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A Crash Course in Liberal Education: An Analysis of Civically Engaged Edutainment Videos

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A CRASH COURSE IN LIBERAL EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF CIVICALLY
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by
Caitlin Marie Lancaster Anderson
May 2020

Accepted by:
Dr. James Gilmore, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

Crash Course is an entertainment education YouTube channel that was founded on principles that align closely with that of liberal education. Liberal education is a model of education dedicated to broad knowledge, specific intellectual and practical skills, and personal and social responsibility, most notably civic engagement. Despite the value derived from liberal education, it is facing a crisis where it is replaced at the university level by neoliberalism, an ideology dominated by workforce performativity and individualism. Using Michel Foucault's power/knowledge concept, this thesis examines the neoliberal shift in education as a crisis of power and explores how liberal education is rearticulated online through the Crash Course videos. To explore the channel's content, this thesis poses two research questions: In what ways, if at all, does the Crash Course channel model the values of liberal education through its content? How are the principles of liberal education, especially civic engagement, supported and subverted through the content on the Crash Course channel? Through textual and semiotic analysis of 15 videos from 2015-2019, this thesis finds four prominent symbols presented to viewers: the American bald eagle, the American flag, light(bulbs), and mugs. Through this analysis, it is clear that Crash Course aligns with liberal education, but this alignment is not consistently applied to content on the channel. As such, the videos present citizens as in tension between the liberal, collectivist forces of the past and the emergent neoliberal values of the present. While the videos imagine citizenship in ways that embrace the experiences of everyday life, these opposing forces make it difficult for the liberal values to fully shine through, presenting the future of true liberal education online as tenuous.

This thesis presents significant implications for both twenty-first century liberal

education and edutainment for shaping beliefs about civic engagement in contemporary

life.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Matt, and stepson, Bradley, for their endless love and support through this project and beyond. Matt, you are my rock, and I could not have emotionally made it through this process without you. Thank you for doing the dishes when I was exhausted, too. Bradley, you are my sunshine. Thank you for being unabashedly loving and silly. Your hugs are the best cure for when I am a "grizzle grump". After the long days spent writing, coming home to "my boys" was what kept me going. Everything I do, I do for you two.

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Thank you to my family nearby and afar, all of whom believed in my work even when they didn't quite understand what I was doing. Your unwavering confidence in my abilities builds me up. A special thanks to my parents for instilling a love for learning, bringing me to the library even when you had to impose a limit on my book haul. That passion for education is what drove this thesis.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone in the Communication department, most importantly my cohort, for becoming a second family. There were many times in this process that I questioned myself and my work, but you all were there to support me along the way. You are all intelligent, hilarious, and kind people that I am lucky enough to call my friends. While we will soon disperse across the country, I hope that we will never be too far apart to ask: Is it the cats?

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INTRODUCTION

As of March 7th, 2020, the Crash Course YouTube channel had nearly 10.4 million subscribers and 1.2 trillion views, joining the rapidly growing segment of edutainment (educational entertainment) channels on YouTube (Crash Course, n.d.; Hua, 2015). Crash Course started as a series of videos in 2012 about topics in the humanities and sciences presented by brothers John and Hank Green as an extension of their VlogBrothers YouTube series (Talbot, 2014). The channel's goal is to "create educational connections in the hopes that it will be useful to people" including students, teachers, and independent learners (Crash Course, 2015a, 0:24). The Crash Course videos, as the name suggests, provide quick lessons on various subjects to provide "the basic concepts the average person will ever need to know about the subject" (Rule, 2014). In 2020, the channel covers a wide range of subjects, including World History, Literature, Chemistry, and, more recently, professional development courses on Engineering, Business Soft Skills, and Navigating Digital Information.

The Crash Course channel creators present a particular pedagogy that closely aligns with liberal education. Liberal education is an educational system that emphasizes learning styles which "empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change" through an emphasis on "broad knowledge" as well as "a sense of social responsibility" supported by "strong intellectual and practical skills" ("What", n.d.). An example of how Crash Course attempts to emulate liberal education can be seen in the channel's first episode. The video emphasizes that knowing history does not find

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its value in a test or any other form of measurable output; instead, the real "test will measure whether you are an informed, engaged, and productive citizen of the world" and this test "will last your entire life and it will be comprised of the millions of decisions that taken together make your life, yours" (Crash Course, 2012). As such, the channel is clearly founded on liberal education principles.

From this foundation, Crash Course sets out to link specific subjects to broader ideas in order to equip viewers with knowledge through these online videos to use as a tool "good" in the world. Indeed, Hank Green has expressed that the Internet can be "a good thing for society," and this sentiment is reflected in Crash Course's emphasis on improving one's self in order to practice social responsibility and civic duty (Cain, 2018). Scholars like John Dewey, an influential figure for liberal education, imagined that democratic citizenship and education are inherently intertwined, viewing the central purpose for education as a means to teach students to understand the social purposes for citizenship and how to think as a citizen (Dewey, 1916; van der Ploeg, 2018). More contemporary scholars like Asen (2004) have built on this conception of citizenship, constructing the discourse theory of citizenship as an approach to how to discuss civic engagement in everyday life. As a result, the channel's "progressive politics" and emphasis on knowledge as a powerful tool to fight the wrongs of society acts as a link between the channel's philosophy and liberal education (Romano, 2018).

At the same time, liberal education is experiencing a crisis in legitimacy, especially in higher education as a result of neoliberalism, an "exercise of political power…modeled on the principles of a market economy" that views citizens as global

workers (Foucault, 2008, p. 131; Grenier & Orlean, 2007). As a result of neoliberalism, liberal education is increasingly replaced with a marketized view of education in which career-readiness opportunities are revered above all else. While far from a new trend, the problem has seen a steady increase following the 2007 economic recession that made maximizing job security a top priority, all the while leading to questions about the value of a liberally focused degree in the job market (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Fears revolving around unemployment have led to state-sponsored projects, such initiatives from the Urban Institute, that frame education as a tool on citizens' career paths, adding to the global emphasis on competitive, career-driven graduates (Eyster, Anderson, & Durham, 2013; Axelrod, 2002). Liberal arts majors and liberal education curriculum are increasingly supplanted by a "practical vocational education" that can present measurable benefit for students while leaving them with fewer opportunities for a liberal education that activates a broad-based knowledge and sense of social responsibility because these traits, while valuable, are not easily measured (Jones & Hearn, 2018, p. 163).

One theorist of neoliberalism's emergence was Michel Foucault, whose work broadly explored genealogies of power, which supports the use of power/knowledge as a primary theory driving this thesis. Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, in which power and knowledge are mutually constructed in ways that are decentralized and dynamic, plays an important role in all educational systems and how they establish their legitimacy among the people that turn to them (Foucault, 1980a). Indeed, all educational systems rely on discourse to construct truths through which power/knowledge can be presented, though the way this legitimacy and authority is presented pushing back against

the established modes thanks to digital manifestations of education. Understood through Foucault's power/knowledge concept, the neoliberal crisis facing higher education becomes rearticulated as a crisis of power the more education becomes digitized; rearticulation, in this case, acknowledges articulation as "ensembles of forces" that "create and maintain identities" in the social world that are continuously reshaped, or rearticulated, based on how the "social, institutional, technical, economic and political" context changes (Slack, 1996, p. 126). Personalized, online learning platforms have already transformed many educational markets, meeting the demand for new approaches to learning in the digital era, indicating the powerful potential of other platforms seeking legitimacy (Horn, 2019). However, some that seek to disrupt the industry, such as the now dissolved online tutoring company Knewton, have failed to achieve the profitability and legitimacy that backers expect, indicating that the digital authority of education online is trepidatious and infused with potentially dangerous neoliberal frameworks (McKenzie, 2019; Warner, 2019). Today, Crash Course presents a potential source of liberal education that seeks legitimacy while asking an increasingly technology-reliant "student" body to devote particular forms of agency in their learning experience. As such, this thesis studies Crash Course's relationship to liberal education through textual and semiotic analysis of content on the channel.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Liberal Education's Foundations

Liberal education finds its roots in the ideas of orators and philosophers in ancient

Greece and Rome, including Isocrates, Cicero, Aristotle, and Plato; these thinkers sought

to understand education grounded in *liberalis* or the activities of "free men" and expand

human understanding of thought and inquiry central to society (Kimball, 1986, p. 13). As

the etymology entails, the foundations of liberal education are tied up in the systems of

governance and politics that make up a society—classical liberalism and contemporary

liberalism alike sought to "lift the individual above the constraints of family or cultural

background" through education, an education in which the state and government gained

an increasingly important role in setting norms and establishing community values

(Feinberg & McDonough, 2003, p. 4). However, this lifting was often only for certain

social classes that were able to receive a liberal education. Liberal education is often

associated with elitist traditions and ivory towers, reflecting that while *liberalis* was an

education for free men, not everyone was free to receive the same education (Beyer,

1986; Hollinger, 1996; Katz, 2005).

While liberal education on the surface focuses on instilling knowledge, an

important aim of the system is to "develop personal character and intellect" to support a

"framework of civic responsibility" (Lang, 1999a, p. 134). Scholars in the twentieth

century, among them Mortimer Adler, worked to highlight that liberal education

"produces citizens who can exercise their political liberty responsibly" (Adler, 2012).

Similarly, liberal education is driven by the work of Dewey, including his foundational work *Democracy and Education*, which emphasizes educated citizens as a central force in promoting and supporting democracy (Dewey, 1916). The twenty-first century manifestations of liberal education rely on a similar "democratic vision of society and the power of education to advance citizenship", working "in a dialectical manner" with civic engagement to realize the true liberatory potential of the system (Rhoads, 2003, para. 6; Stanton, 1987). In fact, the "cultivation of virtues" within "personal and social responsibility" are important facets to the US liberal education system—universities such as Duke and Swarthmore emphasize "moral, spiritual, and aesthetic values" to support their liberal education curriculum (Hersh & Schneider, 2005, p. 8). Liberal education, through its focus on civic responsibility and engagement, gives power to the common person with their "common experience and common sense" and adds an emphasis on individual growth for the collective good (Weltman, 2005, p. 69).

Civic engagement is a significant aim for colleges and universities precisely for their role in molding the citizen for democratic society and maintain this system of governance, which Dewey (1927) asserts is the best way to support the public interest despite its many flaws (Harkavy, 2006). By teaching students to engage in civic life, institutions of higher education can help students realize their role in promoting social good through their everyday actions (Dewey, 1916). Knowledge is the foundation for civic engagement, dating back to arguments from Plato and Aristotle's concerns "for a political system open to the pitch and say of citizens susceptible to the swells of emotional displays" (Hauser & Grim, 2004, p. 1). However, citizens need ways to direct

this knowledge through expression and action that produces the changes that they desire in their communities (Gordon, Baldwin-Philippi, & Balestra, 2013). Thus, civic engagement education is wholly necessary to teach students how to act upon their knowledge and assert their power as a citizen to address issues that threaten the public good. In the twenty-first century, participation in civic life is changing, and necessitates that conversations about civic engagement shift from "what" it constitutes to "how" it can be enacted in daily life (Asen, 2004, p. 191). Conversations about how to be civically engaged are central to activating political knowledge for socially responsible action (Dewey, 1927). This shift in how people think about civic engagement enables citizens to understand the best ways to identify issues in society and intervene when problems arise to protect issues that threaten democracy.

Despite its connection to democratic education, liberal education in its current form is not an option for everyone: liberal arts colleges are struggling to paint their educations as worth the high price tags that accompany the schools, which rely heavily on tuition and endowments to operate (Lang, 1999b). Furthermore, liberal education is combating an elitist tradition that has yet to escape the curriculum, including beliefs that it is disconnected with the practical issues of daily life and that it continues to emphasize traditions rooted in Western, patriarchal traditions that exclude many voices (Neely, 1999; Entwistle, 1997). These assumptions surrounding liberal education, while not unfounded, hinder its benefits from being realized in its current form, which makes digital platforms appealing opportunities for its spread. The potential accessibility that digital platforms hold represents a new avenue through which the democratizing benefits

of liberal education might be realized while removing the negative associations that accompany liberal education in its traditional form.

Proponents of liberal education have also adjusted their goals alongside processes of globalization to emphasize knowledge based on citizenship in a global society rather than a nationalistic one (Nussbaum, 2002). The system is moving away from the liberal democratic traditions as they were once understood toward a more nuanced approach, incorporating agonistic ideals "where the aim is neither the annihilation nor the assimilation of the other, and where the tensions between the different approaches contribute to enhancing the pluralism that characterizes a multipolar world" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 41). Liberal education today attempts to reflect the multiplicity of the world, incorporating civic responsibility that moves away from traditional "citizenship" towards the ways in which communities are intertwined around identities and beliefs that make up said community—that is, "individuals are embedded in a collective identity that nourishes them and provides them with the means for flourishing" but there is still a need for "certain cultural dispensations or supports" that acknowledge the various perspectives within a community (Feinberg & McDonough, 2003, p. 5),

Neoliberal Crisis of Liberal Education

While liberal education proponents are moving toward communal structures, intuitions of higher education are shifting focus in favor of individualized interests through the commodification of higher education via a neoliberal focus (Tilak, 2008). In the past, liberalism has emphasized governmental institutions as sources of legitimacy, thus asking populations to value the government and encouraging civic engagement to

support cultural and community beliefs (Axelrod, 2002). Critics of liberalism, such as

Milton Friedman (1955), examined education's ties to government responsibility and

questioned the value that community involvement, especially in funding, plays in the

system. From these critiques, neoliberalism, a system of governance "modeled on the

principles of a market economy", was applied to higher education, transforming the

system to focus on education as a private good and financial success as the desired

outcome for students (Clarke, 2012; Foucault, 2008, p. 131). By focusing on education as

a private good, there is an imbalance between public and private values in the US,

leading to a "culture of separation, isolation, and self-orientation" that moves away from

the civic engagement that is central to liberal education (Hoyle & Slater, 2001, p. 791).

Without the university providing necessary support for civic responsibility

through its discourses, especially in educational goals and curriculum, the

neoliberalization of higher education is potentially detrimental to democratic processes

(Asen, 2004; Roosevelt, 2006). Perhaps, this places too much emphasis on the university

as a mainstay for democracy in the United States. Religious institutions such as churches,

after all, provide similar democratic principles through moral education, including an

emphasis on "tolerance and respect for others, procedural impartiality, and concern for

the rights of the individual and the welfare of the group" (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont,

Rosner, & Stephens, 2000, p. xxi). On top of that, these morally driven institutions are

often more accessible to the common person than higher education with its admission

requirements and exorbitant costs. Online platforms offer more options for Americans to

become involved in civic organizations and practices without needing to enroll in college courses (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009).

However, civic life is also built on knowledge about the complex systems in which people live, and "an educated citizenry is an essential instrument for promoting responsible social action and community well-being" (Lang, 1999, p. 140). This process places a burden on the citizen to be understand the textbook rules of citizenship, rather than understanding how to apply this knowledge to understand threats to democracy in their lives; as such, citizenship in the daily life is wholly necessary, and places of learning are central components of these daily experiences (Schudson, 1998). Furthermore, by instilling conversations about political and civic information in the nonpolitical components of education, students can begin conceptualizing how the role of a citizen influences their everyday experiences and see the value in identifying anti-democratic trends whenever possible (Asen, 2004). With increasing threats to our democratic institutions, especially through online efforts to support misinformation and create divisions in our communities, an education that reinforces civic values is wholly necessary (Linvill, Boatwright, Grant, & Warren, 2019; Naughton, 2018; Zuiderveen Borgesisu et al., 2018). Because these institutions continue to hold a strong place in US society, universities and colleges have high potential to influence the formation of good citizens, especially because there is often strong overlap between "the qualities of good citizenship" and "the marks of a well-educated person" (Ramaley, 2000, p.). As such, colleges and universities are suitable and responsible for instilling democratic values that

will both benefit the schools and the communities to which the students belong (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007; Harkavy, 2006).

Despite the established history of liberal education, the educational system itself is losing its footing in higher education today, a trend that is not new but certainly alarming. In 1990, David Breneman published a report outlining the rapid decline in both Liberal Arts I and II colleges around the nation from roughly 600 to 212 institutions, with many traditional liberal arts institutions either closing due to declining enrollment and financial hardship but also shifting largely toward a "professional college" orientation (Breneman, 1990, p. 6). These professional colleges offer degrees focused on career-readiness, such as nursing, business, and healthcare and their associated technical skills. In a follow-up report in 2012, the number of institutions had dropped to 130 following Breneman's methods—this represents a 38 percent decrease over just a 20-year period (Baker, Baldwin, & Makker, 2012). This trend has continued well into the 21st century with St. Gregory's University, Atlantic Union College, Mount Idea College, and Trinity Lutheran College, among others, shutting down in recent years while other institutions, such as Sweet Briar and Antioch colleges, barely surviving the face of impending closures (Marcus, 2018).

As these institutions decline, so do associated liberal education programs at non-liberal arts institutions again in favor of career-readiness programs. Liberal education is not seen as practical or valuable for modern career paths as students increasingly view education as a means for career development (Bidwell, 2015). According to a 2011 Gallup survey, 53 percent of American adults view the purpose of education "to earn

more money" and 33 percent see it as a means "to get a good job" while fewer than 5 percent view its purpose among liberal education values such as to "learn to think critically" or to "learn more about the world" (English, 2011). The societal pressure for universities to demonstrate measurable value from degrees and support workforce demands has led to many universities "jettisoning entire liberal arts programs or staff in favor of majors perceived to lead more directly to jobs" (Marcus, 2018). Despite the valuable "human skills" derived from liberal education programs, such as "communication, leadership, and problem-solving," students feel inclined to study majors with marketable skills and universities inclined to offer more programs supporting them (Whitford, 2018, para. 9). The University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point is a clear example of this—they have proposed a plan that would shut down 13 majors related to liberal arts and liberal education curriculum, including English and Philosophy programs, while growing programs that are career-focused such as Computer Information Systems and Management and Marketing (Marcus, 2018). While higher education is the main focus of this paper, there are trends toward college and, by extension, career-readiness and away from liberal education in K-12 schools as well, thus setting the tone for when students arrive at college and opt for programs that are career-focused (Sharratt & Harild, 2014; Rothman, 2012; Tucker, 2011).

The Neoliberal University

Historically, American universities have always had ties to capitalism and existed as a legal corporation before traditional businesses were considered under the title (Cooper & Marx, 2017). Yet, "anti-egalitarian sentiment" in the United States spurred by

corporate interests in scaling back equal-opportunity education has led to the university, particularly at the public level, to become increasingly supportive of technical skills while decreasing valuable social and cultural teaching as one would gain through a liberal education (Newfield, 2008). Over the last nearly 40 years, neoliberal ideology has become dominant in the United States spurred by growing governmental support for free markets from fiscally conservative leaders, including Ronald Reagan, the establishment of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the fall of communism in the 1990s; as such, Foucault's focus on the relationship between neoliberalism and governmentality is essential to understand this transformation (Campbell and Pedersen, 2001; Foucault, 2008; Radice, 2013). Neoliberalism, within economic theory, proposes that "human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms" such as "property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade"; while these systems attempt to establish these liberties as beneficial to democratic, capitalistic societies, in many ways these systems further stratify people not only through economic class disparities but through political, social, and cultural inequities as well (Harvey, 2007, p. 22).

  While many Universities of the past focused on individual enlightenment, communal morality, and active citizenship, the twenty-first century US system of higher education has embraced neoliberalism and established its purpose around competition in consumer markets—embracing and emphasizing practices that focus on the value of "winning at all costs, a ruthless competitiveness, hedonism, the cult of individualism" and "market-driven rationality that abstracts economics and markets from ethical

considerations" (Giroux, 2010, p. 185). Higher education is increasingly entrenched in corporate values and power systems, which leaves little room for the instilling of democratic values and other social problems that the university typically tackled in liberal education models (Giroux, 2004; Giroux, 2005).

When infused with neoliberalism, the university is transformed into a place that can "supply the system with players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by its institutions" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 48). Thus, the university must train students through career-focused programs so that they might acquire technical skills that enable them to become better workers (Aronowitz, 2000). Many liberal education benefits are not directly measured as with those in a marketized perspective— that is to say, the "soft skills" that a liberal education can provide, including communication, problem-solving, and ethical judgment, are beneficial to students both in life and career, but they are not immediately tangible and applicable in a market-oriented perspective (Axelrod, Anisef, & Lin, 2001; Hart Research Associates, 2013;).

Economic downturns have further exacerbated problems for liberal education. The Great Recession left many potential students fearful that a liberal arts degree and education was not technically specialized enough to find them a job in a tough job market, a belief that has remained in higher education over a decade later (Selingo, 2018). For example, history degrees dropped 42 percent from 2008 to 2017 in conjunction with the perceived lack of economic value attached to this liberal degree (Schmidt, 2018). Comparatively, degrees that are multidisciplinary or emphasize scientific and vocational training have seen a slight increase thanks to their perceived

economic benefit—for instance, Communication now includes more majors than English or History thanks to its relationship with the social sciences (Jaschik, 2017). Furthermore, due to the decreased demand for these programs, administrators have used these crises as justification for cutting liberal education programs and corresponding staff as the programs do not have the demand necessary to remain (Tsiligiris, 2012). Hence, the shift toward career-readiness programs which can more easily measure their benefits and return. The injection of neoliberal values into the university encourages outputs, particularly those using quantitative methods, that support the commercialization of knowledge production (Lakes, 2008; Parker, 2011).

Crisis of Power & Foucault

The neoliberalization of the university indicates that the traditions of the university, rooted in ancient Greece, have lost authority within the educational sphere. This prompts further examination not just of the institutional shifts that have contributed to the crisis but also encourages a reframing of the problem itself as a crisis of power through Foucault's power/knowledge concept. Within all forms of education, power is vital and central; however, power is not equally shared. In fact, within education, there is "a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations" in which "power and politics operate out of the lived culture of individuals and groups situated in asymmetrical social-political positions" (Mohanty, 1989, p. 184). In particular, educational programs that "fail to respect the particular view of the world held by the people" can become a form of oppression through "cultural invasion" even when the program's creators present "good intentions" (Freire, 1972, p. 95). Michel Foucault's perspective on power can provide

helpful guidance to understanding this asymmetrical, socially based negotiation in education and society as a whole that is radically reframed through neoliberalism to value individualism and economic success.

In the face of this crisis, liberal education is losing its authority within the realm of education, particularly higher education. Foucault's concept of power/knowledge presents a helpful theoretical framework for how power is part of institutional knowledge structures. This can help clarify how higher education has changed over the last 40 years, pointing to how power/knowledge has shifted through neoliberalization of the university. Furthermore, Foucault is also helpful for understanding power and knowledge as they exist in the digital sphere—the means through which YouTube edutainment channels, especially Crash Course, establish their authority and how Crash Course can intercede the crisis facing higher education. This is because the knowledge that these channels hold can offer legitimacy for many students in their daily lives, but this knowledge must fit certain standards for education in order to be seen as useful for the students; as such, there is a tension between the values expressed and the external pressures from neoliberalism in education and online that play into this dialectic tension. Power is often understood as a negative, repressive concept. However, Foucault's concept of power understands it as not only a "force that says no but that it traverses and produces things" and as a result, it should be "considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body" (Foucault, 1980a: p. 119). Power, while possessing a potential for the negative, also "produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault, 1977, p. 194).

In the case of Foucault, power is not understood as a top-down force but instead "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate" that "comes from everywhere" in that it exists within the relations within a society that his neither an "institution" or "structure" (Foucault, 1978, p. 92-93). In this way, power is ubiquitous. Power becomes an extension of the entire network that it exists within—it is not a force on its own but a result of the relationships in a wider context. Thus, Foucault does not view power as a purely individual or institutional possession—indeed, it cannot be possessed, and it cannot be acted upon another. Instead, power exists in all social relations and it is not concentrated only in traditional figures of authority but "employed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus" (Foucault, 1978, p. 89). Power at its core thus is localized through the multitudes of social relationships that cannot be mirrored at the institutional level, which attempts to use power in configurations that work in different ways.

Central to the idea for power, though, is the concept of knowledge. Many theorists have posited that those in power wield knowledge. In this view, theorists imagined knowledge as a tool for power, exercised in a unidirectional manner and acting as an extension of power. Yet, Foucault believed that these two forces were mutually responsible for one another's existence. Indeed, Foucault believed that "there is no power relations without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations" (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Knowledge needs "a system of communication, records, accumulation and displacement" in order to exist, a system which is "a form of power" and linked to larger

systems of power; "conversely, no power can be exercised without the extraction, appropriation, distribution or retention of knowledge" leading to knowledge/power coexisting in a system (Foucault, 1980b, p. 283). The goals of the two are intertwined and there cannot be one without the other. As a result, knowledge/power are utilized together and can be understood as one.

As a result, those that have power advantages are in control of knowledge creation and circulation. Truth is closely intertwined with knowledge in the knowledge/power concept. In fact, "truth isn't outside power" and it "induces regular effects of power" (Foucault, 1980a, p. 131). Furthermore, truth is "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements" that "detaches" from "the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at this present time" (Foucault, 1980a, p. 133). Knowledge is an overarching force to truth, and it possesses the ability to be defined as truth, which is "centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it" (Foucault, 1980a, p. 131). Through the circulation of knowledge/power, the university becomes an important force hallmark for truth within a culture.

While education, particularly higher education, was once a stable and revered system in the United States, the authority that these institutions hold today is greatly shifting, particularly as seen with liberal education systems (Marcus, 2018). Indeed, education is a space in which Foucault's concept comes alive. Foucault's concept clarifies how neoliberal ideas have infiltrated the decision-making bodies of higher education; furthermore, how these logics have led to a re-articulation of the university's

power/knowledge away from the liberal education model, with its corresponding civic responsibility, toward a neoliberal education that is bound to marketplace obligations. Foucault (1972) believed that "every education system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and power they bring with them" (p. 46). As previously discussed, neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology in the United States, infiltrating higher education in the process; neoliberal discourses in education have been viewed as "more desirable" and, at the same time, "more innocent" while being "natural and inevitable," all of which demonstrates the authority that this discourse holds in education today (Davies & Banesel, 2007, p. 258).

In the current times global perspectives are becoming increasingly integrated into educational theories and practices. Globalization "implies the free flow of goods and services across borders resulting in an integrated world economy" that relies on market forces rather than States "to promote economic growth and social welfare" (Varghese, 2013, p. 7). The growth of the knowledge economy, which is an economy based on abundance and access of information, is closely related to globalization and bridges into higher education, itself a "knowledge intensive industry" (Brinkley, 2006, p. 29). This opening of borders has reshaped social boundaries, leading to a greater emphasis on individuality and modifying higher education programs toward objectivist knowledge and career performativity precisely thanks to the emphasis on the world economy (Wagner, 1994). Thus, globalization connects neoliberalism with shifting power toward knowledge for economic purposes.

As such, the growth of a "global, science-based, knowledge intensive economy" has led to increasing demand for accessible higher education, particularly online, which enables education to "transcend local, state, and national borders" leading to more opportunities for people to climb the proverbial ivory tower (Gunawardena, 2014, p. 75). The boundaries of higher education are reshaped through new technologies, creating in part what Deleuze (1992) dubs a "society of control" in which the boundaries between different systems have blended so that systems such as "the corporation, the educational system, the armed services" are now "coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation" (p. 4). Indeed, many for-profit institutions, including the University of Phoenix and DeVry University, offer classes and degrees in entirely online spaces to participate in globalized education (Morey, 2004). Furthermore, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are increasingly popular online (Walsh, 2011). Coursera, a MOOC platform, has made news by partnering with many institutions like Duke University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and University of North Texas through their "Coursera for Campus" program, offering online degree pathways; the platform continues to offer the direct-to-consumer courses for individuals, but is signaling a more aggressive shift toward partnerships with brick-and-mortar institutions (Burke, 2019; McKenzie, 2020). While online portals make these courses more accessible, they are still tied to the legitimacy of the university as officially sanctioned components of the institution.

Other approaches to online education bypass traditional educational institutions all together, including edutainment like Crash Course. Indeed, Crash Course contributes

to a long history of edutainment starting far before YouTube was ever conceptualized. Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Alamanck* is considered an early written example of edutainment, building off puzzles, riddles, and more to entertain those reading the instructional text (Beato, 2015). The term "edutainment", though, was first coined in 1954 by Walt Disney for the *True Life Adventure* series; however, the "neo-logistic portmanteau" gained traction in the 1970s—in 1973 it was used by Robert Heyman while "producing documentaries for the National Geographic Society" and also in 1975 by Dr. Chris Daniels when working on the Millennium Project which was later renamed the Elysian World Project (Mckinney, 2018, p. 58). Peter Catalanotto is also credited with creating the term during the 1990s as he traveled around the United States to teach school children through illustrations (Hewett, 2009). Contemporary edutainment grew through the audio-visual form with popular programs like *Sesame Street*, *Schoolhouse Rock!*, and *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* (Lathan, n.d.). Educational TV (including the Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS) has often used an edutainment approach, which has been associated with improved learning outcomes for young children in reading comprehension and literacy, mathematics and problem solving, science and technology, and more (Ball & Bogatz, 1973; Hall, Etsy & Fisch, 1990; Harvey, Qiuroga, Crane & Bottoms, 1976; Leitner, 1991; Peel, Rockwell, Esty & Gonzer, 1987). PBS used its edutainment platform to not only teach content but also instill civic beliefs, encouraging viewers to become active citizens while encouraging democratic principles (Atkin & Gantz, 1978; Ouellette, 1999).

While educational TV helped edutainment grow, digital media has played a significant role in the growth of edutainment as well, particularly on the YouTube platform. Educational YouTube content first gained popularity with Sal Khan's channel "Khan Academy" which offers free, interactive videos on subjects ranging from math to English and beyond (Khan Academy, n.d.; Hua, 2015). Following Khan Academy's success on Youtube, channels began adopting the edutainment style to build off the information economy while also using entertainment to maximize the platform's attention economy (Hart, 2010). Today, edutainment is a rapidly growing portion of the content on YouTube, though this was not always the case for the video-sharing platform (Hua, 2015). YouTube was founded in 2005 by three PayPal employees to facilitate video sharing in one online location (Ace X, 2016). At the end of 2006, Google acquired the company with plans to "operate as an independent unit of Google" (La Monica, 2006, para. 7). At that time, the most popular videos were focused on pure entertainment, with the "Pokémon Theme Music Video" amassing the most views--around 6.8 million in 2006 (Weller, 2015). Those numbers are incredibly small compared to viewership today—incredibly, YouTube users watch 1 billion hours of content every day and upload 400 hours of content every minute (Bergman, 2017; Goodrow, 2017). Users are not only viewing this much content for pleasure, though—in fact, "half of U.S. adults who use YouTube say the site is very important when it comes to figuring out how to do things they haven't done before", demonstrating how vital YouTube is for helping viewers not only remain entertained but also learn more about subjects and skills (Van Kessel, 2019,

para. 11). As such, it is clear that edutainment is an important facet to YouTube's content collection today.

While not tied to traditional systems of higher education, as with MOOCs and other open courses, YouTube edutainment channels tackle online education as a means to make knowledge more accessible to viewers. These re-shaped boundaries to education still come with their own issues, especially as education is not backed by a tangible degree that users can attain to legitimate their knowledge (Carlson & Blumenstyk, 2012). However, these programs nonetheless represent an avenue for floundering liberal education to remain alive today outside the traditional setting. Still, many online education systems have also been "shaped by neo-liberal ideology" that leads to a greater emphasis on economic and career considerations, further reinforcing the dominate ideas instilled in higher education (Teghe & Knight, 2004). The power/knowledge that these new systems of education hold outside of the university provides a potentially interesting exploration into types of authority within education and support for educational ideologies today. Additionally, understanding how these systems present their authority can help us better understand the future for education as the system is transplanted further outside its typical reach in the digital world.

Liberal education was founded on liberatory principles, emphasizing its potential to support democratic outcomes and civic engagement. While this model is beneficial for personal, professional, and civic purposes, liberal education is declining as liberal arts schools close and other programs are replaced with those focused on workforce performativity. These changes are due to the growth of neoliberalism, an economic

framework that promotes free market capitalism. Michel Foucault, a scholar who explored neoliberalism, gives this thesis its primary theoretical framework, power/knowledge, to understand the neoliberalization of the university, particularly as learning moves online. As such, the literature reviewed here provides the necessary context to understand how the liberal education crisis is rearticulated as a crisis of power online in the Crash Course videos, enabling this thesis to explore how knowledge constructs truths about the purposes and outcomes of learning itself.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

While the Crash Course channel situates itself as a progressive channel focused on educating citizens of the world, it is important to understand how this claim, from a video in 2012, is maintained as the channel grows to its current size. As a fan of the channel, I have seen the videos greatly change overtime, introducing new subjects, hosts, sets, and even locations, operating out of both Utah and Indiana. Furthermore, the importance of civic engagement has only continued to grow over this time, especially in the face of the instability of democratic elections grows due to online interference, while liberal education institutions continue to shut down and curriculum is increasingly focused on economic performativity. To understand how Crash Course is rearticulated in the face of these forces, I asked the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways, if at all, does the Crash Course channel model the values of liberal education through its content?

RQ2: How are the principles of liberal education, especially civic engagement, supported and subverted through the content on the Crash Course channel?

In order to answer these questions, I relied on textual analysis situated in the critical cultural paradigm. For this project, I wanted to focus on what was happening in the videos to understand the knowledge that was espoused rather than how viewers were reacting or understanding this knowledge, as would be seen in a typical qualitative study. In the same vein, I did not want to simply identify the elements in the videos, as would occur in a content analysis, but instead understand how the elements can be understood

within the context that frames these videos and liberal education as a whole, which is especially pertinent to critical cultural work (Slack, 1996). Through the use of critical cultural work, I can best understand power as it relates to the knowledge used in these online videos, a central aim of my work, and further explore the complex layers to the videos.

Critical cultural media studies informed this work, which builds on traditions of "reading" TV and film as texts (Creeber, 2006; Fiske & Harley, 1978). Raymond Williams (1974) examined that technology shapes culture through television viewership; through this analysis, Williams asserts the importance of the messages and their formal properties on the television, resisting the technological determinism found in Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message" concept. As such, I apply critical cultural work to the of the videos, rather than assuming that the YouTube speaks alone for the channel. Barthes (1987) similarly uses textual analysis for the study of cultural forms, particularly those that illuminate the production of value in popular culture. Stuart Hall (1973), additionally, developing his "encoding/decoding" paradigm in examinations of media, centering the audience as an active member of the conversation rather than a passive participant.

As such, my use of textual analysis is not without critique, particularly because of my decision to not include methods that give voice to audience perspectives on the Crash Course videos. Philo (2007) critiqued text-only analyses for media and journalism properties because these types of research have often worked in "isolation" and missed out on important processes of "content, production, reception and circulation" in the

media environment (p. 194). Similarly, Lewis (1992) painted textual analysis as "textual determinism" that ignores the "realities" that are experienced by audience members in favor of the preferred readings from the scholar (p. 34). These critiques are valid and serve as a guiding force for what I should not do in this study, leading me to use "self-reflexivity and transparency" here to acknowledge the "plurality" of the Crash Course text; based on this plurality, I contend that I am addressing just one approach to this series, and do not pretend to represent all audience experiences (Creeber, 2006, p. 83-84). However, to say that this study is isolated ignores the contextual elements that are reviewed in the literature and acknowledged in my analysis. In particular, I acknowledge Larry Grossberg's (2010) calls for contextualism in critical cultural work, as my analysis relies on "an analytical commitment to mapping the force relations that produce certain conditions of power within a closure of social reality" (Davis, 2019, p. 49).

Furthermore, "social action is not a pure reality" but instead "the idea of reality in people's heads" which enables textual analysts to "elucidate the scope and spectrum of the mediated reality in our heads" with its "relationship to ideology and social change" (Fürisch, 2009, p. 246). Textual analysis gives the study of Crash Course the necessary "vocabulary to describe the elusive" dimensions to the way in which culture is manifested through these videos, giving voice to concepts that are difficult for viewers to articulate (Phillipov, 2013, p. 221). By using textual analysis in this project, I can illuminate the contradictory dimensions to the thread I have outlined in the literature, pulling together the concepts that are difficult to truly give name to, building off culturally significant ideals that are constructed through visuals and sounds.

Finally, I must note that this analysis was framed through productive ambivalence, a practice that especially supported the aim of my second research question, acknowledging that both elements were likely going to be present in the videos. At the same time, this practice was necessary to support a critical approach to this work. I am an avid fan of Crash Course and the Green brothers for the clearly important work they do in these videos; however, these videos are not without flaws that come into conflict with the ideas. A critical approach to this work is difficult to paint in purely positive and negative terms, especially as both are manifested in the content. Furthermore, brands frequently present conflicting elements that are necessary to tease out (Banet-Weister, 2012). As such, this process mapped out is a productive approach to understanding the ways that Crash Course is presented to the public and how the cultural elements in these videos are understood by those viewing the content, particularly examining as ambivalence increasingly relates to feeling toward citizenship and country the twenty-first century (Butterworth & Shuck, 2016). This productive ambivalence is not to be resolved, but instead explored for central tensions that facilitate the multi-faceted nature of this thread (Gilmore, 2019).

Methods

This thesis utilized a combination of close textual analysis and semiotic analysis to examine Crash Course videos as a way to understand the way in which the lessons intertwined with the symbols in the visual field to communicate ideas to the audience. In this thesis, a close textual analysis enables a rich and detailed examination of the elements in the videos, including the ways aesthetic and content choices work together to

convey messages. As such, this combined analysis helps to understand the visual and spoken messages that are conveyed through the videos focusing on the symbols that recur across videos to create a channel-wide message about education and its purpose.

Textual analysis "focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text" understood as a "complex set of discursive strategies that is situated in a special cultural context" (Fürisch, 2009, p. 241). Crash Course videos were closely analyzed to look at their "duality of being" as a means of understanding how "objects as both things that are acted upon and things that act upon us" to study the "lives" that these videos lead (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 219). By dissecting the videos, this thesis uncovered rich descriptions about the videos, discovered what they communicate through their constructions, and assessed how individual elements of videos represent particular values and beliefs.

In particular, the visual and spoken elements that Crash Course utilizes tell a story that holds important value for understanding the cultural contexts within which the channel exists. Thus, semiotic analysis, or the study of signs, is an opportunity to understand the ways that visual symbols convey meaning throughout the Crash Course videos. Crash Course videos attempt to emulate the classroom environment through set design, teacher appearance, spatial arrangements, and so on. Even the scripted and planned nature of these videos relates to teaching as a performance, a phrase that points out that "effective teaching often relies upon "theatrical techniques" to capture and maintain the student audience's attention (Pineau, 1994, p. 4). As such, it is essential to understand what tools that these online videos, functioning as classrooms, utilize to

convey messages about the learning, schools, and the liberal ideals the channel's creators espouse while also facing non-traditional constraints and avenues for teaching this information via online video. Semiotic analysis helped this thesis identify "meaningful connections between the expression and content" that is "shared and collective" while also giving insight into the cultural "ideas, rules, practices, codes" that are expressed through the Crash Course videos (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 466).

Semiotic analysis allowed this thesis to examine the signs that the channel uses to signal associations between the channel and educational institutions as well as the ways that these symbols signify other influences and beliefs. The cultural codes that are baked into the visual construction of Crash Course are a means through which viewers can "make sense of the world" and how it is "connected to the social milieu" in which they exist (Berger, 2011, p. 53). The choices that the producers and staff of the channel make convey important ideas in the videos through the prop choices, setting, and so on (Rose, 2001). For instance, there are several signs in the classroom that tie into our traditional conceptions of teachers and the classroom environment, including blackboards and desks (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Thus, it is essential to explore the symbols and the visual field in which they exist to understand how viewers might receive this content.

By relying on these different but related methods, this thesis' findings are strengthened through crystallization. Ellingson (2009) defines crystallization as "multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation" that create "a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers' vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about social constructed

meanings and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them" (p. 4). Importantly, this approach to establishing research and analysis acknowledges that the critical cultural approach does not follow the same post-positivist objectivity when studying the social context. Most researchers will opt for triangulation, a methodological approach that employs multiple sources of data, measures, or methods of analysis, to lend greater support to their findings, focus on the phenomenon, and reduce researcher bias (Salkind, 2010). While this thesis does attempt to reduce research bias in data collection, as discussed below, opting for crystallization over triangulation avoids "detaching a research finding from its context", which in the case of this research is entirely necessary to understanding the significance of the findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 277).

Data Collection & Analysis

For this thesis, I performed a textual analysis on 15 Crash Course videos using random sampling from a pool of videos spanning from January 2015 to December 2019 when the videos were collected. These videos were chosen in an even distribution over time to ensure that the sample is representative and does not skew the videos toward a particular date range. This date range was chosen to provide a more present-focused look at the channel and how it relates to the current issues and crises outlined in the literature. While the early videos from the channel's founding are still representative of the channel's identity, values, and purpose, the channel has undergone a natural growth to include more perspectives and subjects that would best be understood from the provided timeline. Early videos, for instance, largely feature the two Green brothers almost exclusively while later series bring in diverse teachers that represent many different

identities and perspectives. To ensure that this analysis fully captures this change, the date range was necessary to properly contextualize the research. Furthermore, a summary of these early videos has already been provided in the first sections of this prospectus. Focusing on the period from 2015-2019 allows this thesis to build on this foundational work and assess more current video production. This also provided any interesting comparison point for analysis.

During the data collection process, videos were filtered based on the data range on YouTube, titles collected in an Excel spreadsheet, and sample chosen using the randomization formula in Excel. While random sampling is not a typical practice in qualitative research methods, random sampling allowed this research to demonstrate that the image that I have painted here of Crash Course is present through the various videos on the channel, of which there are over 1,150, and not simply videos that have been cherry-picked to support the points I wish to make with this thesis. Additionally, random sampling works well "when the researcher has no compelling a priori reason for a purposive approach" (Mays & Pope, 1995, p. 110). I feel that a purposive approach is not necessary as I have already constricted the subject and data range to fit the context and further restriction may lead to issues with validity.

These videos represented content from 12 different Crash Course series: Anatomy and Physiology (A&P), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Economics, Engineering, Entrepreneurship, Film Criticism, Film History, Government and Politics, History of Science, Literature, Navigating Digital Information, and Philosophy. While, ideally, all videos would be from different subjects, not all series are running at the same time. This

means certain years will only have a few different series running at once; as such, there was unavoidable overlap between videos. The videos ranged between 6 minutes and 47 seconds ("Freedom of Religion: Crash Course Government and Politics #24") and 14 minutes and 27 seconds ("1984 by George Orwell, Part 1: Crash Course Literature 401"), with the average video lasting 10 minutes and 45 seconds. For these series, the hosts were Anna Akana, Jabril Ashe, Michael Aranda, Craig Benzine, Matthew Clifford, Hank Green, John Green, Adrienne Hill, and Shini Somara. Both Green brothers and Craig Benzine hosted multiple series in this list, and they are far more represented in the sample as a result—Hank Green hosted the most, covering A&P, History of Science, and Philosophy, while John Green hosted the Literature and Navigating Digital Information series and Benzine hosted both Film History and Government and Politics.

After collecting the sample list, I watched each video through while taking notes to identify overarching ideas and symbols that were present in the videos. During this process, I used Charmaz's (2000) constant comparative method, which is "an ongoing process of comparing units of data with each other" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 250). As ideas emerged, they were noted in the notes with corresponding support as preliminary symbols. Throughout these viewings, the videos were frequently stopped to facilitate close reading, examining the visual fields for significant details and how these details came together within the image. These examinations were also noted in conjunction with the spoken messages from the series hosts as a means of understanding the educational context that props were situated within. Through these videos, sounds, outside the spoken

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word and one guitar riff noted in the analysis, were not a significant symbol for this analysis.

   After all the videos had been viewed, I began to make connections between the identified symbols, looking for overlap between videos to reinforce the findings. Subsequent viewings reinforced those symbols that were truly representative of the sample. Once this list was finalized, I did one final watch through of all videos to identify when symbols appeared and how they relate to the ideas presented in each given video, though I often rewatched key video segments throughout the analysis to reinforce the support of my findings. While the all videos were connected to at least one symbol, not all are featured in the subsequent analysis due to space constraints.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

During the coding process, I identified four symbols--the American bald eagle, the American flag, light and lightbulbs, and branded mugs. The following analysis section is organized based on these symbols, in which each section acknowledges the symbol, its role, and what is communicated through the visual and spoken field in which the symbols exist. For this analysis, symbols represent the ideas that can be found in themes; themes span symbols and, as such, these symbols work together to bring themes present in the content to life for the viewer. The analysis is organized by symbol to understand how each captures a component of the themes, each contributing my analysis' significance in the discussion.

American Bald Eagle

Patriotic symbols appear throughout the videos, including a miniature American bald eagle figurine. The eagle figurine appears in five of the fifteen videos examined, including those that fall outside topics related to government and politics, such as philosophy and film criticism. In the United States, bald eagles are symbols for freedom, democracy, and the country itself. The bird of prey appears on official government items including currency, stamps, and official seals. Officially, the American flag and the United States seal, which prominently features the bald eagle with a "red, white, and blue shield over its body," are the only two symbols for the country codified by law (Atwood Lawrence, 1990, p.63). On the seal, the bald eagle represents the "grace, power, and sheer majesty" that the founders hoped would embody the nation, especially in the face

of war and other military interventions (Breining, 2008, p. 16; Atwood Lawrence, 1990).

Throughout the Crash Course videos, the eagle figurine embodies American culture and

citizenship, allowing the hosts to model important principles of civic engagement as a

result.

Craig Benzine, a host for the "Government and Politics" and "Film History"

series, is shown in contention with the eagle in most videos in which he appears; his

literal fight with the eagle demonstrates how educated viewers can defend themselves

with the knowledge obtained in these videos against threats to the public good. Benzine

introduced the "eagle punch" in his personal channel video, "Wheezy Eagle", where he

'attacks' an eagle for taking his seat while shouting "just because it's Columbus Day and

you're the mascot of our country doesn't mean you get your own web show"

(WheezyWaiter, 2010, 1:46). The bit grew in prominence through his work with Crash

Course, though, as the channel introduced the figurine to the series he hosted. For

instance, in "Media Regulation: Crash Course Government and Politics #45," Benzine

discusses media regulation and, specifically, the right of rebuttal for political candidates

from personal attacks. He then states "these rules don't apply to eagles" while punching

the figurine to the ground (Crash Course, 2016a, 3:57). This suggests the viewers,

represented by Benzine, have the power to metaphorically attack or critique the United

States government as an entity. Throughout the episode, the host discusses the federal

control over the media by placing "limits on the media" despite assumptions that "we live

in a free-market capitalist society" where consumers are in control (Crash Course, 2016a,

0:18). The episode ends by discussing net neutrality and reasons the public should be

skeptical of censorship, especially as media serve a vital "public function" (Crash Course, 2016a, 8:21). Thus, despite taking an entire episode to discussing the power that the United States government has over the public, the episode ultimately works to demonstrate the need for public power in the media and the importance of standing up to initiatives that might restrict civic freedoms due to corporate intrusion in a public good. The eagle attack is a visual representation of how an educated populace, aware of the government's role in their media consumption, can assert themselves in the face of regulations that overstep bounds but also when corporations are not checked by the government as citizens see necessary.

Figure 1. Benzine right before he punches the eagle figurine in "Freedom of Religion."

Similarly, Benzine punches the figurine in "Freedom of Religion: Crash Course Government and Politics #24" focusing on the First Amendment's protections as another means of exercising reasoned action through knowledge about civic engagement in the video. At the conclusion of the episode, Benzine previews the next episode about

freedom of speech by stating that freedom of speech is a far more controversial issue than freedom of religion. He then punches the eagle (fig 1.), turning to look at the figurine and aggressively saying "Just wait. You just—you just wait" (Crash Course, 2015c, 5:58). The attack suggests that the people again are warranted in their opposition to the government, encouraging actions of free speech even if they go against the established values. Additionally, this violent display demonstrates the controversial nature of exercising free speech previewed in the episode, suggesting that exercising free speech can be a battle. Benzine is modeling critical examinations of the government, a necessity in liberal education that teaches students "*how* to think" and not "*what* to think" [original emphasis] (Prince Jr., 2000, p. 251). Thus, while the host is clearly situated within a democracy and surrounded by symbols of the US government, including the flag and Capitol building, there is still room for critique; this ostensibly welcomes viewers to become educated about the controversies and use these to address their critical reflections as citizens living in a democracy that should protect their right to free speech. Of course, viewers might not read this exchange in the same manner, but the reoccurring symbol, and how it is treated by the host, reinforces this reading. By doing this in an obviously humorous way can also encourage viewers to take part in their own critiques without worry about retribution as the host can continuously take light-hearted jams at the eagle without facing backlash. Broader conversations in American culture, in particular, are embracing challenges to hegemonic structures within the US, signaling that critical citizenship is a necessary skill as myths of American exceptionalism are more frequently questioned (Butterworth & Schuck, 2016; Von Burgy & Johnson, 2009).

In other videos, the eagle is often perched in the background, watching the interaction from behind the host, which demonstrates the power that American culture holds over education in a global world. The video "*In the Mood For Love*: Crash Course Film Criticism #5" features the eagle on top of a stack of books, turned toward the host, Michael Aranda, while he discusses the Wong Kar-Wai film. By placing the eagle on top of these books, the video demonstrates that American, Westernized culture is pervasive in these videos, thus influencing the stances that the videos themselves take. Furthermore, perching the eagle on the stack of books demonstrates the influence that this perspective shapes the knowledge that is gained through watching these videos, influencing the perspective that viewers take on the film itself. Thus, even when studying films from different cultures, the lens seems to situate itself from a Westernized space, including a socio-political analysis about Hong Kong in the 1960s explaining that one character is "leaving Hong Kong for the United States because of the political instability" in the colony and asserting that the safe harbor of Hong Kong, just like the main characters' love for one another, is over (Crash Course, 2018a, 8:19). While this is paramount to the film itself, the focus on the United States demonstrates how the channel frequently refers back to the ways that American culture permeates different cultures and does so in a way that presents the culture as stable and free. By placing the eagle in the background throughout these conversations, the background becomes a representational space that demonstrates the influence that American culture plays in the conversations occurring in these videos.

The eagle is similarly situated in the episode "What is God Like?: Crash Course Philosophy #12", similarly depicting America as both protecting and looming over the viewers learning. The eagle only appears in the Philosophy videos that cover religion as well as death, being replaced by a green skull in the 18th video in the series about identity. The episodes with the eagle focus on central beliefs related to American culture, particularly Judeo-Christianity, which further suggests an acknowledgment from the set designers about the Western focus of the content as well as the significance to viewers in these regions. Additionally, the eagle demonstrates the United States government's close relationship to religion, with Judeo-Christian symbols and concepts present in national symbols and other official items, such as the national anthem and Pledge of Allegiance.

Figure 2. The Apollo statue shown next to the eagle figurine on the bookshelf to the right of Hank Green.

In "What is God Like? Crash Course Philosophy #12", the statue next to the eagle also supports and reinforces the eagle as a symbol for the United States, demonstrating

the ideals of American exceptionalism that should be critically examined by citizens.

This statue is a replica of a larger bronze statue of a man wearing a Phrygian cap while holding a staff and shield (fig. 2). While the figure is small, it closely resembles other figurines of the god Apollo, a fitting set piece for a series examining philosophy and religion. In Phrygian mythology, Apollo is a significant figure, especially as the god of music, in which he both portrayed as masterful but also brutal and violent, flaying alive his musical challenger, Marsyas, after defeating him in a contest and display his dead body for others to see (Berk, 2016). Paired with the staff and shield, the figurine demonstrates a potential for battle and fighting. At the same time, Apollo's brutality is shown as a "victory of good and of life over evil and death", restoring order to the region through his "pure and stately music" (Toynbee, 1981, p. 5). Indeed, the cap that the statue wears is often referred to as a "liberty cap" and can be traced from Roman times to the American Revolution, starting as a symbol for "freedom granted" to slaves in ancient Rome (Korshak, 1987, p. 52). The United States similarly uses violence through military actions to impose order on the world and support "freedom". By grouping these items and placing them within a collection of other items related to philosophy, the video suggests that not only does American culture permeate these videos but also that the creators critically view America, recognizing the almost god-like reverence that citizens have for the nation while also acknowledging the violent costs that come with freedom through military force. This fits into a larger theme about critical citizenship education that pervades the videos.

Taken together, the bald eagle figurine is representative of the United States and its injection into standards of education, replicated in its own participation in larger world events. The Crash Course videos encourage critical examinations of the United States through knowledge related to practicing rights, such as freedom of speech, but also suggest that American cultural values and beliefs are inherently built into the knowledge presented by the videos themselves. As a result, the frames that these videos largely take Westernized to take on these topics they handle. While the hosts are American and the production is based in the United States, these videos are published on a global platform with non-Western audiences viewing to support viewers learning about themselves and their world.

Rather than just view globalization as an economic opening of borders, these videos should embrace global citizenship that connects all viewers in this online space rather than only cater to one audience. Indeed, a common critique for liberal education throughout its storied history has been its inherent reliance on Western perspectives and traditions that ignore important global voices (Endres, 2002). While the channel does examine other perspectives, it tends to return to the Western audience's frame of reference, further playing into this issue inherent in liberal education. So, while the channel encourages those in the United States to critique their country through their rights as citizens, the channel does little for encouraging global citizenship commitment and exploration. As education becomes increasingly globalized, especially through the Internet, these videos need to expand to address citizenship from beyond the American viewpoint anchored in these videos and incorporate critical pedagogical beliefs to support

active citizenship beliefs. Pairing liberal education with critical pedagogical beliefs in these videos can help expand the reach that is present in the videos and encourage viewers to take "broader domains of culture and human experience that the liberal arts address" thus fostering the necessary development to support the channel's goals to develop informed global citizens (Endres, 2002, p. 66).

American Flag

In addition to the eagle figurine, the American flag appears in several videos serving as a symbolic representation of the United States, its government, and its societal values. As the literal symbol for the country, the American flag is clear to "socialized members of American society" as the physical manifestation of national sentiment (Gusfield & Michalowicz, 1984, p. p. 421). National flags like the US flag represent physical nation-states while also encouraging "symbolic action" on behalf of the country (Klatch, 1988, p. 138). The flag can evoke "emotional expressions of national identification, allegiance, and self-sacrifice" but also demonstrates a paradox, as is true with all national symbols, that these expressions of patriotism are "directed toward national symbols rather than to the nation itself" (Schatz & Lavine, 2007, p. 330). Thus, the flag becomes a figure for political expression and national allegiance without necessitating further contribution from those that proudly identify with the symbol; this can cause issues with how citizens choose to interact or protest the government represented by the flag as evidenced by the storied history with flag burning (Goldstein, 1996) and controversies surrounding the national anthem at sporting events (Schmidt, Fredrick, Pegoraro, & Spencer, 2019). As a result, the American flag can both symbolize

patriotism but also serve as a symbolic critique for the country it represents, furthering the discussion about citizenship surrounding the eagle by demonstrating the deeply political and complex ways citizenship manifests.
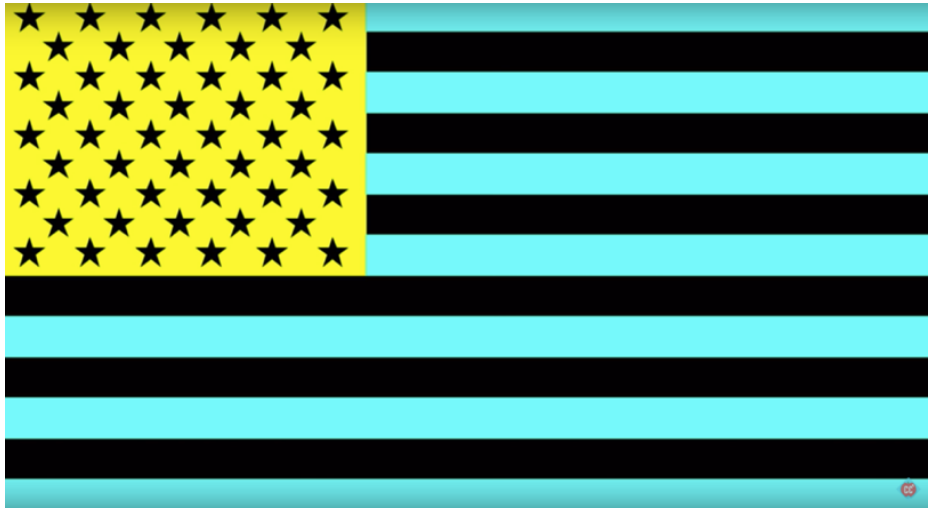
Figure 3. The yellow, black, and blue American flag.

The video "Vision: Crash Course A&P #18" begins by filling the entire screen with the American flag; however, the patriotic colors are replaced with blue and black stripes and a yellow square with black stars that transforms the symbolism of the flag in the video (fig. 3). The traditional colors on the American flag hold symbolic meaning as outlined by Charles Thompson, former Secretary of the Continental Congress, who noted that "white signifies purity and innocence," red signifies "hardiness and valour" and "blue, the color of the Chief […] signifies vigilance, perseverance and justice" (United States Government Printing Office, 2001, p. 41). Subverting these colors with opposing color schemes suggests that the channel is critiquing the values latent in the national symbol. For instance, replacing the white with black suggests the death of the "purity and innocence" of the country. While the host, Hank Green, claims that he is "not trying to

make a political statement here" and "not going to ask you to swear allegiance to the

Republic of Hank or anything" it seems that inherently using this symbol has political

connotations no matter its application (Crash Course, 2015c, 0:28). By changing the

colors for the flag, the video suggests that the reality through which viewers see the flag

and the United States, in general, can be colored by false perceptions and changed to fit

alternative agendas.

       While, on the surface, this use of the symbol facilitates a critical look at the

United States, the American flag also enables reflective inquiry, which is an important

tool for democratic education as situated within liberal education. For this video, the flag

is used to explain photoreceptors in the eyes and how certain images and colors can leave

ghost effects: when viewers stare at the screen for long enough, the next blank white

screen will show American flag with the correct colors, a "ghost effect" from the first

image. Thus, it seems that the visual suggests that the ghost effects of core American

values are still present in the country, but they are hidden behind other constructs. The

channel is teaching viewers about their literal vision but also about how they can easily

be tricked into seeing alternatives about the country and must use their critical approach

to discover the truth in what they learn about the country. Indeed, the video ends by

asserting, "Human vision is fallible, but those mistakes that it makes can help us

understand that wonderfully complex system" (Crash Course, 2015d, 8:30). The

discussion seems to assert that we as humans are inherently flawed in the way we

construct things, such as the systems that we exist within, but that we must learn to think

critically and look beyond the surface image to understand these complex systems. As an

extension of critical citizenship education, this relates to reflective inquiry, which John

Dewey (1916) asserts is a process necessary to "distinguish between our own attitude and

the objects toward which we sustain the attitude" (p. 173). Americans have certain

nationalistic attitudes toward the flag that prevent them from looking critically at the

nation (Haerens, 2018; Murty, Holyfield-Moss, Vyas, & Roebuck, 2018); but, by looking

at the symbol from another perspective and reflecting on the actual contents of the flag

itself and the design of its parts, the channel is encouraging a type of reflective inquiry

that is central to the democratic requirements of liberal education.

Figure 4. American flag overlay shown in "Deficits & Debts: Crash Course Economics

#9".

Another video, "Deficits & Debts: Crash Course Economics: #9", incorporates the

flag to discuss the economic concepts debt and deficit, applying them to the global

economy in a way that is central to modern liberal education's demands for students. The

host, Adrian Hill, dives into a real-world example using America because the "United

States has the largest debt. Hooray! America—number one!" (Crash Course, 2015b,

1:23). Following this proclamation, there is a cartoonish explosion, the Star-Spangled

banner plays on electric guitar and the semi-opaque overlay appears with the American

flag and the text "America: Land of the Awesome since 1776" (fig. 4). Underneath this

layer, images from the Revolutionary War to the present are shown in quick succession.

The images and musical tempo speed up much like America's debt clock, which Hill

demonstrates is rapidly rising by the second. Within liberal education, there is a concern

with preparing students to not only be "responsible" citizens but also take part in a

"global economy" through the skills gained though liberal education ('What', n.d., para.

4). Through this connection with United States and the global economy, such as later in

the video when Hill compares American debt to other countries like Japan, the global

nature of citizenship starts to come alive; however, the reliance on American nationalist

tropes seems to drive more of a "us versus them" perspective in which countries are

competing to be the best in terms of debt and GDP rather than part of a globalized

society.

Reflective inquiry, as discussed with "Vision: Crash Course A&P #18", also

becomes an important skill in viewing the present video because the imagery surrounding

the flag is seemingly at odds with the simplified beliefs, like pride, that are often distilled

into the national symbol itself. Notably, both Hill's sarcastic tone about the United

States' debt and the phrase "Land of the Awesome" seem to contradict the images that

are included in a quick montage. These images include divisive events in the nation's

history, including the 1856 Caning of Senator Charles Sumner over slavery and Vietnam

War protests; proud patriotic images, such as the iconic Flag Raising on Iwo Jima and the

Statute of Liberty; and moments that fall somewhere in-between, such as the meeting of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X during the turbulent Civil Rights era (Blake, 2010; Klein, 2014; Rosenthal, 1945; United States Senate, n.d.). Despite overly patriotic expressions, the mix of images suggests that they are not as blindly patriotic as the images would appear on the surface, embracing ambivalence toward the seemingly blatant claims of American exceptionalism (Butterworth & Schuck, 2016).

Yet, this realization requires close analysis of the images to see these details, as the montage covers just a few seconds in the video itself. Returning to Dewey's (1916) reflective inquiry idea, this montage requires the viewers to not only experience the information but also reflect on the concepts and carefully dissect it to fully understand it. The framing encourages viewers to question the way they look at the United States' superiority and consider what criteria are necessary for them to actually make this declaration. At the same time, the video suggests that a country's "awesomeness" is gauged on economic grounds, using these iconic images to then lead into a discussion around what measures between debt, debt to GDP ratio, and deficit, are best for rating a country's success. Because this is the Crash Course Economics series, the show is naturally concerned with issues related to the economy and markets. Yet, the seeming direct connection between political prowess and economic health is a troublesome tension that centers the learning from the students as a democracy reliant on economic performativity. Thus, democracy in the United States becomes less about these monumental moments that bond the community together and more so about the economic spending and taxing decisions that will chart the course for future success or failure.

Figure 5. The first American flag graphic in "Poverty & Our Response to it."

The video "Poverty & Our Response to it: Crash Course Philosophy #44", though, provides a stark contrast to the ideas presented in the economics video, instead of focusing on the relationship between American citizenship and social responsibility. An American flag with "poverty" in bold dark blue text appears next to Hank Green as he states:

> The United States is an affluent country; we have enough money to easily stop
>
> world poverty—just end it. But why should we? Why should I give any of my
>
> hard-earned money to strangers I will never meet? What entitles them to a portion
>
> of what I have? (Crash Course, 2017, 0:53).

In this visual, poverty is literally imprinted onto the American flag (read: the United States), which has the resources, collectively, to solve global poverty (fig. 5). As Green asserts, though, many questions why they should support those suffering when they are inherently strangers. Dewey (1978) frames a similar conundrum when discussing the ethics of service, posing the question: "What attitude shall I adopt toward an issue which

concerns many persons whom I don't know personally, but whose actions along with mine will determine the conditions under which we all live?" (p. 319). Democracy is prefaced on the idea that "one contributes to social well-being" and that service is a necessary concept to learn in our education system to acknowledge one's privileges and carry out just actions to support the community as a whole (Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 17). In this way, the Crash Course channel is depicting individualism developed in a neoliberal society; but, also, how to start critically questioning, as Dewey does, these principles while working to support democratic principles rooted in liberal education. Furthermore, the critical citizenship depicted here attempts to uproot the us versus them mentality that was seemingly supported in the "Deficits & Debts: Crash Course Economics: #9" video; in the current video, the United States is shown as part of the larger society and responsible for supporting everyone else, rejecting the individualism developed in neoliberalism. This is especially evident when the second image replaces the flag with the globe, showing how people educated about social responsibility should move beyond nationalistic borders. Within liberal education there is an emphasis on embracing global perspectives that account for the pluralism that exists in a globalized society (Feinberg & McDonough, 2003; Mouffe, 2013; Nussbaum, 2002).

Figure 6. The second American flag graphic with a bright yellow 1%.

Green models the moral and ethical reasoning central to critical and global citizenship later in the video, advocating for social responsibility to support the global poor. At this point, the American flag returns with a bright yellow 1% on top of the flag (fig 6.), drawing the eye to the figure and emphasizing Green's lesson:

> If everyone in America donated just 1% of their income to help people in extreme poverty, we could save so many lives. Now, we know that everyone isn't going to do that, but according to Singer, each of us is responsible for our failure to help, regardless of what everyone else is doing (Crash Course, 2017, 4:35).

By emphasizing this responsibility, the channel is demonstrating its dedication to liberal education values surrounding citizenship; moreover, it demonstrates an emphasis on a global community to which all people are responsible to care for the inhabitants. Unlike the previous depiction of the flag, where poverty was shown almost like a dark cloud over the flag, the bright 1% looks like a beacon of hope for the world.

While this emphasis on charitable donations shows a dedication to global citizenship, Dewey disdains charity because it "assumes a superior and inferior class" (Dewey, 1978, p. 349) and instead recommends "doing something" that builds "relationships with others" reinforcing the communal bonds through these learning experiences (Dewey, 1916, p. 127). Thus, while the charitable need is important, it also seems to be used as a way to assuage guilt and "buy off the resentment" from those suffering in the world, placing their needs as something to bought out by the wealthy (Dewey, 1985, p. 301). While Green's example, taken from Singer, involves direct actions to help a child, the video fails to provide non-monetary alternatives to helping the global poor. Including more direct ways that people can help the global poor in addition to their charity can help create more lasting bonds with community service, as is the goal with service learning. Service learning, along with democratic education, is increasingly contextualized within global perspectives that are important for education across all levels, including in higher education (Barber, 2003; Barber, 2006; Battistoni, Longo, & Jayanandhan, 2009; Bok, 2006). Thus, this symbolic interaction with the American flag presents a demonstration for how students can expand beyond nationalistic borders associated with their national symbol and think about supporting a global community through socially responsible acts.

Light(bulbs)

While these American symbols highlight the ways that Western culture and citizenship are infused into the knowledge presented by Crash Course, the way that Crash Course presents its own knowledge must be explored. Throughout the videos, lightbulbs

are frequently used as props and drawn in graphics. These lightbulbs are typically the traditional incandescent bulbs with glowing orange filaments (rather than more modern LED models). The lightbulb as a symbol of knowledge is well known, especially when it comes to creativity and inspiration (Glavenau, 2011). Before lightbulbs were invented, light from candles and other sources were also commonly associated with the spread of knowledge, demonstrating that while lightbulbs may be the central symbol today, light, in general, can also be a related symbol (Bowen, 2015). Additionally, light is a traditionally divine concept, including the phrase "let there be light" which is used in Judeo-Christianity for the creation of the world (Schnepel & Ben-Ari, 2005). Many higher education institutions use light in university mottos and seals, which situates education as a form of enlightenment and inspiration while also showing the connection between American universities and religious founders (Martin, 2002; Rudolph, 1990).

Figure 7. The lightbulb shown over Akana's head in "How to Develop a Business Idea."

In "How to Develop a Business Idea: Crash Course Business – Entrepreneurship #2", a glowing lightbulb is placed over the host Anna Akana's head to demonstrate the

spread of knowledge from the channel to the viewers (fig. 7). As a symbol for knowledge, which is reinforced by the corresponding Archimedes graphic, this placement suggests that knowledge is being spread from the mind of the host (and the channel that she is representing) outward to the viewers. Much like a crown, the placement of the glowing bulb establishes her authority over the domain and the knowledge that she will share in the video about entrepreneurship. Bratianu and Andriessen (2008) consider knowledge as energy in a field of forces, which can then "spread in space as a continuous domain" (p. 76). As the energy from the lightbulb spreads from the host in this graphic, it demonstrates the potential for knowledge to spread to viewers and grow as the field through their interactions with the ideas presented here mixed with their aspirations for a business (or other pursuits). The shape also breaks from the "linearity" associated with knowledge, demonstrating that knowledge is flexible, shared, and constantly evolving (Andriessen, Kliphuis, McKenzie, & van Winkelen, 2009, p. 413). This shared quality demonstrates that this knowledge is not exclusive to the elite names that make it big as entrepreneurs but also something that the average viewer can experience by watching these videos. While Akana is a fairly well-known singer, author, and content creator on YouTube, whose channel has 2.65 million subscribers as of February 2020, her accolades are not discussed in the video (Anna Akana, n.d.). Her appearance, in a simple green sweatshirt and casual hairstyle, signals that she is much like the average viewer and makes the empowerment of this knowledge more approachable. Thus, the lightbulb embodies the power to use knowledge to build a brand and business that is not contained within the mind of a select few but to be spread as far as light can reach, further

overlapping with the divine knowledge ideas as presented in religious ideology, knowledge that is open and free to all for the benefit of the Crash Course learning community.

Despite the openness of this community, the very nature of entrepreneurship is incredibly individualized, relying on the neoliberal value of self-maximization, which is demonstrated in this video's discussion of Steve Jobs and Elon Musk, to convey success (Harvey, 2007). While the video refutes the idea that "a lucky few of us get struck with inspiration" and demonstrate that "we can all get [great ideas]" for a business, the channel still relies on these inspirational stories to sell the idea of the self-made man (or woman) in neoliberalism (Crash Course, 2019, 0:21). The viewers are tasked with using their individualism to overcome any hindrances and put the knowledge into play—the host literally addresses the viewer by saying "we've got you", expressing that the channel will teach individuals how to use the knowledge from the channel to build up their businesses, drawing on the individualism of the knowledge they are sharing (Crash Course, 2019, 0:33). Despite the support suggested by the video, entrepreneurship is inherently a task in rooted in neoliberalism and capitalism, tasking the individual to preserve for accolades in an economic world. While the channel is a resource to draw from, the challenge is ultimately up to the viewer to put the plan into place, calling upon the Puritan work ethic that is baked into the American dream (Von Burg & Johnson, 2009).

Figure 8. A glowing lightbulb shown in glass a container in "The Columbian Exchange."

Physical lightbulbs are also used in the Crash Course videos, situated as props next to hosts. Unlike the graphic, the light emitted from these bulbs is much dimmer, lighting up just the filaments in the bulbs themselves. In several videos hosted by Hank Green, including "The Columbian Exchange: Crash Course History of Science #16", the lightbulb is contained within a cylindrical glass container (fig 8.). While the glass nature of the container allows viewers to "see" into this world, there is also a clear barrier to actually situating themselves in this realm; much like the glass container, the YouTube platform allows the viewers to look in on the learning space, but largely prevents viewers from being part of the experience itself—making the viewer more of an individual rather than a vocal member of a community. As knowledge is equated with energy, containing this symbol for knowledge prevents the visual spreading of knowledge through communal discussions, demonstrating how the platform obscures liberal learning potential through YouTube. Dewey and other prominent scholars in liberal education sought to reframe the approach to teaching by moving toward more active and

experiential methods rather than the transmissive models of the past to strengthen

communal bonds (Dewey, 1997; Erickson, 1992; Voparil, 2008). YouTube as an

educational medium can only replicate this experience to a point, instead taking on a

largely linear, transmissive approach to the learning process. This approach situates the

viewer as an individual receiving information rather than a community member growing

knowledge with the channel. As a result, the transmissive style becomes engrained in the

pedagogy of the videos, preventing knowledge from growing in organic and far-reaching

ways that are possible in other spaces, approaches that bring in diverse communal

perspectives that can best support a broader public good.

Figure 9. A bronze pipe lamp situated near WALL-E figurine in "Preventing Flint."

In "Preventing Flint – Environmental Engineering: Crash Course Engineering

#29", light brings clarity to an environmental issue that evokes ideals of social

responsibility in liberal education. The lamp, which is a staple on the engineering set (fig.

9), is fitting for the particular topic, the Flint water crisis, due to ignorance about how the

Flint River water would react with the pipes caused the lead crisis itself (Crash Course,

2018b). In the video, the light shines upon a stack of books, indicating the importance of education and knowledge when pursuing a career as an engineer; furthermore, the importance of knowledge about the contextual elements in addition to the scientific elements is necessary to avoid environmental disasters.

Knowledge about environmental engineering is not only used to discuss the technical knowledge necessary for the profession but also the societal implications and social responsibility that comes with the career. The light illuminates how important knowing the implications of the project, but also the issue with the inaction and poor planning on the part of the engineers and policymakers that made the Flint decision— asserting that this mistake will "take years to fix what could have been avoided" while emphasizing that the "lesson here is that you need to make sure whatever water source you're using, it isn't going to mess up any systems already in place" (Crash Course, 2018b, 1:53). Through this conversation, the concept of personal and shared responsibility, a key facet of liberal education, comes alive and demonstrates that education must address the moral considerations about the knowledge they teach (Hersh & Schneider, 2005). However, in the video, it is not presented as a requirement for all citizens or from all education, but instead placed as a duty for the engineer to fulfill in their career demands; this focus thus is more concerned with how the engineer sees their career influencing others rather than a community member taking concern for how their actions influence others' lives.

Near the lamp, a WALL-E figurine reinforces the connection between preserving the environmental and personal and social responsibility (fig. 9). WALL-E is the titular

character from the Pixar film released in 2008 about a robot designed to clean up future earth after humans have trashed it beyond livable conditions (Disney, n.d.). Throughout the film, the robot is shown dutifully completing his tasks while also exploring the world with a child-like wonder, finding "novel possibilities even in an abandoned world" (Yang, 2018, p.5). Placed upon a bookshelf, another symbol and literal container for knowledge, the WALL-E statue becomes an audience member for the course, embracing new knowledge through the ideas presented by the host. Just like the robot, the viewers have personalities and ostensibly want to break from the traditional model to seek out new and interesting concepts through their use of these online videos; furthermore, this demonstrates how viewers hold an important role in preventing and fixing social issues that impact the environment.

Figure 10. The x-ray images on the walls and the Hanklerfish to the left of Green.

In another Hank Green video, "Vision: Crash Course A&P #18", light is central to the video's topic, vision. Indeed, in order to talk about eyesight, the video states that they

must "talk about what they're actually seeing—light bouncing off of stuff" (Crash Course, 2015d, 1:35). Light is the literal mode of transport for knowledge to human eyes that are then translated through photoreceptors there. Thus, while lightbulbs are the central focus for this symbol, as mentioned previously, light is also a symbol for knowledge and its use as a vehicle for knowledge in this video requires attention in addition to the physical bulbs. It is worth noting that lightbulbs are also a technology for vision-assistance, enabling the light necessary to see to reach human eyes. As the channel utilizes technologies to illuminate knowledge for viewers, the relationships between these concepts is vital to the analysis here.

For one, light is used to illuminate the x-rays behind the host (see fig. 10). The bones have an ethereal white glow against the black background. In the video itself, the light spectrum is discussed with x-rays following outside the visible light spectrum for human eyes. As a result, the x-ray images in the background represent something that cannot be seen until the right tool is used to bring it to "light". Indeed, "x-ray images were trusted for their ability to represent reality" when they were first introduced and were met with great enthusiasm because the "observation of the 'invisible' with our organ of sight in itself arouse our greatest interest and curiosity" (Pasveer, 1989, p. 361-362). X-rays, though, become "representations of reality" that provide "knowledge and organizing practice" for those that use them, presenting one facet of human health in literal black and white (Cartwright, 1995; Pasveer, 1989, p. 377). As such, the presence of x-ray images in the Anatomy and Physiology series goes beyond just the presentation of the body being studied but instead the ways that our knowledge is presented through

medical knowledge discourses (Foucault, 1994). Knowledge has the potential to illuminate elements of the human experience that are previously understood but in a limited way; while this illumination provides necessary insight into human health, it is only one representation of reality and thus cannot encapsulate all medical knowledge about the human body (van Djick, 2016). Thus, the knowledge presented in these videos is only one frame for discussing human anatomy as it is for all information shared through the channel. The light can illuminate certain ideas and attempt to do so, but there will also be components that are left in the shadows when coming from just one source.

Finally, light is presented through the stuffed blue fish next to Green (fig. 10). This fish is colloquially known as a lamp fish, though technically called an anglerfish, for the light bulb-like appendage hanging from its head. Hank Green created this stuffed animal in a vlog and referred to as a "Hanklerfish" because it is a fish drawn by a person named Hank (Vlogbrothers, 2011). The Hanklerfish was made into a stuffed plush animal that is sold on the DFTBA.com store, which includes merch from various reaches of the Greens' online videos. Anglerfish use their "luminous flesh" in the dark depths of the ocean to draw prey close enough for the fish to swallow (National Geographic, n.d.). In this way, the light on the Hanklerfish represents the knowledge from the Crash Course channel to draw in viewers looking for sources that can illuminate or explain the ideas to pull viewers from the darkness of uncertainty. However, the predatory nature of the fish signals that the channel also seeks to gain something from the viewers—not only do their views bring the channel financial success, but further consumption of merchandise, like the stuffed Hanklerfish, demonstrates the less progressive side to the company. While the

channel seeks to share knowledge for free, they are still a business that wishes to be profitable and sell users into continuing to watch their videos by drawing them into the bright and shiny knowledge presented in their videos before feeding on their viewership. This is not to say that the channel should not seek to be successful, enabling them to make a living, support staff, and grow the reach of the channel; however, in the current system, progressive ideals depend on advertising structures, such as those on YouTube, to be heard. Thus, capitalism seems invariably intertwined with the promotion of progressive ideals, undermining the core structures of liberal ideology and giving way to the neoliberal marketplace. While this is far from a new realization, the tensions between the ideals and the realities are growing in tension as education moves into online spaces (Cooper & Marx, 2017).

Mugs

The relationship between the capitalist structures on YouTube and the Crash Course channel are best seen through the final symbol, coffee mugs. These mugs are exclusively from the DFTBA online store, featuring logos and quotes from the show. Some hosts interact with these mugs, picking up or moving the mugs but never drinking from them. Other hosts leave the mugs as props, ignoring their existence much like the other items that surround the person speaking. While never filled with actual coffee, these coffee mugs signal important ideals in American culture, as coffee is seen as "a precursor and facilitator of brain work" that is literally centered around consumption (Wells & Gale, 1995, p. 148; Sherry, 1995). Thus, these coffee mugs symbolize "brain work" that occurs in and as a result of the videos as well as the consumption of products and

advertisements from the channel itself (McCracken, 1986; Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Through this consumption, though, a tension arises between the progressive values espoused in the channel and the emphasis on advertising for capital gains in the videos themselves. As a result, the mugs bring a tension to this analysis between liberalism and neoliberalism.

The coffee mug is a branding item for the channel itself, suggesting that the desire to learn is not enough to "power" the channel, but that viewers must also support the channel in monetary ways to keep it running, a trope in American schooling as evidence through the apple logo. In The "Freedom of Religion: Crash Course Government and Politics #24", Craig Benzine wheels into the room backward with coffee mug in hand before addressing the audience; he switches the mug to his other hand while keeping the design—the Crash Course "CC" logo in a light blue apple—facing the audience until cutting to the intro theme. The Crash Course logo features a shiny apple containing the channel's initials. Apples are a well-known symbol in Western culture and Judeo-Christian beliefs, harkening back to the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, and is often related to schools and learning (Ferber, 1999). Additionally, in the United States, the apple "becomes a symbol of home, national identity, and fertility" as apple orchards were planted by colonists while settling the new land; at the same time, the apple symbolizes the "American frontier spirit and (white) American identity" as a result of the colonizing actions associated with the establishment of these orchards (Pezzoli-Olgiati, 2015, p. 283). Families in frontier houses were also "responsible for housing and feeding teachers" and would often send apples with children as gifts for teaching students, which

is one theory for giving apple as a gift is a culturally recurring motif (Binkovitz, 2012, para. 10). Based on these select interpretations, there is a clear association between schools, teaching, and the apple. Choosing the apple for their logo was likely derived from these associations in American culture, but also suggests that the channel serves as a "gift" for the teachers. Indeed, the channel creators hope to "make a teacher's life a little less stressful" (Cirincione, 2015) by providing free content, especially for "the school that needs the most resources" (Chmielewski, 2014). Thus, the apple in the logo represents the gift of free, educational videos for teachers to use but also the need for student support to make this gift possible. In the same vein, the apple connects education with technology, most notably as the symbol for one of the most successful tech companies in the world, Apple. By supporting the channel through merchandise purchases, for instance, the gift of Crash Course can continue for teachers while also supporting the growing tree of knowledge from which the channel is seemingly plucked.

Figure 11. The Descartes mug placed to the left of Green while mug is on the shelf behind the host to the right.

The apple mug makes many other appearances throughout the channel but is often also accompanies by other Crash Course mugs, including one that reinforces the connections between the mug and consumerism, both for the Crash Course products and knowledge. In "Poverty & Our Response to It: Crash Course Philosophy #44", there are two mugs visible in the frame, with a white mug turned out to the audience catching immediate attention due to its placement next to the host (fig. 11). The mug has the text "I drink therefore I am" written in blue and yellow with a man in the "thinker" position drinking from the same mug on which he is featured; the man is sitting on a yellow stone with the Crash Course apple logo. The quote is a play on the "I think, therefore I am" proposition coined by Rene Descartes, a famous French philosopher. Crash Course is not the first to repurpose this line. Famously, artist Barbara Kruger (1987) applied the phrase as a critique for modern consumerism, postulating that people are no longer focused on thought but instead ownership as a measure for a meaningful life (Public Delivery, n.d.). While Kruger critiqued consumerism, this mug further supports this system, encouraging viewers to purchase the mug as an extension of their identity as linked to the Crash Course brand. The mug demonstrates that drinking from this mug and figuratively drinking from the well of Crash Course knowledge will shape how they think to achieve a meaningful life. This further reinforces the relationship between advertising structures, consumerism, and knowledge-sharing on the online platform, implicating viewers into the economic pressures espoused by YouTube.

The Descartes mug's message relates to the neoliberal values associated with individualism, though there is a clear tension with the liberal content in the video itself.

The quote focuses on the self by using the first-person voice, which plays upon the presentation of the ideal self and how the brand can communicate the self to others; in this case, by owning this mug, a consumer can be seen as an intellectual that understands the reference thanks to Crash Course videos (Bagozzi, 2013; Goffman, 1956). The individual man on the mug is sitting on the Crash Course logo, demonstrating that the individual is bolstered through the mountain of knowledge obtained through watching these videos that can be used to present the self. The focus on the individual is central to neoliberalism, which suggests that the individual is responsible for their own lives and the social consideration that was central to liberal democratic beliefs is unnecessary when embracing free-market values (Brown, 2003; Peters, 2001). By promoting consumerism and neoliberal values, the mug seems to convey a progressive message shrouded and potentially negated by capitalism. However, the channel then goes on to present global poverty as a collective issue, as discussed in the American flag section, suggesting that there is a shared responsibility among citizens and the government itself to support the impoverished. This is clearly juxtaposing the consumerism that is promoted through brand placements in the videos, suggesting that the individualism they hope to combat through the lessons is then promoted through consumer images and advertising for the channel itself.

Figure 12: The Mongol mug shown to the right of Green in "The Columbian Exchange."

Another Crash Course mug is featured in the background of "The Columbian Exchange: Crash Course History of Science #15", which demonstrates the relationship between knowledge espoused by the channel and the components of liberal education. The white mug pops out against the dark purple wall, unlike the surrounding objects that are largely dark hues and indiscriminate décor objects (fig. 12). As a result, the eye is drawn to the coffee mug, which features the quote, "We're the exception" with exception underlined twice and written in bold red while the other text is a light blue. Next to the text, there is a graphic representation of presumably Genghis Khan, the historic leader of the Mongol civilization, and the Crash Course red apple logo on a blue square background. The quote is a reference to the Crash Course World History series hosted by John Green, where the older Green brother would use the quote as a motif to comically discuss how the Mongol civilization also seemed to break the established historical rules for building a civilization. Much like the series it is shown in, this mug's presence in the video shows how multiple subjects, in this case science and history, can work together to

support holistic learning; this reinforces the relationship between the channel's progressive ideals, content, and liberal education, which emphasizes "broad learning in multiple disciplines" ('What', n.d., para. 2).

While the quote is about this motif, on the mug (and other Mongol merchandise available on their store) the quote seems to assert that, much like the Mongols, Crash Course is the exception to the standard for online educational videos by supporting community involvement, though this involvement is in tension. The bright color, titled and large text, and underlined word draws the eye, even from far behind the host. Thus, you should make the exception and use their brand to demonstrate how they will stand out as well. The inclusive "we" in the sentence also establishes that this learning community, including the viewer, is part of a unique group that will excel above the rest. Brands like Crash Course use inclusive language to support "a collective identity" and "common goals" (Dewey & Heiss, 2018, p. 143; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Because Crash Course sets the expectation that the viewers will be part of a "community of learners", the use of we leads to favorable perceptions of and attitudes toward the brand itself (The Crash Course, n.d., para. 2.; Sela, Wheeler, & Sarial-Abi, 2012). This subtle word choice leads viewers to feel a closer bond to the brand and feel a greater investment in its success, which can lead to investment in the channel monetarily, such as purchasing merchandise or supporting their Patreon, as well as through viewership itself, which helps the brand grow. At the same time, though, it embodies the us versus them mentality that has grown in the United States today, asking viewers to align their communal beliefs with a corporation while supporting an inherently exclusionary perspective (Lang, 1999, p.

141). By stating that Crash Course is the "exception", the tag line evokes competition that is supported in free market capitalism, demonstrating the tensions citizens experience between supporting their community and striving for the tropes of American exceptionalism espoused in neoliberalism.

In this chapter, I presented and analyzed semiotic elements from the videos sampled. This section was organized by the four identified symbols: the American bald eagle, the American flag, light(bulbs), and mugs. Combining these symbols with other important visual and dialogic elements in the videos allowed for a close exploration of the content and its treatment of education. In the following section, I will discuss what these findings mean for liberal education in an online space.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This thesis represents an intentional practice in productive ambivalence, a practice that forced me to examine this channel—run by figures that I have admired for much of my life for their dedication to creating educated citizens—as fallible despite its admirable mission supporting liberal education values (Gilmore, 2019). There is a clear need for the work that the Crash Course team does, as liberal education, with its focus on molding educated citizens, continues to fall out of favor in the contemporary neoliberal university despite its appeal for personal, professional, and civic purposes. Through this analysis, I have found that this channel relates to the liberal education model not only from the diverse subjects covered but from emphasis on "intellectual and practical skills" as well as "personal and social responsibility" ('Essential', n.d.) that are essential to prepare people "for both responsible citizenship and a global economy" ('What', n.d., para. 4). However, a close examination of the four symbols and the visual field in which they exist reveals that these liberal values are not consistently or clearly applied throughout their videos, often obscured through the capitalist demands that come from existing on a private platform. As such, this discussion argues that the channel is filled with contradictions between its values, content, and execution, presenting progressive ideas in an inherently neoliberal container online. Through this discussion, it is evident that the future of liberal education is uncertain as it moves into online spaces.

In line with the channel's founding mission, Crash Couse models intellectual and practical skills mapped out in the AAC&U's "Essential Learning Outcomes" for liberal

education. Notably, the textual reading demonstrates how inquiry, analysis, and critical thinking were present across the videos. For instance, reflective inquiry was used in both "Vision: Crash Course A&P #18" and "Deficits & Debts: Crash Course Economics: #9", to examine the deeply regarded national symbols for the United States and what these symbols were communicating—namely, that the citizenship does not reduce the need for critical thinking about governmental actions. Furthermore, critical thinking is an ever-present concept in these videos as hosts demonstrate ways to unpack moral and ethical issues, examining the ways in which actions influence outcomes, as with the global poverty video in which Green examined the conversations about using financial resources to help the global poor.

As with the global poverty video, these skills are often framed within the concepts of personal and social responsibility. These topics directly implicate the viewers as actors in changing these issues, tasked with improving the world through their decisions. Viewers are asked to think about the ethics of their actions—considering the various outcomes and encouraging action—such as the ramifications of changing a water source and how this can devastate an entire community, as seen in the "Preventing Flint - Environmental Engineering: Crash Course Engineering #29". This responsibility is often tied up in civic values and how citizens shape the communities in which they live through their actions, demonstrating that "citizenship, social responsibility, and community are inseparable" in these videos just as they are in liberal education (Lang, 1999, p. 140). Learning through these videos becomes a practice in how to think about civic

engagement rather than what to think, allowing citizens to engage with the inherent politicization of their world (Asen, 2004; Prince Jr., 2000).

Through these connections, Crash Course seemingly normalizes civic engagement for the public good. For instance, the "A&P" video utilizes the American flag to discuss the ways in which vision works, inverting the colors to demonstrate ghost effects and discussing how viewers need to look beyond the first glance to understand a "wonderfully complex system" (Crash Course, 2015d, 8:30). Through this approach, the non-political becomes political, encouraging further examination of one's citizenship and what it means to participate in a democratic community. In this way, the channel emulates Asen's (2004) discourse theory of citizenship by continually advocating for civic responsibility in the conversations that the hosts have about the various topics, topics that build off the broad series subject but also demonstrate ways in which societal concerns can be addressed in everyday life. By weaving citizenship into these conversations, viewers may come to view citizenship as "a guiding spirit that informs human interaction" rather than simply "a set of institutions or specific acts" (Asen, 2004, p. 196). This use of knowledge reinforces the idea that "an educated citizenry is an essential instrument for promoting responsible social action and community well-being" (Lang, 1999, p. 140).

The conversations on the channel embody the emancipatory nature of democratic education as fostered through a liberal education, as the model is literally an education that is set on freedom through education. As such, the videos embody liberal education when it portrays education as an approach that frees the viewers through knowledge that

empowers them to tackle issues important to their lives. Most notably, the eagle punch encourages viewers to use their expansive knowledge to fight back against issues that harm the collective rights of the people, such as the freedom of speech or religion discussion in the "Freedom of Religion: Crash Course Government and Politics #24" video. The videos provide a tool to protest injustices and confront policies that are oppressive in nature; through this physical action, the video suggests that educated citizens can overcome the particular forms of complacency that are so often bred under neoliberalism, protecting the public needs that are often subverted by individualism, a practice that insulates the person from the social issues in the world (Hamann, 2009).

x Throughout these videos, the neoliberal model is reinforced through conversations about workforce preparation through education, most notably in "Economics of Education: Crash Course Economics #23", a video in this sample though not directly discussed in the analysis section due to space constraints. This video frames education as a means to participate in the global economy, which is one of the goals of liberal education; however, the video itself presents education as a liminal space before joining the workforce, offhandedly mentioning that some people learn for fun before returning to a conversation about higher education as a means to getting a job, whether it be through gaining technical skills or signaling competence to future employers; the conversations paint education for workforce preparation as "natural and inevitable" while education for citizenship or personal development is ignored or an added bonus to the degree holder (Davis & Banesel, 2007, p. 258).

Furthermore, the knowledge presented by the channel is situated in the demands of capitalism, encouraging the viewers to use this open, public source of knowledge to support individualistic pursuits. Crash Course's entrepreneurship series is a clear example of this where the channel utilizes self-maximization tales about entrepreneurs to encourage viewers to follow similar pursuits, using the channel's knowledge to struggle to make their ideas a reality. Videos like "How to Develop a Business Idea: Crash Course Business – Entrepreneurship #2" tend to draw on individual desires for success, using narratives about self-made individuals to perpetuate this capitalist fantasy, ignoring the value that community support can play in helping those succeed; furthermore, these discussions only place value on the profitability of ideas, ignoring the potential for inspiration and knowledge to be used in other avenues, including improving social situations in the communities in which these future businesses might operate. In face of the channel's progressive ideals, the disconnection between the series, particularly those discussing Economics or Entrepreneurship, demonstrates a drawback in the emancipatory potential of the channel because these videos measure success almost exclusively on financial outcomes.

Finally, the channel's existence is reliant on capitalism, supporting neoliberalism through their use of advertisements and branding in videos. The product placements, including the branded mugs, plush Hanklerfish, and other merch from the DFTBA store, create a visual space that normalizes corporate inclusion in educational spaces. Ostensibly, viewers will see these items as normal and representative of the channel, drawing on the desire to show affiliation with the knowledgeable channel and

membership in the learning community; however, viewers must literally buy these branded items to present this affiliation. This practice, though, implicates the platform, YouTube, and its support for neoliberal values more than the channel itself because Crash Course relies on the platform and its designs to even reach viewers. Crash Course cannot be faulted, to a point, given the neoliberal system in which it exists and realities that the channel relies upon to get their message out to the public. Furthermore, conceptualizing content that is purely anti-capitalist would run counter to many ideas that viewers must learn in order to succeed in their own schooling. Thus, in a neoliberal society, even the rearticulated versions of liberal education cannot escape the dominance of capitalist economies. Liberal education, with its emphasis on freedom, is seemingly trapped behind the walls of capitalistic forces online. As such, the Crash Course channel demonstrates that neoliberalism is seemingly inescapable when the Internet is shaped by corporate interests.

Throughout these videos, the visual field enforces the role of the viewer as a citizen; however, this citizenship is in tension between the liberal, collectivist forces of the past and the emergent neoliberal values make the citizen an individual serving a state of one. As such the Crash Course channel presents the competing forces modern citizens face in their daily experiences, transforming understanding about what it means to truly be civically engaged. Despite the attempts to make progressive education available to all citizens, the tensions in the videos make it difficult for these concepts to clearly come through, hindering the potential for edutainment to save liberal education, and its emphasis on the collective good, in online environments. While Crash Course represents

a rearticulated version of liberal education online, this rearticulation places more economic burden on citizens than liberal education of the past and make it difficult for citizens to achieve the aims outlined by liberal education ideology.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

In this project, I mapped a thread focused on the popular YouTube channel, Crash Course. This channel was founded with a pedagogy that closely aligns to that of liberal education. Liberal education is a form of education that emphasizes freedom through broad knowledge, intellectual and personal skills, and personal and social responsibility. As such, the liberal education model is beneficial for personal, professional, and civic purposes. Despite these benefits, liberal education is declining at a rapid rate, due broadly to the growth of neoliberalism and exacerbated by the 2007 financial crisis, which made workforce training more salient than it was previously. Neoliberalism shifts the purposes of education toward economic performativity while also supporting free market capitalism and individualism. Liberal education is thus facing a crisis, losing its legitimacy in higher education as whole. Using Foucault's power/knowledge as a guiding theoretical framework for this thesis, the liberal education crisis is rearticulated as a crisis of power online in the Crash Course videos in which knowledge constructs truths about the purposes and outcomes of learning itself, making these videos important to examine as education as whole increasingly moves online (Lederman, 2019).

To better understand the videos, I employed a textual analysis that combined both semiotic analysis and close reading to understand what, if at all, the videos teach about liberal education ideologies and how the channel both supports and subverts these values, especially civic education, in the content they present. I chose this method because the videos present a dense visual and spoken field that communicates many concepts to

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viewers, and it requires close examination in order to fully comprehend the cultural significance presented in the videos themselves. Particularly, as these videos are fast-paced, it might be difficult to fully exhaust the potential in the videos through audience or production analysis. The use of textual analysis enables an understanding of the social reality constructed in these videos and how the videos are influenced through the context, mapped out in the literature review, in which the videos exist.

Through an analysis of 15 videos from the Crash Course channel, I identified four primary symbols that communicate important claims about the daily life of the citizen in the modern world, particularly framed through what they learn in online courses. These symbols were the American bald eagle, the American Flag, light and lightbulbs, and coffee mugs.

The American bald eagle figurine demonstrates how citizens are part of a larger democratic society, welcoming citizens to act upon the knowledge taught in the videos and empowering them to stand up to issues that threaten their democracy and the social good. While this citizenship is framed as a critically productive force for viewers, it is limited to the American audiences, and is often blind to the Westernized bias that is contained within the knowledge the channel supports. Furthermore, by supporting this knowledge, the channel demonstrates the way in which American civic ideals continue to influence global education despite the need for a renewed global focus in liberal education.

Similarly, the American flag demonstrates how citizens understand their own citizenship and what it means to be both critical and socially responsible through civic

engagement Discussions surrounding the flag enable the nonpolitical to become political, teaching viewers how to critically and reflectively think about their own civic engagement, framing these as daily practices that can lead to important change. At the same time, the channel can work to build outside the channel's bounds, helping viewers to consider more direct ways to enact citizenship for the public good in their daily lives using the knowledge from the channel.

Building off the discussions of citizenship knowledge, light and lightbulbs illuminate how knowledge is shared through these videos and what ends this knowledge serves. Light is frequently related to inspiration and enlightenment, suggesting that the knowledge on channel serves the same ends for viewers. The boundless nature of light further extends to viewers, spreading the knowledge across the learning community to benefit all that view the videos. However, the light is often contained and channeled in linear ways, demonstrating that the platform hinders the truly experiential and community-focused aims of the channel. Furthermore, the knowledge often relies on values that support neoliberalism, suggesting that knowledge can often only have power when constituted through economic channels for financial success. The same can be said about the Crash Course channel itself, that must rely on structures of capitalism to survive in an online space, hindering the potential for truly liberal education online.

Finally, coffee mugs are the most blatant connection to neoliberalism presented in the videos, utilizing branding to feed into consumerism for both goods and for knowledge from the channel itself. Most videos feature the Crash Course branded mugs, suggesting to viewers that knowledge is tied up in capitalist structures, and encouraging viewers to

buy into their products to support the knowledge from the video. As mentioned with the lightbulb symbol, the Crash Course channel's existence does rest on the forces of capitalism in order to project its progressive message. Through the mugs, it is evident that the channel wishes to support this learning community in order to support the democratizing education; but the channel is reliant on the advertising and branding, as a function of capitalism, to survive on the Internet.

Taken together, these symbols depict that, even eight years after its creation, the channel still embraces liberal education. The channel incorporates broad knowledge to support viewers as citizens with the power to shape the world around them; however, the role of the citizen as viewed online is not the same as was imagined in liberal education. These videos demonstrate that the modern citizen is torn between liberal and neoliberal forces in their daily lives, often asked to both embrace democratic civic engagement for the public good and achieve financial success that supports a free market system.

For liberal education, these findings are, much like this analysis, ambivalent. On the one hand, this example does not bode well for the traditional liberal education model nor the modernized version supported by the AAC&U. It seems inevitable that students are asked to view education as a means to economic success because it is the driving force behind what brings them to college in the first place. Furthermore, neoliberal systems are entrenched in the knowledge economy that directly supports education, even more so in online spaces that rely on corporations to support education. Crash Course does, in many ways, resemble MOOCs like Coursera or edX that are, at their core, business that rely on capitalist structures to provide their services to students. However,

in a system where liberal education is disappearing rapidly, Crash Course's emphasis on liberal education values, most notably civic engagement, prepares students to exist in a world with increasing threats to democracy and support for individualism. By engaging users in a learning community, the channel clearly does try to make the education available to viewers in online spaces, empowering the with knowledge that supports the ideals in the liberal education, giving hope that important elements can live on in online education.

For communication and media studies, this thesis considers the power that online videos can play in shaping beliefs about education, particularly the power of entertaining videos to teach, among other values, civic engagement. Building on Asen (2004)'s discourse theory of citizenship, this thesis demonstrates how these discussions can look when the nonpolitical becomes political, allowing citizens to view civic engagement in a new light. Furthermore, this thesis applies Asen's theory to online conversations happening in entertainment education videos, rather than direct conversations between various community members. Others have explored how conversations on digital networks influences civic engagement beliefs, outlining important avenues for civic engagement as participation using digital media (Bennett, 2008; Burgess, Foth, & Klaebe, 2006; Deuze, 2006; Fischer, 2005). The present thesis did not explore the direct participation aspect, though, and instead chose to examine what is taught before viewers act. This thesis significantly examines content for entertainment education purposes that signals certain values about citizenship, particularly as it might be enacted in one's daily life and necessitates future research building from these findings.

Limitations

This thesis faced several limitations. For one, as I addressed in the research design, this thesis relies on textual analysis, which cannot presume what the audience would actually learn from watching the Crash Course series. As such, these claims can only represent my own reading of the Crash Course channels without encroaching on analysis outside the bounds of the text. While this analysis relied on the literature review and related sources to validate the findings as culturally significant, there are still many other interpretations that would likely be found through an audience analysis. Also, because this analysis does not look at audiences, I cannot make claims about how the viewers would actually use the information presented and whether it would have an effect on how civic engagement is enacted in their daily lives.

In addition to using audience-focused methods, production-focused analysis would importantly give voice to creators of the channel, demonstrating what was actually intended through these videos, rather than just my own interpretations. While the creator cannot also control the interpretations that are garnered from viewers, their input could shape the way the boundaries of this analysis, preventing it from stretching beyond the limitations enforced by the creator.

Furthermore, these videos only represent a small sampling of the actual videos on the channel. While I controlled for sampling bias by using a randomizer function in Excel, this does not prevent other videos from providing contradictory narratives and symbols that could largely reshape the findings of this analysis. Further exploration of the channels' content, potentially on a year-by-year comparative basis, could illuminate how

the channel is rearticulated as it grows while also more precisely identifying the issues that might have causes these changes; for instance, important political changes, such as new elected officials, or changing YouTube policies, such as new monetization rules, might show interesting changes in what the channel chooses to discuss and how they frame that discussion.,

Finally, the Green brothers were overrepresented in this sample, which could skew the sample toward the progressive focus that is seen in the first video. In total, five of the fifteen videos were hosted by one of the Green brothers. While they, as co-creators, likely exert considerable influence on all content, the videos they host likely feature their beliefs about education in the most express ways. Thus, analysis that does not include the Green brothers can illuminate how the channel lives up to the progressive mission when others are hosting. Additionally, removing the Green brothers can offer more diversity to these conversations, allowing for diverse perspectives about the content itself.

Future Research

As evidenced by the limitations, there are many other approaches that can be used to study the Crash Course channel. Audience-focused methods, such as ethnographies (or even netnographies), focus groups, and interviews, can illuminate how the audience interprets these videos and how this shape their beliefs about education and citizenship. These studies could compare those from different academic backgrounds to examine how their values about education and civic engagement shape their willingness to participate based on their interpretations of videos. Furthermore, interviews with the Crash Course production team would be an absolute dream, illuminating the work that goes into

making these videos and exploring the intentions behind the content; this would provide an interesting point for my analysis compared to the findings in this thesis. I think this could provide an interesting foray into how production and consumption are presented, particularly through an extend exploration of neoliberalism focused on branding and advertising in these videos.

Future research is also necessary to expand ideas addressed in this thesis that were not fully explored in the discussion due to space constraints. For one, global citizenship needs to be addressed in future research, exploring the ways that the globalized nature of the Internet facilitates or inhibits beliefs about citizenship that transcend national borders. As seen in the video about global poverty, the channel does acknowledge that these videos are appealing to a global audience with global concerns. Furthermore, the video reveals that, at the very least, Hank Green believes that the Internet connects people as citizens of the world and implicates them in a sense of shared social responsibility. Research exploring the global dimensions to citizenship education would build off of the growing scholarly research in this realm (Barber, 2003; Barber, 2006; Battistoni, Longo, & Jayanandhan, 2009).

Additionally, I might also explore the pedagogical potential of these videos. As noted in the lightbulb section, these videos tend to rely on transmissive styles of teaching rather than the experiential approach championed by Dewey (1997). Thus, it would be beneficial to see how effective this channel is at teaching, let alone teaching liberal education and its corresponding civic values to viewers.

Finally, while I identify the tensions that face citizens in their daily lives, this idea should be expanded to understand what citizenship means for actual experiences of everyday life. Rita Felski's (1999) concept of everyday life as ordinary can help frame this exploration, examining the ways that civic engagement is seen as an ordinary part of daily life. At the same time, I might also contradict this with how work, especially for citizens in a neoliberal society, plays into this conception about engagement and participation, especially in online spaces. Gardiner (2000) would provide a helpful approach to critiquing the everyday to examine how structures influence experiences with civic education, building on a necessary application of Henri Lefebvre's work exploring the complexities of "social existence" (p. 1). As such, there are many other paths that I can take from this research, and I know that there are many more projects in my future exploring Crash Course and other online edutainment.

In sum, this thesis represents the potential for edutainment videos to revive liberal education, particularly for its emphasis on civic engagement. These videos present the viewers as citizens, a status that is in tension between the liberal, collectivist forces of the past and the emergent neoliberal values of the present. While the videos imagine citizenship in ways that embrace the experiences of everyday life, these opposing forces make it difficult for the liberal values to fully shine through, leaving more questions than answers about the potential for edutainment to save liberal education.

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