

A TURNING POINT IN POLITICS:
DOCUMENTING THE REPRESENTATION OF POPULIST CONSERVATIVE
IDEOLOGIES TO COLLEGE-AGE STUDENTS THROUGH YOUTUBE VLOGGING

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THESIS: A Turning Point in Politics: Documenting the Representation of Populist
Conservative Ideologies to College-Age Students Through YouTube Vlogging

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This study captures and creates a profile of the ideologies and methodologies used by college-age-centric conservative organizations in their online presence that targets college-aged viewers. This data was gathered from three principal college-age conservative organizations' YouTube channels over a four-month period in 2020. Data was analyzed for the presence of ideas regarding the notion of individuals, institutions and political institutions. Support was found for the ideas that these channels present themselves as offering alternative knowledge and moral teachings that other outlets supposedly will not offer, as well as a fomenting fear and distrust of those considered to be part of the collective 'Left'.

Introduction

What is it that political conservatism stands for in the United States today? The ideological emphasis of this political body has grown increasingly hard to define in the last decade. Previous “within party” fractures have been expanded by the arrival of a populist-driven Republican party that has advocated for a liberty-heavy focus in their platform. These shifts have done little to change the fact that Republicans struggle to appeal to younger voters in college. That does not mean the party is not striving to send a compelling message, but it is often unclear what exactly they have done. It’s also unclear how they relate to the existence of social institutions. To understand this communication strategy, it is imperative to take a look at the messages shared via the digital platforms used by politicians and activists to influence voting college students.

Review of the Literature

The Essentialism and Breakdown of Social Institutions

Sociology is, at its core, a study of groups of people. One of the most notable examples of groups of people comes through the social structures and collective organizations that frame how we live. Our economic practices are typically defined by both the market participants and the regulatory entities. Our relationship to the law is reinforced by those who enforce the law and who delegate it. These framings are what create the institutions that inevitably influence our lives.

The notion of institution can be fuzzy at times, since there are Institutions are best understood as “systems of organisations grounded in economics, political etc. spheres of activity” (Walzer 1983). These could be something as vast as free-market capitalism, or as small as the human family.

These sorts of institutions are inherently important to political conservatives historically based on how they provide a framework. One definition of conservatism as a political ideology

defines the movement historically as favoring institutions that “have evolved gradually and are manifestations of continuity and stability” (Dagger 2018). While some conservatives might frame the historical institutions as being complementary to one another, some conservative sociologists have framed the narrative in more contrasting terms. Robert Nisbet framed one of the greater conflicts in American society as one between institutionalism and individualism (Nisbet 1966). Nisbet argues that for a significant part of history, institutions played an important role in forming towns and communities and improving the conditions of life. As people began to emphasize notions of “equality, moral release and rationalist techniques of organization and power”, the institutions began to diminish and people abandon institutions in public life. In doing so, Nisbet argues that this abandonment is what leads to the community breakdown and burgeoning loneliness described by Comte and Durkheim (Nisbet 1977).

Nisbet’s work focused on the power of local communities, which he viewed as having the highest value. The state, in contrast, was the largest encroaching threat to that sense of community; typically framed through the lens of Woodrow Wilson’s vision to create a “national community” (Baehr 2014). This approach offers a reliable and insightful perspective on what some ideal communities may look like. Nisbet is but one sociological perspective that draws upon intellectual conservatism in a meaningful way. But one trend has been consistent; that the general trust in institutions across the United States has declined for several years (Gallup Inc. 2020). A significant part of this decline is affected by how news habits and political parties describe the state of the country.

Seeking to Build a Shrinking Party Base and the Rise of Media

One of the significant questions to occur after a key election is the state of both parties; particularly the losing party in 2020; the Republicans. One of the factors that contribute to this query is that of demographic realities. Pew Research has shown that Republican demographics

reflect an aging majority of older white male constituents. Combine that with 22% of Millennials/Gen-Z voters identifying as Republicans, and the Republican party expects to struggle to maintain a voter presence in coming elections. Note also that the Millennial voting population is now large enough to compete in numbers with Boomers (Fry 2018). You combine the sheer numbers with Millennials' decreasing interest in conservative causes (Pew 2019), and there is much for the Republican party to be concerned about. There's also been a shift in what sorts of priorities the party has enforced over the years.

One of the challenges the Republicans face is the need for parties to convince voters that individual votes do matter and that a vote cast for their party will affect positive change. In the past, this argument expressed itself through debate, community discussion, and other formats (UShistory.org). As technology has changed the tools of communication, so has it changed political strategy and methodology. The tools of television, cable news, and online media have equally shifted the nature of political expression, to the point of solidifying the partisan elements that came to exist (Alcott 2017). Since CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC have come to take up a significant part of the news market; political data reveals that these platforms have played a significant role in pushing a polarized agenda forward at a vastly accelerated rate (Levendusky 2013). As younger media consumers grow more reliant on online outlets, these platforms often act as a critical influence of political opinions. (Kahne 2012). The media tools have also evolved the nature of politics; or as technologist Marshall McLuhan put it, the medium is the message; causing a heavy emphasis on the digital presence in exchange for less meaningful policy endeavors.

YouTube as Political Propagator

One of the tools of these organizations in the last five years would be the creation of YouTube videos. The viral nature of this modality has given greater momentum and reach than

previous campaigns have ever enjoyed. Created in 2005 by a trio of former PayPal employees, YouTube has grown into one of the most extensive video-hosting services on the internet. It was reportedly the second most visited website in July 2019 (Salim 2019). When surveyed, seventy-three percent of adults in the United States say that they actively use YouTube (Perrin, Gillis 2019), with eighty-one percent of 15-to-25-year-olds using the platform in some fashion every month (Statista 2019). These younger age groups have stated that they prefer YouTube over most video services except for Netflix (Variety 2019). The majority of content is typically apolitical or politically adjacent. Almost all of YouTube contains unique subcultures and content appeals specifically to niche audiences (Burgess, Green 2018). Users who may wish to consume solely cooking content, or a particular genre of gaming have options that allow them to do so across a multitude of channels. It also means that those who wish to be exposed to specific ideologies are able to do so without risk of being intellectually challenged. It is a culture of both trust, authenticity, and authority, where individuals speak directly to their audiences in a manner that implies a more profound relationship than more traditional creator/consumer models (Berryman/Kafka 2017).

Educating the Next Generation of Voters

This relationship includes the delivery and consumption of political and news-oriented content. In the last decade, the political right has developed a robust foothold on YouTube that the political left has yet to build organically (Thompson 2020). The press has done extensive coverage over recent years regarding the effects of alt-right leaning YouTube content on young white men (Berger 2018, Evans 2018). Their research includes data on how a young man's viewing alt-right content over five years can reflect severe shifts in worldview (Roose 2019), and how organizations like conservative educational institute Prager University's online presence offers conservative alternatives to modern college teachings in small easy-to-view quantities (Bowles 2019). These collections of creators have had a significant influence on young college-

age voters and will continue to play a part in the promotion of what they see as conservative ideology.

While some of the more prominent voices in these groups are often outspoken individuals filming private content, an equally important presence would be the college organization presence (Young Americans for Freedom 2017). Since William Buckley founded Young Americans for Freedom in the 1960s, Republicans and conservatives have consistently used student-lead organizations to promote the ideas of right-leaning thought. Quite often, these ideas stand in opposition to the standard thought process presented at colleges (Thorburn 2017). On some campuses, these organizations might be the local chapter of College Republicans. On others, it might be grassroots organizations like Turning Point USA or Young Americans for Freedom (YAF). These organizations offer community structures to right-leaning students. They have, on many campuses, also been the spark of controversies and tension with local race/LGBT-oriented groups on campus. These controversies often were inspired attempts at critiquing particular campus decisions through performative gestures such as 'affirmative action bake sales', or comparing certain policies with others. These actions were often taken by the leadership with the express purpose of goading supposedly overblown responses from these groups to prove a point. Their YouTube presence is rarely different.

The Gaps in Existing Research on YouTube

YouTube has been extensively studied by academics (Alias et al 2013). There have been rather extensive analyses of the expressions of beauty (Garcia-Rapp 2016), femininity (Maguire 2017) and masculinity (Morris 2015) on the platform itself. Given its broad array of offerings, YouTube has evolved into a platform that has something for many audiences (Kyncl 2018). However, the distinct nature of its political communities is an area that is far less studied.

As of 2020, studies have been done regarding the social network between right-wing channels like the Daily Wire, Rubin Report and Stefan Molyneux (Lewis 2018). There have also been studies of how consumers were often attracted to far more extreme political content within a year of consistently consuming right-leaning political content (Ribeiro 2019). Whether this radicalization occurs due to the platform's algorithms or the informal power of social networking is a point of debate, although most social media researchers do believe the platform's algorithm plays a significant part in this echo chamber creation (Kozlowska 2019).

The studies above are helpful for understanding how the right leaning channels specifically interact, but the research tells observers little about the commonalities between them in regard to their ideology. Many of the individuals in Lewis' studies (2018) are what she considers gateway ideologues that lead consumers to more extreme right wing thought, including creators like Ben Shapiro and Jordan Peterson. An individual may find themselves interested in Shapiro's work, only to eventually show an interest in far more radicalized creators such as Lauren Southern or Stefan Molyneux. For example, arguments challenging the common notion that racism is a systemic issue may lead to eventual presumptions that the economic/cultural plights of African-Americans are self-inflicted, which could eventually grow into the notion that Black citizens are inferior for either social, biological or cultural reasons. This potential for radicalization is further cemented by what media scientists have surmised about the power of video over the user; specifically, media effects. Academics have looked at how people consume and make sense of online video and how those simple ideologies will often lead or mislead viewers toward certain conclusions without realizing the source (Levendusky 2013). These misrepresentations shape consumer's perceptions of what is real.

An application of other media studies (Gerbner 2017) further cements the evidence of how media consumption shapes our understanding of the world by showing how constant exposure to certain forms of content can encourage discriminatory and politically fearful worldviews. While there is a lack of specific research regarding the application of cultivation

theory in regard to YouTube content (Buselle 2019) the broader mechanism--seeing violence makes people fearful of those different from themselves--applies to the content on this platform. However, the majority of these studies often fixate more on connections and methodologies, and less on ideologies. They do little to note the linguistic or intellectual differences in what Shapiro says compared to Molyneux, which is important in context. None of the studies mentioned above detail whether economic debates are more likely to influence or drive students toward far-right viewpoints as opposed to moral or socially driven issues.

Research Question

Given the gap in the literature described above, this study will explore the research question: Using the lens of media analysis and cultivation theory, what are the messages about institutions in 2020 that were being promoted to college-age voters through conservative YouTube channels?

The Project

In order to better understand these tools, the intent of this study was to do the following: To track a series of pre-vetted video channels that are owned by principal right-leaning college organizations, with the intent of capturing what their key ideologies are and how they are presented and then interpreted through how it affects relations to institutions and media.

The Data Source

The channels that were focused on for this study are:

- **Young America's Foundation (YAFTV):** YAF is considered one of the longest running conservative college organizations still in operation today. Originally founded in 1960 by William F Buckley Jr, the organization has been a consistent and active presence ever since (YAF 2017). The organization currently manages several of Ronald Reagan's

previously owned properties and has run a popular lecture series featuring right-leaning thinkers like Ben Shapiro and Dinesh D'souza. According to YAF's main website, the conservative organization maintains more than 250 chapters across the country on college and high school campuses alike.

- **Turning Point USA:** Originally founded in 2012, TPUSA describes itself as an organization whose mission is to 'identify, educate, train, and organize students to promote the principles of freedom, free markets, and limited government.' It's founder, Charlie Kirk, has developed a strong reputation in recent years as a vocal supporter of Donald Trump, even going as far as to pen a book applauding Trump's term, titled 'The MAGA Doctrine'. The organization claims to have more than 1500 chapters active in the United States, and its leadership has a notably vocal presence on Twitter and other platforms (Turning Point 2020).
- **Prager University:** Prager University started in 2009 as a platform to promote the ideals of Dennis Prager, a popular conservative radio host from California. While the original goal was for the channel to become an actual university, Prager's producer pitched the notion of explaining conservative ideas in five minute increments (Bowles 2019). Since then, the channel has boomed, with more than three billion views on YouTube as of this thesis and an active college presence of ambassadors called the Prager Force, who seek to challenge students and create content on campus.

The principal investigator chose the listed organizations based on the following metrics:

- **Non-Profit Funding:** While there are numerous creators whose main audience are likely college students, the decision to focus solely on non-profit advocacy organizations allows for the primary sources of data to come from groups that have proven themselves as having a nationwide presence.

- **Presence on college campuses:** The organization has been considered if the group claims to have an active presence on college campuses, and offers online resources for said gatherings.
- **Significant Subscriber count:** All of the channels chosen had more than 100,000 users subscribed to their channel as of May 2020, at the start of the project.
- **Consistent video creation:** The channels must release consistent content, regardless of format, with a minimum of twice a week.
- **Media Attention:** All of the organizations came under significant scrutiny by journalists of the left and right leaning spectrum in mainstream publications like the New York Times or the Washington Post.

The researcher chose these factors based on the appearance of reliability and external validation by other media outlets and researchers with similar topical interests.

The Dataset

The researcher selected three relevant subjects that reflected the priorities of 2020 over a short period of time. For this study, the topics include the impeachment, COVID-19 and the George Floyd protests. Said videos were sampled from November 2019 until August 24th, 2020. These topics and timeline were chosen for two reasons. The first is that this period reflects the evolution of ideas from the end of the political primary season to the political conventions where both parties announce both the Democrat and Republican candidates. In this period, one would expect a significant increase in propagandistic content to arise as political parties gather in hopes of stopping the other's attempts at winning the 2020 election. These endeavors have been further pursued, as Prager University promoted a series of content 'marathons' during the stay-at-home state of the pandemic, and has consistently voiced concerns about the lockdowns and virus over said length of time. (Prager University 2020). The

second reason was pragmatic because it gave the researcher sufficient time to gather data during an academic break, thus allowing immediate data analysis afterward.

Methodology

All content (62 videos coded and randomly selected from a pool of 183 videos) released in the period regarding the pre-ordained topics was selected and coded for relevant information. The videos were selected if they A) mention the relevant topic (Impeachment, race, COVID-19, George Floyd) or B) seem to deal with known events correlating with said topics. The clips were gathered in a simple Excel-based database and randomly selected, using a pattern-based selection process for each channel. IF the channel had less than five videos related to the subject, then all of them were kept in the database. If there were more than five, then a relevant sampling pattern was selected so that a minimum portion of 20 percent of the media was contained in the sample.

The data includes reference documents that will provide context to any news-centric claims or accusations as well as any possible references that may support or refute the claims of said video. The data was then double-checked at a later date inside the document to minimize bias or reflecting changes in personal ideology. This data was also checked and analyzed for any possible increases in evidential or rhetorical elements. Videos were transcribed and exported onto an external transcription database in hopes of maintaining accuracy.

Analysis

The resulting content was gathered and coded into a qualitative dataset in Excel for the sake of qualitative analysis. Qualitative analysis is an especially useful technique for understanding similar strains of ideologies across multiple platforms. In order to do this, the researcher turned to grounded theory. (Corbin 2015) Grounded theory is a research method

used alongside qualitative data to systematically collect and analyze information for the express purpose of developing theories that help explain particular patterns in the data. Due to the differences in the content format as well as the open-ended nature of the videos' argumentation about modern politics, being able to capture the strains and common thoughts between creators requires an open-ended approach reliant on interpreting common phrasing and video editing to determine the subtle threads common amongst all the ideologies. a grounded theory approach in hopes of keeping any and all results epistemologically objective while also allowing the data to speak for itself and not through the researcher's personally critical perspective.

While the framing of the project fixates around the ideology of understanding institutions, the particular categories and ideas provided by what institutions are only appeared indirectly. Hence a need to appeal to a more interpretive framework, designed to read into the patterns and frameworks provided through argumentation by the specific creator (Holtzman 2008). How this might work would be if a speaker attacks the notion of 'equality' as a legal concept, that could be seen as anti-individualism. But in the same vein, if the same person holds up the individual right to own a firearm based on personal morality, that could also be pro-individualism.

Why This Project Matters

In gathering this data, my goal was to provide a descriptive portrait of what was being explicitly promoted through the social platforms of popular conservative thinkers in 2020. While it is easy to point to singular videos or phrasings that might be interpreted as racist, it does not provide a solidified centralized sense of their ideas. By completing a time-sensitive study, I created a data-centric profile of what consistent values and themes appear to resonate through their media presence, and whether that is equally reflective of viewing habits. For example, will the freedom of the individual always usurp that of institutions? Will The Left be treated as a

boogieman? Will every possible chance of grievance be turned into opportunities for political gathering? While there are select reasons to believe it to be predictive based on columns, using repetition and consistency over time (as well as a potential sampling methodology) will help this study to make meaningful observations and conversations about where the political right will go with coming generations.

When selecting the topics, the primary focus is on saturation. When discussing saturation, we are specifically referring to how often a theme or idea may appear in a video. If a video is consistently discussing themes of capitalism, then it would be considered relevant to a study of capitalism. All of the three channels were chosen and preemptively reviewed for relevant content through keywords or terms. If the video mentioned the topic or a thematic element related to said topic, it was included in the initial collection. Some content was removed from the possible pool, such as Candace Owens' hour-long interview programs and lectures hosted by YAF. This was done, in part, due to content length or the inability to focus the content down to singular, relevant points. Then, using an iterative randomized sampling process, one out of three videos were selected and reviewed by the reviewer through repetition, with the hope of sampling a variety of videos and argumentation over a relevant period. If the topic was under-covered, I drew whatever samples I could. For example, impeachment only drew out 2-3 videos from the channels, leading to the decision to keep all videos in. By the end, I was able to acquire equivalent pools of video content from each channel, with TPUSA and PragerU each offering an estimated 13 videos themed around COVID-19 and George Floyd each, while YAF provided far less.

Table 1: A cursory look at the content saturation

Video titles	Prager University	Turning Point USA	YAFTV	Total:
Total released from November 2019-August 2020	230	366	158	788
Impeachment	3 (1.30%)	9 (2.46%)	3 (1.89%)	15 (2.00%)
covid-19	28 (12.17%)	49 (13.39%)	1 (0.63%)	78 (9.90%)
Race/riots	33 (14.35%)	47 (12.84%)	2 (1.27%)	82 (10.4%)

What does the Data Reveal: When looking at the data as a whole, a few interesting patterns appear. The first is that, in choosing topics based around specific high-priority events, two out of three channels emphasize that which reflects the zeitgeist of the moment. COVID-19 was a priority topic for both Prager University and Turning Point USA as soon as it arrived in the United States in late March 2020. Race was treated in the same way after George Floyd’s death in May 2020. As soon as the events became a mainstream focus, so did they become that for Prager University and Turning Point USA.

When it comes to content frequency, the channels maintained a fairly significant density for at least the first 1-2 months before it either faded due to shrinking focus on the topic. For example, COVID-19 was at the center of everyone’s news story until May 2020, when George Floyd became the center of political discourse. Any virus-related content ceased during June and July. The two would soon begin to overlap with content that was not time-sensitive, which came out around the same time.

The exception, in this case, was YAFTV. Their content strategy appears to be uninterested in modern events and offers minimal insight into the three topics that became the

focus of this study. This is likely due to YAFTV's reliance on older conference clips over creating time-sensitive content.

What Each Channel is Stating

Impeachment:

- **YAFTV:** Since YAFTV only had two videos, the most notable message related to that of college students and to Congress. Through local interviews, the creators appear to imply that students do not have a complete understanding of why the impeachment was occurring, and emphasized their rationale that it was a political motion rather than a genuine attempt to remove Trump.
- **Prager University:** This channel was the most straightforward in terms of message and ideology. Out of all of their content, Prager University's content appears to avoid political content or discussing the validity of the claims but instead defines the process in short videos. The sole outlier featured Will Witt, a college-age white male host who is a frequent contributor on the channel, as he interviewed and spoke to several individuals in California about a protest. The video is limited in scope due to the attendees appearing to reject Witt due to his affiliation with Prager University
- **Turning Point USA:** The channel with the most direct and transparent messaging, its content focuses on coloring one's view of the protesters and average Americans through interview pieces. The channel relies on news clips mixed with footage created by 'Benny on the Block', a show hosted by TPUSA director Benny Johnson. The show is selectively edited, only showing segments or interviews with individuals answering particular questions that are misleading. For example, Johnson decides to ask protesters if certain crimes are being impeached that day, but the crimes described are actually crimes conservative channel and pundits allege were committed by Barack Obama. The host is

trying to agree to comments so as to suggest it is actually Obama who should have been impeached. This sort of misleading content appears to imply that those in support of the impeachment are not doing so out of rational thought, but irrational notions presented out of anger toward president Trump or through media manipulation. In that same vein, it presents pro-Trump voters as holding to valid and accurate political concerns while challenging those who would uphold the vote; most notably in a video where CA voters are asked about whether their lives had changed due to impeachment finding, only to find that it did not.

COVID-19:

- **YAFTV:** Considering this channel only created one video over the period of time regarding the topic, either the topic was inconclusive, irrelevant to their method of content creation or simply untenable.
- **Turning Point USA:** TPUSA's messaging has evolved over time. In the first few weeks, motions were made to emphasize China's influence in this pandemic, most notably through emphasizing early trends toward calling COVID-19 the 'Chinese Virus' and noting the Chinese operations to censor and limit information, placing blame upon them. But as time goes on and May approaches, so does the message. Rather than focus on China's influence over the state of the virus, videos seem to shift to fixate on the lockdowns, promoting content that challenges the narrative of lockdowns being effective, and implying they are political motions made by the Democrats to seek power; most notably portrayed in a segment hosted by Tucker Carlson in my data sample. However, the data became limited after the Floyd protests, as TPUSA's content seemed to pivot entirely to issues of race for the remainder of the summer, barring select videos on hydroxychloroquine (a controversial medicine that many claimed could help cure COVID-19 to mixed results) and vote-in mailing as reinforced by Dr. Anthony Fauci.

- **Prager University:** One of the main focuses of the PragerU footage is an emphasis on the notion that a lockdown is an unwise gesture. Dennis Prager, an integral speaker for the channel, has argued that the effects of the lockdown would eventually exceed the potential deaths evaded by said lockdown, pointing to loss of income, food decreases and other variables. Other opportunities have presented it as an infringement upon American freedoms, as repeated by notable commentators such as Anand Giridharadas of MSNBC or Elon Musk of Tesla/SpaceX. Mix this with claims of the media acting irresponsibly. There are also arguments that dismiss the input of 'experts' (read scientists, epidemiologists, etc.) on politics as well as how any sense of 'safety' is inapplicable.

George Floyd/Antifa/Race:

- **YAFTV:** With only two videos, it is difficult to determine a singular narrative. Both videos appear student/employee made and are recordings of incidents in DC where Black Lives Matters protesters were out in force. One offered a sample of the BLM protest involving DC, while the other offered an argumentative exchange in front of a monument. Both existed with minimal commentary, instead allowing the subjects to seemingly speak for themselves.
- **Turning Point USA:** Within days of Floyd's death and the following protests, TPUSA fixated upon and advocated against Antifa as a significant threat. Early clips focused on local authorities and governors condemning the events of Floyd protests, while also arguing they lack value. Common themes include the 'comeuppance' of BLM protesters assaulting police or conservatives, the abrasive and aggressive themes that define the BLM position, and the importance of police officers. Other videos note victims of the protests, such as police officer David Dorn. The most notable attempt is a short video clip of a Chicago mall that had been destroyed due to a riot in early July, featuring a news reporter flying over the station. The video is titled "This is what happens when

Leftists come to power', implying that riots and protests would become uncontrolled and entirely destructive if a Democrat agenda were the ones enforcing it.

- **Prager University:** The videos that arrive out of this montage aim to do several things. Early content tries to establish that the protests are based on lies and emotion and not actual facts regarding the deaths of black men and women. It also aims to dismiss notions of white privilege or that the events of Ferguson are promoted as some say they are. Much of this seems to be interpreted in a colorblind lens designed to counter the notion that race has any effect on one's cultural ability to live. The primary speaker on these topics, Dennis Prager, attempts to present these resistance endeavors as though they are directly designed to oppose American premises such as liberty or being self-made.

Some later videos attempt to establish a narrative regarding those engaging in protests; most notably that A) they are not peaceful and B) they are not what black communities truly desire. It also establishes a notion that the sudden popularity of anti-racism among young people is based on emotionalism, deception and a lack of facts.

While all three of the select channels do have similar threads of ideas, they each exude different approaches and emphases in their construction.

Channel Differences:

Methodologies

- **YAF:** Young Americans for Freedom TV seems to not comment on the events of the day in my content sample. While this could easily be blamed on content structuring issues, it seems also likely to note that this places them in a more 'timeless' existence among viewers. Their videos deal with non-time sensitive issues such as reproductive rights, cancel culture and big government. These are topics that have mattered for a long time

to the conservative constituency, and that will matter regardless of the election's results. It also presents itself as an outlet for 'thinkers' or at least those considered by conservatives to be worth listening to. While the videos I focused on were student-produced, many of the creators that YAF fixates upon are pundits like Ben Shapiro or contrarian academics like Thomas Sowell.

- **Turning Point USA:** Their channel seems to be the least developed. Barring specific programs like *Real America with Graham Allen* or *Benny on the Block*, TPUSA's reliance on other people's content seems to make them less reliable when it comes to viewing numbers. TPUSA's content on the whole received less views across the board.. It also failed to produce anything original beyond the promotion of news footage or conference clips for the majority of the sample. The few instances that did, such as Benny Johnson's *Benny on the Block* program, relied on the opinions of other Americans to answer what appeared to be specifically pointed questions designed to draw out particular responses from the public about particular news events.

The heavy reliance on Trump administration officials for content also implies that Turning Point USA's opinions are in line with that of the Trump administration (a hardly shocking statement considering that the founder of TPUSA, Charlie Kirk, wrote a book titled *The MAGA Doctrine* in praise of President Trump.) The media framing felt like a disjointed series of clips focused on particular points, making the creation of a coherent narrative difficult.

- **Prager University:** Dennis Prager's programming offered what was arguably the most unique content when it came to the topics in question. Between its 5-minute educational segments, the Fireside Chats hosted by Dennis Prager and the documentary-esque attempts at interviews on the street, PragerU seems to do the most work in connection to its projects. This may occur through specific experts speaking on a particular topic (see Larry Elder on *the Ferguson Lie*) or through Fireside Chats designed to argue for or

against a particular viewpoint. Prager University's research appears to offer the more coherent narrative, and collect the most views out of the three channels selected for the sample.

Ideologies:

- **YAF:** Due to the limited amount of content created by YAFTV, judging the ideology is difficult. It was arguably the most factual in nature; allowing for footage of select events to tell the story that they wanted to tell. Perhaps it was an illustration of how college students and their support of impeachment is not based on the actual policies involved. Perhaps it is a sort of 'student journalism', meant to reveal what is actually going on. Saying anything of substance is difficult, as the subjects in question are different than most of what YAF creates.
- **Turning Point USA:** The channel's reliance on news clips and press briefings appears objective in a limited sense. It is allowing news creators (Trump, Mike Pompeo, Anthony Fauci, men at a scene) to lead the discourse or illustrate a particular point. If a point is not entirely obvious, the surrounding subtext around the item will often provide pointed incriminations or explanations of a specific event. The core ideologies presented in each clip can typically be summarized as "Trump administration is good." and "Leftists/Antifa/Fauci/etc are bad for America. "For example, several videos will offer positive affirmations stating that "X person is so right!" before affirming their statement. Beyond those, the interview segments do not seem to offer much of intellectual substance beyond striving to denounce and imply that a particular point is bad. For example, Benny Johnson hosts a segment asking Californians about an event where Nancy Pelosi described her freezer full of ice cream on television. Throughout the video, Johnson attempts to show that her constituents do not believe that she is not acting or completely pursuing the best possible laws to help alleviate the financial issues. While this may be a fair critique in some people's minds, it adds little substance.

- **Prager University:** With Prager University, the ideological substance of the content is more substantive and elaborate. Not only do the videos attempt to provide what they see as a contrary narrative, but they do offer simple-yet-understandable arguments in support of them. But in that same vein, Prager U's content relies on a sort of 'common sense' ideology that the authors use as a reference. There's an underlying ideology that PragerU attempts to uphold, but it appears to be reliant on ideas about the Left ruining everything and about American exceptionalism that had been expressed prior to the sample period. The video 'Fireside Chat Ep. 130 -Has the Lockdown Worked?', Dennis Prager fixates the argument on the April Lockdown, which was showing immense economic and social consequences. He begins the argument by implying that the scientists who had made the models in question were left-leaning by nature. This was, according to him, enough to justify distrusting them. This was particularly true in Prager's mind when it came to scientific decisions affecting the economic realities that existed for some people.

It should be noted that Prager's arguments about the long-term effects of a lockdown on the economy having long-term effects are not false concerns. But the chat itself seems to rely on very few visibly objective resources for supporting said concerns.

Common Themes

Before speaking to the differences across the channels, it seems imperative to establish the specific themes and cultural decisions that all three sample outlets seem to adhere to. This will allow for a better understanding of what each one offers to their viewership based on a general study of the three channels and their content as a whole.

Forbidden knowledge: A general framing mechanism used by all three channels is that of promoting ideas or concepts that the creators perceive as 'forbidden' or 'restricted' in contrast with the rest of society. Whether it is the university, the media or simply general ignorance, all

three channels are trying to present arguments that they see as unique or valuable in their own context. A key illustration of this is TPUSA’s reliance on the hashtag #thinkforyourself, implying that those adhering to their ideology are the actual ones practicing critical thinking and intelligent discourse; not ‘them’. For example, TPUSA posted a series of people being interviewed about their opinions regarding impeachment and Trump. The video framed itself as offering the ‘real opinion’ of Americans; opinions that were not receiving a platform during the media coverage of impeachment. Every individual featured in said footage either expressed support for Trump, attacked the impeachment or noted how it was a sham. According to Johnson, these were real Americans, as opposed to the elites or journalists who were covering the impeachment.

The same thing occurred when it came to how the initial George Floyd protests were covered by the media. During the first weeks of the George Floyd protests, PragerU sent documentarian Ami Horowitz to Minneapolis to interview protesters. In much of the coverage, the protesters were being described in media coverage as peaceful. Horowitz was able to find several Black men and women who went on the record to state that they wanted to destroy America and create anarchy. The clip coded after this one reflected this discrepancy; as it featured New Mexico representative Deb Haaland calling the rioters “peaceful protesters”; a description that stood in stark contrast with Horowitz’ footage.

Table 2: Method of Persuasion

What method of persuasion is being used? (some videos may overlap)	Pathos (Emotion)	Ethos (Ethical Conduct)	Logos (Logic, evidence)
All	29 (46.77%)	15 (24.19%)	19 (30.65%)

Unanimous opposition: If a user were to pick a random video on all three of the channels selected for this analysis, the odds of them receiving one that would appear derogatory toward ‘the left’ would be quite high. All three channels tend to speak of the political left as though it is a conglomerate of people. For example, the same policy positions that Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi supports are often seen in tandem with that of politicians who are further to the left, such as Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders. However, Pelosi has a history of politically moderate activity; as does Joe Biden. There are also those who emphasize economic policy over cultural policy; and vice versa. There are lots of differences when it comes to why the political left act or support what they support. But these sorts of distinctions are irrelevant in the three channels. YAF, TPUSA and PragerU rely on overbearing statements regarding the ‘Left’ that combine all of these intellectually different leaders into a singular entity with negative connotations toward American interests. This makes it easy for the speakers to critique their opposition.

Much of the content on TPUSA’s page over the summer fixated on the physical altercations between Black activists (often identified as BLM or Antifa) and police, presenting them as a significant threat to America and to the everyday citizen. One clip might feature an altercation between two Black men (one ‘conservative’, the other BLM), while another might feature footage of said activists running from police for an unknown reason. Much of this footage is posted without context, and is described in a way that makes them seem like a significant threat.

Table 3: Oppositional Positioning

Is the Video Inherently Oppositional?	Yes	No	Maybe
All	50 (80.65%)	3 (04.84%)	9 (14.52%)

Just Critique, Never Build: In the sample chosen for this study, I was unable to find videos that offered an excess of positivity or recommended ideas. The channels seem determined to only point out the flaws of the 'Left', rather than offering any meaningful alternatives. In the case of COVID-19, the majority of commentary was upholding the status quo underneath the Trump administration, or attacking political leaders for lockdowns/negative effects. The sole recommendation that I found was a recommendation to end lockdowns based on Sweden's supposed ability to handle COVID-19 with minimal lockdowns. However, the results of this methodology were soon found to be flawed as Sweden's death rate rose above the average of the EU later in the year. (Rolander 2021) The same could be said about the issues of race. Rarely did the creators offer substantial problems to the things they critiqued beyond statements implying that 'X is false' or 'group/person Y is wrong'.

This was most prominent in PragerU's weekly Fireside chats, where Dennis Prager would typically speak about a particular subject or theme. The sample pool ended up including five of these episodes, and are arguably the most reflective. In the two Chats released that focus on COVID-19, Prager's focus is solely on critiquing the reliance on medical/scientific experts to make policy decisions, as well as the encouragement to not allow fear of what is unsafe to drive people to make decisions. Prager frames policy concerns about lockdowns and exposure to issues of personal character and morality. For him, any matter like lacking income (in the context of needing a stimulus) or decisions about safety must occur on the individual level; not on the national level.

White, Male, Commentators: The individuals who typically appear in the videos coded were often white and male in identity, as well as employed by the organizations themselves. These include President Donald Trump, PragerU Founder Dennis Prager or TPUSA Creative Director Benny Johnson. All of these individuals were supposedly holding some form of authority based on their place of employment or opposition to leftist values; rather than actual expertise. A

significant example of this would be Will Witt, 21-year-old. Witt is one of the more common creators on the PragerU platform; even going as far as to get his own podcast as of July 2020. He attended University of Colorado-Boulder for two years before dropping out. In any other situation, Witt would have no credibility when it comes to matters of race, epidemiology or impeachment. But it is common for Witt to speak as though he is an expert on a multitude of topics; from the danger of the lockdowns to the non-existence of white supremacy.

Table 4: Demographic Data of Persons in Videos

Gender/Sex	Male	Female	N/A	Total
All	43 (69.35%)	11 (17.74%)	8 (12.9%)	62 (100%)

Race of main subject	White	Black	Hispanic	Unsure
All	40 (64.50%)	7 (11.30%)	1 (1.61%)	14 (22.6%)

	Journalist	Commentator	Politician	Academic	Medical Official	Activist	Other (Student, unidentifield, etc)
All	6 (9.6%)	20 (32.25%)	17 (27.42%)	4 (06.45%)	4 (06.45)	5 (8.10%)	5 (8.10%)

These themes all offer a coherent methodology and tone for the listener to consider what is being said. But as time went on throughout the reviews, it became difficult to determine if there was a coherent sociological or philosophical narrative underlying much of the content. Political conservatism has a long and significant history of intellectualism to draw upon (Hawley 2017) , but finding evidence of this tradition was difficult.

Institutions and the Individual:

In reviewing all of the videos in the selected pool, it became immediately obvious that institutions was less relevant to the chosen to reflect the period than had been earlier anticipated. While the majority of content is engaging with political subjects, the analysis of data fixated on three categories; individuals, political institutions (Congress, the President, etc.) and non-political institutions (everything else)

- **Individuals:** Whenever the rights of singular individuals are discussed, they often occur in the context of freedom and ethics. During conversations about COVID-19, the lockdowns are typically framed as an inhibiting event that restricts the freedom and access that Americans normally have. Individual decisions in these contexts appear to be held up as good in themselves. Individuals should have the ability to choose whether they take the risk of being infected by COVID-19, rather than having other larger entities (media, government, etc.) enforce what they believe should be done.
- **Political Institutions:** Discourse surrounding political institutions appeared to replicate the trends that one would anticipate. Any content involving Democrats was critical of the party, often attacking key figures like Nancy Pelosi and framing them as irrelevant. Conservative politicians were often praised and featured; particularly when they engaged in conflict with either the press or certain officials. Figures like Ted Cruz, Rand Paul and Mike Pompeo made several repeat appearances.
- **Non-Political Institutions:** The majority of content chosen within this pool dealt primarily with non-political institutions. On one side is the media, universities and Black Lives Matter/Antifa. These are the organizations that the Left controls, and are being used to change American life significantly. On the other are local businesses, churches and police departments. These entities are presented as under attack by the decisions made in light of COVID-19 and George Floyd. According to those organizing these videos, they're organizations that the Leftists detest.

The one entity that does seem to offer a slightly contrasting narrative is that of the healthcare system. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, channels offered praise for nurses, like most channels did. But as time went on, the creators soon changed their tone. Much of the content began to tout talking points and advocates that stood in contrast with the consensus of most medical experts. The input of medical experts like Dr. Anthony Fauci seems to be relative to the message being expressed. When Fauci or the medical facility attack China, they receive praise. When they support the lockdowns, they were typically attacked and replaced with experts who claim to have ‘alternative data’.

Table 5: Nature of Themes Present

Which clips contained themes of:	Individuals	Non-political Institutions	Political institutions
Yes	42 (67.42%)	46 (74.19%)	33 (53.23%)
No	20 32.36%)	16 (25.81%)	29 (46.77%)

Out of these organized samples, institutions were either corrupted by the Left, or were victims of the Left’s control. Rarely did the creators in our sample create or impart the reasons for why the institutions that form our society were important. The singular instances where organizations were held up was when they were under threat or entered conflict with the Left. Returning to Nisbet’s framework, the ideas presented within the video pool place significantly more value in individuals and their rights over institutions. While institutions do require individuals to exist in order to operate, very little in the sample reflects a significant interest in reinforcing institutional trust in those entities which they place eminent value within.

Media Effects:

One of the authors previously addressed was George Gerbner, a media ecologist who presented the notion of cultivation theory. Specifically, Gerbner argued that consistent exposure to certain images, tropes and patterns in the media would lead to the encouragement of fear. As we compiled the relevant data, what was observed seemed to also match up with Gerbner's premise. If users were relying on YAF/TPUSA/PragerU as their primary source of information, they would be inundated with images of Antifa seeking to assault local towns, governments ignoring data to keep things locked down, and the notion that their freedom was on the cusp of disappearing at the hands of Leftists.

A notable example of this would be in the pool of Impeachment videos released from Turning Point USA. The segment was titled "Leftists Want Trump IMPEACHED For Obama Clinton Scandals", and was part of the *Benny on the Block* video series. In this case, Benny Johnson had attended an impeachment protest during the proceedings to interview attendees about the specific crimes that Trump was being impeached over. Historically, the trials were over the calls made to Ukraine over Hunter Biden. However, Johnson attempts to frame it by referencing crimes that Obama and Clinton have reportedly committed and asking if those are enough to impeach Trump over. These include crimes such as lying to Congress/federal prosecutors, weaponizing federal agencies for personal purposes, or cooperating with cartels in some fashion.¹

Johnson's message intent seems to occur on a few different levels. First, it is attempting to frame both Obama and Clinton as being legally/morally worse than President Trump. Second, it is trying to show how ill-informed that the impeachment protesters are about the man they want to remove. Third, it is implicating 'leftists' as hypocrites for ignoring Obama/Clinton's

¹ The author will admit their ignorance regarding the particular issues referenced by Johnson, in that they are not entirely sure if they deserve to be considered impeachable offenses. For the sake of this paper, I assume they are at least noteworthy.

crimes and not acting on them while seeming willing to impeach Trump for just about any reason. Finally, it empowers the audience through their 'inside knowledge' that the protesters are getting the facts wrong.

In many ways, this video illustrates a sort of saturation message that all of the creators seem to want to imply; that those who are left-leaning or critical of Donald Trump are either hypocrites, malicious or unintelligent. The videos create a network of ideas which consistently challenges and critique the 'Left' while upholding what it sees as common sense or intelligence on its own merit. And what underlies this is a notion that the institutions that matter to Americans are either weakening or totally corrupted by the ideas of the Left. It is a picture of the world that is hopeless and that offers few meaningful alternatives beyond simple statements like "be brave" and "speak up."

How This Affects Students

The original intent of this study was to determine how the channel content and methodology was presented in order to have a sense of how it might and influence the beliefs and practices of college-age voters. A survey of the students and how they read and interact this content would be immensely beneficial to this goal, but was not included in the study due to differing methodologies and time restrictions. There is also a need to do a more longitudinal study of these sorts of videos and how their messaging evolves or shifts over time. Based on what is known of Gerbner's prior work involving television news (2017), an observer could surmise that consistent exposure to videos emphasizing channels as providers of 'alternative knowledge' from college-driven information leads to distrust of the university and its allies. Parts of that alternative knowledge include the threats of Antifa, the use of lockdowns to attack American rights, and the use of impeachments for political plays rather than actual justice. It

also offers a simplistic narrative for others to challenge and chastise the arguments that may offer a complex and perhaps even reorienting understanding of how race works in their lives. There is also this inherently negative approach to the institutions being critiqued. Rather than viewing universities, media and politicians as something that they can help improve life, the creators seem more interested in proving the flaws of said organization/individuals. National Affairs editor Yuval Levin argues that channels like those included in the video pool act as a sort of alternative institution for the Right. These entities excel at attacking the Left, but lack any meaningful alternatives to fill in the holes of policy or culture required for some sort of success (Klein 2021). This fixation limits the potential of working within structures, and ends up discouraging trust of institutions; particularly those that some consider to be 'corrupted' by the Left.

The Future of These Channels?

When this project was originally pitched, the fate of the 2020 elections were unknown and not set in stone. At the time of the thesis' publishing, Joe Biden has been declared the president and has been inaugurated despite consistent repetitive endeavors by the Trump administration to twist or change the vote through legal and media action. There is also the ever-present issue of an insurrection organized by similar parties for the purpose of challenging and overthrowing the election results of the past.

In the weeks and months after the Biden victory on November 9th, the channels' content has not changed in substance. Turning Point continues to uphold Trumpian ideals as the best option for American politics, including the boosting of Antifa footage framed alongside anti-lockdown rhetoric. Prager University has consistently created content that seems to challenge what they present as 'leftist' ideals without engaging directly with the election process or in the naming of presidential candidates. And YAF relies consistently on pundits and commentators to decry the Left and (more specifically) socialism. But what is confusing is that all three of the subjects seem to act entirely different on social media. Claims of voter fraud saturated the feeds

of PragerU/TPUSA employees and ambassadors; all while attempting to paint the Biden administration as overtly liberal and a threat to democracy.

Conclusion

The events of 2020 starkly changed the United States, as did the politics and election results. After four years under the Trump administration, American politics changed. And so did the young men and women who came to adulthood at this time. Cable news was no longer the sole provider of news and commentary. Rather, it became a manifested element on the internet; particularly through YouTube. Researchers have started to realize the influence that creators on these platforms have over their viewers; both in informing their political opinions and radicalizing them toward crazier ideas. Through an in-depth analysis; this study offers clues to the nature of the content that attracts and hooks young viewers to the larger college-age organizations who promote conservative values on campus. They offer alternative narratives and institutions that do not require the user to practice or change themselves in any meaningful way. Rather, it is the colleges, the media and the government and their 'woke' narrative that threatens them and demands change. But above all, it is their liberty that is at risk. And the evidence of said threat is often illustrated through selectively edited footage and simplistic arguments.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of the current study is that it analyses the postings on just a few channels. However, this methodology could be extended further in future studies to affiliated organizations that could receive similar attention for further analysis. These include the anti-semitic Groyper collective; organized by Nicholas Fuentes as well as the more intellectually oriented Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Further study could also be done on the non-organizational creators, such as Dave Rubin, Steven Crowder or Ben Shapiro; as well as surveys of the

viewers. Other limitations include the time-sensitive nature of 2020, where the hyper-partisan realities surrounding lockdowns, masks and vaccines may have affected or skewed what insight may have arisen. There's also a question to be explored about how the decision to analyze this data after years of students already being saturated in the content of these organizations may have minimized the insights or connections to either Gerbner or Nisbet.

The research could also be focused on the responses of students to these creators and their reasons for preferring specific creators. While media theory provides a fairly substantial understanding of how viewers may process or respond to new information, reinforcing that understanding with in-the-field interviews can go even further. It would also further substantiate the differences between ideologies, methodologies and the particular communication approaches that said creators may prefer.

But this study is merely a start to beginning a conversation and understanding of what priorities the college-age conservative seemingly emphasizes. And so far, it all points to an offering of 'alternative knowledge'. The creators present themselves as sources for learning about the world around them, but without the necessity of education or a college degree. This knowledge appears moral in nature, and acts in many ways as a differentiator from 'The Left' and from the mainstream. But lingering beneath all of it is a simmering distrust of institutions and very few actual suggestions for how to fix the problems that conservatives suggest are the plague of society.

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