiating themselves from imagined marks, smart fans nevertheless retain the 'overt knowledge that the core wrestling narrative relies, to a significant degree, on their successful performance as dupes not in on the con' (Ford, 2019: 120) – that is, the capacity to suspend disbelief is predicated upon the collected audience playing the part of a 'true believer'

sports spectator. Thus, to retain its 'dramatic appeal' pro-wrestling requires smarts to *perform* as marks when attending events (Ford, 2019), just as a successful rally requires that its attendees cheer and chant, performing their role as supporters-who-believe. In their own exposition on smart fandom McBride and Bird (2007: 166) refer to this as 'the spectators' performance of credulity'. Returning to the Žižekian formulation, smarts 'know very well what they are doing, but still they are doing it' (Žižek, 2008: 33) – and it is the 'cynical distance' (Žižek, 2008) underpinning this epistemology of 'smartdom' (whether pro-wrestling *or* political), which in turn works to smooth the consumption of underpinning ideological messages.

The relationship between smart fan and performance is premised upon the former's seemingly critical deconstruction of the content of the performance. The spectator subsequently thinks, 'because I am not a mark, *I must already be critically aware of the way that the performance works'* (Nevitt, 2010: 324); yet, being smart requires the ability to actively think like the writers, producers and performers themselves, this insider knowledge constituting the capital that allows one to take part in the interpretation and prediction of storylines and matches that underpins pro-wrestling fandom. The implication is that audience members learn to interpret within a narrow framework of 'rules', which structure their subsequent reception of any information, while simultaneously focusing said interpretation upon uncovering the *intention* of a performance (the hidden logic behind that choice being made) rather than critically questioning the substantive content of the performance. Furthermore, as Jansen (2020: 321) warns, focusing interpretative interest on the intention behind performances risks inoculating pro-wrestling fans from the real consequences of what they are watching – specifically, in the case of pro-wrestling, the long-term physical and psychological costs of a performance form infamous for exploitative working conditions, high mortality rates and endemic addiction issues.

Adapted to the field of politics, the role of 'booker' is usually played here not simply by the politician and advisors who craft a performance to produce a particular reception, but the political pundits within the media who are themselves central figures and factors within politics *as such*, as well as being a key audience, reporting and packaging said performance for general consumption. Mainstream political punditry has a tendency towards a particular epistemological understanding of how politics should be interpreted; as Allen (2020: 75) identifies, conversations among political pundits 'have a distinct flavour: an interest in process over substance, a preference for certain kinds of knowledge (primarily statistics) and a mode of engagement that is at pains to assert its political objectivity'. Politics is resultantly discussed by these 'smart' commentators 'as a series of events and people associated with what is happening at some site of political power' rather than as concrete struggles over material resources, focusing upon questions such as 'who will win?', not 'what will (or, indeed, should) *X* do if they win?' (Allen and Moon, 2020: 86).

In studies of political communication, this discursive style is known as 'strategic game framing', focusing on winners and losers and matters of campaign strategy – aka 'horse-race coverage' (Aalberg et al., 2011) – in comparison to 'issue framing' approaches focused on substantive discussion of political issues, policies and the consequences of proposed problems and solutions (Young et al., 2019: 84). We thus find Trump's announcement that he will 'build a wall with Mexico' produce op-ed pages and news reports focused not upon the critical analysis of the substantive ideological content of the statement, but rather upon interpreting the 'message' said politician seeks to send tactically, to whom, for what end, and evaluations of the likelihood of success (the latter scientifically modelled as part of the 'Big Data-isation' of campaigns (Issenberg, 2013)). Why did

Trump do that? What is he (and his team) hoping to achieve? Even within the partisan pro-Trump media-sphere, interpretative practices focused upon identifying 'the message within the message', with alt-Right partisans searching to identify evidence of support for White supremacist politics within ambiguous statements (see Neiwert, 2017: 268–271). Like pro-wrestling fans interpreting kayfabe (cf. Jansen, 2020), the risk is that this approach to politics – focused on interpreting the strategic intention of political performances – sees the real, often disastrous consequences of political decisions (and responsibilities for them) go overlooked.

Marking Out

The conceptual insertion of kayfabe and smart fandom into the field of politics thus offer an explanation for an apparently cynical public nevertheless suspending their disbelief in Trump's performance in order to play along, investing in his candidacy, attending rallies and ingesting his political message, while simultaneously maintaining a 'cynical distance'. However, as Young et al. (2019: 83) describe, evidence suggests that framing politics as a game of strategy increases cynicism and decreases political participation. How, then, to explain not simply the active engagement of Trump supporters with his 2016 campaign – turning up to rallies and keeping kayfabe – but the enthusiasm and passion with which they did so?

Useful in bridging this conundrum is the concept of 'marking out'. As noted, in pro-wrestling terminology, the mark is a rube, someone taken in by the performance of antagonistic violence, believing it to be true. Yet while revelling in their insider knowledge, smart fans maintain a desire for the 'comfort and pleasure of being a mark' (Long, 2019: 140); as Mazer (1998: 167) relates, '[a]s they expose the con artistry of the game, they revel in it and, on some level, seek to be conned'. What the smart fan 'constantly strive [for is] to so lose themselves in their performances that they momentarily forget they're playing a role' (Ford, 2016: 41); that is to say, for the opportunity to 'mark out' – a label for those moments when, swept up in the performance, smart fans are also able to express 'the genuine emotion associated with fully immersing themselves in the role of the "believing sports fan"' (Ford, 2019: 123).

In the world of 'new kayfabe', where everyone self-conceives as smart and thus in on the work, eliciting these moments in which emotion overrides critique – in which signs are imbued with 'a pure and full signification' (Barthes, 2009 [1957]: 14) – is a central goal of performers and promoters who must go 'to greater, more dangerous lengths to suspend audience disbelief – to evoke the experience of the mark' (Jansen, 2020: 321–322). Pro-wrestlers, as Schjørring (2017: 11) aptly puts it, are 'emotion inducers'. Yet, the emotional inducement goes beyond in-ring action; it is the arena, the fireworks and the entrance music. Studies of pro-wrestling crowds illustrate how membership of the crowd allows spectators to experience and enjoy these emotions in a manner otherwise unavailable to them; being ringside offers 'the excitement of seeing and being seen, of screaming and displaying rage in a rare public context where such expression [is] socially permitted' (Ezell, 2017: 12). Getting caught up with the crowd 'frees us from the constraints of our own repressed exuberance, offering a controlled release of our repressed responses to the stresses of civil interaction' (Di Benedetto, 2017: 34).

Emotional engagement is increasingly seen as a key motivation for political participation generally (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018a: 2072). Trump's rallies clearly engaged supporters' emotions (O'Brien, 2020: 96); he was 'an emotional performer, acting as the advocate

of the people and the impersonator of their anger' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018b: 775), his excessive, hyperbolic, morally simplistic and antagonistic style reaching the excessive heights required for smarts to mark out. Here too, this emotional inducement went beyond Trump's verbiage, his rallies producing a similar atmosphere in which 'emotional contagion' occurs. The effect of this, Fitzduff (2017: 7) argues, 'was obvious [in 2016] in the growing numbers attending Trump rallies, where the prevailing atmosphere was often one of excitement, bonding, and hero worship'. The crowd at a Trump rally occupies a safe space in which it is socially acceptable to emote: screaming, shouting and cheering for one's country and candidate, openly expressing hatred for political opponents, both verbally (chanting 'Lock her up!') and symbolically (wearing 'Trump that Bitch!' t-shirts). In short, a space in which even the most cynical of voters might lose themselves in the moment and 'mark out', becoming not 'the believing sports fan', but 'the believing voter'.

Summary

This article is a response to widespread claims that Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential campaign was in some sense understandable through his long-standing relationship with pro-wrestling. It does not seek, however, to prove or disprove these claims by reflecting on how Trump's style and public perception as a political campaigner may have been influenced by his experience with pro-wrestling. Rather, it outlines how an interdisciplinary engagement with professional wrestling studies offers political studies scholars an enhanced conceptual toolkit to study Trump's appeal and the dynamics of his audience engagement. Making this case, the article introduces the academic field and subsequently delineates how concepts developed therein – 'kayfabe', 'smart fandom' and 'marking out' – offer a framework for political scholars grappling with the conundrum of why a self-consciously cynical electorate nevertheless engaged with and invested emotionally in the Presidential campaign of so obvious a political fraudster as Donald Trump.

In summary, the article argues that viewing the relationship between candidate and crowd through the lens of the 'new kayfabe' illuminates a co-performative relationship between them, driving an active suspension of disbelief that, while predicated upon the maintenance of a cynical distance on the part of self-defined 'smart' supporters, actually facilitates an intellectual and even emotional engagement with Trump's campaign and transmission of his ideological message.

This article hardly exhausts professional wrestling studies as a resource for studying Trump. Nor is it the first, nor will it be the last, to investigate this rich seam. Can the insights developed here have wider application, beyond Trump? Faced with widespread patterns of political disengagement and disillusionment, and the prominence of 'larger than life' political leaders such as comedy panel stalwart and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, further interdisciplinary enquiry certainly seems viable. As the analytical approaches of political studies increasingly struggle to meet the challenges presented by developments in actually existing politics, the onus is on scholars to cast their net widely in search of alternative intellectual resources that provide new insights. Professional wrestling studies will likely be just one fruitful catch among many still to come, but it offers a promising start.

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Notes

1 The World Wrestling Federation (WWF) changed its name to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in 2001.

2 These were more than warm words; during the 2016 election campaign, Vince and wife Linda gave a combined total of US$7.5 million to pro-Trump super PACs, the RNC and the campaign itself, making the McMahon family the third largest financial backer of Trump's presidential bid (Gold and Narayanswamy, 2016). Trump, in turn, appointed Linda to his Cabinet as Administrator of the Small Business Administration following the election. She stepped down from the role in 2019 to chair America First Action, a pro-Trump super PAC (O'Brien, 2020, 41).

3 What Simon Critchley describes as 'a smirking knowingness, which means one can never be surprised by anything . . . because you know it's a sham' (quoted in Fowler, 2009).

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