Streaming to Transgress:
The Racial Politics of Reactionary YouTubers and their Audiences

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis examines the racial discourse of "alt-lite" YouTube personalities and their audiences. The term "alt-lite" was coined in the mid-2010s by self-avowed members of the white nationalist "alt-right" movement to castigate fellow reactionaries whose politics broadly aligned with theirs but who were not bold enough to explicitly embrace ethnonationalism. In this thesis, I examine "alt-lite" discourse as a calculated position within the attention economy, one that has been adopted with great success by popular reactionary influencers, particularly on YouTube. Understudied compared to other mainstream social media platforms, YouTube operates as an important launching pad for these right-wing micro-celebrities and serves as the primary field site for this qualitative study. Building on scholarship within critical race and digital studies, cultural studies, and political communication, this thesis asks: What discourses about race circulate within and around "alt-lite" YouTube channels?

To answer this question, I draw on two and a half years of online data collection: over 250 YouTube videos; observation of nine Facebook, Reddit, and Discord groups; and semi-structured interviews with 18 current and former viewers of reactionary YouTube channels. I use qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis to interrogate these materials and draw conclusions about the strategies and impacts of "alt-lite" influencers. I find that these YouTubers traffic in white supremacist talking points, while adopting rhetorical strategies and legitimating practices that obfuscate their ideological extremity. Even as the most popular "alt-lite" YouTubers bring in substantial salaries from ad revenue, crowdsourcing, subscription fees, and partnerships, they are perceived by audiences as subversive "outsiders," who are unbeholden to the institutional and ideological constraints of establishment media. Thus, "alt-lite" influencers are emblematic of an "alternative" right-wing media ecology that flourishes online, providing viewers with engaging political commentary that reflects their frustrations, keeps them entertained, and validates their desire to think for themselves.

Dedication

In memory of Kang Yin Fo, ***康印佛****, my grandmother*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1. "Like and subscribe"

When the news alerts started lighting up phones around the world on January 6, 2021, many onlookers opened their news apps and web browsers to shocking images: MAGA-clad protesters had stormed the United States Capitol during the certification of the 2020 federal election results and were now roaming the halls of the building with their phones out, documenting. On YouTube, a search for "Stop the Steal" or "Patriot Capitol" would surface several live streams chronicling the occupation of the Capitol building, some with monetization features turned on so that viewers could tip the influencers, both fledgling and established, who were documenting the event (Alexander et al., 2021). In the days and weeks following the riot, news outlets were able to re-create the timeline of the day, down to the minute, by analyzing[1] hours of footage that had been uploaded by participants to social media platforms (Leatherby et al., 2021). Some pundits noted, wryly, that once they had successfully breached the Capitol, rioters seemed to have no plan beyond taking selfies.

In the aftermath of the event, media commentary diverged predictably along political lines. Liberal outlets drew attention to the white supremacist iconography represented at the protest (Rosenberg & Tiefenthäler, 2021; Washington Post Staff, 2021), the outgoing president's instigation of the mob (Jacobo, 2021), and the complicity of Republican lawmakers who had parroted the false narrative that Biden had only won because of election fraud (Pengelly & Luscombe, 2021). Meanwhile, right-wing outlets rejected the characterization of thousands of peaceful protestors as violent insurrectionists, foregrounding what they saw as legitimate grievances about voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election. In Tucker Carlson's[2] opening monologue the following day, he opined, "Millions of Americans sincerely believe the last election was fake. Rather than trying to change their minds… as you would do if you cared, our new leaders will try to silence them" (Fox News, 2021).

[1] This thesis adopts Canadian spellings throughout, which draws from both American English and British English spelling conventions.

[2] At the time of writing, Tucker Carlson is the host of Tucker Carlson Tonight (Fox), the highest-rated primetime cable news show in the United States.

Thus, January 6th highlighted two emerging and related phenomena within US politics: the contestation over what makes a right wing "extremist" and the emergence of social media influencers as a class of political actors. On the first issue, extremism scholars have written on the mobilization of far-right movements and para-military groups since the Obama administration (Belew, 2018; Miller-Idriss, 2022). Meanwhile, critical race scholars have highlighted how white supremacist ideology has underpinned US life since the country's founding (Du Bois, 1962; Feagin, 2006; Ferreira da Silva, 2007). On the second, communications researchers have documented the rise of the partisan pundit in the American media landscape and the adoption of micro-celebrity practices among political commentators (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Lewis, 2020).

This doctoral thesis ties together these various strands of enquiry, taking as its focal point a network of US-centred reactionary YouTube personalities and their audiences. This coalition of political influencers reached peak visibility and unity during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, after which a period of in-fighting caused highly public rifts among leaders in the movement. Within this broad coalition, the far-right plank known as the "alt-right" garnered the most coverage and notoriety due to their explicit white nationalist politics (Hartzell 2018). Despite their infamy, however, the self-avowed "alt-right" made up only a fraction of the online pro-Trump coalition. The most popular figures within this network of online reactionaries insisted, emphatically, that they were not "alt-right." Characterizing themselves as colourblind conservatives, these individuals emphasized that their political agendas were driven by patriotism or "civic nationalism"—rather than ethnonationalism—a stance which prompted "alt-righters" to refer to them pejoratively as "alt-lite." Given the harmful rhetoric spouted by "alt-lite" figures, it may seem as though these categories represent a distinction without a difference. In this thesis, however, I examine "alt-lite" discourse as an important, calculated position within the attention economy, one that has been adopted with great success by right-wing influencers. Currently understudied, YouTube operates as an important launching pad for these influencers and will serve as the primary field site of this qualitative study.

In the following chapters, I paint a picture of the "alt-lite" YouTube ecosystem, from the creators through to the viewers. Ultimately, I argue that these YouTubers occupy a strategic and lucrative space within the right-wing media landscape. Their rhetoric, often trafficking in racial and

gender stereotypes, puts them at the edge of acceptable political discourse; at the same time, they adopt rhetorical strategies that complicate and obfuscate their ideological extremity. In this way, they tread the boundary between extreme and mainstream, blurring the line between the two. Even as the most popular "alt-lite" YouTubers bring in substantial salaries from ad revenue, crowdsourced donations, subscription fees, and other partnerships, they cast themselves as "outsiders," who are unbeholden to the institutional and ideological constraints of legacy media. Thus, they are emblematic of an "alternative" media ecology that flourishes online, drawing in viewers who are disillusioned with the mainstream media and searching for authentic, engaging political voices that reflect their frustrations and their values.

2. Discovering the "alt-lite"

To further contextualize this research project, it is useful to think back to November 2016. In the weeks following the US presidential election, think pieces began to proliferate about the surprising influence that a collection of internet personalities had on the race. The headlines declared:

> "The alt-right comes to Washington: A new generation of nationalists see a chance to ride Donald Trump's coattails into the capital" (Schreckinger, 2017 for *Politico Magazine*)
>
> "How the alt-right uses internet trolling to confuse you into dismissing its ideology: Meme culture allowed the alt-right's white supremacy to spread online" (Romano, 2017 for *Vox*)
>
> "The alt-right hails its victorious God-Emperor" (Marantz, 2016 for *The New Yorker*)

The individuals featured in these articles—Milo Yiannopoulos, Mike Cernovich, Richard Spencer, Gavin McInnes, Andrew Anglin, among others—loomed large in the media landscape at the time, and some even received feature-length profiles in prestigious publications (eg. Stack, 2017 for the *New York Times*). In Marantz's (2016) story, he wrote, "one could argue that, together, these people's social-media activism made it possible—made it conceivable—for Trump to get elected." Looking back at coverage from this period, it is striking how mystified reporters were by the power and savviness of this cohort of internet celebrities. While the coverage did highlight the extremity of "alt-right" views, reporters were also transfixed by the irreverent, counter-cultural personas cultivated by these figures, which seemed to capture the imaginations of young men in particular. In this vein, both journalists and academics called them "provocateurs" and "trolls," who were

chiefly interested in getting a reaction out of political opponents (eg. Romano 2017; Nagle 2017). For example, in the same *New Yorker* piece, Marantz (2016) wrote, "the alt-right is united less by ideology than by sensibility; a hallmark of that sensibility is a careful attunement to social norms, and a perverse delight in desecrating them."

This characterization was embraced by many internet reactionaries—especially those that would later be called "alt-lite"—who delighted in their newfound stardom. When accused of racism, misogyny, and Islamophobia, these personalities sometimes adopted the position that, while they may say what they mean, they do not always *sincerely* mean what they say. For instance, Mike Cernovich, a men's self-help guru and Twitter personality who drew substantial press attention after the 2016 US presidential election, said in a YouTube video: "What I do is troll with a message. So I take something that I believe, and then I dial it up to provoke, to cause a reaction in people… I consider my Twitter a form of comedy" (Cernovich as quoted in Greg Stevens, 2016). In a televised news interview, Milo Yiannopoulos—a former Breitbart editor and YouTuber who is widely referred to in the press as a "provocateur"—told the reporter, "If my rudeness creates conversation, if my rudeness provokes people into saying 'Oh what a monster' and then twenty percent of people start talking about what I was actually saying, I will consider my career to be a terrific success" (ABC News, 2016). In both these excerpts, Cernovich and Yiannopoulos embrace the logic of "trolling," making statements to deliberately provoke a hostile or frustrated reaction, as a political tool.

After doing some searching online about these right-wing micro-celebrities, I came across a 2017 Anti-Defamation League (ADL) article that described these figures as "alt-lite," one of the first times this term was explored substantively by a major civil society organization. Learning about this group, and reading the reporting around them, I was struck by the slipperiness of "alt-lite" rhetoric. Shrewd critics had to consider how they could denounce wild factual inaccuracies or flaws in reasoning without giving undue credence and attention to statements made solely for the purpose of eliciting shock. This careful positioning also enabled followers to discount accusations of racism as overwrought and humourless. Commenting on a stunt pulled off by the Proud Boys (2017)—a men's club for "Western chauvinists" that gained notoriety for their violent street fights—the group's founder Gavin McInnes said on his YouTube show, "It was cool, and it has

mainstream appeal. That's what scares the left… They don't really care about Unite the Right because they know it has no appeal. But they hate Trump supporters doing funny and fun and rebellious and interesting stuff because it's too appealing" (CRTV, 2018).

Distinguishing himself from the "alt-right" and those who carried tiki torches at the 2017 Unite the Right march in Virginia, McInnes aligns with a cohort of "New Right" personalities whose politics were ostensibly characterized by rebelliousness, provocation, and humour, rather than outright white racial resentment. Despite the broadening appeal and increased prominence of this group in the post-2016 period, I could find very little written about the category of "alt-lite" within the academic literature. This lacuna became one of the main motivators behind the following thesis project.

3. Setting the scene

3.1 YouTube's origins

My research on "alt-lite" discourse draws on a tradition of critical discourse analysis that considers social context to be an important object of analysis (Hodge & Kress, 1988). As such, the norms, affordances, and constraints of YouTube are foregrounded in each of the empirical chapters to follow. YouTube was founded in 2005 by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim, three former PayPal employees who set out to create a video platform for those seeking romantic relationships, analogous to "Hot or Not" (Bergen, 2022) After some early success, and a pivot away from dating-oriented videos, it was bought by Google in 2006 for US$1.65 billion. Today, YouTube is the second most visited website in the world, after Google Search, with more than 2.5 billion monthly users. In May 2007, the company launched its YouTube Partner Program (YPP), which invited select creators to share in the profits of YouTube advertising revenue (a 45% to 55% split, in favour of creators) by hosting ads on their videos. In 2012, the program was extended to all creators who met a certain threshold of subscribers and watch hours. This program created a new pathway for YouTubers to monetize their content and, for some, even turn their channels into a full-time career. With the YPP, YouTube pre-empted Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites in supporting influential users to commodify the attention of others.

Under Google's management, YouTube faced significant pressure to grow their viewership and ad revenue at all costs (Bergen, 2022). Given this relentless drive for growth, the leadership at YouTube decided to make consequential changes to the site's recommendation algorithm, which surfaced videos that might interest users based on their previous activity and site-wide viewing patterns. While in the earlier days of YouTube, the platform generally recommended content that had—or was predicted to have—a high number of views, beginning in 2012, the key metric for algorithmic recommendation shifted from views to "watch time." That is, the most recommended channels would no longer be those that produced viral moments but rather those that consistently uploaded engaging, long-form content that could keep people on the platform, watching ads, for significant stretches of time. While this shift hurt some of the most popular YouTube channels at the time—those like Howard Davies-Carr, of "Charlie bit my finger" fame, who succeeded in generating viral hits—a host of creators rose to prominence on YouTube under this new algorithmic regime; some shared footage of their daily lives, streamed themselves while gaming, or uploaded long, meandering conversations about politics and philosophy.

3.2 YouTube and the culture wars

Throughout the 2000s, key figures in the YouTube politics landscape tended to be unaffiliated individuals speaking to their cameras at home. Many of these earlier commentators were part of a "skeptic" movement that dedicated themselves to critiquing organized religion (Bergen, 2022). However, from the late-2000s to the mid-2010s, a right-wing digital media ecosystem was gaining momentum, buoyed by the ongoing backlash against the Obama administration and the growing influence of the Tea Party movement (White, 2018; Benkler et al., 2018). As a part of this trend, "alternative" outfits like InfoWars and Breitbart attracted new audiences and funding sources, while using social media sites like YouTube and Facebook to broaden their reach (Nicas, 2018; Sullivan & McAuley, 2017; Benkler et al., 2018). Building on previous generations of right-wing outrage personalities (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014), these outlets started to cultivate their own networks of reactionary influencers that appealed to internet-savvy audiences.

Starting in 2014, with the escalation of the online culture wars, these dispersed political commentators began to cohere into something more identifiable. One of the defining moments

of this trend was the 2014-15 Gamergate fiasco, when a diatribe written by an avid gamer about his game developer ex-girlfriend snowballed into an all-out harassment campaign against women in the video games industry, especially those who were accused of forcing feminist and "social justice" values into gamer sub-culture. During Gamergate, which was largely coordinated on 4chan and Reddit, tactics of networked harassment such as online swarming and doxing reached new levels of intensity (Massanari, 2017). Right-wing influencers like Milo Yiannopoulos, Carl Benjamin, and Stefan Molyneux, who had previously demonstrated little to no interest in gaming, took advantage of the furor, putting out anti-SJW[3] YouTube content on the topic (Salter, 2017). Doing so elevated their profiles among disgruntled, mostly male gamers, who saw them as edgy, outspoken figures unafraid to violate the norms of political correctness.

The year 2015 saw another notable event that brought more eyes and ears to political YouTubers. In January, Facebook announced that it would prioritize videos in its algorithmic feed, which resulted in media publishing companies adopting a "pivot-to-video" strategy that involved drastically cutting writing staff and investing in the production of short-form video content (Moore, 2017). Within a few months of Facebook's announcement, publishers like Buzzfeed, Mic, Vox, MTV and others began churning out general interest videos in pursuit of clicks and ad revenue. In the wake of the first Black Lives Matter protests and Trump's political ascendancy, many of these broadly liberal media outlets produced videos on the subject of racism in the US. The virality of these liberal "race videos" inevitably made them targets, providing fodder for a whole genre of right-wing "response," "takedown," and "debunking" videos. Many reactionary "debunkings" gained so much traction that they far surpassed the original post in terms of views and galvanized swarms of people to harass the narrators of the target video (Bergen, 2022). With a cohort of right-wing YouTubers rising to prominence off the backs of these viral moments, the response video became one of the canonical formats of reactionary YouTube channels (Lewis et al., 2021).

[3] SJW stands for "social justice warrior," which is a term conservatives frequently use to disparage liberals and progressives.

3.3 YouTube in the Trump era

In 2016, the Donald Trump presidential campaign brought new energy to these channels, providing them with a shared political cause around which to mobilize. By this point, a cohesive network of reactionary YouTube personalities had taken shape, aptly named the "Alternative Influence Network" by Rebecca Lewis (2018). In her work, Lewis carefully traces how these figures formed a right-wing ecosystem on the platform, wherein YouTubers referred to each other's work, appeared on each other's shows, and occasionally debated one another. Throughout the 2010s, aided by YouTube's recommendation algorithm, the influence of this network grew without much public awareness. However, after the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, a flurry of journalism and research was produced on disinformation and possible foreign influence in the American information sphere (Solon, 2016; Madrigal, 2017; McCarthy, 2017). YouTube, for the most part, went overlooked in these initial investigations, which focused mainly on Facebook and Twitter. However, attention did turn to the platform in the ensuing years, especially after a former YouTube engineer spoke out about the damaging impacts of the company's recommendation algorithm, which he claimed systematically pushed users towards conspiratorial and sensational content in order to increase watch time and ad revenue (P. Lewis, 2018). The publication of two high-profile *New York Times* pieces—an op-ed by Zeynep Tufekci (2018) and an article-turned-podcast by Kevin Roose (2019)—brought even more mainstream attention to the issue of far-right radicalization on YouTube and accelerated research and debate among academics on the topic.

In response to the negative press attention and public pressure, YouTube began in 2019 to institute a series of algorithmic and policy changes to curb the spread of disinformation and extremism on the site. These steps included reducing algorithmic recommendations to conspiratorial content (YouTube, 2019a) and explicitly disallowing content that espoused the supremacy of one group over others (YouTube, 2019b). The introduction of these policies saw the subsequent deplatformings of notable figures within the online right including Stefan Molyneux[4], Gavin McInnes, and Richard Spencer[5] in 2019. In addition, many channels were

[4] Stefan Molyneux is a far-right former YouTuber and podcast host who has endorsed principles of scientific racism.
[5] At the time, Richard Spencer was the face and de-facto leader of the "alt-right" movement.

"demonetized" in this period, meaning creators were no longer eligible for ad revenue-sharing on their videos.

Even with these "crackdowns" on members of the Alternative Influence Network, YouTube continues to sustain the business models of increasingly professionalized right-wing content creators. Those who have been deplatformed can still leverage their notoriety, gained through YouTube fame, to crowdfund and promote their business ventures. Meanwhile, individuals who have managed to stay on the platform are increasingly cashing in on lucrative business deals with conservative media companies. For example, in 2022, Steven Crowder—a popular conservative YouTuber and podcaster—left his business partnership with Glenn Beck's company Blaze TV. A few months later, he revealed that he had been approached to join the Daily Wire (founded by YouTuber Ben Shapiro) but walked away from the deal due to unfavourable terms. The Daily Wire's CEO then released an almost-hour long video revealing that Crowder had been offered $50 million over four years to produce his YouTube show, Louder with Crowder, for the Daily Wire (DailyWire+, 2023). This episode gives us a rare glimpse into the business of the reactionary YouTube ecosystem, which continues to draw large audiences and substantial pay cheques for successful influencers.

3.4 YouTube and me

My understanding of YouTube as a platform is grounded not only in academic research but also a personal relationship with the website, which I have regularly visited since I was in high school. Like so many teens in the mid-00's, I first stumbled onto YouTube because of viral hits like "Charlie bit my finger" but then lingered on the platform long enough to discover an array of quirky creators who produced vlogs from their living rooms or funny skits with their friends. I was charmed by the intelligent, philosophical conversations of the vlogbrothers and tickled by YouTube comedians like Natalie Tran (communitychannel), Christine Gambito (HappySlip), and Kevin Wu (KevJumba), who brought an element of the surreal to their short sketches on the mundanities of everyday life. Notably, these YouTube comedians represented some of the few Asian faces in my media sphere at the time, and they were the first Asian (micro)celebrities whose work resonated with me personally. All of them had, like me, grown up in Asian immigrant

households and, on their YouTube channels, depicted the idiosyncrasies of this experience—the humour, the oddities, the bittersweetness—in a way I had never seen before on TV or film growing up in Canada.

I continued to watch YouTube throughout my undergraduate years, taking breaks from essay writing to indulge in recipe videos, movie and tv show reviews, and clips from late night talk shows. Even now, YouTube remains one of my main sources of entertainment and information. Almost every day after work, I log on to see what professional chefs are cooking in their kitchens, what celebrities' homes look like in New York or LA, and what my favourite video essayists have to say about social issues. Over this decade and a half of being a YouTube viewer, I have come to understand how online personalities can start to feel close over time, like mentors or even friends. Given these personal experiences, I aim to study "alt-lite" YouTubers as serious and influential political actors who are not only sources of information, but important figures in the daily lives of viewers. These YouTubers, like the ones I watched growing up, can not only shape viewers' political opinions but also reflect their experiences back to them in a way that is intimate, unique, and currently understudied.

4. Terminology

In this thesis, I use the labels "alt-lite" and "alt-right," albeit cautiously. Both of these terms were coined by self-avowed white nationalists as a way of demarcating boundaries within the wider conservative movement. These origins make the labels problematic to adopt uncritically; however, they will help direct readers to specific iterations of white identity politics in a US context. When using the term "alt-right," as opposed to simply "white nationalism," my intention is to recognize the movement's specificities: its rebranding of ethnonationalism as a pseudo-academic enterprise and as a corrective to mainstream conservatism, an effort which will be discussed further in Chapter 2 (Hartzell, 2018).

The term "alt-lite" is similarly fraught. The suggestion of harmlessness inherent in "lite" makes the label potentially misleading. As with "alt-right," it has also faded from relevance in the past five years, with new configurations of right-wing and far-right figures moving into the fore. At the same time, I believe the term points to an interesting dynamic within far-right discourse, in

which white pride and white supremacy are constantly invoked while also being disavowed at strategic moments. Given these complexities, I adopt "alt-lite" critically throughout this thesis to refer to a specific cohort of online personalities who rose to prominence in the mid-2010s. These figures were initially aligned with the "alt-right" but eventually distanced themselves from the white nationalist movement. Following Trump's election, some of these individuals referred to themselves as the "New Right" in an effort to distinguish themselves from disgraced "alt-right" figureheads and to brand their movement as youthful, rebellious, and counter-cultural (Hawley, 2018). However, this term is more nebulous and less specific than "alt-lite," was never widely adopted, and has the same problematic origins as the latter. Ultimately, "alt-lite" serves as a useful heuristic that points us towards individuals who engage in a particular form of ambiguous or "edgy" racial provocation, as described in Section 2 of this chapter. As with "alt-right," I keep the term in quotation marks throughout the thesis to indicate that I take up the term critically.

In the following chapters, I also use "reactionary" as a descriptor of the subjects of this study (R. Lewis, 2018; Robin, 2011). I believe the word captures how prominent right-wing YouTubers are largely oriented around reacting to a host of political antagonists—progressive activists, liberal politicians, the mainstream media, and academics—who are seen to be advancing a warped version of "social justice" on behalf of various out-groups: immigrants, people of colour, queer people, Muslims, the list goes on. The term "reactionary" captures a wider swathe of influencers than "alt-lite," and I use it in this thesis to remark on a sprawling network of anti-SJW, anti-woke channels on YouTube. Thus, some findings in this thesis are particular to a specific cohort of "alt-lite" channels, while other findings are relevant across reactionary channels on YouTube. I try to be deliberate in my use of these terms in the subsequent chapters.

5. Research questions

In her 2018 article, "Why do people share fake news?" Alice Marwick introduces a sociotechnical model of studying media effects that accounts for how actors, messages, and affordances each affect the reception and dissemination of media. Her model encourages us to consider how "human agency and technical affordances mutually shape artifacts." Throughout this thesis, I take up Marwick's approach to study "alt-lite" YouTube videos, taking into account the actors involved

in the production and consumption of these videos, the messages that circulate on reactionary channels, and the affordances that allow for their circulation. In doing so, I attempt to approach this topic in a way that takes platform power, discursive construction, and viewer agency seriously.

Given the relative lack of academic attention paid to "alt-lite" figures, I believe that studying their content will help researchers to better understand the landscape of right-wing content production in our increasingly platformized society. In particular, I am interested in what these individuals and their viewers can tell us about the evolving nature of white supremacist ideology and its underlying logics. Drawing on Stuart Hall, I conceptualize ideology in this study as "the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation… which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works" (Hall, 1996a). Like other cultural studies scholars, I examine how ideology is negotiated in the realm of representation and discourse. As such, in this thesis, I aim to answer the research question: "What discourses about race circulate within and around 'alt-lite' YouTube channels?"

This overarching research question will be explored through four sub-questions:

- Sub-Question 1: How do these YouTubers speak about whiteness and white people in their videos?
- Sub-Question 2: How do they speak about non-white people and communities?
- Sub-Question 3: What is the function of racial "provocation" in their discourse?
- Sub-Question 4: How are these discourses received and understood by viewers?

Adopting Foucault's definition, discourse here is constitutive: it is language that constructs or at the very least frames the concepts about which it speaks. Critical race scholars have taken up this concept to better understand the "discursive" ontology of race: the way it is made real through rhetoric, performance, and circular logic (Toyosaki, 2016; Fields & Fields, 2012). These theorists argue that modern notions of racial difference were constructed through the production of knowledge that claimed to describe race while reifying it as a social fact.

Building on these foundations, I use the category of "alt-lite" as an entry point into a particular discursive community (Hodge & Kress, 1988) that has played a role in the resurgence of white race consciousness in the Western Anglosphere (Hartzell, 2018). By studying these YouTubers

and their audiences, I aim to understand how racial difference is constructed in their videos and how these discursive constructions go on to inform viewers' understandings of themselves, of racialized "others," and of politics more broadly. I will pursue my questions through a mixed-methods qualitative research design that engages both YouTube videos and the people who watch them. At the time of writing, this thesis is the first academic research effort to seek out study participants from within reactionary YouTube audiences.

6. Contributions to theory and policy

This thesis contributes to multiple conversations taking place across the social sciences and tech policy. First, I engage with ongoing debates in extremism studies and internet studies on online radicalization. As I will explore in Chapter 4, the "alt-lite" is frequently framed by scholars and civil society groups as one step on a radicalization pipeline, desensitizing viewers to far-right ideology and making them vulnerable to even more extreme arguments. By adopting a qualitative approach that integrates both video and interview analysis, I hope in this thesis to paint a well-rounded picture of how edgy and racially provocative videos resonate with viewers. By leaving room for viewer agency, I will critically interrogate existing models of YouTube radicalization and explore both the supply of and demand for reactionary content online. Following other recent work on right-wing media (Bauer, 2023; Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2022; Pérez,. 2022), in this thesis, I shift away from a focus on "hate" and other negative affects and examine the range of emotions that can accompany reactionary politics: from laughter to shock to pleasure.

Second, this thesis contributes to conversations about the sources and impacts of right-wing disinformation. Although I do not adopt "disinformation" as a key concept within this thesis, opting for the more specific "white supremacist discourse," I join other critical communication scholars in showing how racial hierarchy demands and motivates the circulation of inaccurate, dehumanizing, and discredited information (Reddi et al., 2021; Marwick et al., 2021). These scholars eschew simplistic "hypodermic needle" models of disinformation, which emphasize the power of misleading content to dupe, confuse, and persuade impressionable subjects. They advocate instead for approaches that recognize how media consumers seek out items that not only provide them with information but also affirm their opinions, reflect their values, and keep them

entertained. In this vein, I explore in the following chapters how "alt-lite" talking points perpetuate historically entrenched narratives and harmful stereotypes that legitimate racial inequity.

Third, I situate this thesis in the tradition of "critical race and digital studies," as articulated by scholars at NYU (Center for Critical Race + Digital Studies, n.d.). This body of work explores how racial inequities are reified, reproduced, challenged, and subverted in and through digital technologies. In particular, I trace how YouTube's affordances, incentives, and policies create an environment where white supremacist talking points can flourish. In this way, the platform contributes to the troubling revitalization of "white race consciousness" within the United States and other Western countries, a decades-long process which Dylan Rodriguez (2020) terms "white reconstruction." Throughout this thesis, I connect technological structures to the proliferation of reactionary talking points and fascistic logics that continue to harm marginalized people in myriad ways.

7. Chapter outlines

In the next chapter, I summarize the extant literature on five subject areas related to my thesis topic: conceptualizing whiteness and white supremacy, the discourse of white supremacy, reactionary communities online, right-wing YouTube culture, and the conservative media ecosystem. The first two sections establish the conceptual framework of the study, while sections three to five summarize the empirical contributions that are most relevant to the research questions. I highlight areas of tension or openness within the current literature and identify how my research advances these ongoing conversations. Chapter 3 introduces the logic behind the study's qualitative research design, emphasizing what can be learned from each of the methods adopted—critical discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, and interviews—and how findings were triangulated between data sources. I detail my data gathering and analysis procedures and consider the ethical implications of doing research on "alt-lite" subjects as a minoritized scholar.

Chapters four to six make up the empirical portion of the thesis; in each, I rely on one key data set in order to advance my arguments. Chapter 4 takes up the term "alt-lite" as an entry point for identifying and analyzing "borderline" YouTube channels. I trace the lineage of the term and

present findings from a qualitative content analysis of 78 videos uploaded by "alt-lite" YouTubers. I argue that, despite their self-presentation as colourblind conservatives, these figures are firmly embedded within white supremacist ideology. I identify a set of *mitigating rhetorical strategies* that "alt-lite" figures use to temper and obfuscate their reactionary views. Chapter 5 examines how the "alt-lite's" brand of edgy political commentary operates at the discursive level, based on a critical discourse analysis of seven racially provocative videos that are emblematic of the genre, along with interviews with audience members. I demonstrate how this brand of edgy humour gives right-wing YouTubers the discursive space to overtly and violently denigrate minority groups while providing audiences with a roadmap for how to process, rationalize, and support these performances. Ultimately, provocative racial humour helps YouTubers to convert conventional reactionary talking points into contentious "free speech events" (Titley, 2020).

Drawing predominantly from interviews with 18 current and former fans of reactionary YouTubers, Chapter 6 explores how viewers of these channels speak about their political beliefs, and how they negotiate those beliefs alongside social media influencers, online forums, media outlets, and their offline communities. I introduce the concept of *bootstraps epistemology* to explain how rugged individualism forms the basis not just of the reactionary right's political ideology, but also of their imagined epistemology. I argue that reactionary YouTubers both disseminate and benefit from bootstraps epistemology by positioning themselves as independent thinkers who exist outside of institutions and therefore outside of rigid dogmas. I explore how this combative and individualistic approach to politics legitimizes social hierarchies and is premised upon white supremacist logics.

Finally, Chapter 7 closes the thesis with a discussion of the empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions of the work. Taking a broader view of my findings, I describe the role of "alt-lite" YouTubers within the right-wing information ecosystem, situating this discourse within the history of racial backlash in the United States. I explore how YouTube's architecture incentivizes and amplifies this regressive ideology, reaching those who are especially disenchanted with establishment media sources. I end the chapter, and the thesis, by reflecting on the impacts of this discursive community on social and political life, suggesting potential avenues for research, and resistance, in the future.

8. Conclusion

Before delving into the research literature on this topic, it is worth taking a moment to consider what "alt-lite" discourse looks and sounds like. Consider, for example, a 2017 video uploaded by Lauren Southern, a young Canadian YouTuber and would-be journalist. In the video's opening, she says to the camera that she's going "back to her roots." That is, she's taking to the streets to speak to protestors at a women's rights march, the kind of stunt that first rocketed her to YouTube fame. She is well-lit, with a fresh face of makeup and bright blond hair, and speaks into a microphone while the scene behind her remains shrouded in darkness. What are the women marching for? What events have precipitated their gathering? We don't find out in this video. Instead, we get five and a half minutes of unsuspecting protestors being confronted with the confounding question: "What would you rather have, women's rights or Islam?" Caught off guard, the women on the other end of her mic are flummoxed. Some express anger that Southern is attending a march she clearly does not support in order to stoke division. As tempers rise, and some protestors loudly demand Southern be ejected from the march, she looks to the camera and says "Y'all are crazy." The video ends.

Since being uploaded to YouTube, this video has accumulated 1.4 million views. Even after Southern re-branded herself in 2020 as a more "moderate" figure, after a year-long YouTube hiatus, this video remains available to watch on her channel. After all, she does not say anything overtly offensive—at least not anything that would be flagged by an algorithm. She is simply "asking questions." And those questions provoke unhinged, hysterical responses from the social justice warriors attending the march; so the story goes. But as critical onlookers, it is easy to see how this simple question carries with it ugly, Islamophobic assumptions about the repressiveness of Islam, on the incompatibility of this religion with so-called Western values. In the following chapters, I will consider how this kind of provocative, ambiguous, reactionary content functions and how it impacts the community of viewers who gather around it.

Looking in from the outside, this world of right-wing and far-right content production can seem vast and unwieldy. The invocation of "online far-right" calls to mind a range of actors: QAnon, incels, manosphere influencers, Groypers, the list goes on. In this thesis, I will shed light

on one area of this ecosystem, on one particular platform, with the aim of better understanding how racist ideologies travel and evolve within complex sociotechnical systems. To do so, I will draw on two and a half years of online data collection: over 75 hours of YouTube video content; 1050 YouTube comments; observation of 9 Facebook, Reddit, and Discord groups; and semi-structured interviews with 18 current and former viewers of reactionary YouTube channels. These data provide an archive of the reactionary YouTube community from 2015 to 2021. By interrogating these data sources, I explore what creators like Southern, who have "cracked the code" on reactionary video production, can tell us about the evolution of white supremacist discourse, the desires of YouTube viewers, and the platforms that sustain this enterprise.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

1. Introduction

This study asks: "What discourses about race circulate within and around 'alt-lite' YouTube channels?" In order to pursue this question, I draw on two key bodies of work: my conceptual framework is derived from the field of critical race theory—and the sub-field of critical whiteness studies in particular—while my empirical investigation builds upon the extant literature on digital manifestations of white supremacy. In this chapter, I aim to summarize the most relevant contributions from these fields and highlight crucial gaps within these ongoing scholarly conversations. The first two sections of the literature review establish the conceptual framework for the study, and the last three sections summarize the most relevant empirical works that have been undertaken on the topic.

Although online reactionaries champion a variety of regressive views targeting women, trans people, and religious minorities—different axes of marginalization that intersect and reinforce one another—this study focuses on the racial dimension of their politics. It is worth noting up front that this study's focal point is the United States in a field that is already US-centric. However, US vocabularies and understandings of racial hierarchy heavily influence discourses outside of the country due to the dominance of US-based media and technology companies, as well as US cultural hegemony (Daniels, 2009, p.176). As such, American reactionaries may lie within a global network of actors, but—at least among English-speaking YouTubers—the terms of discussion tend to be US-centric, regardless of where the personalities themselves are based. Thus, the following literature review focuses on American racial politics and information landscapes, which each have large ripple effects throughout the world.

In reviewing the literature on whiteness and white supremacy, I aim to highlight how racist structures bleed into all aspects of social life. This understanding of white supremacy as an ongoing political reality informs my subsequent analysis of reactionary YouTube personalities and their viewers. Throughout the work I characterize these figures not as aberrations from the discursive norm but as individuals who have capitalized on mainstream (mis)understandings about race and who have responded to incentives within the broader media ecosystem. I argue that "alt-lite" personalities complicate the dichotomy between "mainstream" and "extreme" in ways that elide

existing frameworks on online radicalization. I end with a discussion of how these personalities fit into historical trends in media production and consumption. By drawing together these different lines of enquiry, I hope to paint a holistic picture of the forces animating those who create and consume reactionary political content on YouTube.

2. Conceptualizing whiteness & white supremacy

2.1 Critical whiteness studies

This study draws its theoretical foundations from writings in the critical race theory (CRT) tradition. Building on these works, I use the term "white supremacy" to refer to the "unnamed political system" that channels wealth, opportunity, and social capital towards white people and away from those deemed non-white (Mills, 2014, p. 1). Although the laws which explicitly enshrined the dominance of white people throughout the globe have been repealed over time as a result of mass struggle and revolution, the legacy of European conquest, slavery, colonialism, segregation, and racist science continue to structure our everyday lives (Mills, 2014). This study accepts that "race," as it exists today—including categories such as "white" and "black"—is a modern phenomenon that arose in conjunction with European imperialism to sanction and legitimize the domination of non-Europeans (Mills, 2014; West, 1999; Fields & Fields, 2012). Within this broad framework, I draw especially from the sub-field of critical whiteness studies (CWS), which emerged in the United States in the 1990s, although Black thinkers like Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and WEB Du Bois had been writing about the social construction of whiteness throughout the 20th century.

Critical whiteness scholars start from the assumption that whiteness is a modern invention that has become tied to a range of material, social, and psychic advantages (Nayak, 2007). This body of work can be broadly categorized into two approaches. First, the historical materialist approach in contemporary theorizing on whiteness is commonly represented by Roediger's (1991) *Wages of whiteness*, which argues that the cementing of racial hierarchy during the reconstruction period prevented poor white people and newly freed Black people in the South from uniting in opposition to their mutual oppressor: property-owning white elites. Scholars rooted in a historical materialist approach often highlight how definitions of whiteness have shifted over time due to

changing economic and social forces, even within recent history, to assimilate those who had previously been racialized, or racially mark those who were previously white (Brodkin, 2011; Maghbouleh, 2017). Scholars have studied the long-term material impacts of being deemed white or non-white, even after outwardly racist policies have been struck down. For instance, Lipsitz (2006) traces the story of racial advantage in the United States from the New Deal to federal housing subsidies to urban renewal programs—all of which were designed to be race-blind but effectively enriched white people while disenfranchising Black people. Thus, policies that provided benefits for jobs predominantly held by whites or that offered subsidies for people to move into neighbourhoods that only welcomed whites did not need to say anything about race in order to reify racial hierarchy (Lipsitz, 2006). In fact, the very absence of explicit race talk contributes to the American myth of meritocracy (Sue, 2015).

Second, scholars within the culture and discourse tradition have sought to deconstruct representations of whiteness and dislodge it from its position as the "benchmark" or "default" against which all other experiences are compared. Dyer (1997), for instance, argues that while non-white people are seen as "having race," those designated as white people are afforded the privilege of simply being themselves, and as such possess "the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity" (p. 1). Such power enables white people to move through the world untethered to the weight of belonging to any racial category, whereas people of colour must perpetually contend with their meaning-laden racial identities. Researchers in this tradition are interested in how white subjects and spaces are represented in a wide range of media, from film to news coverage to video games (Montez de Oca, 2012; Dietrich, 2013).

Recent scholarship in this vein has examined the discursive construction of race amongst white people themselves, highlighting how a person can benefit from their race while continually denying its power. In these studies, white subjects consistently invoke the rhetoric of colourblindness when asked to consider how race may have affected their life experiences. Kanjere (2018) found that, when confronted with the reality of their privilege online, white subjects emphasized their own innocence and vulnerability—that they personally had done nothing to harm people of colour and so the constant discussions about racism perpetrated by white people, some in the distant past, were themselves accusatory and hurtful. This brand of "white race

discourse" (Foster 2013) obscures the systemic dimensions of racial oppression, focusing instead on individual actions and, by extension, individual innocence.

Current debates within critical whiteness studies revolve around what praxis-oriented research looks like (Toyosaki, 2016); the "discursive ontology" of whiteness versus its material and structural dimensions (Martínez Guillem, 2016); and the intense Anglo-American focus of the field, which ironically centers Western experiences over more globally coherent theories (Nayak, 2007). Comparatively, less scholarly attention has been dedicated to the study of white racial consciousness as a mainstream social trend, rather than a phenomenon that exists on the margins of society. In this study, I problematize the assumption that whiteness is predominantly invisible to those who embody it. By highlighting their own experiences of minoritization, reactionary internet personalities seek to undermine the narrative that only non-whites can be victimized on the basis of race. These claims are highly popular online and require interrogation. In undertaking this task, I join other scholars in the field of critical whiteness studies who examine the discursive construction of race amongst white subjects, "as they struggle to recuperate, reconstitute and restore white identities" in the post-civil rights era (Twine & Gallagher, 2008, p. 13).

2.2 Epistemologies of whiteness

This study asks how discourse reveals both political and epistemological assumptions: How do we come to know what we know about ourselves and others? Who has access to knowledge and how? Just as the wages, living conditions, and health outcomes of individuals today bear the imprint of past racial injustices, so too do our frameworks for understanding the world. Charles Mills (2014) argues that, from the start of the colonial period, European thinkers and leaders pointed to the "deficient rationality" of non-white people in order to classify them as sub-human and justify their own dominance over these groups. In *Toward a global idea of race* (2007), Ferreira da Silva demonstrates how racial logics underlie many of the foundational works of Western philosophy, from Descartes to Locke to Kant. This logic of raciality elevated the European subject as one possessing *interiority*, capable of ordering, defining, and governing various "others," human and non-human. Ferreira da Silva analyzes these texts to show how the European subject is framed historically as *transparent*—endowed with agency and reason—while Europe's "others" are

constructed as *affectable*—subject to the forces of nature. She extends her analysis to the United States, as American national identity has always been premised on a founding connection with Europe and the legacy of the Enlightenment.

This epistemology of whiteness amounts to, in the words of Mills, "an agreement to misinterpret the world… but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority" (p. 18). And indeed, the fields of history, philosophy, and science have all been deployed throughout history to legitimize racial hierarchy while erasing the crucial impacts of slavery and colonization on European dominance (Mills, 2014). Scholars have shown how the physical sciences were used to "prove" the inferiority of non-white races (West, 1999), how supposedly objective tools like statistics have been deployed strategically to construct the trope of "Black criminality" (Muhammad, 2011), and how modern genomics makes ontological assumptions that cast Indigenous people as primitive, less evolved beings (TallBear, 2013). Thus, the ideology of white supremacy permeates institutions of knowledge, past and present, and conditions who can act as a "knowing inquirer" and who forms the raw materials from which knowledge is extracted (TallBear, 2014).

Within contemporary political discourse, ideals of rationality, objectivity, and neutrality, continue to be invoked, especially by reactionary commentators, who position themselves as the inheritors of the Enlightenment tradition[6]. "Reason" is often taken up by these personalities to paint themselves as eminently rational while disparaging their political opponents as overly-emotional, hyper-sensitive, and self-serving (Hong, 2020). The frame of "objectivity" is also used by conservatives to dismiss the testimonies of marginalized people as "biased" while they, mostly white men, can seize the authority to speak on various issues from a place of neutrality. Thus, the legacy of the *transparent* subject continues to loom large in public discourse (Ferreira da Silva, 2007). This phenomenon becomes the subject of further investigation in Chapter 6.

[6] Starting in the mid-2000s, a collection of anti-democratic reactionary writers cohered online under the banner of the "Dark Enlightenment." The Dark Enlightenment blogosphere (also called the "neo-reactionary" movement)—led by software engineer Curtis Yarvin and philosopher Nick Land—grew in influence throughout the 2010s, and gained a powerful readership, including ex-Trump advisor and Breitbart Editor Steve Bannon (Gray 2017).

3. The discourse of white supremacy

3.1 Post-1960s racial discourse

Like other cultural studies scholars, I am interested in how power relations are negotiated in the realm of culture and discourse. In the Western anglosphere, mainstream discourses on race today can be traced back to the civil rights movement, which inaugurated a series of political and social transformations across the United States that led to widespread backlash—overt and covert (Omi & Winant, 2015; Anderson, 2020). In the US, the resentment of white Americans towards the demands and advancements of marginalized people coalesced around the narrative of the "silent majority," a term coined by Richard Nixon in his 1969 presidential campaign. Omi and Winant trace the evolution of code words such as "family values," "law and order," and "big government" as a way of mobilizing racist sentiments without deploying overtly racist language, which had become taboo under the post-1960s political consensus. Thus, the new status quo saw the rise of "reverse racism" and "colourblindness" as frameworks used by people in power to describe, and constitute, race relations (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Anderson, 2020). These frameworks simultaneously incorporated the language and demands championed by civil rights activists while denying the existence of systemic racism against non-white people.

It was not only mainstream conservatives and liberals who adopted these frameworks in discussing race and racism. Berbrier's (2000) research highlights how white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and the National Association for the Advancements of White People (NAAWP) evolved after the civil rights movement and embraced a "victim ideology" that framed advancements won by Black people, and other people of colour, as discriminatory attacks on the rights of white Americans. In their pamphlets and promotional material since the mid-20th century, these groups moved away from rhetoric that was explicitly hateful or derogatory towards non-white people and embraced the language of grievance: white people are discriminated against by affirmative action policies, denied the right to express pride in their heritage, and stigmatized as "racists" and "bigots" for drawing attention to these injustices (Berbrier, 2000). Most dramatically, this new cohort of white supremacists claimed that the white race itself was endangered due to low white birthrates, miscegenation laws, and high rates of non-white immigration. According to supremacist groups, these new policies and trends constituted an

existential threat to the white race and a form of "ethnic cleansing." Since the 1970s, these talking points have moved from fringe extremist groups into more mainstream conservative, and even liberal, spaces (Hughey, 2012).

The frame of colourblindness has proven to be just as durable, and even more expansive, than "reverse racism" in the post-civil rights era. The colourblind worldview holds that everyone is the same deep down, skin colour does not matter any more, and highlighting disparities between racial groups serves to increase division rather than overcome it (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Kanjere, 2018; DiAngelo, 2019). Colourblindness serves multiple discursive functions and has become the hegemonic[7] frame for talking about race since the 1960s, gaining traction amongst conservatives and liberals alike. Even as it obscures the structural dimensions of racism, reducing historically entrenched systems to a simple question of individual "hate" or "bigotry," colourblindness bestows upon its adherents an aura of tolerance and liberal acceptance of difference. By insisting on the irrelevance of race—often reduced in this worldview to "skin colour"—the discourse of colourblindness makes it impossible to talk about, and therefore address, ongoing racial harms: residential segregation, differential access to quality healthcare and education, mass incarceration, widespread police violence etc. The subsequent chapters will examine how these discourses constrain mainstream conversations about racism and pave the way for reactionary narratives about white vulnerability and dominance to take hold.

3.2 The "alt-right" and "alt-lite"

Scholars often link the current manifestation of white racial resentment to wider trends of globalization and neo-liberalism since the 1980s: in particular, the offshoring of high-paying manufacturing jobs, the decline of union power, and growing inequality (Brown, 2017). In *Strangers in their own land*[8], Hochschild (2016) presents an empathetic examination of this phenomenon,

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[7] In his essay "Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity," Stuart Hall (1996b) re-visits the concept of hegemony in the context of racial domination. He highlights how the ruling class wins the consent of the ruled not simply through force and coercion but also through hegemony: the winning of consent and the forging of alliances between groups that possess both overlapping and conflicting interests. The consensus around "colourblindness" across the political spectrum serves as a poignant example of hegemony at work.

[8] Despite the title of the book, Hochschild does not meaningfully engage with the reality that her respondents themselves are settlers, living on land that was inhabited by Indigenous peoples for millenia before their ancestors arrived.

based on five years of ethnographic research conducted among Tea Party supporters in Louisiana. Hochschild describes how the perceived mistreatment of "real" (ie. rural and white) Americans is not only material but also symbolic. Her informants felt themselves to be looked down upon and laughed at by the mainstream media and liberal elites: "You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored" (p. 144). Cramer (2016) calls this the "politics of resentment" and highlights how white Americans living in rural areas feel ignored, underserved, and disrespected by those living in cities. The language of decline, even apocalypse, underpins contemporary discourses of white resentment. Brown (2017) dubs this sense of social castration and desire for restored entitlement as "apocalyptic populism." Implicit within this worldview is the belief that working white people are being erased from the prosperous America that they allegedly built.

While this framing has been popular within both media and academic discussions of white racial resentment, especially in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election, Bhambra (2017) and others have criticized Hochschild for "methodological whiteness"; that is, failing to account for "the role played by colonialism and race in the very structuring of [the] world." Bhambra criticizes Hochschild for overstating the class anxieties of her respondents while obscuring the fact that neither they, nor Trump voters more generally, were primarily from the working class. She identifies a recurring pattern whereby journalists and academics have mis-described white middle-class voters as a romanticized version of the working class. While Hochschild's respondents were indeed from "one of the poorest, least educated" states in the US, Louisiana, they were relatively privileged within that context; in Louisiana, it is the Black descendants of enslaved people who are the poorest and who have suffered disproportionately under neoliberal policies since the 1980s. These communities are barely mentioned in Hochschild's work. Bhambra (2017) writes, "what is at issue is the way in which data and arguments are being distorted to support a particular narrative of the exceptional distress of these populations that is not borne out by the evidence." And indeed, other scholars have argued that the flaring up of white supremacist violence in the United States is tied not to economic decline in real terms but rather the perception that non-white others are gaining power relative to white Americans (McVeigh & Estep, 2019; Anderson 2020). This form of racial backlash has been ascendant not only in the US but also other Western nations, as

reflected in the renewed popularity of far-right political parties, the demonization of non-white and immigrant populations in the press, and the uptick in white supremacist organizing and violence (Geary, Schofield, & Sutton, 2020).

Against this backdrop of growing racial resentment, the rise of the "alt-right" in mainstream politics has been the result of purposeful strategizing on the part of far-right activists and intellectuals. In 2008, Paul Gottfried, a humanities professor and self-identified "paleo-conservative," founded the HL Mencken club alongside Richard Spencer, a "young and rising star" of the far right (Hartzell, 2018; Michael, 2017). The term "alt-right" was first used by Gottfried in a 2008 speech, during which he situated the movement in opposition to mainstream conservatism—particularly the neo-conservatives who held power within the Republican party at the time—and argued that it was irrational to expect the same outcomes for all groups because not all groups had the same capabilities (Hartzell, 2018).

In the same time period, Andrew Breitbart founded Breitbart News, which sought to influence American politics by mobilizing conservatives around culture war issues such as illegal immigration and political correctness (Michael, 2017). This re-orientation proved to be extremely fruitful and was on full display in the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, whose campaign team was led by then-Breitbart chairman Steve Bannon. In 2010, Richard Spencer launched alternativeright.com where he pushed a message of pro-white race consciousness and tried to re-brand white nationalism as a legitimate political movement (Michael, 2017). The following year, he was appointed the president of the National Policy Institute, a white supremacist think tank founded and bankrolled by William Regnery II, the wealthy heir of a textile fortune (Risen, 2021). The Rebel Media was launched in 2015 by Canadian conservative activist Ezra Levant and launched the careers of far-right figureheads Faith Goldy, Lauren Southern, and Gavin McInnes, amongst others. In 2016, Bannon declared Breitbart News "the platform for the alt-right," emphasizing the movement's anti-establishment conservatism.

While the "alt-right" looms large in studies of the far-right online, this study does not focus on the most extreme figures within this coalition. Instead, it looks at a cohort of reactionary personalities commonly called the "alt-lite"—a pejorative coined by "alt-right" figures to refer to those who broadly aligned with their ideology but who were not willing to openly embrace the

goal of establishing a white ethnostate. The term emerged to identify a rift within the reactionary pro-Trump alliance after self-avowed members of the "alt-right" were outed for raising Nazi salutes at a conference in November 2016. This controversy led several high-profile reactionaries to publicly disavow the "alt-right," despite having associated with and worked alongside the white nationalist movement throughout the 2016 Trump presidential campaign (Hawley, 2019; Marantz, 2020).

This category of "alt-lite" personalities has received far less attention among scholars than the "alt-right", despite their significantly greater reach (Hawley, 2019). Those who have written about the "alt-lite" emphasize how these figures distance themselves from explicit white supremacy and white nationalism, opting instead for the language of "civic" nationalism (Marantz, 2020). Scholars have also argued that these personalities serve as a step on the far-right radicalization pathway by introducing controversial ideas about race and gender to mainstream audiences (Lyons, 2017). In Chapter 4, I will look more closely at this under-studied term and challenge some of the conclusions drawn by scholars on the nature of this group. My aim in studying this branch of the online right is to focus on the personalities with the greatest popular appeal and to investigate how these individuals straddle the line between "extreme" and "mainstream." Indeed, these terms themselves are increasingly fickle in an era when US presidential candidates can openly spout racist stereotypes and still win elections and when Tucker Carlson reaches millions of viewers with his brand of white grievance politics every day. This study aims to make sense of this complex discursive environment by examining those who operate at the edge of acceptability.

4. Reactionary communities online

4.1 Platform racism

This work draws upon, and aims to contribute to, the existing literature on race and digital cultures. Early internet researchers suggested that online communication would enable disembodied identity "play," wherein individuals, liberated from their offline bodies, could assume radically different online personas (e.g. Hansen, 2006). For the most part, this vision did not come to pass, as dominant commercial platforms adopted business models that relied on users' adherence to a

fixed identity, as visual representations of the self proliferated throughout social media, and as users chose—more often than not—to connect with people they already knew offline (Marwick, 2013). Meanwhile, Nakamura's (2008) work showed that even in anonymous or pseudonymous environments, online communities assumed a default user who was white, male, and straight. When users revealed that their identity differed from this default, for example, in multiplayer games, they were often subject to racist and sexist attacks from other players (Gray, 2015).

As social media platforms like Facebook grew ubiquitous, scholars shifted their attention to online self-presentation. Informed by Goffman's front-stage/back-stage formulation, Grasmuck et al. (2009) found that Black, Latino, and Indian ancestry college students demonstrated high levels of colour-consciousness in their social media profiles and actively highlighted their racial identities online. In her book, boyd (2014) uses ethnographic methods to study teenage internet use and found students' tastes in online platforms were informed by discourses of racial difference. She observed that white and middle-class students left MySpace—which they saw as increasingly "ghetto"—in the mid-2000s for Facebook, while Black and brown students did not (p. 34). Other scholars have explored how people of colour navigate online platforms and carve out spaces to have candid conversations with one another (Hughey, 2008; Parker & Song, 2006). Public sphere theory has been taken up by researchers to characterize the function of online communities like Black Twitter, which Hill (2018) describes as a "digital counterpublic." Brock (2012) illustrates how the practices of Black Twitter users interact with the trending topic algorithm to amplify their conversations. He writes, "Black Twitter hashtag domination of the Trending Topics allowed outsiders to view Black discourse that was (and still is) unconcerned with the mainstream gaze" (p. 534). I argue in Chapter 4 that the visibility of this content, on Twitter and other platforms, triggered a reactionary backlash against progressive people of colour online.

In her 2012 literature review and critique of how race has been studied by internet scholars, Daniels argues that the field has been under-theorized and urges researchers to critically examine how whiteness manifests online. With the renewed visibility of white nationalist movements in Western democracies (Brown, 2017), scholarly focus has indeed turned in this direction. Research on far-right extremism has shown how white supremacist and other reactionary groups have

adopted new technologies to amplify, monetize, and mask their ideologies (Daniels, 2018; Ganesh, 2020; Massanari, 2017). In this way, white supremacists act as "innovation opportunists," who exploit platform affordances and moderation blind spots to advance their ideological goals (Daniels, 2018). For instance, Daniels (2009) work documents how white supremacists disguise their propaganda through "cloaked websites," which masquerade as educational resources on race-related subjects (eg. www.martinlutherking.org) while pushing racist conspiracies. These groups have also used search engine optimization (SEO) strategies to ensure their websites appear at the top of search results when users query terms like "black on white crimes" (Noble, 2018). When attention is drawn to these dangerous patterns, US-based technology companies have historically adopted a "cyber-libertarian" stance, claiming that "information wants to be free" and that their platforms simply facilitate access to information, even as their algorithms rank, curate, amplify, and promote some ideas over others (Dahlberg, 2010; Daniels, 2015). Within this online ecosystem, reactionary actors are driven not only by their political agendas but also by the online attention economy, which rewards engagement and thus incentivizes sensational, outrageous, and emotionally salient content (Harsin, 2015; Persily, 2017).

Despite optimism amongst liberals and progressives in earlier eras of social media, recent scholarship has shown that, in the US context, right-wing activists are better poised to leverage the benefits of digital technologies when compared to their left-wing counterparts. Schradie's (2019) research on the "digital activism gap" found that groups with greater access to resources, organizational infrastructure, and an "evangelizing" approach to politics fared better on social media in terms of engagement. In her fieldwork, it was conservative organizations that were most successful in their efforts to spread ideological information online, as compared to progressive organizations that attempted to use social media to organize their movements. Research by Twitter has shown that right-wing politicians are algorithmically amplified to a greater extent than their left-wing counterparts (Huszar et al., 2021). Thus, despite their own rhetoric, social media companies do not serve as neutral "platforms" for speech (Gillespie, 2010); instead, they present a range of affordances and incentives that shape the behaviours of content creators and consumers alike.

4.2 Networked harassment

Despite the persistent trope that radicalization takes place in "dark corners of the internet," firsthand testimonies and cross-platform studies have shown that mainstream social media platforms—YouTube, Facebook, Twitter—have been some of the most effective at disseminating racist, Islamophobic, misogynistic, and transphobic ideas (Davey et al., 2020; Roose, 2019). Within this highly polarized landscape, social media platforms not only allow reactionaries to share content but also enable them to coordinate large-scale "networked harassment" campaigns against individuals who disagree with them (Lewis et al., 2021; Massanari, 2017). The affordances of mainstream social media platforms have provided the tools for harassers to coordinate hundreds, even thousands, of geographically dispersed, anonymous individuals to attack their victims at an unprecedented scale. Posts on image boards like 4chan and 8chan disappear after a matter of hours, making it difficult to trace harassment campaigns back to individual organizers. And even mainstream sites like Facebook and Reddit rely on user moderation, with some lax moderators allowing, or even encouraging, bullying and harassing behaviours (Massanari, 2017).

These practices of networked harassment are deployed disproportionately against people of colour, women, and trans people, especially when they transgress or challenge the norms of geek masculinity that pervade many online spaces. In communities oriented around gaming, coding, science fiction, and other hobbies, "masculine self-esteem and social capital are built through specialized technical knowledge and skills, rather than mainstream indices of masculinity such as athletic or heterosexual prowess" (Salter, 2017, p. 250). Within communities where these technical skills are prized as indicators of masculinity, the arrival of women and trans people in particular are read as incursions. This hostility is heightened when women, LGBTQ people, and people of colour complain about their treatment within these environments.

Scholarly investigations often trace the weaponization of trolling techniques to online gaming communities (Salter, 2017; Braithwaite, 2016; Mantilla, 2013). Gamergate looms large in the literature as a defining moment in this history, when male gamers' resentment of perceived outsiders fuelled vicious personal attacks against female developers and writers who dared to call attention to the misogynistic and racist overtones of gamer subculture. The crusade of these gamers gained momentum when charismatic right-wing internet personalities like Milo

Yiannopoulos, who had previously expressed little interest in gaming, adopted the cause as a platform to wage war against "social justice warriors" and political correctness (Salter, 2017). Since Gamergate gained notoriety in 2014, a thriving "manosphere" has coalesced online, including but not limited to men's rights activists, pick-up artists, and incels. There is significant overlap between the ideology of the manosphere and that of the "alt-right," both of which are concerned with the victimization—and fallen status—of white men in the face of growing social justice movements (Marwick and Caplan, 2018).

When it comes to the rhetoric of networked harassment, scholars have paid particular attention to the concept of trolling, a term that encompasses a range of online behaviours. Trolling strategies range from covert (ie. luring individuals into frustrating discussions that are irrelevant, pointless, or circular) to overt (ie. openly antagonizing or shocking users with offensive statements on a taboo subject like rape), but all seek to provoke an emotional response from the target (Hardaker, 2015). While trolling is now strongly associated with the online right, Phillips (2015) traces the practice to early-2000s internet subcultures that emerged with image-posting boards like 4chan. Participants in these early trolling communities relished mocking and shocking the mainstream but were not always overtly political. Phillips also highlights how trolling tactics align with longstanding American principles and norms: the "adversary method" of cool, detached, hyper-rational debate; the embrace of unrestrained freedom; and free speech absolutism. In Chapter 5, I will explore how these principles are frequently invoked by reactionary YouTubers and their audiences to cast racist performances as legitimate speech.

4.3 Beyond "disinformation"

In this study, I aim to move away from "disinformation" models of understanding the right-wing digital media landscape. Whereas "disinformation" evokes instances of bad information—which deviate from the norm of good, trustworthy information—this study looks at how white supremacist narratives emerge out of common sense and widely-held understandings of racial difference. Thus, these narratives are not aberrations from the norm but baked into mainstream conceptions of racial hierarchy since the civil rights movement. Similarly, I eschew "dark corners of the internet" framings of online extremism, which exceptionalize and sensationalize digital

manifestations of racism, to explore how reactionary personalities use social media platforms to reach wide swathes of the population, most of whom are located within "mainstream" political discourse.

Popular writing on disinformation has also tended to construct conservatives as passive recipients of information who have been influenced by "fake news" and foreign actors to act against their own interests (Bernstein, 2021). However, qualitative scholarship on this topic has shown that those who buy into reactionary narratives are active agents in their news consumption who seek out views that affirm their beliefs and sense of self (Tripodi, 2018). Thus, the literature on disinformation has focused disproportionately on the supply of misleading, polarizing, and sensational news at the expense of studying the demand for these narratives from news consumers themselves (Munger & Phillips, 2020). This supply-side approach imagines the media's chief role as transmitting information, obfuscating how we also use media to serve our desires, calm our fears, and affirm our beliefs (Hagood, 2020; Marwick 2018).

Scholars have started to subvert the framing of disinformation as an exceptional or uniquely contemporary phenomenon. For instance, researchers at UNC CITAP argue in their syllabus on critical disinformation studies that disinformation has existed historically as "a key way in which whiteness in the United States has been reinforced and reproduced," from justifying Japanese incarceration to the trope of the welfare queen (Marwick et al., 2021). Reddi, Kuo, and Kreiss (2021) use "identity propaganda" to highlight how media narratives "target and exploit identity-based differences to maintain existing hegemonic social orders and/or undermine challenges to extant political power." Their analysis shows how misleading, sensationalizing, and harmful media narratives reflect longstanding tropes about racialized others. Similarly, Marwick's work (2018) finds that the articles which perform best on social media are those that build on "deep stories" already in circulation within mainstream conservative discourse. This dissertation builds on these nascent approaches, which explore how the media have long exacerbated and profited from social inequalities.

In general, this thesis uses the language of "white supremacist discourse" in place of broader terms like "disinformation," "misinformation," and "propaganda." My analysis of white supremacist discourse is not concerned with disproving or debunking false information but rather

examining how YouTube videos shape and reflect the "deep stories" held by their audiences about politics and difference. Furthermore, focusing specifically on white supremacist discourse allows me to go deeper in my analysis, connecting the rhetoric under examination to broader histories of racial harm and structures that perpetuate racial hierarchy.

5. Right-wing YouTube

5.1 YouTube's affordances & reactionary influencer culture

Due to a confluence of technological, cultural, and economic factors, YouTube has proven to be fertile ground for many reactionary influencers. This study considers how white supremacist discourse on YouTube interacts with the micro-celebrity practices that proliferate on the platform. Lewis (2020) documents how YouTubers engage in micro-celebrity practices in order to cultivate an aura of authenticity and trustworthiness while differentiating themselves from mainstream media outlets. For instance, political YouTubers often divulge personal information, film videos from their homes, and adopt the aesthetics of "citizen journalism": shaky camera work, interviews with people "on the ground," and filmed confrontations with authority figures or political opponents.

YouTube's affordances also give influencers a great deal of flexibility in terms of form and content. Unlike traditional news broadcasters who are constrained by time slots and journalistic norms, reactionary YouTubers are able to accommodate a variety of formats on their channels: from short "takedown" videos to hours-long debates and interviews. These long-form videos provide viewers with in-depth discussion and coverage they are unable to find in mainstream news. And indeed, conservative influencers often dismiss mainstream news outlets as superficial, sensational, and biased in favour of liberals (Lewis, 2020). By contrast, reactionary YouTubers tend to position themselves as speakers-of-truth and inheritors of the Enlightenment tradition (Hong, 2020). As Hong writes, "Influencers… claim their places as standard-bearers of Facts and Reason not so much through the exact factuality of individual claims, or by constructing a logically consistent theory of politics and culture, but by building a recognizable style for confrontation and argument, solidarity and pleasure." In other words, for many right-wing YouTubers, Reason is a *brand aesthetic* as much as it is an intellectual ideal. The aesthetic of Facts and Reason often involves

"destroying" liberals in debate settings, a confident and aggressive disposition, and the rapid-fire deployment of supporting evidence such as statistics and news headlines.

These practices by YouTube influencers have proven to be popular with viewers as well as lucrative for some creators. YouTube is different from other mainstream social media platforms in that the company shares advertising revenue with video creators through the YouTube Partner Program (YPP), as discussed in Chapter 1. At the time of writing, content creators can apply to the YPP if they have over 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours over the past year. The amount paid out to YouTubers ranges significantly based on the types of videos they make and the number of views they receive, but the financial rewards are enough for many popular creators to quit their day jobs and commit to YouTube full time (R. Lewis, 2018). However, this arrangement can be precarious for creators as YouTube reserves the right to "demonetize" videos or entire channels that are deemed to be inappropriate for advertisers. This precarity has grown more acute over the past six years, as YouTube has made changes to both its recommendation algorithm and monetization policies in response to concerns about extremist, lewd, and violent content proliferating on the platform (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020).

In recent years, right-wing YouTubers have pointed to the demonetization of their videos as evidence of left-wing bias and censorship at the company, despite the fact that creators across the political spectrum have been subject to demonetization (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). Given these challenges, YouTubers have had to rely more heavily on fans to contribute to crowd-funding campaigns, pay for subscription packages to access exclusive content, or purchase branded merchandise. This financial dependency on fans incentivizes reactionary influencers to be highly responsive to supporters and to demonstrate their accountability by updating them on the channel's finances, highlighting pressures facing the channel, and interacting with fans on live streams and in-person meetups (R. Lewis, 2018). Despite these complexities, YouTube continues to be an important launching pad for reactionary personalities, who use the platform to cultivate long-term, loyal fan bases[9] (Hosseinmardi et al., 2021). Thus, YouTube personalities serve not only as sources of news and commentary but also as micro-celebrities with whom fans form close

[9] Joe Rogan gained fame and notoriety once he started uploading his podcasts in video form on YouTube. After gaining an audience on the platform over the course of almost 8 years, he signed a $200 million dollar deal to produce his podcast exclusively for Spotify in May 2020 (Rosman et al., 2022).

relationships over time (Lewis, 2020). This unique positioning makes them a highly influential and understudied class of political actors.

5.2 Radicalization on YouTube

Following the 2016 US presidential election, social media platforms drew critical attention from the press and legislators. In 2018, former YouTube engineer Guillaume Chaslot went public with his concerns about the platform's recommendation system, pointing to the potentially radicalizing influence of the popular website on users (P. Lewis, 2018). Given this early framing, academic research on YouTube radicalization was initially focused on the platform's recommendation algorithm, which various individuals cited as leading them down right-wing and far-right "rabbit holes" (Roose, 2019; Evans, 2018). As such, quantitative studies have largely been concerned with proving or disproving the radicalizing effect of the algorithm, with differing conclusions. For instance, Ribeiro et al. (2020) observed the migration of commenters from mainstream to more extreme channels over time, suggesting that viewers were indeed watching increasingly radical content on the platform. Meanwhile, Munger & Phillips' (2020) study found that viewership of far-right channels peaked in 2017 and has since been in decline, whereas more mainstream conservative and liberal channels have gained viewers in that period. They suggest that these findings demonstrate the greater importance of audience preference over algorithmic influence. Echoing these findings, Hosseinmardi et al's (2021) paper analyzed the browsing histories of a representative sample of the US population (N=309,813) over the course of 4 years (2016-2019) and found little evidence of users being driven towards more radical content by the YouTube algorithm. They did, however, find that videos categorized as "anti-woke" gained in popularity and watch time over that period. Their study represents the most comprehensive analysis on this question at the time of writing.

Within these quantitative studies, however, radicalization is operationalized as the consumption of progressively more "extreme" videos. These studies do not and cannot capture how even "mainstream" conservative or "anti-woke" videos (which usually do not fall under far-right categories in these studies' typologies) can also have profoundly destabilizing effects on viewers' worldviews, for instance undermining trust in mainstream media and research institutions.

Qualitative research on this topic has highlighted how the networked nature of reactionary YouTube channels can mainstream fringe ideas (R. Lewis, 2018). For example, a right-wing personality with a large following on YouTube might interview a far-right conspiracy theorist or white supremacist on their show, thereby introducing the fringe figure to a broader spectrum of YouTube audiences. However, no studies at the time of writing have undertaken qualitative research involving those who watch reactionary YouTube content. In light of this research gap, this study seeks out respondents from within this group in order to establish a more well-rounded understanding of how reactionary discourse on YouTube circulates offline.

6. The conservative media ecosystem

6.1 The outrage machine

To avoid an ahistorical account of reactionary online influencers, it is important to emphasize that the rhetorical strategies taken up by these figures were pioneered by an earlier generation of American media personalities. Hemmer (2016) traces the conservative backlash to mainstream news to the 1940s and 50s, when those who opposed the New Deal set out to create an outlet for their discontent in the form of conservative radio shows. The emergence of conservative talk radio in the early 1960s presented a vocal challenge to the growing liberal consensus on racial integration and President Kennedy's political agenda. Later in the 1960s, President Nixon imported his resentment of mainstream media into operations at the White House when he set up an office, led by Pat Buchanan, specifically for the purpose of monitoring and responding to what he perceived as biased coverage of his presidency (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014).

Political communication scholars trace the acceleration of talk-based and opinion-driven political programming to the deregulation of media industries during Reagan's presidency (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Young, 2019). With the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, broadcasters were no longer compelled to balance their coverage by airing opinions from both sides of the ideological spectrum. Regulations requiring airtime for informational programming and limiting concentration of media ownership were also repealed during this era. This changed regulatory landscape opened up opportunities for broadcasters to create more talk and opinion-based programming, which were cheap to produce and engaging to audiences. Under these

loosened rules, media outlets like Fox News were also empowered to shift their news coverage from more traditional reporting to outright advocacy (White, 2018).

In their 2014 book, Berry and Sobieraj track the rise and proliferation of "outrage" programming in the post-1980s American media sphere. They define outrage as political content which is personality-centered, reactive, engaging, and ideologically driven. Berry and Sobieraj point out that outrage programs (eg. Rush Limbaugh on Fox News and Glenn Beck on talk radio) generally do not break new stories but instead respond to and critique existing coverage, reinterpreting current events with an ideological spin. Outrage content reassures audiences that they are on the morally correct and intellectually superior side while diminishing political opponents as stupid, immoral, and ill-informed. These characteristics are replicated, and heightened, amongst reactionary YouTube personalities, who add their own unique mix of micro-celebrity and citizen journalism practices.

Over the past three and a half decades, the tilting of mainstream news towards outrage and other opinion-based programming is correlated with decreased levels of trust in news media. For instance, a 1976 Gallup poll found that "trust in news" among Americans was at 72% whereas by 2016, that number had fallen to 32% (Swift, 2016). Benkler et al. (2018) demonstrate in their book *Network Propaganda* how this distrust has been leveraged by "alternative" media companies on the right, which do not subscribe to journalistic norms and actively challenge the legitimacy of mainstream news institutions. These largely digital outlets thus make up an insular and self-reinforcing "right-wing media ecosystem," wherein misinformation and conspiracy can circulate with relatively little intervention. The "alt-lite" YouTube channels studied in this thesis form a part of this ecosystem, and in the following chapters, I explore the role that these channels play within an evolving media landscape.

6.2 Interpreting media messages

One of the thorniest and least resolved areas of media studies remains the question of media effects: what impacts do media messages have on individuals' beliefs and actions? This study does not seek to quantify the effects of reactionary YouTube videos on viewers. Rather, I aim to understand how people interpret and interact with this content in the context of their everyday

lives. What narrative tropes resonate? How do ambivalent, ironic, or humorous moments land with viewers? How do these videos fit into people's pre-existing media diets? These are the questions that qualitative research can answer. Very few studies have examined these questions when it comes to online right-wing content due to the difficulty of accessing subjects who are geographically dispersed and often wary of outsiders. However, researchers have taken on this subject when it comes to conservative media more broadly.

Tripodi's (2018) ethnographic work with conservatives in the US southeast found that right-wing news readers and viewers engage in the practice of *scriptural inference*: that is, using Christian "theological teachings to unpack texts like the Constitution or other forms of media" (p.18). These practices of close reading, re-visiting founding documents, and tracing news stories back to primary sources engender a skeptical orientation to mainstream media. This skepticism often led her participants to "fact-check" claims made in the media by using search engines like Google or content-sharing platforms like YouTube, which were framed by participants as neutral reservoirs of information. These findings are supported by other studies (Schradie, 2019) which show that conservatives are more likely to check multiple sources to verify news stories than liberals. Tripodi's findings are compelling and highly relevant to this study, which looks at similar practices of media literacy, fact-finding, and truth-seeking among a broader demographic of highly online conservatives. In Chapter 6, I argue that these practices of scriptural inference derive not only from Christian teachings but also from a broader epistemic individualism that pervades right-wing spaces online.

This study asks how people understand ambivalent, outrageous, and ironic political media, which are hallmarks of "alt-lite" content (Main, 2018; Munger & Phillips, 2020). In this realm, studies over the decades have shown how genres like satire and parody are not always interpreted in the way that creators intend. For instance, Vidmar & Rokeach (1974) found that conservatives saw the bigoted protagonist of *All in the Family*, Archie Bunker, in a decidedly positive light, despite the intentions of the show's producers. More than three decades later, an analogous study revealed that a significant portion of conservative viewers of *The Colbert Report* believed that Steven Colbert was only pretending to be joking about his subject matter and in fact agreed with the views espoused by his character (Lamarre et al, 2009). Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) found in

their interviews with viewers about the film *Rush Hour 2* that, while none of their respondents identified the film's use of stereotypes as racist or offensive, notions of racial difference were subtly legitimized with the logic of "it's funny because it's true." Moreover, audience members claimed that the stereotypes were harmless because they were presented in a comedic context and thus people knew not to take the representations seriously. These findings support arguments made by critical race theorists that racial stereotypes exist within deeply entrenched systems of representation, and thus tend towards their own reinforcement, despite the intentions of creators and the agency of viewers (Omi, 1989).

7. Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, scholars across disciplines have written rigorously on the subject of white supremacist discourse in online spaces. However, there remain substantial gaps within the literature as well as assumptions that should be problematized. This study addresses three of those areas. First, the focus on so-called "alt-lite" channels presents a unique opportunity to better understand right-wing micro-celebrities who straddle the line between extreme and mainstream. How do these individuals maintain this tenuous position, and what do they gain from doing so? This study seeks to complicate current understandings of online "radicalization pathways," which assume that radicalization occurs when individuals are exposed to content that is more and more ideologically extreme over time. Instead, I examine how people's politics and identities are shaped by ongoing engagements with "borderline" or "edgy" content creators. I also emphasize both the continuities and discontinuities between these figures and earlier iterations of conservative outrage icons.

Second, YouTube remains an understudied platform compared to Facebook and Twitter, likely due to the difficulties and inefficiencies of analyzing video content. The platform, however, continues to be one of the most-visited sites in the world—only second to Google (McLachlan, 2022)—with more than a billion hours of video streamed every day (Goodrow, 2017). YouTube has 1.7 billion unique monthly visitors, more than Facebook, Instagram, and Amazon, and the platform is increasingly integrated into people's everyday media diets (McLachlan, 2022). YouTube creators themselves are also professionalizing, with some individuals building their own media

empires and spinning off their YouTube notoriety into podcasts, merchandise, book deals, and speaking engagements. The platform's affordances, along with the medium of video, offer creators unique opportunities to build relationships with viewers and engage in micro-celebrity practices. This study takes seriously the potential influence of such a platform, which has already launched the careers of high-profile personalities from Jordan Peterson to Ben Shapiro to Joe Rogan.

Third, this study seeks out interviews with those who watch and engage with reactionary YouTube videos. Despite the multitude of publications on right-wing and far-right online communities, very few have spoken to individuals who are active in this space. This is a major research gap that limits our understanding of how online reactionary content actually circulates in people's lives. Understanding that conservative viewers are active agents in their media consumption and eschewing "fake news" framings, this study looks at both the supply of and demand for "alt-lite" media. Although many of the YouTubers studied in Chapters 4 and 5 are based in the United States, viewers of these videos are distributed across the English-speaking world. As such, interviews with audience members open up space to examine how these US-centric figures shape the politics and identities of those in other geographical contexts. In the following chapter, I will discuss in greater depth the process of securing and conducting these interviews, as well as how these interviews fit into the wider research methodology.

Chapter 3: Methodology

1. Introduction

This chapter will summarize, and reflect upon, the methods I used to answer my research questions. The discussion will reflect the iterative, non-linear reality of qualitative fieldwork, which can often be retrospectively smoothed over to form a coherent research narrative. I will begin by reflecting on the disciplinary traditions that inform this project's methods. Next, I will summarize the logic behind the study's qualitative research design, emphasizing what can be learned from each of the methods adopted—critical discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, and interviews—and how findings were triangulated between data sources. I will detail how each of these methods were operationalized, including sampling strategies, coding processes, and other logistics. I reflect on the ethical implications of each of these methods, as well as their limitations and affordances.

Throughout the chapter, I consider how my positionality as a non-white, female researcher oriented me in relation to my topic and respondents. While having a (relative) outsider status was a limitation in some ways, it also rooted me in an oppositional standpoint that informed my writing and argumentation in productive ways. Finally, I share some of the lessons learned from almost two years of interview recruitment among skeptical, and sometimes hostile, right-wing online communities. I hope these reflections can provide important context for subsequent chapters while also helping future researchers to effectively design their own studies on related topics.

2. Theoretical foundations: writing between disciplines

Having completed both of my previous degrees in interdisciplinary media studies departments, I have never felt strongly rooted within a traditional social science discipline, although my research incorporates theoretical and methodological tools from sociology, anthropology, and political science. However, when I read the transcript from Stuart Hall's 1988 lecture "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," some pieces fell into place. Towards the end of his lecture, Hall (1992) says:

> I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we've been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything. If you don't feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook.

Despite these shortcomings, Hall continues by meditating on what cultural studies has to offer, even amidst urgent affronts to human life and dignity:

> On the other hand, in the end, I don't agree with the way in which this dilemma is often posed for us, for it is indeed a more complex and displaced question than just *people dying out there*. The question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are the many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not? AIDS is a site at which the advance of sexual politics is being rolled back. It's a site at which not only will people die, but desire and pleasure will also die if certain metaphors do not survive, or survive in the wrong way. Unless we operate in this tension, we don't know what cultural studies can do, can't, can never do; but also what it has to do, what it alone has a privileged capacity to do. It has to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death. Those are the things cultural studies can address.

Reading those passages, I recognized the tension that Hall describes, between the urgency of social injustice and the ephemerality of culture as an analytical focal point. As Hall puts it, those of us who study culture work "in an area of displacement" that evades easy causal links to material injustice and inequity. At the same time, cultural researchers understand the symbolic realm—language, visuality, metaphor—as "a site of life and death," where society's many failings can be legitimated, reproduced, and sometimes subverted. Reading this piece helped me to identify cultural studies as a trans-disciplinary place to call home, and it is the methodological starting point for this thesis.

Cultural studies, as a field, is concerned with how the symbolic domain relates to the material world. The field adopts a broad, anthropological understanding of culture as "a whole way of life" (Williams, 1989) and "the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages, and customs of any specific historical society" (Hall, 1996b). Unlike anthropology, however, cultural studies grew out of the study of modern, post-WWII societies, and its founders conceived of culture as a site where power relations borne out of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy were negotiated (Bennett, 1998). Building on the legacy of these scholars, this study takes seriously "the constitutive and political nature of representation itself" (Hall, 1992), and

employs methods of close reading and textual analysis in order to better understand the world that is being imagined within right-wing YouTube spaces.

The topics explored in this study—disaffection with news media, people's information-seeking habits, processes of political identity formation—also fall under the domain of political communication. My work is not the first to bring together these two scholarly projects. In 2015, leading scholars within political communication asserted that the quantitative methods that had dominated the field for decades were "best suited to refining our understanding of established concepts in a relatively stable communications landscape, and less useful in generating new analytical categories to keep pace with changes in media and social structure" (Karpf et al., 2015). As new categories of political actors emerge—from social media influencers to podcast networks to click farms—qualitative research plays a crucial role in theorizing how these actors fit into and disrupt existing media ecosystems. In this thesis, I join a cohort of scholars (egs. Marwick, 2018; Reddi, Kuo & Kreiss, 2021) who have responded to Karpf et al.'s 2015 call to embrace qualitative scholarship as a way of advancing theory within the field. In particular, I aim to bring the theoretical commitments of cultural studies and critical race theory to bear on topics related to political communication, such as online toxicity, disinformation, and polarization. To do so, I employ a range of qualitative methods, outlined below, to make connections between the discursive constructions of race and the underlying politics of right-leaning communities online.

3. Research design

This thesis takes a qualitative mixed-methods approach to studying reactionary YouTube channels and their audiences. Mixed-methods research allows scholars to observe a subject from multiple angles, triangulating findings between different data sources (Hesse-Biber, 2010). In order to answer my research questions about the racial discourses circulating in and around "alt-lite" YouTube videos, I set out to analyze three discursive domains: the videos themselves, the comments posted in response to the videos, and interviews with those who watched them. I believed that analyzing these three sources of data would provide a holistic picture of the "alt-lite" YouTube ecosystem. It became clear, however, after manually coding over 1000 YouTube comments, that this particular data set did not lend itself to discursive analysis; the comments were

generally short, often repetitive, and lacked context (especially in a random sample). In the end, findings from this analysis did not enrich my understanding of racial discourses among reactionary communities online. As such, the research strategy described below focuses on the two sources of data that came to inform the subsequent empirical chapters: YouTube videos and interviews with audience members.

In analyzing YouTube videos, critical discourse analysis (CDA) emerged as an obvious tool for excavating the ideological formations that underly these cultural texts. CDA is not a well-defined empirical method, but rather a "cluster of approaches" that share a theoretical basis and a broad aim of investigating "social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized… by language use" (Wodak, 2001, p. 3). While scholars differ, sometimes quite significantly, in how they operationalize CDA, there are some common principles that unite the approaches. First, CDA is underpinned by a theory of social life and an interest in how social relations manifest through language (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak, 2001). Second, critical discourse analysts seek to problematize ideas that have been naturalized as "common sense," making explicit the underlying logic that often goes unstated (Wodak, 2001). Third, the analysis is usually conducted on a relatively small sample of texts, which are selected for being "typical" of a phenomenon (Meyer, 2001). And finally, CDA produces scholarship that is not just descriptive, but also normative in orientation (Fairclough, 2010). That is, scholars take a political stance and seek to actively undermine unjust power relations through their work.

Critical discourse analysts have advocated for CDA to be used in conjunction with other data sources and methods—an approach known as triangulation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Blee and Latif (2021) argue that triangulation is especially crucial in studies of the far right, where research subjects cannot always be taken at their word and sometimes even purposely mislead researchers. Following this recommendation, I aim to strengthen my arguments by corroborating findings from across three data sets and methods: critical discourse analysis of seven racially provocative videos, qualitative content analysis of 78 videos by "alt-lite" channels, and semi-structured online interviews with current and former viewers of reactionary YouTube channels. While each of these methods are qualitative in nature, I engaged in quantitative data collection at the start of my research process with the aim of obtaining a well-rounded sample of videos (Hesse-

Biber, 2010). For instance, to inform my sampling strategy, I undertook a literature review of scholarly and civil society sources and compiled a seed list of YouTube channels most frequently referred to as "alt-lite" (See Section 5.1 of this chapter). Once I arrived at my sample, I used CDA to complete close readings of selected "alt-lite" YouTube videos that embraced the rhetoric of racial provocation. Doing so enabled me to analyze the logics and assumptions underpinning these performances. In particular, I adopted a discourse-historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) that prioritized argumentation strategies, the internal logic of texts, the implications and insinuations of statements, and intertextual references over more linguistic considerations such as word order, turn-taking, grammar, and hesitation.

While completing data collection for CDA, I realized that the study would benefit from a more holistic exploration of what "alt-lite" means in the context of YouTube. Completing a critical discourse analysis of seven to ten videos would not allow me to make broader claims about the rhetoric of "alt-lite" YouTubers. As such, I set out to collect and analyze a larger sample of "alt-lite" videos using a grounded approach to qualitative content analysis. Grounded theory offers a useful juxtaposition to CDA; while the latter starts with a theory of social life, which informs subsequent analysis, the former advocates for a more inductive approach that focuses on the texts themselves as the basis for theory-building. The method was founded by sociologists Glaser and Strauss as a reaction to the pervasiveness of hypothesis-testing within the social sciences and was "designed to minimize the imposition of the researcher's own categories of meaning upon the data during the research process" (Willig, 2013, p.76). A grounded approach to qualitative research bypasses the close reading and granular analysis of language typical of CDA and allows researchers to explore discursive and thematic patterns emerging from a larger sample of texts.

Finally, I decided to take on interviews as a method in order to understand how racial discourses espoused by YouTubers circulate in online and offline communities. Adopting this method would allow me to fill a conspicuous gap in the literature on audience reception and answer my research questions in a more fulsome way. Doing interviews also enabled me to compare the claims of YouTubers on the impacts of their content against the actual experiences of viewers. I adopted a semi-structured approach to interviewing, which would give me the freedom to pursue interesting and unexpected insights from respondents while providing conversational scaffolding

for interviews where rapport and familiarity were not guaranteed. Following Harvey's (2011) guidance on conducting elite interviews, I asked a combination of open- and close-ended questions in order to keep the interviews varied and to collect different types of data, from demographic details to personal history to political viewpoints. After conducting and transcribing the interviews, I undertook a qualitative content analysis of the transcripts, adopting a grounded approach to coding.

The table below summarizes how each of these methods corresponds to my research questions and how they are integrated into the subsequent empirical chapters.

Table 1. *Research questions and corresponding methods*

Research Question	Chapter(s)	Data and methods
RQ: What discourses about race circulate within and around "alt-lite" YouTube channels?	4-7	Triangulating findings from all data sources
SQ1: How do they speak about whiteness and white people in their videos?	4	Content analysis of 78 videos uploaded by reactionary YouTube channels
SQ2: How do they speak about non-white people and communities?	4, 5	Content analysis of 78 videos uploaded by reactionary YouTube channels In-depth critical discourse analysis of 7 videos
SQ3: What is the function of racial "provocation" in their videos?	5	In-depth critical discourse analysis of 7 videos Interviews with 18 current and former viewers of reactionary YouTube content
SQ4: How are these discourses received and understood by viewers?	5, 6	Interviews with 18 current and former viewers of reactionary YouTube content

Although each of the chapters draws explicitly from one or two data sets, the arguments I present in them are informed by the sum of my data collection through the process of triangulation. In the diagram below, I visualize how triangulation between my three methods operated in this study, allowing me to make more robust empirical and theoretical claims.

Figure 1. *Triangulation between methods*

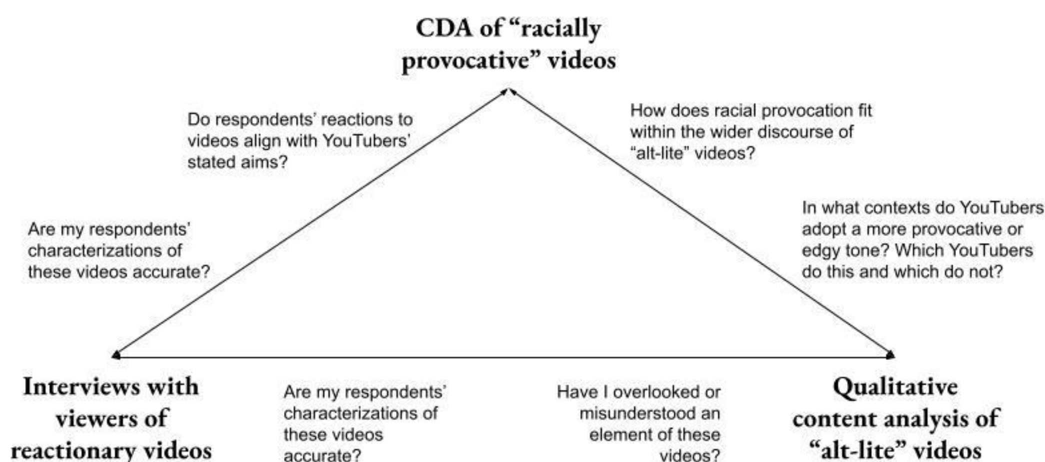


Figure 1 represents how each of the methods interacts with and strengthens the others. For instance, conversations with viewers can be used to problematize or corroborate the claims being made by YouTubers about how humour and provocation function in their content. Meanwhile, analysis of video content can help me to evaluate the accuracy of viewers' statements about the videos they watch. This process of triangulation shaped all of the arguments presented in this thesis.

4. Positionality and researcher well-being[10]

As with all interpretive social science research, my analysis was informed by my positionality as a Chinese-Canadian woman (Haraway, 1988). Most notably, my positionality kept me rooted in an oppositional standpoint in relation to my research subject. When watching videos, I would often brace myself when the subject turned to COVID-19 or immigration, knowing that around the corner, I might be confronted with a mocking remark or racist stereotype that could send my heart racing and leave me feeling embarrassingly exposed. Although disorienting, these moments served as reminders of what was at stake in this project: that is, the research matters because minoritized people—my friends, colleagues, and family—are harmed by reactionary rhetoric, because their

[10] This section draws upon conversations with researchers including Rebecca Lewis, Suzanne van Geuns, and Abigail Curlew. Passages from this section have been drawn from my personal essay for Can't Compute (Forthcoming 2023).

dignity and safety matter. Writing from a place of opposition, then, was not about discrediting or disbelieving my research subjects, but carefully tracing social trends to broader histories (and personal experiences) of harm and foregrounding how reactionary discourse impacts marginalized communities.

My positionality also presented practical considerations throughout the research process. Writing about right-wing online spaces from a critical standpoint comes with risks, as evidenced by the spate of networked harassment campaigns targeting researchers and journalists, especially women and people of colour (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Doerfler et al., 2021). Given this reality, I sought to mitigate the risk of being targeted as much as possible, while maximizing my chances of securing interesting, insightful interviews with respondents. In particular, I feared that my identity as a young Asian woman would immediately put respondents on edge, as their assumptions about me might override my attempts at fostering rapport and trust. I also feared that my racial identity could cause respondents to self-censor in conversations, leading to less candid interviews. As a result, I tried to keep my identity obscured throughout the interview process, never disclosing my name or using my image in interactions with potential respondents (the logistics of conducting interviews pseudonymously are detailed in Section 5.6 of this chapter). By conducting interviews without video, I could keep my identity—and more specifically my ethnicity—obscured, while also protecting the identities of respondents. As such, my mostly white respondents were not confronted by my racial difference during our conversations. In audio-only interviews, I could also leverage my Canadian nationality and accent to cultivate a degree of collegiality with my mostly American, British, and Canadian respondents—all of whom had largely positive feelings towards Canadians.

Although conducting research interviews came with many safety considerations, the most emotionally taxing portion of the research was watching hours of right-wing YouTube content. During interviews, I was privy to the life stories and idiosyncrasies of respondents, often hearing their pets or children in the background. Despite moments of nervousness and apprehension, our conversations tended to be easy and friendly in tone. On the other hand, YouTube videos presented no such reprieve; for the most part, they were relentlessly aggressive, slickly produced, and sometimes maddening to watch. Over time, the voices of these reactionaries began intruding

on my thoughts, asserting themselves into conversations that had nothing to do with them. For instance, while reading the works of progressive writers, I would find myself anticipating the attacks of far-right figures and justifying my beliefs to imaginary interlocuters. On one occasion, two of these figures even made a threatening appearance in a dream. Given these harmful effects, it was important to establish clear boundaries for the work. Despite the ethnographic sensibilities of this thesis—the desire to understand the internal norms, logics, and assumptions that govern a culture—I avoided the method of participant observation, which would involve becoming a participant in the field site, engaging with research subjects there, and being open to unplanned experiences (Hine, 2000).

While other scholars have conducted ethnographies with groups whose politics were antithetical to their own (Hochschild, 2012; Blee 1998; Hughey, 2012), immersing myself in reactionary online communities would involve participating in my own denigration in a way that did not feel necessary to answering the questions at hand. Adopting ethnographic methods would also open me up to increased risks, as unplanned interactions within right-wing online communities could quickly sour and turn to hostility or even harassment. As such, I engaged with my field sites in a systematic, controlled way, rather than allowing myself to become fully immersed within the ecosystem I was studying. For instance, I did not spend time lurking or interacting in online forums where I was recruiting respondents; I followed detailed sampling criteria to determine which videos I would watch; and in May 2021, I cut myself off from YouTube data collection in order to focus on analyzing materials already gathered over a two-year period. When interacting with respondents, I did so in one-on-one interviews, mostly outside of the platforms where they were recruited. In doing so, I was able to control when and under what conditions I engaged with my field site, a decision that allowed me to protect my identity, safeguard my well-being, and take time away from the data when needed.

5. Methods and data

5.1 Seed channels

As discussed in Chapter 1, my aim in writing this thesis is to study the discourse of reactionary YouTube channels, especially those that traffic in racial provocation. In order to pursue this topic,

I used the term “alt-lite” as a starting point to identify channels and personalities that engaged in the type of edgy, “borderline” political rhetoric I aimed to study. To start my sampling process, I undertook a literature review, compiling a list of YouTube channels that had been identified as “alt-lite” by scholars and civil society groups. Ultimately, I relied on seven sources, published between 2017 and 2020[11], that used the term and applied it to specific right-wing personalities and organizations. For the purposes of sampling, I narrowed my focus to a seed list of 13 YouTube channels that were referenced by at least two of the seven sources consulted (see Table 2).

Table 2. *YouTube channels most frequently identified as "alt-lite" in literature*

Channel name	Subs	Views	ADL (2017)	Lyons (2017)	Nagle (2017)	Main (2018)	Hawley (2019)	Munger & Phillips (2020)	Ribeiro et al. (2020)[12]
Milo	860K	136M	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Gavin McInnes	360K	42M	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y
Mike Cernovich	79K	2.7M	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y
Breitbart News	137K	23.6M		Y	Y	Y	Y		
Lauren Southern	712K	59M			Y			Y	Y
Brittany Sellner	126K	8.3M	Y						Y
Computing Forever	420K	100M						Y	Y
Lauren Chen	406K	45M						Y	Y
No Bullshit	660K	141M						Y	Y
Paul Joseph Watson	1.73M	413M						Y	Y
Rebel News	1.26M	464M			Y				Y
Stefan Molyneux	929K	283M						Y	Y
styxhexenhammer666	389K	195M						Y	Y

Note: Number of subscriptions and views retrieved from YouTube in September 2019 [13]

These 13 channels were my starting point for identifying relevant videos and other “alt-lite” channels. It is worth noting that some of these channels have been labeled “alt-right” by news outlets and civil society groups at different points in time. For the purposes of this study, the fact that they have been identified as “alt-lite” by at least two of the seven sources indicates that they

[11] The two papers consulted that were published in 2020 had pre-prints available online in 2019, which is when this data collection took place.
[12] This paper draws from the 23 channels Ribeiro et al. (2020) use as their initial seed list of “alt-lite” channels.
[13] InfoWars was listed as an example of an “alt-lite” media outlet by two of the sources, but was not included in the table because, by the time of data collection, the channel had already been permanently taken down by YouTube.

at least attempt to create distance between themselves and explicit white nationalist or white supremacist ideology.

5.2 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

In order to determine my sample videos for CDA, I wanted to establish a good understanding of each of the YouTube channels in my seed list and identify other potentially relevant creators. Starting from October 2019, I watched the three most-viewed videos from each of the channels in my seed list. Throughout this exploratory viewing period, I noted down key information about each channel, including frequency of uploads, recurring topics and formats, and viewership rates. I also made note of frequently suggested videos and channels that appeared in the recommendations sidebar. After observing that Steven Crowder's videos were repeatedly recommended and highly viewed—and knowing that he had been identified as "alt-lite" by one of my seven sources (Ribeiro et al., 2020)—I also watched the top 3 videos from his channel. To determine my sampling criteria, I compiled a list of race-related keywords which appeared in video titles or thumbnail images. After completing this process for all 14 channels, I yielded a list of 39 keywords and 3 key-images (see Appendix 1).

Table 3. *Sampled channels summary (CDA)*

Channel	Videos watched	Total watch time (mins.)	Average video length (mins.)	Average views (for videos watched)
Milo	45	517	11	314,367
Gavin McInnes	22	621	28	98,930
StevenCrowder	84	1772	21	1,691,330
Lauren Southern	24	211	9	592,780
TOTAL	**175**	**3121**		

Reflecting on my notes, I narrowed down my sample to four channels that captured the brand of provocative racial discourse I was interested in studying: Milo Yiannopoulos, Gavin McInnes, StevenCrowder, and Lauren Southern. Each of these channels mixed political commentary with jokes, pranks, and purposely shocking imagery. For these four channels, I viewed videos posted between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2019 that contained one of my keywords or key-images in the video title and/or video thumbnail image. Because of time constraints and

ethical considerations (discussed further in Section 5.4 of this chapter), I excluded from the sample any videos that had under 10,000 views. Due to the frequency and popularity of Crowder's uploads, I excluded from the sample any videos from his channel that had under 500,000 views. This sampling process yielded a list of 175 titles which totalled over 52 hours' worth of video watched (see Table 3).

In this second, more targeted viewing period, I input each of the videos watched into a spreadsheet, along with key details like number of views, date uploaded, number of comments, video length, likes, and dislikes. I also summarized the video's topic, format, guests, key arguments, and notable moments in a "Notes" section. Throughout the viewing process, I developed a typology of video types (Table 4) and a list of common rhetorical devices (see Appendix 2). The rhetorical device codes were developed iteratively over the course of the viewing period and provided a revealing look at some of the common argumentation strategies of "alt-lite" figures. At the end of the viewing period, I revisited my notes for each video and made sure that the rhetorical device and video type codes were consistently applied.

Finally, having developed an in-depth understanding of each of the four channels, I selected a purposive sample of 7 videos for critical discourse analysis (see Appendix 3). In keeping with the norms of CDA, I aimed to select "typical texts" which captured the "alt-lite's" provocative tone, rather than particularly outrageous or anomalous cases (Meyer, 2001). Although this sampling process was inevitably subjective, I was guided by the "video type" and "rhetorical device" codes assigned to the videos. As such, I chose videos that reflected a range of popular video types and demonstrated the most common rhetorical devices. Between the seven sampled videos, the four most common video "types" (Table 3.4) and the 13 most common rhetorical devices are represented (see Appendix 4).

Table 4. *Video types*

Type	Description	Videos viewed	Sampled videos for CDA
Talk show	Filmed in a studio, with producers (who are sometimes shown, sometimes not) and multiple segments	91	2
On the street	Documenting events taking place in public; sometimes speaking to passersby; minimal editing	25	1

Speaking to camera	Vlog-style talking head video, sometimes scripted; alone or appearance of being alone	15	2
Public speaking	Recorded public-speaking event (addressing a crowd)	10	1
Documentary	Mixture of "on the ground" footage, voiceover, and interviews	8	0
Promo	Short clip/montage with chief purpose of promoting a new show or subscription package	7	0
Sketch	Self-contained video telling a fictional narrative or story; often performing as a character	6	1
Interview	Two people speaking, both on screen, and one person predominantly asking questions	6	0
Prank	Purpose of video is to dupe or fool unknowing targets, who do not realize they are being recorded	4	0
Montage	Series of videos spliced together, with an overarching theme but no voiceover	3	0

To complete my critical discourse analysis, I manually transcribed each of my sampled videos, taking screenshots to capture the visuals that accompanied the video's text/audio. I drafted a CDA guide with a variety of questions drawn from Jager and Maier (2009), Reisigl & Wodak (2001), and my own research questions (see Appendix 5 for full list of questions). The CDA guide started with questions about structure. For example:

- What is the video's subject and context?
- What norms or conventions of genre are employed?
- Who is the implied audience?

Next, I moved on to the "fine analysis" (Jager & Maier, 2009) focused on rhetoric and underlying logic:

- What are the video's main arguments, and how are they stated or signaled?
- How are people and groups referred to and what traits are attributed to them?
- What is the overall "tone" of the video?
- Is the video ironic, or are there ironic moments? What are the said and unsaid meanings circulating around these moments (Hutcheon, 1994)?

Finally, I analyzed the video's visuals:

- What are the visual markers of genre?

- What are the visual "resources" that creators draw upon?
- What kinds of symbols and icons are used and what is connoted by these?

The aim of this interrogation was to make explicit the logics, assumptions, and argumentation strategies underpinning the sampled videos, as well as the said and unsaid meanings circulating around ironic moments. I used this guide to complete a close reading of the seven sampled videos, answering each of the 23 questions in the guide for every video. I then compared my answers across the seven documents, manually coding the completed CDA guides in order to identify recurring themes and findings.

5.3 Qualitative content analysis

As I was undertaking my data collection for CDA, I realized that my focus on four channels—and specifically instances of provocative racial humour within these channels—yielded a rather narrow understanding of the broader "alt-lite" YouTube space. I also noticed that videos in my sample tended to involve representations of non-white people and communities while leaving the subject of whiteness under-explored. This was a significant gap, as "alt-lite" figures persistently differentiate themselves from the "alt-right" by ostensibly rejecting white nationalism and white identity politics. As a result, I decided to engage in more comprehensive data collection to establish what "alt-lite" meant and what, if anything, united these channels on the subject of race. With Sub-Question 1[14] in mind, I devised a quota sampling strategy centred on how whiteness, in particular, was constructed by these figures who strategically eschew the language of white pride and instead position themselves as colourblind conservatives.

Over several months in late 2019 and early 2020, I re-visited each of the 13 seed list channels and, using YouTube's search function, queried the terms "white," "white privilege," and "white people" in order to surface videos that engage explicitly in discussions about whiteness[15]. Although these search terms inevitably missed out on more subtle, dog-whistle discussions of race and racism, "alt-lite" YouTubers do engage in forthright conversations about these topics, and I wanted my sample to be well-targeted, given the amount of time I had already spent watching

[14] SQ1: How do "alt-lite" YouTubers speak about whiteness and white people in their videos?
[15] This process was done in incognito mode on Google Chrome to prevent my personal browsing history from potentially influencing results.

reactionary YouTube videos. After deciding on these terms, I queried each of my search terms for all thirteen channels and input the top five videos returned into an excel spreadsheet; this process yielded a database of 151 unique videos. Of these, I viewed 78 videos, which—based on titles, thumbnails, and descriptions—met my sampling criteria:

1. Videos with over 10,000 views.
2. Videos that explicitly discuss whiteness in a North American context, or
3. Videos that explicitly discuss race or racism in a North American context.

Table 5. *Videos sampled from each channel by year (qualitative content analysis)*

Channel	Unique videos returned	Videos with over 10k views	Videos meeting all sampling criteria							
			2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Breitbart News	14	3								**0**
Brittany Sellner	11	11							2	**2**
Computing Forever	13	13			3	2	1			**6**
Gavin McInnes	14	12				1	1			**2**
Lauren Southern	11	11								**0**
Mike Cernovich	14	3								**0**
Milo	12	12			1	2				**3**
No Bullshit	13	13			1	8	3	1		**13**
Paul Joseph Watson	10	10		3	3	1	1			**8**
Rebel News	15	14		1	4	3	3	3		**14**
Roaming Millenial	11	11			2	1	3	1	4	**11**
Stefan Molyneux	13	13	1	1	1	2	2	1		**8**
Styxhexenhammer666	14	13		1		8	1	1		**11**
			1	6	15	28	15	7	6	**78**

As summarized in Table 5, three of the channels returned no videos that met the sampling criteria. In the case of Breitbart News, this was largely due to the channel's positioning as a source of breaking news, rather than commentary. As such, video titles and blurbs were largely descriptive and did not reference concepts like whiteness or white privilege. Both Breitbart News and Mike Cernovich's[16] videos also had low view counts, indicating that their followers engage more with their content on other platforms—such as Facebook and Twitter—rather than on YouTube. No videos from Lauren Southern's personal channel met the sampling criteria due to her relatively

[16] In addition to having low views, Mike Cernovich's YouTube channel also did not meet my threshold of having at least 100,000 subscribers.

infrequent posting and international focus; however, one of her videos for Rebel News did. Similarly, the sample includes two videos from Gavin McInnes's personal channel and five of his videos for Rebel News. The average video length was just over 14 minutes, with seven videos lasting over 30 minutes and two videos over an hour. In all, 1109 minutes (approximately 18.5 hours) of video content was viewed in this portion of data collection. Four of the videos had been previously viewed as a part of the CDA sampling process (as described in Section 5.2 of this chapter) but were re-watched for the purposes of this analysis.

Next, the sampled videos were subject to a qualitative content analysis (eg. Daniels, 1997; Berbrier, 2000). Adopting a grounded approach to content analysis, the coding process started with descriptive field notes that summarized each video's subject matter, key argument(s), setting, and imagery. In light of my research questions, I also noted down what claims regarding whiteness, or white people, were being advanced. The resulting field notes contained detailed descriptive summaries on each video, as well as key quotes and observations on how whiteness was framed or conceptualized. After I viewed all 78 videos once, I printed the field notes and manually annotated recurring themes and rhetorical strategies, developing codes at higher levels of abstraction. I then viewed some of the videos a second time in order to draw out further quotations and clarify emerging findings. During the data collection period, Gavin McInnes's, Stefan Molyneux's, and Computing Forever's channels were permanently banned from YouTube as the company sought to address concerns that the platform had a radicalizing effect on users. As a result, during the analysis stage, I accessed some of the videos through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.

5.4 Ethics: video analysis

The viewing, transcription, and analysis of YouTube videos raised several ethical considerations. Notably, I did not seek informed consent from the YouTubers whose videos I studied. This could be done ethically for a few reasons. First, I only analyzed videos that had been uploaded by well-known YouTube personalities with at least 100,000 subscribers. The content creators studied in this thesis did not upload their videos with the expectation of a limited or niche audience. Quite the opposite: they monetized their channels and publicized new videos across platforms to achieve

maximum visibility. In general, the videos uploaded only featured themselves and others who had agreed to take part in the recording as guests. On the private-public spectrum of online content, these videos fell comfortably in the realm of public (AoIR, 2019).

A second ethical concern was potentially amplifying the views of reactionary individuals through the publication and dissemination of my research. In order to mitigate this risk, I only conducted analyses of videos that had over 10,000 views uploaded by channels with over 100,000 subscribers to avoid highlighting videos and YouTubers who were not already well known. In the subsequent chapters, I generally do not name the videos being discussed within the body of the text. Within the References section, I include the URL of the videos (as required by the APA citation format) but do not include hyperlinks in order to avoid inadvertently serving their search engine optimization efforts. When quoting from YouTube videos in the following chapters, I always seek to critically interrogate the claims being made.

5.5 Limitations: video analysis

As with any method, qualitative textual analysis comes with its limitations. First, given the vast quantity of relevant video content—and the time-consuming nature of analysis—it was only possible to analyze a small sample of the total available "alt-lite" YouTube data, which raises the question of representativeness. In this case, doctoral study provided a unique opportunity for me to spend many months watching "alt-lite" YouTube content before even beginning the sampling process. This period of exploring my seed list and getting to know the channels under investigation allowed me to develop a sense of the landscape and tailor my sampling strategy accordingly. Ultimately, I watched over 175 videos in the process of arriving at my sample of seven titles for critical discourse analysis. Through this time-consuming, but enlightening, process I was able to develop video type and rhetorical device codes that guided my selection of a balanced sample. In all, I watched over 250 videos for the purposes of this study, which represents a small fraction of the total available data, but was more than enough to reach a point of theoretical saturation given how repetitive the videos were in theme, rhetoric, and format.

With that said, quantitative and computational approaches would have allowed me to analyze a much larger sample and make claims about the nature of these videos in broader terms:

how often is whiteness spoken about in comparison to non-white identities? What words are associated with which identities in "alt-lite" videos? However, given the nature of my overarching research questions—which involve highly contextual matters of how irony and provocation function and how race is constructed through discourse—I believe qualitative methods of textual/visual analysis were best suited for this study. These methods enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the reactionary YouTube landscape and advance theoretical discussions on how these videos operate discursively.

5.6 Interviews

The second major data source for this thesis was semi-structured interviews with adults who regularly watch, or used to watch, right-wing YouTube channels, conducted over a two-year period from October 2020 to July 2022. Starting in August 2020, I queried the names of popular reactionary YouTube channels—along with commonly associated keywords (egs. Proud Boys, Intellectual Dark Web)—based on my previous seed list and Rebecca Lewis's (2018) Alternative Influence Network, using Facebook and Reddit's search function (See Appendix 6 for full list of search terms). I logged the details of relevant fan and discussion communities in an Excel spreadsheet. Using pseudonymous research-specific Facebook and Reddit accounts, I then joined these groups. On Facebook, I joined 12 public groups with memberships ranging from 200 to 50,000 people. I also requested to join 16 private groups with memberships ranging from 160 to 22,000 people; of these 16, I was ultimately approved to join 9, bringing my total Facebook group memberships to 21. On Reddit, I identified 23 relevant subreddits, with memberships ranging from 200 to 250,000 people, and joined each of these. One Reddit moderator for a large YouTuber fan community informed me that discussions were livelier on Discord than Reddit and invited me to join their Discord server, which I did.

From there, my approach differed according to the platform. On Reddit, I messaged each subreddit's moderators and identified myself as a researcher with the University of Oxford interested in interviewing members of their community. I gave them several days to notify me if they were uncomfortable with my plan. If they approved, or did not respond, I posted a recruitment message to the subreddit. On Facebook, I started out with a similar approach, but

messages to group admins typically went unread, likely because they were filtered out to Facebook Messenger's "Requests" folder and did not reach the recipient's main inbox due to a lack of mutual friends. Upon reflection, I decided to skip this admin approval stage for Facebook groups for several reasons. On Reddit, individuals typically adopt usernames that do not reveal their personal identities, while Facebook users are compelled by the platform to use their real names and photos. As such, reaching out to individuals as a pseudonymous researcher on Facebook felt more intrusive and had the potential of making message recipients feel unnecessarily surveilled. As such, after the first few days of recruitment, I began posting to the discussion board of each Facebook group without admin approval, informing members that I was a researcher with the University of Oxford seeking interview respondents.

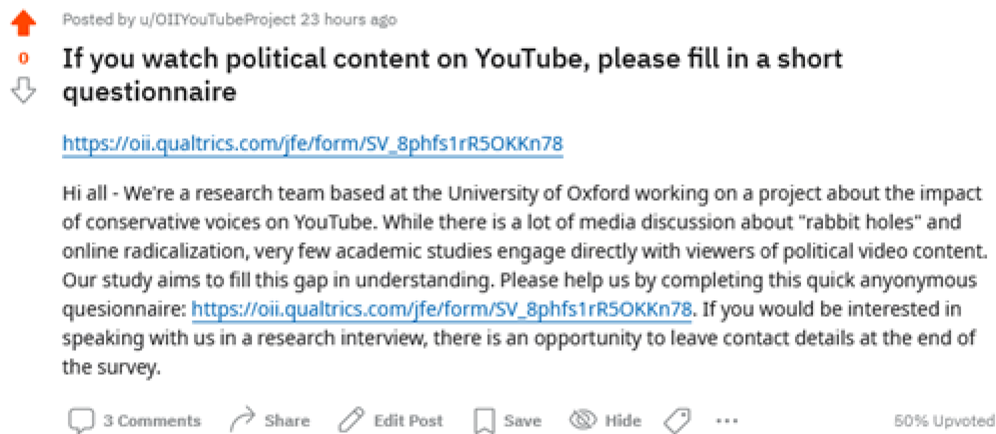
Figure 2. *Sample interview recruitment flier*

At the start of the recruitment process, I included with my message a simple flier image containing a high-level description of the study and my research email, asking people to get in touch if they were interested in being interviewed. Due to a lack of uptake with this method, I transitioned in February 2021 to posting an online questionnaire as a recruitment tool[17]. The survey asked basic questions about the participant's engagement with YouTube channels and provided space at the end for respondents to leave an email address, Reddit username, or Discord handle if

[17] The idea for this recruitment method came from a call with Deana Rohlinger, who used surveys as a recruitment method in her research on Tea Party members.

they were interested in being interviewed (see Appendix 7 for full text of questionnaire). On Discord, the moderator who invited me to join the server posted the link to the questionnaire in an announcement, informing members of the community that I was a researcher interested in recruiting interview respondents.

Figure 3. *Sample interview recruitment post, with questionnaire link*



The recruitment questionnaire strategy proved to be more fruitful than the flier, and respondents' answers provided a useful starting point for tailoring subsequent interview questions. In all, I received 54 expressions of interest through this recruitment process, of which 15 individuals ultimately completed interviews. For security reasons, I remained pseudonymous throughout the recruitment process, signing off on emails and messages as "The OII YouTube Research Team" and making sure participant information forms did not disclose any personal details. During interviews, I kept my identity obscured by leaving my camera off and never disclosing my name (see Section 4 of this chapter for further discussion of these choices). I made exceptions to this practice in a few cases, where I contacted individuals from within my own network who met the study's criteria for respondents. Ultimately, I interviewed 3 individuals from within my network of contacts, in addition to the 15 who had expressed interest via the survey or by email. Semi-structured interviews were completed over Jitsi (8)—an encrypted open-source conferencing platform—Discord voice chat (4), Discord text chat (1), Zoom (3), email (2), and Reddit messages (1). Four of the interviews were asynchronous while the rest were conducted synchronously over various forms of voice chat. On each of these platforms, except for Zoom, I was able to remain

pseudonymous by using a research-specific account and username. I used a personal Zoom account for interviews with individuals recruited from within my network. The tables below summarize key demographic details of participants (self-disclosed) at the time of interview.

Table 6. *Gender of respondents*

Gender	*No. of Respondents*
Male	18
Female	0

Table 7. *Age group of respondents*

Age	*No. of Respondents*
18-19	2
20-29	6
30-39	8
40-49	2

Table 8. *Occupation of respondents*

Occupation/Industry	*No. of Respondents*
Tech/IT	5
Trades	3
Student	2
Media	2
Military	1
Religious worker	1
Real estate	1
Research	1
Retail/sales	1
Undisclosed	1

Table 9. *Country of residence of respondents*

Country	*No. of Respondents*
USA	8
UK	5
Canada	2
India	1
Lithuania	1
South Africa	1

Table 10. *Race of respondents*

Race	*No. of Respondents*
White	15
Indian	1
Prefer not to say	2

Table 11. *Current engagement with YouTubers*

Engagement with reactionary YouTubers	*No. of Respondents*
Used to watch reactionary YouTubers but no longer do	2
Currently watch reactionary YouTubers	16

Table 12. *Place of recruitment*

Place of recruitment	*No. of Respondents*
Reddit	8
Discord	4
Facebook	3
Researcher's personal network	2
Referral	1

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and were conducted with a loose interview schedule that included questions on the respondent's main sources of news and information, engagement with political YouTube channels and other social media platforms,

participation in online discussion communities, and their political views more broadly (see Appendix 8). The text of asynchronous chat-based interviews was copied into Word documents, and I manually transcribed all of the synchronous interviews based on audio recordings. I uploaded all transcripts as individual files into NVivo for qualitative coding. I adopted a grounded approach to coding, starting with highly descriptive codes, and iteratively developing and organizing these codes into broader themes, a process known as *constant comparison* (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). The overall process of recruiting participants, interviewing them, and transcribing/analyzing the conversations was also iterative. As the interviews went on, I spent less time on topics where earlier interviews had already reached a point of theoretical saturation and focused on topics that elicited an interesting variation in responses. Ultimately, after 18 interviews, I reached a point of theoretical saturation on the topics relevant for this study (Flick, 2018).

5.7 Key learnings from research interviews

Because few studies have sought to recruit interview respondents from within right-wing and far-right online communities, I want to reflect on some of the lessons learned from almost two years of recruitment trial-and-error. As discussed earlier, interest in interviews increased dramatically when I switched from sharing a flier image to a questionnaire. Upon reflection, the increased effectiveness of the recruitment questionnaire makes sense: the flier asked individuals to contact a research email after being provided some very basic details about the study itself. On the other hand, once potential respondents clicked into the questionnaire, they were immediately shown a consent form that provided more detailed information about the study, along with a CUREC number and contact details in case problems arose. In contrast to a simple JPEG flier image—which anyone would be able to create—the 15-question Qualtrics form was associated with the Oxford Internet Institute through its "oii.qualtrics.com" URL, lending the questionnaire some institutional legitimacy.

Upon completing the short questionnaire, some individuals wrote in the "Any additional comments" section that they were pleasantly surprised by the non-biased nature of the survey. Despite the increased time commitment, the experience of completing the questionnaire appeared to build trust in potential respondents and made them more likely to express interest in being

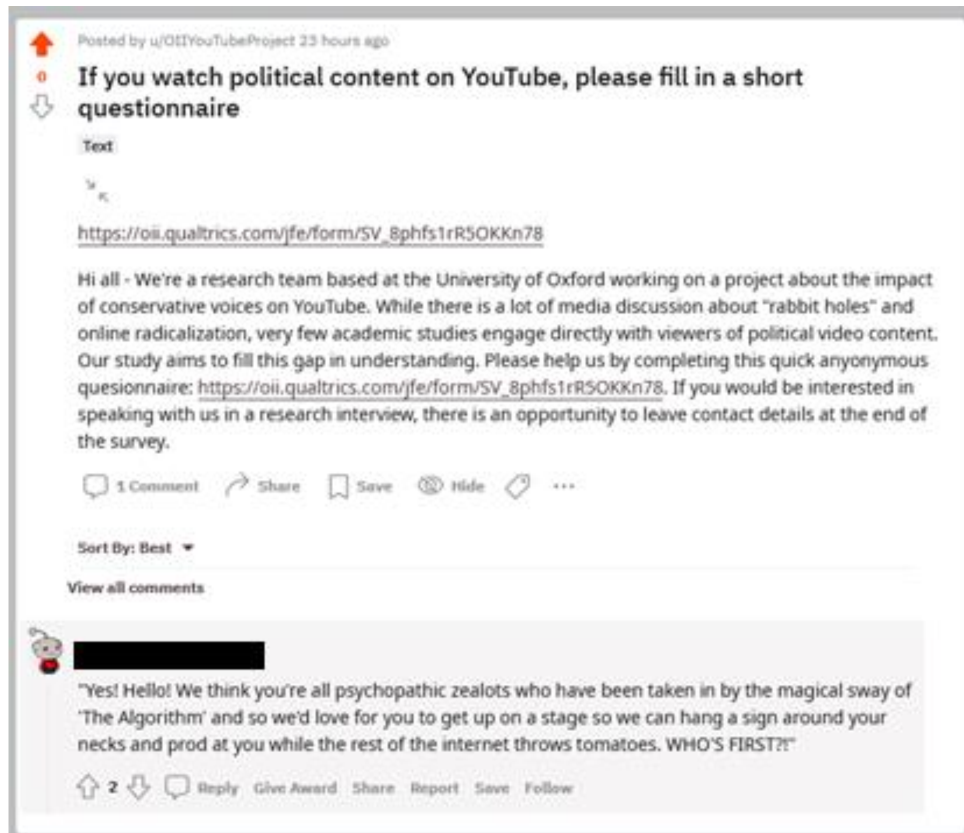
interviewed. Willingness to leave contact details also increased notably after I took the advice of a Discord moderator and allowed respondents to leave pseudonymous Discord or Reddit usernames rather than emails[18]. Giving potential respondents the option to remain pseudonymous throughout the entire recruitment and interview process decreased the perceived risk of participation and aligned with the pre-existing norms of Discord and Reddit communities.

In addition to being an effective recruitment tool, the questionnaire also provided useful background information ahead of interviews. For example, I asked questionnaire respondents to share their favourite political YouTube channels; responses to this question allowed me to screen out individuals who did not meet my sampling criteria. I could also watch videos uploaded by respondents' favourite YouTube channels ahead of the interview and tailor my questions accordingly. Responses to other survey questions such as "Has watching YouTube videos impacted your political views? If so, in what way?" provided a useful foundation for interview preparation and a source of participant auto-confrontation (Mollo & Falzon, 2004), allowing me to build upon respondents' answers by asking, "What did you mean by this?" Because respondents had spent some time thinking about their politics and media consumption habits prior to the interview, their responses to my questions were more detailed, and they were less likely to be stumped or caught off guard. Overall then, the recruitment questionnaire allowed me to prepare for interviews more strategically and to bypass surface-level questions in favour of in-depth, personalized ones that were more likely to generate interesting responses.

During the interview recruitment process, my posts did sometimes elicit skeptical and hostile responses. This reaction did not come as a surprise, as academics are often distrusted and characterized as "liberal elites" in right-leaning communities. In particular, people expressed fear of being unfairly represented (see Figure 4), being misled by the researcher ("Nice try FBI"), and being doxed or otherwise persecuted through the research process ("Smells like a trap, proceed carefully."). Over time, I noticed that my invitation posts elicited less hostility when I used more neutral and professional language. Earlier posts, where I tried to strike a more friendly or ingratiating tone, seemed to make people feel as though they were being deceived.

[18] One Reddit user wrote, in response to my recruitment post, that the questionnaire was "Short, sweet and no email required."

Figure 4. *Recruitment post with unsympathetic responses*



Despite moments of tension and apprehension, the interviews were largely friendly and productive. I was able to feel confident and secure in these interactions in part because I remained pseudonymous throughout the interview process. Along with keeping my identity obscured, I also took additional precautions, such as ensuring that my public online profiles (for example on my department's website) remained vague and thus more difficult to link to my research project (Ramalingam, 2021). Although none of these strategies were foolproof, and a respondent highly motivated to uncover my identity would likely be able to—given their knowledge of my department and research topic—they provided additional layers of security that helped me to feel more at ease in my fieldwork.

5.8 Ethics: research interviews

Although concerns about my own security and well-being were often front of mind during interviews, I was also attentive to potential risks for interview respondents. Protecting their

confidentiality was a top concern, as respondents often disclosed controversial political opinions during our conversations, and they were alert to the potential negative consequences of being linked to these views. As discussed in the previous section, allowing respondents to remain pseudonymous throughout the interview process was one way to put them at ease and mitigate the risk of de-anonymization. I also followed best practices for research interviews, like removing any identifying details from transcripts and, in cases where I knew the identities of respondents, storing identifying details separately from the transcripts and recordings. Within this thesis, I use pseudonyms to refer to specific participants and limit my inclusion of demographic details, except in ambiguated data tables. I also chose not to name the specific Facebook, Reddit, and Discord groups that respondents were recruited from, both as a measure to protect respondents' confidentiality and to limit the exposure of online forums that were created predominantly for intra-group conversations.

The nature of the interview questions also came with some risks. For instance, in earlier interviews, I asked respondents to watch video clips in order to ask them questions about specific instances of provocative racial humour. In doing so, there was a possibility that I would expose respondents to harmful or offensive material that they would not have otherwise encountered, potentially upsetting them or introducing them to new reactionary YouTubers. With this risk in mind, I only played clips that the respondents were likely to have encountered already. For instance, if an interviewee was recruited via Reddit due to their participation in r/LouderwithCrowder, I would select a clip from a popular Stephen Crowder YouTube video for the interview. Before asking them to watch the clip, I would check if they were familiar with the selected YouTuber and if they were comfortable watching the video.

It is very likely that my respondents will ultimately disagree with my analysis, as I draw connections between their political beliefs and white supremacist systems, conclusions that fly in the face of their self-avowed colourblindness and tolerance. However, doing research ethically is not only about safeguarding participants but also about ensuring that the research does not go on to perpetuate harmful systems of oppression. As such, I challenge the logic and conclusions of my respondents throughout this thesis.

5.9 Limitations: Interviews

In evaluating my interview data, one stark reality is that all my interviewees, recruited through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, were men. It is worth noting that this male skew partially reflects the overrepresentation of men as viewers of right-wing YouTube channels. For instance, based on data gathered via Tubular[19], a data analytics company, in 2021, Paul Joseph Watson's audience was 92% male; Steven Crowder's was 90%; Ben Shapiro's was 87%; and Rebel News's was 80%. This pattern continues across the right-wing YouTube landscape. With that said, the overrepresentation of men in my sample is likely also driven by gendered discrepancies in behaviour, which may have been highlighted by my recruitment strategy. Because my recruitment process required individuals to volunteer for interviews, I inevitably attracted those who were keen to talking about their politics to a complete stranger, a quality that is unequally distributed between genders both online and offline (Hu et al., 2021; Nir & McClurg, 2015). If I had adopted a more ethnographic approach that involved spending prolonged periods of time in right-wing spaces, cultivating relationships with individuals, and asking them directly for interviews, I could have targeted my recruitment more directly towards women. In the early stages of my research, I even considered attending in-person speaking events in order to recruit respondents in this way. However, as discussed in Section 4, I decided to prioritize my own safety and well-being throughout the research process, which meant maintaining a degree of distance from the communities I studied.

My recruitment procedure also targeted individuals who participated in, or at least frequently checked, discussion forums related to political YouTubers. Members of these groups represent only a small fraction of the total audience of a YouTube channel. Taken together, this recruitment strategy likely led me to the most online, engaged, and politically vocal of a YouTuber's audience base. However, given the practical considerations of interviewing members of right-wing and far-right online communities, it was unlikely that any sampling strategy would yield a substantial number of covert, unengaged viewers. These individuals would be extremely difficult to reach and even less likely to respond to a call for interviewees. Outside of discussion forums, I

[19] Data from Tubular was retrieved by Meaghan Conroy, a researcher of right-wing extremism who I collaborated with on a project in late 2021 and early 2022.

did secure interviews with two individuals from within my network, who met my sampling criteria and who I felt were safe to approach. One of these respondents referred an acquaintance of theirs, who also became a respondent. As such, of my 18 respondents, three were not engaged in online discussion forums and thus presented a slightly different profile to the rest of the interviewees.

At the time of writing, this study remains one of only a few that have secured any interviews with members of right-wing online communities in a Western context (De Koster & Hourman, 2008; Schwarzenegger, 2021), and it is the first to secure such interviews with viewers of reactionary YouTube content. As such, I believe the novel insights presented in the data outweigh the potential limitations of the sample. Studies on cyber-racism are disproportionately weighted towards textual analysis of the content being shared (Bliuc et al., 2018)—a logical outcome given the difficulty of cultivating trusting research relationships with participants in these spaces. Nevertheless, this research gap presents a barrier to theorizing about reactionary digital ecosystems, as media researchers have long known that audiences can interpret texts in unexpected ways (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974; Lamarre et al., 2009; hooks, 1992). Speaking to audiences is even more important when it comes to content, like those of "alt-lite" YouTubers, that is rife with irony, hyperbole, and the potential for polysemy. How can we understand what these ambivalent texts mean in the world without speaking to the people who consume and share them?

Finally, qualitative research does not strive for perfectly representative samples; rather it aims to find coherence—shared narratives and language—across respondents with different life experiences (Smith et al., 2021). In this way, the study fulfills the requirements of qualitative sampling and analysis, identifying recurrent beliefs and rhetoric among individuals of different ages, interests, geographic locations, and socio-economic backgrounds. I hope that future researchers can build upon this work to study how women and minoritized people consume and interpret these materials.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have summarized the methods used in this thesis to study reactionary YouTube channels and their audiences. These methods are informed by cultural studies' attention to discourse, while responding to theoretical gaps within the field of political communication.

Embracing the principle of triangulation, I studied the topic from three complementary angles. First, I adopted a broad viewing strategy in order to select seven videos for critical discourse analysis, paying careful attention to underlying logics, argumentation strategies, and the discursive construction of racial identities. Second, I completed a more comprehensive qualitative content analysis of videos categorized as "alt-lite" in order to better understand the political positioning of this amorphous group. And third, I conducted semi-structured online interviews with viewers of these channels, recruited from relevant Reddit, Facebook, and Discord discussion groups. Together, these methods provided me with a well-rounded view of the reactionary YouTube ecosystem, while allowing me to corroborate findings across data sources. Although the research process was neither linear nor perfectly strategic, I hope this study can serve as one example of how to conduct rigorous qualitative fieldwork on right-wing subjects that balances community immersion with researcher well-being.

In the three empirical chapters to follow, I draw on the data described above to make claims about how race, humour, and political knowledge are imagined by the various groups who make and consume these videos. In each of these chapters, I will dedicate some space to reminding readers of what data, in particular, were used to inform the arguments in that chapter. I will turn first to my qualitative content analysis of "alt-lite" videos in order to establish a working definition of this term before examining its uses and limitations.

Chapter 4: What is the “lite” in “alt-lite?”

1. Introduction[20]

In a now-deleted video for Rebel Media, Gavin McInnes stands in front of a green screen as a video plays behind him. The video depicts a raucous party: a Haitian wedding, the video title tells us, with formally dressed guests twerking enthusiastically in a large hall. As the video plays, McInnes provides his narration over top, sardonically praising the elegance and sophistication of the dancing, while clearly implying the opposite. His condescension invokes a universe of dehumanizing, racist stereotypes about Black people without a word needing to be uttered about race.

This study is interested in “borderline” cases—personalities that position themselves within mainstream conservatism while pushing the boundaries of that category—and what these cases can tell us about the state of white supremacist discourse and the right-wing media ecosystem. In order to study this group of political actors, I use the category of “alt-lite” as an entry point. As summarized in Chapter 2, the term was coined by members of the “alt-right” to characterize fellow pro-Trump, anti-SJW reactionaries who, in their view, were not bold enough to explicitly embrace white nationalism (Hawley, 2019). In recent years, journalists, academics, and civil society groups have also adopted the term to reference a sub-section of the online right that serves as a gateway to extremist, white supremacist content. Although “alt-lite” continues to circulate within journalistic and academic writing, no studies have taken an in-depth look at what unites these personalities. As such, this chapter seeks to empirically establish the distinguishing characteristics of “alt-lite” discourse. Doing so will provide important context for subsequent chapters, which look more closely at how this rhetoric functions within a wider community of viewers and fans.

To interrogate the nature of “alt-lite” as a category, this chapter begins by tracing the lineage of the term among academics and civil society groups. Drawing channel names from the extant literature, I sample 78 videos from “alt-lite” YouTube channels and use qualitative content analysis to evaluate how these individuals advance claims about racial difference, and whiteness in

[20] An article version of this chapter was published in *Social Media + Society* (Ma, 2021). I am the sole author of the published article.

particular. What do these figures, who supposedly eschew the language of white pride, have to say about their own (mostly) white identities? I pay particular attention to how they simultaneously invoke white nationalist talking points when it comes to race while ostensibly disavowing the project of ethnonationalism. I find that, despite the stated positions of these figures, their videos emphasize the historic dominance—and implied superiority—of "white culture," while invoking civil rights discourse to frame whiteness as a marginalized identity in the present and imagined future. I identify several *mitigating rhetorical strategies* that these figures use to obfuscate their views and dodge accusations of racism. These rhetorical moves provide a thin veneer of acceptability for YouTube reactionaries who traffic in racist stereotypes but rely on social media platforms to remain visible, and thus profitable, within the attention economy.

2. Background: Defining and problematizing the "alt-lite"

In this chapter, I aim to locate "alt-lite" YouTube personalities within the landscape of online extremism and interrogate how race is discussed by these figures, who largely position themselves as mainstream conservatives. Scholars have documented how, from the late-2000s, a far-right intelligentsia was emerging in the United States. This group included Richard Spencer, Paul Gottfried, and others associated with the HL Mencken Club, a society aimed at re-branding and raising the profile of white nationalism (Michael, 2017; Hartzell, 2018)[21]. Notably, in March 2010, Richard Spencer founded AlternativeRight.com, "a magazine focused primarily on exposing the 'illusion' of racial equality and arguing for the importance of embracing pro-white racial consciousness" (Hartzell, 2018, p. 19). While the explicit white nationalism of the "alt-right" grabbed media attention following the election of Donald Trump and the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, some of the most visible figures within the online right at the time disavowed the goal of building a white ethnostate and, as a result, were deemed "alt-lite" by their more militant counterparts. The rift between these two factions became more pronounced when, in November 2016, video footage from a conference showed Richard Spencer declaring "Hail Trump. Hail our people. Hail victory," while audience members raised Nazi salutes. This event, later dubbed "Hailgate," prompted prominent figures within the online pro-Trump alliance to publicly disavow

[21] See Chapter 2, Section 2 for a more in-depth discussion on the establishment of the "alt-right"

the "alt-right," even when they had previously seen themselves as playing on the same team (Hawley, 2019; Marantz, 2020). While the terms "alt-right" and "alt-lite" loomed large in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election, they have begun to fade from popular consciousness and morph into new political alliances. Still, the arguments and strategies deployed by contemporary far-right movements remain largely consistent year upon year, even as their figureheads and group identifications continue to evolve.

Despite the fact that the term "alt-lite" was coined by white nationalists as a pejorative, the term was eventually taken up by journalists, researchers, and civil society groups as a useful shorthand, although substantive research on "alt-lite" ideology remains scarce. One of the most influential pieces of writing on the "alt-lite" came from the Anti-Defamation League (2017), who defined the group as "a loosely-connected movement whose adherents shun white supremacist thinking, but who are in step with the alt right in their hatred of feminists and immigrants, among others." That same year, Nagle (2017) wrote in her book *Kill all normies*, "Today, the movement that has been most remarkably successful at changing the culture rather than the formal politics is the alt-light. They were the youthful bridge between the alt-right and mainstream Trumpism… They succeeded largely by bypassing the dying mainstream media and creating an Internet-culture and alternative media of their own from the ground up" (p. 41). Lyons (2017) wrote in a report for Political Research Associates, "Alt Rightists have relied on the Alt Lite to help bring its ideas to a mass, mainstream audience, but to varying degrees they have also regarded Alt Lite figures with resentment, as ideologically untrustworthy opportunists." Hawley went into more depth in his 2019 book, where he distinguished the "alt-lite" from the "alt-right" by emphasizing the former's greater loyalty to Donald Trump, their preference for cultural and economic arguments over explicitly racial ones, and their support for Israel. He also identified how "alt-lite" personalities "attack Islam because of Muslims' purported anti-Semitism and homophobia—issues that do not concern the alt-right very much," a rhetorical strategy that will be explored later in this chapter (p. 186). The definitions of "alt-lite" presented by these authors were largely derived from their own expertise; as such, none of them have been empirically tested against "alt-lite" content, which is what this chapter aims to achieve.

Within the quantitative literature on YouTube radicalization, two studies have operationalized the category of "alt-lite" in their methodologies at the time of writing. Munger and Phillips' (2020) study on right-wing YouTube influencers included a typology of three kinds of channels: *Conservatives, Alt-Lite*, and *Alt-Right*. They define *alt-lite* as an ideologically mixed cluster of personalities who are united by their enjoyment of "racist and otherwise offensive humor as a means to antagonize and upset…liberals and leftists." Ribeiro et al.'s (2020) study uses a four-group typology, with channels categorized as *media, the Alt-lite, the Intellectual Dark Web*[22] *(IDW)*, and the *Alt-right*. They write, "While users in the I.D.W. discuss controversial subjects like race and I.Q. without necessarily endorsing extreme views, members of the Alt-right sponsor fringe ideas like that of a white ethnostate. Somewhere in the middle, individuals of the Alt-lite deny to embrace [sic] white supremacist ideology, although they frequently flirt with concepts associated with it." Their study finds that YouTube users who start off commenting on more mainstream videos by "alt-lite" or "Intellectual Dark Web" channels consistently migrate, over time, to more extreme "alt-right" or white nationalist content. These studies corroborate personal testimonies from those who have shared their stories of radicalization on the platform (Roose, 2019; Evans, 2018). Munger and Phillips, on the other hand, find that audience demand has been under-emphasized in discussions of YouTube radicalization, and that since 2017, mainstream conservative creators have seen a rise in viewership while "alt-lite" and "alt-right" channels have seen a steep decline. They interpret these results to argue that, when more mainstream conservative content became available on YouTube from 2017 onwards, viewers gravitated towards these channels—which better reflected their own viewpoints—and left behind the more extreme content they may have been watching previously.

The typologies summarized above have been re-purposed by other quantitative studies of YouTube radicalization. For instance, Hosseinmardi et al. (2021) conducted one of the most comprehensive studies to date on users' viewing habits on YouTube, analyzing browsing history data collected from a representative sample of the US population (N=309,813) over the course of 4 years (January 2016 – December 2019). Their typology contained six categories: far left, left,

[22] The Intellectual Dark Web (IDW) is a network of YouTube personalities, mostly academics and talk show hosts, who position themselves as public intellectuals challenging the rigidity of progressive orthodoxy.

center, anti-woke, right, and far right. They assigned channels to each of these categories based on how they had previously been tagged by Ribeiro et al. (2020)[23] and Ledwich and Zaitsev (2020). Similarly, Chen et al. (2021) collected data on 915 adults in the United States over the course of 3 months: which videos they watched, which they engaged with, and which were recommended to them. They focused their analysis on two types of channels: "Alternative" channels, which "serve as gateways to more extreme forms of content" and "extremist or white supremacist channels." Their list of gateway channels was drawn from Ribeiro et al.'s lists of "IDW" and "alt-lite" channels, Data & Society's Alternative Influence Network (R. Lewis, 2018), and Ledwich and Zaitsev's (2020) list of "anti-SJW" channels. Based on these studies, we can see how early definitions of "alt-lite" were taken up by quantitative scholars to help conceptualize and empirically test theories of far-right radicalization.

In surveying the literature on the "alt-lite," a few themes unite these varied definitions. First, researchers tend to emphasize the gateway function of "alt-lite" commentators, who they describe as introducing far-right ideas and content creators to mainstream audiences. Second, these definitions distinguish between the race-based nationalism of the "alt-right" and the "civic" nationalism of the "alt-lite," which focuses on the United States' greatness based on values and culture rather than race. Finally, they emphasize the group's appeal to a broader audience, especially among young people, as a result of their digital savviness and adoption of edgy humour. In recent quantitative studies, the category "alt-lite" has been taken up to represent a step on people's radicalization pathways, somewhere between mainstream conservatism and far right ideology. However, the ground-truth remains more complex. For instance, Chen et al. (2021) categorized Mike Cernovich and Faith Goldy as white supremacist channels while Steven Crowder and Michelle Malkin were merely "alternative" or "gateway channels." Having spent many months immersed in the world of reactionary YouTube channels, however, it is not immediately clear that Mike Cernovich espouses a more extreme ideology than Steven Crowder. The categorization of Laura Loomer, Steven Crowder, and Michelle Malkin as "gateway" content risks obfuscating how white supremacist rhetoric appears in varied and insidious ways in their content. In this study, I take up the concept of "white supremacy" as it has been articulated by critical race theorists (e.g.

[23] For example, "alt-lite" channels in Riberio et al.'s typology mapped onto "right" in the Hosseinmardi paper.

Gillborn, 2006). That is, white supremacy manifests not only in claims that white people are superior to other groups but also in rhetoric, policies, and practices that reproduce the dominance of white people and the oppression of people of colour. Using this more expansive definition, I want to interrogate the positioning of "alt-lite" figures (by themselves and researchers) as falling outside the bounds of white supremacist activism and ask, what exactly is "lite" about the "alt-lite?"

3. Analysis

3.1 Overview of videos

The analysis below draws from a qualitative content analysis of 78 videos sampled from ten of the most frequently-cited "alt-lite" channels, as summarized in Chapter 3 (Table 5). In exploring these channels, the styles and genres ranged broadly: from news segments, to vlog-style videos recorded in living rooms, to highly edited talk shows taped in recording studios. While the selected videos varied in length, style, and production value, their talking points remained remarkably consistent. Watching them as a researcher quickly revealed the extremity of "alt-lite" content, with white YouTubers[24] using the n-word and other slurs, perpetuating theories of white genocide and scientific racism, and depicting non-white people as savage or barbaric. A significant portion of the sampled videos target liberal news outlets or supposedly progressive ideas and are framed as "takedowns," "responses," and "debunkings."[25] I will refer to this popular sub-genre as *response videos* throughout the paper (see Figs. 5 and 6). Response videos are "made by YouTubers of one political valence as rebuttals to videos espousing an opposing political valence" (Lewis, Marwick, & Partin, 2021). Within right-wing spaces, these videos follow a familiar format: YouTubers typically play clips or read passages from popular videos or articles that espouse progressive politics, pausing to critique or "debunk" the points raised. These videos usually accuse liberal media outlets of condescension, reverse racism, and general SJW cringe-worthiness. They became

[24] Of the 13 "alt-lite" channels in my seed list, all but two (Rebel News and Breitbart News) were centred on individual personalities. Of those 11 individuals, all were white except for Lauren Chen, who has identified as "Asian" and "half Chinese."

[25] These videos are reminiscent of "outrage" programming as defined by Berry and Sobieraj (2014): "The genre is recognizably reactive. Its point of entry into the political world is through response. The episodes, blog posts, and columns rarely introduce breaking news or political information. Instead they reinterpret, reframe, and unpack news from the headlines, political speeches, or claims made by other outrage hosts" (p. 7).

especially prominent in the mid-2010s—as the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum and Donald Trump announced his bid for presidency—when many liberal digital media outlets like Vox, Buzzfeed, and MTV began producing video content[26] on the subject of racism. Popular on YouTube, these videos were often narrated by people of colour and spoke directly to an imagined white viewer about concepts like privilege, cultural appropriation, implicit bias, and micro-aggressions. Some of these videos like Buzzfeed's "24 questions Black people have for White people" (2015) went viral, drawing new attention to ongoing conversations about racism in the United States. The virality of these videos also made them targets, as they provided fodder for reactionary YouTubers keen to increase their visibility on the platform. Many right-wing response videos gained so much traction that they far surpassed the target video in terms of views and galvanized swarms of people to down-vote[27] and leave vitriol in the comments section of the original post (see Fig. 7).

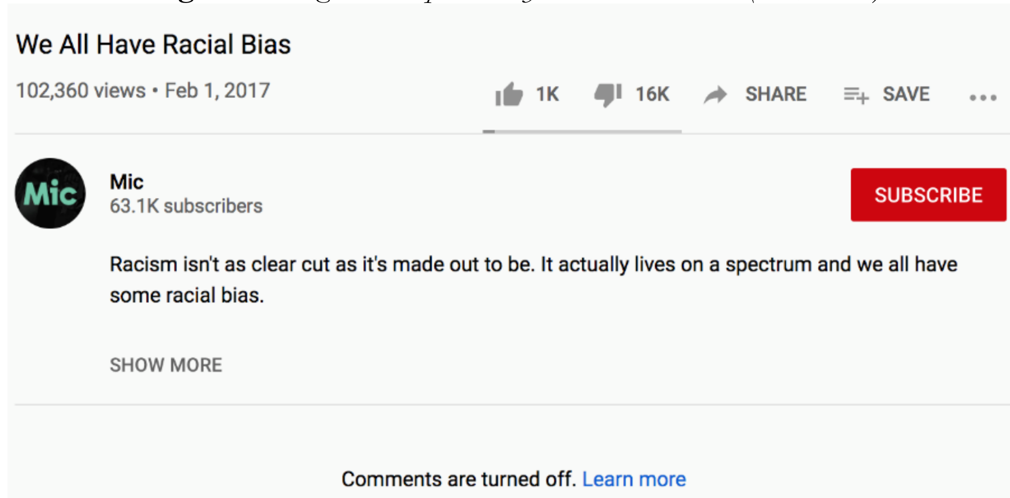
Figure 5. *YouTube response video thumbnail (Rebel News, 2016a)*

Figure 6. *YouTube response video thumbnail (Paul Joseph Watson, 2016a)*

[26] As discussed in Chapter 1, this trend was part of a larger "pivot to video" strategy which began in 2015 and saw media companies cut writing staff and invest instead in short-form video (Moore, 2017).

[27] Since data collection was undertaken for this study, YouTube has removed the likes-to-dislikes bar below videos, partially in response to the practice of mass down-voting as a tool of networked harassment (YouTube, 2021). At the time of writing, viewers can still "dislike" videos, but they can only see the total "likes" count.

Figure 7. *Target video uploaded by Mic on racial bias (Mic, 2017)*



Note the low like/dislike ratio and comments turned off due to the onslaught of negative, hateful comments

Among the videos sampled for this study, just under one third adopt a response video format (playing clips from the original video or reading passages from an article) but all of the videos are broadly oriented around discrediting or mocking liberal Americans and the institutions supposedly aligned with them: the mainstream news media, Democratic party, universities, and Hollywood. In the remainder of this section, I will consider how "alt-lite" figures advance claims about whiteness and their own white identities within this online landscape.

3.2 White vulnerability: the new civil rights struggle

Both "alt-lite" and "alt-right" figureheads emphasize the vulnerability of white people, even within societies where they make up a sizeable and powerful majority. This tactic has a long history within the United States, as Berbrier (2000) has shown in his work tracing the "victim ideology" of white supremacist groups throughout the 20th century. Among "alt-lite" personalities on YouTube, claims of victimhood are frequently advanced in response to structural critiques from progressives about racism in the US; these critiques are re-framed as personal attacks against white people, and white men in particular. For instance, the excerpts below are drawn from "alt-lite" responses to three different videos that each address how racism manifests in contemporary society:

> Why is it racist to make generalizations about beliefs, lifestyles, or behaviours based on a person's race, unless they're white? (Paul Joseph Watson, 2016a)

> Channels like Dot Mic, BuzzFeed, Seriously.TV, MTV News, you all have been calling white people racists over and over again for the better part of a year. That's why white people are being triggered by the word "racist" because you keep calling us f*cking racist for no reason. (No Bullshit, 2017b)

> I've had this discussion before. It's such a lazy thing to do to tell someone who isn't black that they cannot say n-----. Stopping someone from saying n-----, n----- or any other word based off the colour of their skin is wrong and is actually an example of discrimination. (No Bullshit, 2017a)

In these excerpts, the act of talking to white people about racist behaviour is framed as a form of racist aggression in itself. Rather than engaging with the substantive points raised in the target video, reactionary YouTubers imply that people of colour use accusations of racism chiefly as a way of attacking, shaming, and silencing white people. According to this worldview, even framing white people as a group with shared characteristics constitutes a form of discrimination, as seen in the first excerpt.

All three of the videos quoted above have thumbnail images that prominently represent the Black people who are featured in the target piece, with large text displayed next to their faces: "Buzzfeed is racist," "Calling white people racist is bullshit," "Advising Whites is bullshit." While the first two videos target relatively large media outlets, Buzzfeed and Mic, the third is directed at a young Black woman YouTuber with a small following on the platform (91 subscribers at the time of writing). When No Bullshit uploaded his response, the original video had less than 100 views. Despite these power asymmetries, No Bullshit directs vitriol towards the original poster and links to her video, making her vulnerable to harassment by his large online following (Lewis, Marwick & Partin, 2020). At the end of his video, he signs off: "Thanks for watching today's episode everybody. Comment below how much you think this black whale weighs. I'm guessing over 200." (No Bullshit, 2017a). At the time of writing, No Bullshit's video remains online and has over half a million views.

Even as they invoke dehumanizing racial stereotypes in their attacks against progressive people of colour, "alt-lite" commentators insist that they hold a colourblind worldview and are the victims of a gross double standard in modern life: non-white people are allowed to critique the actions and behaviours of white people while the reverse is supposedly forbidden:

> You can write an article about a bunch of reasons why a whole race of people is so bad, and they ruin things, and they're smelly dumb white scum basically. And can you imagine if a site, any site, were to write an article that were basically an inversion of this? If we were talking about Black people or Hispanics or something? Immediately a bunch of internet vigilantes would show up, and they would pressure their web hoster to get rid of their site… Somehow Buzzfeed manages to escape that and I can tell you why: it's because there's no real outrage about it. Only a small group of people understand that this is the moral and ethical equivalent of exactly its inverse, which would be considered heinously racist. (Styxhexenhammer666, 2017a)

> "Things white people killed in 2016." Can you imagine if it was *things Black people killed in 2016*? I'm sure that would go down well! But apparently the last acceptable form of racism is that against white people… People like this guy from Mic and people like Richard Spencer are basically opposite sides of the same coin." (Computing Forever, 2017b)

"Alt-lite" personalities consistently use this double-standard argument to signal that progressive movements have become so dominant and so race-obsessed that they now marginalize the very people they claim are the oppressors. This tactic allows them to simultaneously accuse liberals of reverse-racism while distancing themselves from "alt-right" figures like Richard Spencer. Each, they argue, represents a form of "identity politics," whereas they simply see people for who they are and what they contribute to society. The Styxhexenhammer (2017a) excerpt captures the common refrain that racism against white people is, in fact, a more pressing and more serious problem than the oppression of non-white people because there is no equivalent moral outrage about the persecution of whites.

This rhetoric recalls Bonilla-Silva's (2014) concept of "abstract liberalism," a framing device wherein the language of equal opportunity is used to deride progressive policies as preferential treatment or discriminatory. Amongst "alt-lite" figures, frequent references to Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders serve as shorthand for this kind of argument:

> Martin Luther King's dream was that there would be a nation where we are not judged by the colour of our skin but instead by the content of our character; not a nation in which kids are forced to take privilege tests in school, telling them how guilty or victimized they should feel based on their skin colour. (Lauren Southern for Rebel News, 2015)

> If this was a white performer saying, "Hey you know I want white people at the front of the venue" for whatever concocted bullshit socially progressive-sounding reason, and said "Well everyone else needs to move back a few rows," what do you think would happen? It would obviously be labelled as racist by the media. There would be no defense of it… It's like a Rosa Parks situation. (Styxhexenhammer666, 2017b)

The civil rights movement is invoked frequently by "alt-lite" figures to signal an allegiance to the *idea* of racial equality while condemning any policies or practices that materially address systemic racism such as reparations, affirmative action, or even confronting white privilege. Reactionary YouTubers also reference Martin Luther King to demonstrate their own tolerant, colourblind attitudes on race:

> [Reading from a New York Times Opinion Piece] "Spare me platitudes of how we are all the same on the inside." [Chuckles] Because skin colour matters more than, you know, the contents of a person's character right? (Computing Forever, 2017a)

> You know, this sort of white guy, white girl, a fairly normal person, fairly normal attitude to things. Don't give a shit about skin colour, don't care if you're a boy or a girl, judge you by the contents of your character, not the colour of your skin. Can't remember who said that! The left has moved on a bit from Dr. King. And yet you're assailed with these fake allegations [of racism], with these lies, and then you have no idea how to combat them. (Milo, 2017)

In these excerpts, Computing Forever (2017a) and Milo (2017) frame themselves as the real inheritors of Dr. King's legacy, upholding his vision of equality in the face of race-obsessed leftists. This framing erases Martin Luther King's radical politics—his calls for wealth redistribution and his condemnation of white moderates—and entrenches a revisionist, watered-down version of the civil rights movement as a fundamentally colourblind venture (West, 2018).

Even as "alt-lite" voices frequently invoke Martin Luther King, their rhetoric demonstrates a notable reversal of civil rights discourse, which aimed to shed light on past and present abuses in order to advocate for a more just future. "Alt-lite" voices, like their "alt-right" counterparts, imagine a glorified past and an "apocalyptic future of alienation" in which white people are not only undermined, but erased altogether (Mason, 2007, p. 109). In order to invoke such a future, which serves as an important animating myth among "alt-lite" YouTubers, they weave tales of persecution, which are told and re-told in order to frame pro-white movements as the new civil rights struggle:

> The Rotherham rape scandal destroys the myth of white privilege. The victims were victimized because they were white. The rape gangs got away with it because they weren't white, thanks to decades of social engineering, race baiting, and political correctness. This marked the beginning of white people being treated as second-class citizens because of the colour of their skin: the very definition of racism. (Paul Joseph Watson, 2015)

> Since day 1, I have rejected the violent, Marxist Black Lives Matter and Antifa movements and their extremist ideologies because that's what they are… I reject their blatant and abhorrent hatred of white people and whiteness. I reject their deceitful narrative that

> everyone who opposes them is racist... I reject their tearing down of our statues and their attempts to erase our history. I reject their hatred of the nuclear family and especially of Christianity. I reject all of it. (Brittany Sellner, 2020)

These passages exemplify the fear-mongering rhetoric that pervades reactionary YouTube channels: Watson and Sellner invoke dehumanizing stereotypes that brand people of colour as threats to white innocence and virtue. The construction of white marginality and persecution serves an important function within the context of these "alt-lite" videos. The pervasive idea that white people will be rendered second class citizens in their "own" countries marks progressives and people of colour as the new oppressors, which then justifies the deployment of violent, racist rhetoric against them.

3.3 White dominance: history's saviours and civilizers

Having established the widespread victimization of white people, "alt-lite" figures go on to defend the value of "white culture" by enumerating the great intellectual and humanitarian contributions of white people throughout history[28]. For example, in response to historic injustices perpetrated by European colonizers and their descendants, they consistently pivot their attention to atrocities committed by other groups:

> Slavery existed long before the Europeans settled in the Americas, dating back to the dawn of civilization… In the 7th century, hundreds of years before the Atlantic slave trade began, the Arab slave trade was transporting African slaves to the Middle East. This trade lasted for over a thousand years. In between 10 and 18 million African slaves were brought over to the Arab world, much more than ever taken by Europeans. Additionally, the Barbary slave trade in Northern Africa actually traded enslaved Europeans, not Africans. (Roaming Millenial, 2016)

> I love being made to feel collective white guilt for the slave trade, even though whites were the first in the world to end the slave trade… I love being made to feel collective white guilt for the slave trade, despite the fact that the Islamic slave trade was far more brutal and lasted for much longer. I love being made to feel collective white guilt for the slave trade, despite the fact that more whites were abducted and enslaved by Muslims than the number of Blacks enslaved by whites. (Paul Joseph Watson, 2016b)

[28] The conceptualization of "white culture" by far-right groups is itself an anachronistic invention, which encompasses everything from ancient Greek philosophy to modern-day rock music. It is worth noting that the ancient figures, who are often raised up as examples of white achievement, would not have conceived of themselves as "white" or belonging to a "white race" (McCoskey, 2002).

In these passages, "alt-lite" commentators emphasize that slavery and colonization were historically perpetrated by white and non-white people alike, but it was only white people who brought these practices to an end. This narrative erases the many forces that led to slavery's abolition in Europe—including the declining economic value of slavery and the revolts of enslaved peoples throughout the colonies—in favour of a flattering tale of white benevolence. The frequent invocation of the Arab slave trade in these discussions provides "alt-lite" YouTubers with a convenient foil to the transatlantic slave trade, as the shift in focus perfectly dovetails with their own Islamophobic rhetoric, which paints Muslims as backwards and violent.

This re-telling of history, which appears again and again in "alt-lite" video content, not only erases the struggles for freedom led by colonized and enslaved peoples, but also situates non-white subjects in a position of perpetual indebtedness, from which they must constantly demonstrate both their worthiness and their appreciation (Hartman, 1997). For instance:

> We lost millions of guys to wars fighting to keep you free. You're using all our inventions now. And don't talk to me about slavery, the balance sheet was zero after the civil war. You're sitting on *our* technology and *our* inventions and *our* hard work. And you're sitting there saying "Wow you suck." Look, I never really thought of myself as a white guy until I was told that I suck. Then I went over to Google and I looked it up and I said, "Whoa these guys are kinda awesome." Yeah, I have something to say. This is my new year's resolution: I'm going to start accepting that I created the modern world. And I'm also going to start saying to people like you, you're welcome you f*cking ingrate. (Gavin McInnes for Rebel News, 2016a)

> White people were the first in the world to legally end slavery: reformers like William Wilberforce who campaigned for the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. White people also literally put their lives on the line to conduct raids in African countries to free Black slaves from their Arab captors. Hundreds of thousands of white Americans died in a civil war partly to end slavery. There's your historical context. (Paul Joseph Watson, 2017)

Both McInnes and Watson emphasize the great sacrifices that white people have shouldered, historically, in order to "free" enslaved people, without mentioning the enormous wealth that was accumulated by Europeans and their descendants as a direct result of the slave trade. In the first excerpt, McInnes explicitly connects his pro-white rhetoric to the visibility of progressive media and his subsequent sense of victimization. He insists that Black Americans can no longer point to historical injustices, such as slavery, in order to explain current inequalities. At the same time, however, he happily takes credit for the technologies and inventions supposedly pioneered by white people throughout history. In this way, pro-white rhetoric simultaneously denies the reality

that people of colour inherit the effects of historical violence, dispossession, and segregation, while endorsing the idea that today's white Americans can inherit the achievements of previous generations. These claims—however paradoxical—are repeated so frequently, and with such fervour, that they form a kind of common sense among right-wing communities online (Ganesh, 2018).

When confronted with progressive arguments about white supremacy, "alt-lite" personalities cite bogus figures to elevate the historic achievements of white people and frame them as inarguably benevolent. This narration of US history, and world history, fixes white people as saviours and civilizers, whose misdeeds are vastly overshadowed by the gifts bestowed upon subjugated peoples: modernity, Christianity, individualism, emancipation. For example:

> The white race has had its faults of course but has also done some incredibly wonderful things as well: like spending massive amounts of blood and treasure to end the slave trade worldwide, like creating the idea of universal rights… In modern science, 97% of all modern scientific advancements between 800 BC and 1950 AD came from Europe and North America, not including Mexico. The modern world is a white, male phenomenon. And that has prevented the deaths or allowed the continued life of literally billions of people. (Stefan Molyneux, 2019)

> The United States of America is white culture. Canada and Australia are white culture too. And many parts of Europe. Just because you don't understand what white culture is, doesn't mean it doesn't exist. What's more likely is these racist SJWs know that there's a white culture, and they know how dominant in the world it is because we're the best, we make the best countries to live in and the best culture too… like the internet, music, and Hollywood movies. (No Bullshit, 2018)

In examining these claims, the boundary between "alt-lite" discourse and explicit white supremacy essentially vanishes. Molyneux's video endorses the idea that white people are superior without those words ever needing to be said aloud. Meanwhile, No Bullshit explicitly proclaims "we're the best" in a video that remains on YouTube at the time of writing. In an online landscape where videos about white privilege or patriarchy frequently go viral, these figures justify their pro-white talking points under the banner of "defending white people" against racist leftists.

3.4 Mitigating rhetorical strategies: personal relations with people of colour

Despite their openly racist rhetoric, "alt-lite" YouTubers adopt an array of *mitigating rhetorical strategies* (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 83) that temper or obfuscate their racist rhetoric and signal

their adherence to mainstream, colourblind conservatism. These strategies help them to avoid deplatforming and demonetization while appealing to a wider cross-section of viewers. Across all the channels studied, "alt-lite" YouTubers performatively elevate or align themselves with minoritized communities and individuals when it suits their purposes. For example, these YouTubers frequently highlight their personal relationships with individual people of colour to deflect accusations of racism. This strategy relies on what DiAngelo (2019) calls the "good/bad binary": the common assumption that only deeply immoral people can be racists and that these people make up a small, defective minority. Under this narrow definition of racism, close relationships with non-white people serve as proof that an individual does not deserve to be labeled a racist.

A video uploaded by Gavin McInnes illustrates this common rhetorical move. In 2016, McInnes founded the Proud Boys (2017), "a pro-western fraternal organization for men who refuse to apologize for creating the modern world." Despite his insistence that it was merely a drinking club for old-fashioned men who enjoy sports and cold beer, the Proud Boys gained notoriety. Their skinhead-like uniform, violent hazing rituals, and rallies that often led to brawls unsurprisingly drew media attention. In 2018, after McInnes delivered a talk at the Metropolitan Republican Club in New York, several self-avowed Proud Boys got into a fight with protestors and were subsequently arrested (Moynihan & Winston, 2018). Following this event, McInnes posted a 36-minute video to YouTube, which had well over half a million views by the time his channel was taken down in 2020. In the video, McInnes alternately reads from a script and rants in his signature, indignant style.

The entire video is filmed with McInnes standing next to a photograph of one of the arrested men with his family, namely his Black wife and children (see Fig. 4). The photograph chosen by McInnes seeks to exculpate the man in question by revealing his *true unprejudiced nature*, which has been obscured by the mainstream media. The photo implies that the arrested Proud Boy cannot possibly hold racist views because he has a loving Black family.

Figure 8. *Screenshot from Gavin McInnes (2018) video*

In the same video, McInnes plays a montage of himself praising different non-white groups and individuals to similarly absolve himself. This montage presents one of the clearest examples of how "alt-lite" YouTubers deploy mitigating rhetorical strategies: every relationship with a non-white person, every positive articulation about non-white groups, can be dredged up in moments of challenge as evidence of their tolerance and colourblindness. This strategy pervades "alt-lite" content. When accused by a student of being a white supremacist during a campus lecture, Milo Yiannopoulos responds: "Am I? See the amount of black dick that's been in my mouth… I must be the most self-loathing white supremacist in the world" (Milo, 2016). The short clip depicting Yiannopoulos's retort received over 3 million views and illustrates how "alt-lite" YouTubers use non-white friends, lovers, and family members to defend their moral characters and shut down opposition, all while engaging in openly racist and dehumanizing rhetoric.

3.5 Mitigating rhetorical strategies: performative praise and concern

Beyond personal relations with people of colour, "alt-lite" creators also align themselves with minoritized groups through praise or performative concern, often in service of a specific argument. For example, in a 2018 video criticizing the *New York Times* journalist Sarah Jeong, Ezra Levant—the founder of Rebel News—opens by saying:

> Koreans: industrious, smart, outstanding. I love Koreans. They're so successful in South Korea itself, and in Canada and America, as most Asian immigrants are. I mean, let's just speak candidly, I know this is stereotyping, but it's positive stereotyping: Asians are great! Here's an official chart by the US census. It's from the last census in the US a couple years ago. It shows income by race. It's sort of politically incorrect to do this, but look at this. See that line at the top there? That red line? That's Asians. (Rebel News, 2018)

After ostentatiously praising Koreans by invoking the model minority stereotype, he launches into his critique:

> Sarah Jeong herself is living the dream: she's free, she's happy, she's not under threat in North Korea, she's not starving like North Koreans are. She's welcome to reach any height in America… But wow is she angry at America and Americans, and to be more precise at white people, and at men, and at white American men in uniform. The very kind of people who kept South Korea free by giving up their own lives. (Rebel News, 2018)

Here, Levant invokes white saviour discourse, as discussed earlier, to imply that any success that Koreans like Jeong are able to secure for themselves is ultimately *because* of white Americans, to whom they owe a perpetual debt of gratitude. His praise for Korean people serves to bolster his own argument, advance his worldview, and shield himself from criticism when he goes on to insult and patronize Jeong.

The same instrumental approach is evident when conservative YouTubers performatively express concern for one minoritized group in order to denigrate another. For example, the struggles of Asian Americans are foregrounded in the context of affirmative action debates. Here, Asians, constructed as disciplined and hardworking, are used as a foil to denigrate Black and Latinx communities, who are implied to be culturally deficient and therefore responsible for their own under-representation at post-secondary institutions. For example, Gavin McInnes states in a video "debunking" a pro-affirmative action short film:

> The elephant in the room here is Oriental. What about Asians? What about Chinese Americans? They beat us on every metric. They make more money. They're more successful. They're healthier. They live longer lives. Did they cheat? No. That was hard work. (Rebel News, 2016b).

These YouTubers' concern for Asian people, however, does not prevent them from calling COVID-19 the "China virus" and perpetuating all manner of harmful anti-Asian stereotypes in other contexts. In a similar vein, "alt-lite" YouTubers frequently decry the treatment of women and LGBT communities in majority-Muslim countries to paint Islam as backwards, intolerant, and uncivilized:

> Women are treated like second-class citizens in Muslim countries, that's a fact. Sure it's not all, and it's not everywhere, but it is happening in many places. And there seems to be a lot of pretending going on in the heads of this video's writers… They want to pretend women aren't treated poorly in Islam. What a goddamn joke. (No Bullshit, 2018)

This concern for women's rights, however, only arises in situations where it can be weaponized against other groups, namely Muslims and—more recently—trans people. Milo Yiannopoulos frequently engages in this strategy, speaking incessantly about the persecution of gay people in Muslims countries while dismissing homophobia within the United States as a "hoax." The same logic applies in scenarios when he performs concern for Black people in order to make an argument about immigration:

> I mean one of the reasons why some Black commentators love Trump so much is because they realize what the Black community didn't, which is that one of the groups hit hardest by illegal immigration, particularly Hispanic immigration, are the Black working classes, who find themselves priced out of the jobs market and plunged back into this sort of state dependent unemployment that has caused so many problems for Black cities in the first place. It is the overburdening of public resources, of hospitals and schools, that make conditions in Black communities even worse than they are already. (Milo, 2017)

In this way, Yiannopoulos gestures towards his own sympathy for Black people while building a career from disparaging Black Lives Matter and other movements actually led by Black activists. Throughout these cases, the lived experiences and voices of minoritized people are dismissed, even as "alt-lite" YouTubers periodically articulate praise and concern to demonstrate their tolerance for non-white Others. The struggles of minoritized communities are worth mentioning only insofar as they can be instrumentalized to advance their own talking points.

3.6 Mitigating strategies: Humour, irony, and ambiguity

More than their Fox News or talk radio counterparts, prominent "alt-lite" YouTube celebrities perform outrageous, sometimes goofy comedic bits that establish them as "edgy" while allowing them to maintain ironic distance from the views they are espousing. These comedic bits are well-suited to the visual and DIY nature of YouTube as a platform. Unlike conservative news outlets, which need to maintain a veneer of professionalism for their legitimacy, YouTubers gain credibility with audience members through the demonstration of authenticity and intimacy (Lewis, 2020). For example, Yiannopoulos performs a recurring caricature of Congresswoman Ilhan Omar. Even

as he advances vile, dehumanizing ideas about Muslim women in these videos, he breaks character and laughs at himself throughout, cultivating an ironic distance between him and the caricature he is depicting[29]. Similarly, in a 2017 video for Rebel News, Gavin McInnes blackens his face and performs minstrel-like impressions of liberals scolding white people for their various misdeeds.

Figure 9. *Screenshot from McInnes's video for Rebel News (2017)*

Such performances—usually involving bad accents, haphazard costumes, offensive makeup—allow "alt-lite" celebrities to demonstrate their fearlessness (they can say and do what they like!) without earnestly engaging with the ideas they are advancing. When these representations are criticized for perpetuating harmful stereotypes, "alt-lite" YouTubers frequently invoke humour, irony, and satire to shield themselves from criticism and to frame progressives as overly sensitive whiners who simply cannot take a joke:

> Now I think we should fight this outrage culture, this sort of culture of fake allegations of racism and sexism, mob justice and shaming by ourselves being outrageous. I think the best way to respond to outrage culture is to be shocking. So I put "fagg-t" on my bus, call people tr-nnies, call feminists ham-beasts, ham-planets, ogres, monsters, hippopotamuses, I could go on... (Milo, 2017)

These kinds of statements by "alt-lite" YouTubers help them to evade accountability and are particularly pervasive on YouTube, where the medium of video gives creators ample space for semiotic "play" and ambiguity. As such, when No Bullshit opens up a video with "Hello and

[29] This example becomes the subject of further investigation in Chapter 5, Section 4.3.

welcome back to No Bullshit. Today we're joined by the White YouTuber. White power up in this b-tch today, am I right? No just kidding, and I definitely shouldn't say that before today's video," he is able to simultaneously invoke the spectre of white supremacy while jokingly disavowing it (No Bullshit, 2017a). This kind of edgy tone helps "alt-lite" YouTubers to strategically position themselves as court jesters, who are provocative enough to keep viewers coming back but never sincerely hateful enough to warrant deplatforming. This delicate balancing act will be the subject of further discussion in Chapter 5.

4. Conceptualizing "alt-lite"

After viewing and analyzing many hours of this video content, I find that "alt-lite" does not represent a single, coherent ideology but rather a collection of practices that help right-wing and far-right personalities reconcile their stated colourblind worldview with their popular brand of reactionary politics. Of the personalities discussed in this chapter, Stefan Molyneux has gone the furthest in terms of adopting explicitly white supremacist talking points; for instance, he has in multiple videos matter-of-factly endorsed scientific racism: the widely disproven idea that white people have higher IQs than non-whites, which explains differences in life outcomes. For the most part however, "alt-lite" YouTubers shy away from discussing inherent racial differences in favour of thinly-veiled "cultural" differences when rationalizing American, and global, racial hierarchy. What unites these individuals—and distinguishes them from "alt-right" personalities—is their reliance on a set of mitigating rhetorical strategies in order to temper and obfuscate their arguments: performatively aligning with one minority group in order to denigrate another; highlighting personal relationships with non-white people and knowledge of non-white cultures; embracing a colourblind worldview apparently rooted in Martin Luther King's teachings and the civil rights movement; and maintaining ironic distance when performing more overtly hateful racial stereotypes. This careful positioning within the attention economy has allowed most of the channels discussed in this paper to remain active on YouTube, even as the platform works to remove "hateful and supremacist content" (YouTube, 2019b).

While it may be the case that "alt-lite" creators sometimes serve as people's introductions to far-right talking points, it would be a mis-reading to suggest that these individuals in fact "shun

white supremacist thinking" (ADL, 2017). Similarly, classifying these channels as "gateways to more extreme forms of content" as opposed to "extremist or white supremacist channels" (Chen et. al, 2021), obfuscates how white supremacy manifests in contemporary discourse. Individuals may reject or remain silent on the need to establish a white ethnostate but still engage in white supremacist rhetoric. All of the channels studied here perpetuate narratives of white victimhood, which are used to block equity- and justice-related actions and policies while fueling resentment against people of colour. Despite the violence of their rhetoric, notable "alt-lite" figures like Lauren Southern, Lauren Chen, and Milo Yiannopoulos[30] have successfully leveraged their popularity on YouTube to secure book deals, speaking tours, and roles at news outlets.

Meanwhile, YouTube's efforts to "tackle hate" on the platform have proven ambivalent with regards to "alt-lite" creators (YouTube, 2019b). The platform's demonetization of popular channels has been met with loud backlash and accusations of censorship, which paradoxically reinforce the narrative of white victimhood while prompting creators to diversify their income streams through subscription models and crowd-funding (eg. StevenCrowder, 2019). YouTube's removal of two known white nationalists, Martin Sellner and The Iconoclast, in 2019 caused such a clamour that the individuals' accounts were quickly re-instated (BBC, 2019). In June 2020, YouTube finally banned Richard Spencer and David Duke, a former grand wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, from the platform. Two of the "alt-lite" YouTubers discussed in this chapter, Stefan Molyneux and Gavin McInnes, also had their channels taken down that month. By the time their channels were removed from YouTube, both these men had gained substantial followings—360,000 subscribers to McInnes's channel and almost 1 million to Molyneux's—and had been active on the platform for well over a decade.[31] This practice by the platform of removing channels that engage in racist discourse only *after* their creators have gained success and notoriety, accruing financial rewards along the way, exemplifies the ad-hoc and reactive approach to content moderation so often adopted by tech platforms (Daniels, 2009; Maddox & Malson, 2020). In Chapter 7, I will explore the impact of these policies and alternative approaches to platform governance in greater depth.

[30] Despite his rapid rise to success and notoriety in the mid-2010s, in recent years, Yiannopoulos has lamented that being de-platformed from major social media sites has financially ruined him (Uberti, 2019).
[31] Both McInnes and Molyneux started their YouTube channels in 2006.

5. Conclusion: The "alt-lite" and white supremacy

In this chapter, I collected discursive threads from "alt-lite" YouTube videos to better understand how "borderline" reactionaries position themselves within the online political landscape. I focused on how these political influencers talk about whiteness, highlighting the tension between their stated colourblindness and the racist logics underlying their content. Watching these videos, it becomes clear that—despite their protestations—"alt-lite" personalities are firmly entrenched in white supremacist ideology. First, these personalities frame any discussion of white supremacy or white privilege as an act of racist aggression. Second, they insist that people of colour are indebted to the achievements and benevolence of white people throughout history. Third, they suggest that efforts to uplift or protect historically oppressed groups are in fact a kind of structural discrimination against white people. Finally, they share a set of "mitigating rhetorical strategies" that distinguish them from more extreme figures in the "alt-right." These moments of mitigating speech are deployed instrumentally by "alt-lite" figures and can be cited as evidence of their tolerance when confronted with accusations of racism from critics and platforms alike.

The analysis in this chapter moves away from discussing pro-white ideology as marginal or fringe and aims to highlight how white identity politics have grown out of mainstream concepts of race and racial difference such as colourblindness, meritocracy, and the good-bad binary. It also problematizes the assumption that "alt-lite" content is less extreme in its arguments and assumptions than "alt-right" and white nationalist content. I have shown in this chapter how "alt-lite" personalities invoke racist tropes and logics to implicitly make the case for white superiority. Building on this analysis, in the next chapter, I will explore in greater detail how these same figures portray non-white people, with a focus on "provocative" and "edgy" performances of otherness. While these depictions of women, trans people, and people of colour are reliably demeaning and offensive, YouTube reactionaries employ a host of discursive manoeuvres to evade accountability. I will examine how YouTube personalities justify these performances by engaging in second-order debates about the legitimacy of provocative speech and their right to offend. Together, these two chapters present a holistic view of "alt-lite" discourse.

Chapter 5: The Right to Provoke

1. Introduction

At the height of his fame and notoriety, in February 2017, Milo Yiannopoulos[32] was invited to be a guest on HBO's late-night talk show, *Real Time with Bill Maher*. While Maher positioned himself as a political opponent to Yiannopoulos in the segment, the tone of the interview was undeniably friendly, and the two gushingly agreed on one thing in particular: that humour cannot, and should not, be policed by anyone. In the interview, Yiannopoulos says, "The reason they want to police humour is that they can't control it. Because the one thing authoritarians hate is the sound of laughter, because they can't control what people find funny." Maher chimes in, "And also because when people laugh, they know it's true. Laughter is involuntary." In interview after interview, all manner of reactionaries like to claim that they are, in fact, humourists of some flavour. In the case of Yiannopoulos, he successfully branded himself as a "provocateur," with media outlets from the BBC to Vox to the New Yorker referring to him as such.

This chapter examines the concept of "provocation" as one of the purported aims of the reactionary right. In it, I investigate the common refrain that reactionaries use humour, shock, and irony in order to veil their ideology (Dreisbach, 2021) or "hide in plain sight" (Wilson, 2017), and ask *what exactly are the mechanisms underlying this process*? How does humour work for the reactionary YouTubers who deploy it? I take on these questions by analyzing how provocative racial humour operates within "alt-lite" discourse on YouTube. Using critical discourse analysis as a method, I interrogate the logics underlying these performances and contextualize them within today's media landscape. I also draw on interviews with viewers of reactionary YouTube channels to explore how edgy speech acts are understood and processed by audience members. By analyzing video content alongside audience interviews, I am able to scrutinize YouTuber's claims about how and why they use humour, comparing these assertions against viewers' own testimonies and interpretations.

I argue that provocative humour gives reactionary YouTubers the discursive space to overtly and violently denigrate minority groups while providing audiences with a roadmap for how

[32] At this point, Yiannopoulos was known for his anti-SJW YouTube channel, his controversial "Dangerous Fagg-t" speaking tour which attracted protestors across the US and UK, and his harassment of *Ghostbusters* actress Leslie Jones on Twitter—an episode that would eventually get him banned from Twitter.

to process, rationalize, and support these performances. By brazenly violating the boundaries of acceptable speech, YouTubers generate second-order debates about their right to speak, shifting attention away from the controversial opinion itself and towards intractable battles over freedom of expression. This pivot towards "speech" resonates deeply with viewers of reactionary YouTube personalities, who feel stifled by censorious speech environments, online and offline. Ultimately, provocative racial humour helps YouTubers to convert conventional reactionary talking points into contentious "free speech events" (Titley, 2020), which garner wanted publicity for their videos while eliciting feelings of solidarity from viewers and other potential allies.

2. Background

2.1 Unpacking conservative humour

Dannagal Young argues in *Irony and Outrage* (2020) that liberals and conservatives have, on average, psychological profiles that differ from one another. These differences predispose liberals and conservatives towards different types of political media, so that liberals gravitate towards humour and satire whereas conservatives gravitate towards outrage. Young's study was launched by the observation that, at the time of writing in 2019, there appeared to be no political satire on the right analogous to the *Daily Show* or the *Colbert Report*. Most conservative programming tended not towards humour and irony but—like Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh—towards outrage. Young's characterization of political comedy as a countercultural space well suited for progressive messages resonated with arguments made by other communication scholars about humour's liberatory potential (Rossing, 2012; Lawrence, 2018). These researchers have highlighted how marginalized groups, in particular, have used humour to undermine dominant, othering narratives about their communities, although these performances are always subject to multiple interpretations, a condition known as *polysemy* (Perks, 2010; Atluri, 2009).

Several years on from the publication of *Irony and Outrage*, the proliferation of right-wing comedians and provocateurs challenges some of the key observations that inspired Young's book. While the American comedy scene still prides itself on being countercultural and transgressive, it does not necessarily lean to the left. Indeed, in recent years, famous comedians from Joe Rogan to Dave Chappelle have become central figures in the culture wars, touting the value of free speech

towards anti-progressive ends. In their book, Sienkiewicz and Marx (2022) argue that the conservative comedy scene is robust, profitable, and politically impactful—pushing back on assumptions that comedy has a left-wing bias. Unlike the bulk of research done on right-wing communities, which focuses on negative affects—outrage, resentment, disgust—those working on conservative humour direct our attention to the positive emotions that can accompany right-wing and far-right politics: pleasure, joy, and solidarity (Bauer, 2023; Pérez, 2022). Furthermore, research on the far right has observed how ironic racial humour is central to the movement's discursive strategy. For instance, Billig (2001) argues that extremist groups like the KKK use humour as an outlet for imagining racist violence against minorities while shielding themselves from legal and social repercussions. In his paper on the "alt-right pipeline," Munn (2019) theorizes that racist jokes and memes help to normalize dehumanizing ideas about minority groups and lays the groundwork for further radicalization.

2.2 Analyzing provocative texts

Understanding that humour, irony, and satire can be deployed for a variety of conflicting political goals, this chapter aims to examine one iteration of online humour, which I call "provocation." I use the term to refer to a range of speech acts that aim to scandalize viewers. Here, I draw on Hardaker's (2013) linguistic work on the related concept of "trolling." In her paper, she identifies six key trolling strategies, from covert to overt:

- Digress: luring others into frustrating discussions that are irrelevant, pointless, or circular
- Criticize: nit-picking others on details like grammar
- Antipathize: making deliberately controversial statements
- Endanger: intentionally stating incorrect information, giving bad advice, or asking frustrating questions under the guise of ignorance
- Shock: being insensitive or offensive on a taboo subject (eg. rape jokes)
- Aggress: openly antagonizing another user

The provocative statements and performances I investigate in this chapter fall on the overt end of Hardaker's scale (namely shock and aggress). While the concept of "trolling" highlights how trolls elicit strong emotional reactions on the individual level (Hardaker, 2015), causing the target to lash

out in despair or frustration, "provocation" implies a grandiosity that is directed at the crowd. The provocateur gets his reaction by "going too far" or "doing too much"—by stating the taboo or indulging in hyperbole—in a way that violates social norms and prompts viewers to gasp, cringe, or laugh in disbelief. Provocation and irony go hand in hand, as the speaker undermines their own performance in the act of provoking: the ridiculousness, the absurdity, of the act hints at the speaker's self-awareness. They knowingly lay the bait, ready to laugh at the liberals who inevitably bite.

In order to analyze provocative rhetoric, I am guided by the literature on critical discourse analysis (which is discussed in Chapter 3, Section 5.2) as well as theorizing on irony from other disciplines. Irony serves as a useful analytic for examining how reactionaries undermine, distance themselves from, and otherwise complicate what they outwardly say. In particular, I draw on Hutcheon's (1994) theory of irony as a scene, a discursive situation involving the ironist, the interpreter, and the social context in which they are embedded. Hutcheon argues that what literary theorists have called "understanding" or "misunderstanding" irony has more to do with a person's membership within a discursive community—a group of people that share "restrictive but also enabling communication conventions"—than with their inherent competence as an interpreter (p.18). This conception of irony fits well with my research, which is not chiefly concerned with the speaker's intention, but with the negotiation of meaning taking place between the producer and consumer of the ironic message.

In Hutcheon's (1994) model, irony is defined semantically by three characteristics: it is "relational, inclusive, and differential" (p. 58). Irony is *relational* because it exists between a said and an unsaid meaning. It is *inclusive* because both meanings exist simultaneously in the ironic moment; that is, the "literal" meaning does not need to be rejected in order for the "real" or "intended" meaning to be processed. Finally, irony is *differential* because the said and unsaid meanings are different from one another but not necessarily opposite. Booth's (1974) distinction between stable and unstable irony also arises as a useful concept and is frequently referenced in analysis of contemporary cultural texts. In stable ironies, the irony is covert, intentional, and has discernable, finite targets; the literal meaning of the text is undermined, rather than meaning altogether (Greene, 2011, p. 120). In contrast, unstable ironies deconstruct and subvert their targets without affirming

any alternatives; nothing is concretely proposed and no stable political position is adopted (Booth, 1974, p. 240). As Greene (2011) summarizes, "what distinguishes the two is the presence or absence of an affirmative position on the issue at hand" (p. 120). Greene goes on to cite *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* as examples of stable and unstable ironies, respectively. Together, Hutcheon and Booth's work provide useful concepts for understanding and analyzing the provocative speech acts examined in this chapter.

3. Analysis

The arguments presented in the following sections are drawn from a critical discourse analysis of seven "alt-lite" videos that were selected for their "provocative" tone (See Appendix 3 for list of videos), along with interviews with audience members of reactionary YouTube content. More details on methods of data collection and analysis can be found in Chapter 3, Section 5.

3.1 The jester and the philosopher

In their videos, "alt-lite" personalities strike a delicate balance between educating and entertaining their audiences. They do so by oscillating between two modes of communicating, which I call the "jester" register and the "philosopher" register. These two personas offset and complement one another while endearing "alt-lite" YouTubers to audiences. When speaking in their "philosopher" register, they cite many forms of evidence to support their claims and provide their viewers with an arsenal of talking points to deploy in debates (real or imagined) with liberals. Conversely, as jesters, "alt-lite" YouTubers engage in hyperbolic, provocative performances mocking themselves and others.

This oscillation between jester and philosopher personas is on display in Gavin McInnes's 2019 video "GOML – The Scottish National Portrait Gallery isn't African enough," a response video[33] excerpted from his then-weekly show "Get off my lawn." In it, McInnes stands in front of a green screen, while the target video plays behind him. The target video in question was posted by the National Galleries of Scotland and features a young Black man delivering a dramatized reading of a poem about the glorification of colonizers at the National Portrait Gallery. The poem

[33] See Chapter 4 (Section 3.1) for a discussion of this genre of YouTube video

was composed by the Scottish band Young Fathers, performed by band member Kayus Bankole, and filmed in the gallery itself. McInnes stops and starts the target video, pausing to mock, rebut, and undermine both the poem and Bankole's performance. Throughout the video, McInnes mirrors Bankole's appearance, initially wearing a leather jacket and black beanie, like Bankole, and eventually stripping off these layers, as Bankole does in the original.

Figure 10. *Screenshot from "GOML – The Scottish National Portrait Gallery isn't African enough" (Gavin McInnes, 2019)*

Within the first two minutes of the video, McInnes puts on offensive African and Japanese accents, establishing the video's provocative tone. His overall gripe is that Young Fathers' poem misses the point—that a gallery is meant to immortalize "men of consequence" and that, in Scotland, all of these men are understandably white:

> Well I'm sorry but Scotland is as white as Japan was Japanese. It only had immigrants very recently. Not a lot of people want to go there. The weather's not great, so I'm sorry if at the National Portrait Gallery, you've noticed that a lot of these ancient historical figures from hundreds and hundreds of years ago tend not to look like Rastafarians (laughing). (Gavin McInnes, 2019)

Throughout the video, McInnes performs outrage and embarrassment at Young Fathers' presumptuousness. In his "philosopher" register, McInnes delivers lessons on history and art. For instance, after Bankole recites, "Have you taken all this space / Sucked up all the air / Swallowed

all the wine / Taken the goodness from the earth / Sweated the energy from my family's living essence," McInnes responds:

> Are you implying that the Scottish aristocracy got rich off slavery? The way I recall it was the tobacco industry, potatoes were big, shipbuilding was massive in Scotland's history. I don't think you know of history, my friend. Scotland is not known for their rampant exploitation of the Black man (laughing). You might have an argument that they contributed to the opium wars in China by supplying iron ships that would try to fight the state when the state tried to outlaw opium… Maybe a Chinese guy might have an argument for like one painting. But what the hell? How are these aristocrats his problem? (Gavin McInnes, 2019)

Even as he keeps his tone light and conversational, McInnes steps confidently into the role of educator, mockingly correcting Bankole ("I don't think you know of history, my friend") and citing lesser-known facts about Scottish history to bolster his credibility. At the same time, his framing of Scottish history grossly misrepresents the country's role in the transatlantic slave trade. Throughout the 1700s, slave ships carrying thousands of enslaved people departed from ports in Scotland. Wealthy Scots were enriched through investments in the slave trade and ownership of enslaved people, while poorer Scots served as overseers on plantations across the Atlantic (National Library of Scotland, n.d.). In 2018, the University of Glasgow published a report that estimated that the university had, since 1809, accrued £65.8 million from gifts/donations bestowed by those who made their money from the slave trade (Mullen & Newman, 2018).[34] This figure represents just one Scottish institution's profits from chattel slavery. McInnes's confident, breezy dismissal of Bankole's anger obfuscates this history and ironically reinforces the poem's argument about the whitewashing of Scotland's past. Meanwhile, his performance of incredulity at Bankole's "ignorance" assures viewers of McInnes's expertise on the topic.

Throughout the video, McInnes lectures in this philosopher register, pausing the target video to make his interjections. For instance, after Bankole says, "now you are dead / dead random white dude," McInnes pauses the video and dives into a lecture on literary history:

> The kind of people that are at the National Portrait Gallery include, oh I don't know, Sir Walter Scott? Sir Walter Scott is the guy who came up with the concept of 'I'm going to write a novel but it'll be true.' So it'll be a romantic tale with love interests… and there'll be an A plot and a B plot and the conclusion, but it'll be based on an actual figure, and I'll use actual events… That concept enabled billions more people to read history. It brought

[34] £65.8 million represents a moderate estimate of the present-day value of these endowments based on relative wage or income growth to calculate present-day values.

history down to the common man, the near-illiterate man… You know what? Give the guy a painting in the Scottish Museum! Throw him a bone okay? I don't care if it makes Black guys feel bad that he's in a nice painting. (McInnes, 2019)

The response video format gives McInnes the power to stop and start the poem, interjecting where he wishes and sometimes mockingly chiming in overtop Bankole's performance. This setup is suggestive of a debate, with two individuals expounding their views, but only one person is capable of interrupting, correcting, undermining, and rebutting the other. The viewer is only shown the target video in decontextualized snippets, which McInnes often interprets literally in order to paint Young Fathers' poem as ridiculous, pathetic, and ill-informed. This one-sidedness gives the response video much of its power and lends McInnes an air of rhetorical mastery.

In his "jester" register, McInnes performs a prolonged, self-deprecating joke about his physique compared to Bankole's. In the target video, Bankole eventually strips off his shirt and shadow boxes with the portraits in the gallery as a way of embodying his anger and resistance. Mirroring Bankole, McInnes also takes off his shirt, revealing his torso and belly and jokes, "Would you look at that! Just pause it here. This is eerie. We have the exact same body. This is like... I'm like looking in a black mirror. This is that famous show *Black Mirror*. It's like he's my Black twin. Has my mother been untoward? Why am I seeing my exact body but chocolate?" The joke, of course, is that his body looks nothing like Bankole's (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. *Screenshot from "GOML – The Scottish National Portrait Gallery isn't African enough" (Gavin McInnes, 2019)*

When embodying the jester persona, "alt-lite" personalities often perform degrading caricatures of women, queer people, and people of colour, which will be explored in the following section. In the above excerpt, McInnes also engages in self-deprecating humour to show that he spares no one from mockery and critique, not even himself. Provocative "alt-lite" videos are littered with these diversions, which give the speaker some discursive distance from the views they are advancing, as if to say: *Don't take this too seriously, I certainly don't!* Or alternatively: *Don't take me too seriously, I certainly don't!* Milo Yiannopoulos engages in a similar rhetorical move when, after lecturing for over an hour to students at UC Colorado Springs, he asks the audience, "Is that me? Can anyone else hear her? All that cocaine is finally taken its toll. I'm kidding, I'm kidding, I'm kidding! Everyone thinks I'm on it all the time, but I'm just really fidgety" (Milo, 2017). This oscillation between philosopher and jester registers provides an air of intimacy and familiarity—as though the speaker is sharing peculiar or private parts of themselves. And indeed, one study participant described in an interview how, at the height of his reactionary YouTube fandom, he related to each of his favourite personalities in familial terms:

> A lot of these figures like, you know, Molyneux, Gavin, Jordan Peterson, all these different figures, they all had a different role that they play. Gavin's like your funny crazy uncle, and Jordan's like your stern father. But I very much felt that relationship with them. (Gabriel[35], 27, USA)

Reactionary YouTubers are able to cultivate these relationships of trust and intimacy with viewers by revealing idiosyncratic, goofy, eccentric parts of their personalities and lives. For "alt-lite" figures, the jester register lends them an aura of approachability and gives them leeway to rehash bigoted talking points, while the philosopher register establishes them as serious thinkers with well-researched arguments. The alternation between these registers makes "alt-lite" figures unique and attractive voices within the busy right-wing media landscape.

[35] Names of interviewees have been altered to protect their confidentiality.

3.2 Overly protected groups

In the reactionary's worldview, marginalized groups—people of colour, Muslims, trans people—are understood to be unfairly *advantaged*, insofar as others are socially discouraged from criticizing, attacking, or making fun of them. This sentiment pervades "alt-lite" YouTube videos and came up throughout my interviews with viewers. In a response video posted in 2017, "Crowder: CNN Rebuttal: Yes, Deport Illegal Immigrants/Criminals," Steven Crowder speaks over a CNN clip about a man being deported from the United States after a DUI charge. The man featured in the story describes how he was pulled away from his family without even getting a chance to say goodbye. As the news story cuts to a woman crying and speaking Spanish, Crowder interjects in mocking Spanish, "No no no no no no no no. NO hablas es… no hablas English. Not on this show okay? We don't allow that," which is greeted with laughter from his team in the studio. Throughout his videos, these sidekick figures conspicuously lend Crowder their support through nodding, chuckles, and other affirmations, creating an aura of consensus around his arguments.

After mocking the Spanish-speaking woman, Crowder then pauses the CNN clip and says, "Okay listen, the reason we're laughing here is so that you don't feel guilty about laughing. Because everyone who watched this special in a room with friends…"—he breaks into nonsensical gibberish here, imitating the Mexican man in the CNN clip—"and if you laughed everyone would be like 'You're a horrible human being.' No no no you *should* laugh. As a matter of fact you should laugh *theatrically*! HAHAHAHAHAH" (StevenCrowder, 2017). Here, Crowder frames his dehumanizing caricature of Mexicans as a corrective to the way undocumented immigrants are typically depicted in mainstream media: as those deserving of empathy and compassion. His self-consciously theatrical laughter is meant to reassure audiences that their instinctive disdain for the man being deported is justified. His laughter gives permission to those watching at home to do the same (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). He continues, "They want you to feel guilty and racist for wanting illegal immigrants to be deported, particularly felonious illegal immigrants. They want you to feel guilty for that… So they bring out people crying: sob stories of people who are being deported." Here, Crowder invokes the reactionary trope that marginalized people are in fact coddled by liberals and mainstream media. This framing is invoked by "alt-lite" personalities in order to justify

stereotypical, dehumanizing portrayals of minority groups as "punching up," rather than "punching down."

Viewers of Crowder's content echoed this sentiment in interviews when asked about his frequent performances of racial stereotypes:

> I don't think it's necessarily punching down, there's far more poor people living in abject poverty, drug riddled trailer parks—in the United States specifically—there's far more white people in that situation than any other race, period. There's no possible way that someone in that circumstance laughing at a joke about someone that's in one of these so-called "societally protected classes" is punching down. That is a nonsensical argument. (Terry, 20s, USA)

> It's always been the people with power, which usually means like kings, queens, presidents whatever, if you can't say something about them, they're the ones with power. So now all of the people you can't say stuff about are the people with power, even though they claim to be disenfranchised… and even the view that these people can't stand up for themselves is racist. You think they need your protection? That means you're a racist! (James, 40, Canada)

These excerpts reveal how the progressive logic of "punching up" and "punching down" is reversed in reactionary discursive communities. My respondents did not buy the argument that racists jokes have negative material impacts on the lives of marginalized people. Instead, they saw attempts to criticize, shame, or demonetize right-wing YouTube channels for perpetuating racist stereotypes as a way of censoring dissenting voices and protecting certain classes of people from critique.

In their videos, "alt-lite" YouTubers frequently talk about their experiences of "minoritization" when confronted with jokes about their ignorance and privilege, as white men. Yiannopoulos comments on this experience in his talk at University of Colorado:

> Now you've undoubtedly noticed feminists brandishing 'I bathe in white male tears' signs and stuff like that, you know… I watch how ordinary Americans are spoken about by their own media, by the media that's supposed to look after your interests... And the way they speak about you, frankly, is disgusting. (Milo, 2017)

Within this worldview, where being the butt of a "white male" joke is experienced as marginalization, it is minority groups who are the privileged ones and white men who are the targets. The concepts of punching up and punching down are thus understood completely differently within this discursive community than within liberal or progressive ones.

3.3 The discursive role of provocation

Catering to audiences who feel brow-beaten and unfairly chastised, figures like Crowder reassure viewers that their laughter, contempt, and bias, are not only justified, but righteous. It is *right* to make fun of these groups, to knock them off their pedestals. Thus, the discursive role of humour and provocation, in many of these videos, is to put minority groups "in their place" and present a counterweight to mainstream representations that, according to reactionaries, overly elevate these groups. At the end of the Crowder's CNN rebuttal video about the deportation of undocumented people charged with crimes, he says: "The people who are here, who are committing rapes and murders and are joining and creating gang violence? I think you put them on an exclusive private first-class ICE Air jet" (StevenCrowder, 2017). The video then closes with a short sketch where Jared, one of Crowder's studio sidekicks, is shown (using green screen) flying an "ICE Air" plane. Sporting a bomber jacket and aviator goggles, Jared looks around surreptitiously before parachuting out of the pilot's cabin, leaving the plane to crash in a large explosion. High pitched screams and stereotypical "Mexican" voices are played overtop the explosion, implying the deaths of all the passengers on board.

Figure 12. *Screenshot from "Crowder: CNN Rebuttal: Yes, Deport Illegal Immigrants/Criminals" (StevenCrowder, 2017)*

Figure 13. *Screenshot from "Crowder: CNN Rebuttal: Yes, Deport Illegal Immigrants/Criminals" (StevenCrowder, 2017)*

Through this sketch Crowder implies that these ICE detainees deserve to die, and if he had his way, they would. Provocative sketches like this establish the edginess of "alt-lite" channels, differentiating them from more traditional outrage programming on Fox News or talk radio. Because these spectacles are so outrageous—and thus not to be taken seriously—they provide the discursive space for "alt-lite" figures to imagine and articulate heinous fantasies about people of colour, progressives, trans people, and religious minorities.

In another example of this discursive move, Milo Yiannopoulos performs a recurring caricature of Representative Ilhan Omar, one of the first two Muslim women, and the first hijab-wearing woman, to be elected to the United States congress. In these performances, Yiannopoulos dons a headscarf and black lipstick and puts on a highly affected "Arab" accent. In one such video from 2019, he says, "Being first Muslim woman in Congress of United States [spits], it's not easy. But I make it work by sprinkling a little Sharia into Congress every day, like sugar" (Milo, 2019). Yiannopoulos goes on to make vile jokes about wearing the hijab, female genital mutilation (FGM), and incest within Muslim communities.

Drawing on Hutcheon and Booth's theories of irony, we can identify two ways in which this performance is "ironic." On the level of *stable irony*—that is irony with a direct target—Milo is clearly playing an individual with whom he deeply disagrees. As such, when he says "covering up is very empowering," he means the opposite: "covering up is regressive, but Muslim women dress

it up in feminist language." On the level of *unstable irony*—where one speech act is undermined but nothing is asserted in its place—the performance itself is highly amateurish and silly. Unstable irony creeps into the performance whenever Yiannopoulos breaks character and erupts into giggles; it is also present in the half-hearted costuming and absurd accent. This ironic distance from the performance provides him with plausible deniability: of course, all of this is a *joke*.

By undermining his own performance, Yiannopoulos carves out the discursive space to say appalling things about Omar, and Muslims as a whole, under the guise of humour. Like Crowder in the ICE Air video, he suggests that Muslims like Omar have duped leftists into respecting and admiring them: "Can I support FGM and be a feminist? Of course! Obviously not, but these Western idiots support me anyway" (Milo, 2019). In light of Omar's duplicity and her credulous liberal supporters, it is up to brave provocateurs like Yiannopoulos to put Omar "in her place," at least symbolically. At the end of the video, Yiannopoulos, as Omar, says to the man standing next to him (playing Omar's husband), "Baby, let's go for a walk." The husband character proceeds to put a metal leash around Yiannopoulos' neck, as if to walk him like a dog. Like the ending of Crowder's ICE Air video, these moments depict violent, degrading fantasies involving people of colour—fantasies that would not ordinarily be tolerated in political discourse but circulate widely on YouTube under the banner of comedy.

3.4 Humour vs. "actual" racism

Humour distances "alt-lite" YouTubers from their more offensive acts both implicitly, as illustrated in the previous section, and explicitly, when it is cited as an excuse for past behaviour. For instance, in a 2018 video uploaded by Gavin McInnes, he says:

> I think one of the biggest problems with my message is that I did both a comedy show and a news show and a comedy news show. This enables people to take satirical content and make it sound like some sort of serious political dictum. When you hear quotes that sound racist or anti-Semitic, you are hearing a *joke*. Taken out of *context*.

This framing is used as a justification for offensive statements by both YouTubers and their fans. In her study on Proud Boys affiliates, Kutner (2020) found that McInnes' self-presentation as a comedian allowed her participants to dismiss criticisms of his political ideology. For instance, one of her participants—echoing McInnes himself—said:

> I found a video of Gavin on YouTube in early 2016. I subscribed to his channel on Compound Media and enjoyed listening to his podcasts. He was a regular on a panel show called Red Eye. And I just thought he was funny. He was kind of obnoxious. And I just thought he was funny. [When they started protesting] Gavin McInnes [I thought] Wait? Gavin McInnes *the comedian*? I didn't know he was that political!

Despite the fact that the vast majority of McInnes's content is expressly about politics, the insistence that he is really a humourist seeps into how his supporters view him and gives them the language to defend him when needed. Viewers of Steven Crowder's took up this frame when asked, in interviews, about a controversy involving the YouTuber's offensive, stereotypical caricature of Black farmers[36]:

> He won't care if he uses racist tropes for comedic effect. And again, I don't think he's actually racist, I just think he's doing it for comedy. And as long that is his intention, I don't think he's a racist. But he'll just go out of his way to be like "F-you, The System, I'll say racist things, whether I want to or not, because that's free speech!" I agree with the premise with that, but he doesn't have to do it ALL the time. It just gets, it's grating. (James, 40, Canada)

> I think it was all jokes. Like I don't think he's trying to be racist. There's times where doing accents are fine when it comes to comedy. People have been doing it forever. I think Bill Burr has, George Carlin, like all the great comedians I'm sure at some point have done accents. And I guess in the current political climate, social climate, it's probably not as ok. (Isaac, 20, USA)

In these interview excerpts, both respondents insists that intention matters and that racial stereotypes deployed for the sake of comedy do not qualify as racist speech.[37] Even while defending Crowder's character, however, both participants acknowledged some discomfort with his performance, whether for simply being "grating" or for being inappropriate in today's "political climate." Here, "humour" arises as a flexible tool for reconciling these feelings: men like Crowder, McInnes, and Yiannopoulos are not "genuinely racist," they are simply using racial stereotypes for comedic effect. None of the study's participants offered an explanation for how, in practice, comedy lessened the potentially harmful impacts of perpetuating racial stereotypes.

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[36] In March 2021, a clip of Steven Crowder circulated online in which he discusses a federal policy aimed at compensating Black farmers for systemic discrimination within the agricultural industry. In the clip, Crowder puts on an offensive Black American accent and portrays Black people as belligerent thugs keen to collect government handouts.

[37] This framing reveals the danger of conceptualizing racism as the sum of individual speech acts and attitudes—a belief that leads to intractable debates about whether one statement or performance is "racist or not."

The mechanics of when and why comedic content should be exempt from norms of civil discourse are worth examining. We can imagine instances where hateful rhetoric is invoked in order to mock bigots; in these cases, echoing bigoted talking points undermines the bigots. This comedic mechanism is sometimes called "crossing the line twice" (F.D. Signifier, 2021). However, provocative "alt-lite" content is rarely undergirded by this logic. Instead, the more common sentiment among my interview subjects was "it's funny because it's true." That is, performing exaggerated stereotypes of minority groups does not undermine these stereotypes but instead affirms them. The performance may be ironic in that the YouTuber is amateurish or hyperbolic, but the said and unsaid meanings converge when it comes to the stereotype itself. Study participants expressed this idea in relation to Crowder's offensive performance of Blackness:

> I think stereotypes exist because they're exaggerated versions of real life. Anytime you're stereotyping someone, you might not be stereotyping that person directly but, you know… I guess to deprecate myself, a great example would be white people can't dance. We can't… It's a negative stereotype, but it's not a lie. It's not people just being racist. So I feel like stereotypes exist; they're based in reality. (Mitchell, 34, USA)

> I'm Jewish, there's times where I'll find a penny on the ground and I'm like "See, I knew it would be there, you know?" (laughs). I think jokes around race and ethnicity whatnot, as long as you're not actually attacking someone, is fine. (Isaac, 20, USA)

In both cases, participants shifted the conversation to their own (white) identities to affirm the logic of "it's funny because it's true." This pivot allows them to excuse the YouTuber's offensive performance without having to articulate anything negative about people of colour. In the context of "alt-lite" videos, however, "provocative" content rarely involves making fun of white people for their whiteness. Instead, racial and gendered stereotypes are deployed to mock and dehumanize people of colour, women, queer people, and Muslims. In these cases, the belief that humorous content, by definition, can do no harm, lacks logical coherence. My conversations with viewers of reactionary content demonstrated again and again how these videos normalize harmful stereotypes while minimizing their negative impacts.

3.5 Second-order debates about speech

Just as the idea of humour plays a role in justifying or excusing "provocative" racism, so too does the trope of "free speech." In his book *Is Free Speech Racist?*, Titley (2020) argues that, when

reactionaries claim that they have been silenced for advancing a variety of harmful viewpoints, they are in fact engaged in a kind of publicity stunt:

> It is a transparent yet regularly efficient means of parlaying established public status into virtuous marginality, casting discredited ideas as deliberative propositions, reframing familiar, reactionary ideas as iconoclastic experiments, and entangling criticism and opposition in abstracted debates about freedom that are not, in reality, substantially in question. (p. 10).

Within this landscape, "free speech" has been taken up as a way to broadcast widely discredited ideas and re-litigate them in the public sphere under the guise of open debate and deliberation. This pernicious ritual can be framed as legitimate speech in a society where racism is understood to be a relic of the past and discussions about race exist as purely intellectual exercises between disinterested interlocuters. When anti-racists insist on closure—that some debates need not be re-surfaced—they are accused of restricting the open exchange of ideas (Titley, 2020). "Alt-lite" personalities frequently engage, and encourage, these second-order debates about free speech, oscillating in their videos between patently racist performances and passionate defences of their right to speak.

In one of her now-deleted videos, Lauren Southern visits Luton[38], a racially diverse town outside of London, in order to conduct what she calls a "social experiment." In my coding of content "types" this video belongs to the "on the street" category: videos centred around speaking to or provoking passersby in public spaces. The subjects of these videos are typically those belonging to marginalized groups and/or progressive activists. The 2018 video "Allah is Gay – Here's what happened in Luton" begins with Southern speaking to camera at home. She opens by describing a *Vice* article "Was Jesus Gay?" which, according to Southern, did not receive pushback from Christians when it was published in 2017. Taking this article as a starting point, Southern ostensibly sets out to document how Muslims would react if she claimed that "Allah was gay." She does this by taking on the guise of a "good natured LGBT campaigner" and setting up a stall on a busy high street from which she distributes "Allah is gay" flyers (see Fig. 14). This setup is typical of Southern's popular on-the-street videos, where she "trolls" unsuspecting members of the public in order to film their reactions.

[38] Luton was selected because it is the hometown of far-right activist, and former leader of the English Defence League (EDL), Tommy Robinson.

Figure 14. *Screenshot from "Allah is Gay – Here's what happened in Luton" (Lauren Southern, 2018)*

The bulk of the video is made up of a montage of passersby approaching Southern and her crew to tell them that their stunt is offensive. In response to these complaints, Southern feigns innocence: "Why would it be bad if Allah were gay? Why would it be offensive?" Eventually, the police are called and she is made to pack up the stall under threat of arrest. The point of the video, of course, is to paint Muslims as regressive and intolerant and to show how the state is complicit in allowing their intolerance to persist. As discussed in the previous chapter, Southern performatively aligns with one minority group (queer people) in order to denigrate another (Muslims). While she attempts to draw a parallel between the *Vice* article and her "experiment," the two speech acts are not analogous. The *Vice* article presented a tongue-in-cheek interview with a gay Christian pastor and scholar who wrote a book called "Queering Christ" (Suzdaltsev, 2015). Meanwhile, Southern and her crew were clearly non-Muslims looking to antagonize the local Muslim community. As with many of her videos, Southern exploits tropes of innocence and vulnerability associated with white womanhood (Daniels, 2021) to position herself as under siege by both Muslim others and the police.

Beyond the video's argument about the backwardness of Islam, it also makes a forceful point about censorship within modern Britain. At the end of the video, we see Southern back in her home, describing how, after this incident in Luton, she was barred from re-entering the United Kingdom as a foreign national. She closes the video by asking,

> Why is it racist to say Allah is gay but not racist to say Jesus is gay?... Why does causing offence, not inciting hatred or violence, but *causing offence* to a certain group result in a lifetime ban from a country which proudly touts tolerance as one of its key values. These are questions that I wish I could go to the United Kingdom and ask, but I can't do that now, so I really think that in the UK, unless they are fine with being under archaic blasphemy laws, enforced by Islam and Shariah in 2018, they really need to start having a conversation about this before they are no longer able to have that conversation at all... I hope that a lot of people will be at a Speaker's Corner standing up for free speech these next couple of weeks. I'll be watching from a distance as you fight to retain your freedom in your nations. (Lauren Southern, 2018)

Notably, Southern closes her video with a plea to viewers, not about homophobia, but about urgent threats to freedom of speech in the UK. The primary victim of the current status quo is not queer people but rather provocateurs like herself who are being "silenced" for speaking out against the threat of Islam. In this closing monologue, Southern casts Muslims as enemies both to LGBT people and, more importantly, to the liberal value of free speech.

As Titley describes, "freedom of speech" has been strategically invoked by politicians across Europe and North America since 9/11 to distinguish the enlightened culture of the West from the repressiveness of the Middle East and to justify subsequent wars "on terror." Thus, the notion of free speech does "racializing work" that casts Islam as incompatible with "free" Euro-American societies, all while Western states have, since 2001, implemented a compendium of surveillance and anti-protest measures that have made everyone, but especially Muslims, less free (Titley, 2020). This racializing work is clear in Southern's invocation of "archaic blasphemy laws" and "shariah" in the video's closing monologue. Unsurprisingly, the rights and freedoms of Muslims themselves—their right to move around public spaces without fear, their freedom to raise complaints about those stoking hatred and division in their community—do not figure at all in Southern's argument. Their complaints are not legible as free speech acts. Within reactionary discursive communities, only the speech of right-wing "provocateurs" and contrarians registers as free speech worthy of protection.

By constantly pivoting to second-order debates about their right to speak, "alt-lite" figures and their supporters evade accountability for the harms of racist speech. The debate moves from whether they *should* say or do certain things—whether these actions are ethical or justified—to whether they *have the right* to say or do these things. Blurring the line between these two questions serves "alt-lite" figures well, as driving focus towards the latter invokes feelings of support and

solidarity from viewers, even those who may express discomfort with the content itself. For instance, one participant spoke disapprovingly of Crowder's use of Black American stereotypes in his videos:

> So the problem I have with Crowder is the same problem I have with identity politics in general. The people that think that's good are like literally saying, "I don't like racism, so in order to fight racism, I'm going to add more racism. And hope that somehow cancels it out?" I don't understand the logic there. So what he was doing there was being like, "oh I'll just use these racist tropes to fight against racism... because racism is bad." Ehh... is that really good? (James, 40, Canada)

James's critique of Crowder is significant and expressly moral: Crowder's approach to fighting "anti-white" racism amounts to racism in itself. Two wrongs don't make a right. But once the conversation shifted to what could be done to prevent these harmful stereotypes from circulating, his tone changed:

> I don't care. DON'T care. I don't think it should be taken down or suppressed, I just think he does it too far. I'm probably not as free speech absolutist, like I don't think you should be able to incite violence and stuff, but other than a few things I think, you know, they're just words. Whatever, if you don't like it, don't listen to it.

Even when discussing a creator whose tactics he finds grating, and perhaps even immoral, once the topic turns to freedom of speech, these negative feelings are quickly side-lined in favour of solidarity and support: "They're just words."

3.6 The resonance of speech as a framework

Of the myriad social, economic, and political concerns raised by interview respondents, free speech was the issue that came up most consistently. While respondents invoked freedom of speech as a way of defending their favourite YouTubers, they also used the framework of "speech" to make sense of their own interpersonal struggles and experiences of precarity. A number of participants described feeling professional anxiety because their political views diverged from the status quo in their workplaces. These findings resonate with Duyn's (2022) argument that individuals in the US context are increasingly keeping their politics a secret from parts of their social networks. For instance, Terry, a 20-something American software engineer, described how political discussions at his workplace became heated around the 2016 election cycle. As someone still junior in the

company at the time, he feared that his lack of political literacy could pose a threat to his job security: "You know it's scary when you're at work, and you say something, and you get pushback from people that's aggressive, right? And you have no clue where they're coming from because you don't understand what it is that they're plugged into."

This feeling of precarity propelled him to learn more about politics, and it was during this time that he began watching political commentators on YouTube. He describes his entry into political discourse as being motivated by self-preservation:

> I'm at risk of saying something that is totally benign as far as I'm concerned but is just egregiously offensive and might get me fired, to these people. So I thought, ok, I have to plug in, and I have to start paying attention for my own protection and for my own reasons. And so it was about that time maybe 2015-2016 that I started to find different sources of information that I wanted to try to listen to.

Another one of the study's respondents, James—a Canadian software developer in his 40s—expressed similar reservations about talking politics in professional settings after seeing colleagues "get cancelled" in his workplace:

> We're in a climate where if I talked about any of this stuff openly, even in my workplace, I might get cancelled. Even though I still don't think any of my views are that controversial. But they're controversial enough apparently. And I've seen it happen at my workplace where somebody... It was just an offhand comment, and people just went after this guy. It was incredible. They were like foaming at the mouth. People that I thought were otherwise fairly rational, as soon as it turned to politics, it got real crazy. So I'm very hesitant to do that.

Even when discussing politics online, participants were aware of the potential to be surveilled and doxed for their views. For instance, Terry talked about going on Gab briefly before deleting his account out of a fear of potential hacks:

> There were several websites that came up around the election cycle wherein they were releasing the addresses of Trump supporters that had donated to him. They were saying 'Hey the data's out there you can look on a map, right next to your house, who's donated to Trump you know'... And I don't want to end up on one of those, pardon my French, one of those shit-lists.

He also described being circumspect with who he follows on Twitter, and where he posts on Reddit, as all these interactions are publicly accessible. Political conversations with family and

friends presented a lower-stakes form of discourse for participants, but could also be characterized by disagreement, skepticism, or simply lack of interest:

> With my friends and family, it was like Trump was the most important man in the world to them, he was their new Satan or something. They'd take every opportunity to bring him up and insult him, and would ostracize or break ties if you even said, "Well hey, that doesn't quite add up." (David, 30s, South Africa)
>
> My friends, I really don't agree with often politically. I have a lot of friends who are lib-left. Or you know center left sometimes. Sometimes just dead center. And I never really agree with them. I'll talk to them about a lot of stuff… Actually a lot of them, they're not strong opinionated in the sense that they could [sic] really care less what policies are implemented. (Joe, late teens, USA)
>
> I think it was the New York Post? They shut that account down when they were talking about Hunter Biden… They wanted to completely censor that entire conversation. And when I brought that up with people that I know in real life, they'd never heard of it! Right? And it's a real thing!… People did not know about it and thought that I was a conspiracy theorist for bringing it up and talking about it, because I had heard about it. (Terry, 20s, USA)

Thus, "speech" figures prominently in the political imaginations of study respondents, as they understood various negative tensions in their lives as stemming from a censorious speech environment. Within this fraught social landscape, where both online and offline speech carries with it significant risks, YouTube as a platform presents a reprieve. Because the platform is not primarily discussion- or posting-oriented, users can log on and spend hours watching videos without leaving a public digital trace or even being clocked by their families. Private forums like Discord or Facebook groups also offer "safe spaces" where geographically dispersed individuals can chat about their political opinions without fear of moral judgment. Together, these platforms enable users to engage in what Duyn (2022) calls "networked silence," wherein individuals conscientiously conceal their political opinions from certain parts of their social network while expressing them in others. Within this context, reactionary YouTube channels can come to carry special significance for viewers; YouTubers not only provide venues where "heterodox" ideas can be discussed but, in some cases, serve as viewers' primary interlocuters on political subjects. Given the perceived scarcity of spaces for the expression of controversial or contrarian ideas, respondents were defensive of YouTubers' right to sustain their platforms, even where they might disagree with or dislike the content itself.

4. Conclusion: The function of provocation

In the comments section of Yiannopoulos's Ilhan Omar sketch, one of the top posts reads "Quickly, someone save this or download it before it's taken down." Another commenter responded, "Done and done. And re-uploaded to YouTube and three other video-hosting platforms." A third wrote, "Content striking a super Saiyan only makes it stronger!" In this exchange, we can see the dynamics of "provocation" at work. Although the video's content is straight-forwardly Islamophobic, Yiannopoulos's shocking performance of Omar focuses attention on the video's edgy aesthetic over its simple, racist argument. The aesthetics of provocation provide viewers with a framework, or a script, for engaging with content that places the mischief-making speaker at odds with censorious platforms. In this context, provocation serves as a shortcut for galvanizing feelings of support and solidarity among viewers. This sense of collective defiance leads some, as seen above, to repost the content in question in anticipation of the video's deletion by YouTube. The provocative content thus generates its own publicity, inviting clicks and comments, which help the video to gain exposure within an algorithmically-mediated environment. In short, the articulation of typical reactionary talking points becomes transformed—when provocation is deployed successfully—into a "free speech event" involving an "outrage artist," his supporters (ie. friends of liberty), and his detractors (ie. humourless authoritarians) (Titley, 2020).

YouTube's own guidelines for monetized channels state that "content that is satire or comedy may be exempt" from hate speech standards. Once again, the logic underlying how such an exemption can be justified goes unexamined. As outlined in Section 4.4 of this chapter, hyperbolic performances of racialized and gendered otherness can affirm—rather than undermine—harmful stereotypes about minority groups. In these cases, provocation offers viewers a way of reconciling their feelings of discomfort with their support for reactionary YouTubers. It is thus a powerful tool for pushing the boundaries of conservative acceptability while maintaining good relations with viewers who think of themselves as basically colourblind, and certainly opposed to white supremacy. A provocative performance of Muslim or Black or trans otherness gives YouTubers and viewers a number of recourses in the face of condemnation:

this performance is silly and therefore unserious; *the YouTuber is simply being shocking and therefore unserious*; *he doesn't really mean what he is saying*; and anyway, *shocking speech is still—is especially—protected speech.*

These refrains help viewers to rationalize what they see and draw on personal experiences of perceived censorship and surveillance. To revisit Terry's observation, quoted earlier, "I'm at risk of saying something that is totally benign as far as I'm concerned but is just egregiously offensive and might get me fired, to these people." This participant's solidarity with YouTubers goes beyond a commitment to abstract free speech principles. He understands first-hand that comments that are benign in their intention can still result in punishment and censure. For him then, it is better to err on the side of leniency when it comes to speech of all kinds, even speech that causes discomfort or perpetuates bigotry. These findings from interviews and CDA can lend empirical complexity to platform governance conversations about how to treat comedic, ironic, and provocative content. In analyzing "alt-lite" videos and speaking to viewers, it becomes clear that these ambivalent texts reinforce harmful, degrading, and even violent ways of seeing minoritized groups. Thus, policies aimed at curbing white supremacy online need to take these materials seriously as a site where harmful ideologies can be normalized and reproduced.

While this chapter has focused on popular videos with hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube—and thousands of positive comments—provocative humour that crosses the line, that aims to transgress, does not always succeed in rallying support. Milo Yiannopoulos, the self-proclaimed troll and provocateur, who made a name for himself by shocking liberals, did eventually alienate his fans and enablers by taking it "too far." Mere days after his interview with Bill Maher in February 2017, the Twitter account @ReaganBattalion surfaced a video of Yiannopoulos defending sexual relations between adults and minors on a podcast (Ohlheiser, 2017). In the exchange, Yiannopoulos appears to genuinely advocate for sexual relationships between young gay boys and adult men as a form of mentorship. One of the podcast hosts interjects, saying that the situation Yiannopoulos describes sounds awfully close to stories of grooming and molestation by priests. Yiannopoulos responds, "And you know what, I'm grateful for Father Michael. I wouldn't give nearly such good head if it wasn't for him."

Within a day of the clip resurfacing, Milo was dropped as a speaker from CPAC's annual conference. Shortly after, Simon & Schuster announced that they had cancelled Yiannopoulos's

book deal. Just three days after the tweet, Yiannopoulos was forced to resign from his role as senior editor at Breitbart News. Despite the stated commitment of these institutions to freedom of expression, it appeared they did ultimately have standards around what constituted acceptable versus unacceptable speech. They did not draw this line at Yiannopoulos's violent, unapologetic Islamophobia, transphobia, or anti-Blackness, but condoning sexual relations with minors was a taboo too far. Or perhaps, more accurately, it was a taboo that violated their own discursive norms, whereas Yiannopoulos's bigotry did not. These moments of disjuncture highlight the degree to which free speech operates as a rhetorical strategy, rather than an incontrovertible principle, within reactionary communities. The concept of uninhibited speech, the free exchange of ideas, not only serves to drum up support and solidarity in the case of "free speech events" but also forms the basis of the reactionary right's political epistemology. In the next chapter, I will explore how this market-based understanding of political discourse comes to shape participants' approach to seeking truth and knowledge within a highly contested media ecosystem.

Chapter 6: Thinking for Themselves

1. Introduction[39]

While the previous two chapters have focused on the content produced by reactionary YouTube channels, this chapter considers how these videos are received and how they fit into the pre-existing belief systems of viewers. In other words, how do "alt-lite" discourses circulate offline, in the lives of everyday people? In order to answer this question, I draw on semi-structured interviews with 18 respondents who currently watch, or used to watch, reactionary YouTube videos. These respondents were all men, most of whom participated in online discussion forums centred around right-leaning YouTube channels, between the ages of 18 and 47. They lived in the USA, UK, Canada, India, South Africa, and Lithuania. Despite these differing regional contexts, similarities emerged across interviews in terms of what respondents appreciated about the YouTube channels they visited.

Again and again, respondents—across age groups and geographies—expressed distrust in mainstream media and political institutions. In opposition to disappointing institutions and movements, the figure of the self-sufficient individual arose in interviews as the most reliable source of political belief. Based on these interviews, I argue that "rugged individualism" forms the basis not just of the reactionary right's political project but also of their imagined epistemology. Throughout my interviews, I found that viewers of reactionary YouTube channels described their political journeys as highly idiosyncratic processes of personal research and rational deliberation. I call this narrative of political formation *bootstraps epistemology*.

The concept of "picking oneself up by the bootstraps" has existed for over a century in US political discourse (Kristof, 2020). The phrase conjures the idea of bettering oneself without any outside help, namely from the government. Although the origins of the term are not well documented within the scholarly literature, social scientists have taken up the "bootstraps" metaphor to characterize attitudes towards poverty and social mobility that foreground individual responsibility. This literature has shown that, throughout the 20th century and especially since the 1970s, American individuals and media institutions tended to attribute poverty to personal

[39] A condensed, 5-page version of this chapter was published online by University of North Carolina's Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (Ma, 2023). At the time of writing, an article version of this chapter is undergoing revision with *Political Communication*.

characteristics such as a lack of drive or poor work ethic, rather than to structural inequalities (Smith & Stone, 1989; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013). Today, the concept is used in political discourse to both advocate for (Roth, 2020) and critique (Reich, 2019) policies that slash government assistance in the name of establishing absolute meritocracy and preventing state-dependency.

This chapter examines how this "bootstraps" brand of American individualism manifests epistemologically and the role that online political influencers play in the dissemination and maintenance of this discourse. Just as the bootstraps narrative in politics argues that individuals have the duty to reject government "handouts" and improve their circumstances through hard work and thrift, bootstraps epistemology encourages people to reject dogma and pursue knowledge through solitary study and intellectual combat with opponents. Notably, reactionary YouTubers are both beneficiaries and proponents of this narrative. When individuals attempt to "do their own research" on politics and current events, YouTube presents an obvious place to look (Tripodi, 2018). In their videos, reactionary YouTubers further entrench distrust in institutional sources of knowledge by critiquing these outlets and elevating their own channels as trustworthy alternatives (Lewis, 2020). Ultimately, I argue that the bootstraps narrative of personal responsibility and bootstraps epistemology are mutually-enforcing discourses that advance individualistic solutions to social problems and legitimize hierarchical social structures.

2. Background: Critiquing the mainstream media

This chapter builds upon the work of political communication scholars and historians who have studied the rise of the US right-wing news ecosystem, distrust in mainstream media, and the emergence of new information seeking practices in the digital era. Media historians have explored how, throughout the 20th century, conservative activists forged a political identity in opposition to the mainstream media. While modern day journalistic norms began to take root at the turn of the century, they became hegemonic following WWII. By the mid-1950s, the institution of the "mainstream media" became identifiable: a collection of national news organizations that shared a commitment to values like objectivity and non-partisanship (Greenberg, 2008).

At the same time, a cohort of anti-New Deal radio personalities laid the roots for a growing conservative media sphere that would only grow in the following decades. These right-wing broadcasters were buoyed by the energy of McCarthyism and the funding of oil tycoon H.L. Hunt. In 1955, William F. Buckley Jr. founded the magazine *National Review*, which would develop and entrench the anti-establishment tone of conservative media. As Lane (2020) writes, *National Review* "cultivated doubts about the fairness of the mainstream media and argued that these media served as propagandists for a liberal power structure intent on maintaining its control" (p. 157). Thus, the *New York Times'* and *Washington Post's* adoption of principles like "neutrality" set new standards for journalistic writing while inadvertently making these outlets vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy and bias. This characterization of the mainstream "establishment" remains ubiquitous throughout the conservative news ecosystem today (Confessore, 2022; Benkler et al., 2018).

With the founding of Fox News, Rupert Murdoch capitalized on this tradition of conservative media critique and launched a news network that branded itself as the official opposition to the establishment media. In his book *Fox Populism*, Peck (2019) argues that Fox News's embrace of populist rhetoric and tabloid aesthetics allowed it to "interpellate its audience as the 'authentic' working class majority" (p. 5). Unlike political commentators on the left who emphasized their rigorous research, Fox News personalities like Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity adopted populist personas that eschewed aspirational news values in favour of "low-brow" real talk. As Peck writes, these figures "attacked the legitimacy of objectivity and substituted for it ideological integrity" (p. 25). This positioning proved to be highly popular with American viewers and, since 2002, Fox has dominated the cable news landscape in terms of ratings and profit. The cultural impact of Fox News is not restricted to the United States. The channel is carried in more than 70 countries globally (Fox News, 2019), and its success proved the economic viability of conservative outrage programming, inspiring international spin-offs like the Sun News Network in Canada[40]. In this chapter, I argue that while Fox cemented the voice of populist conservatism, it also left a gap that many YouTubers seek to fill by providing self-consciously cerebral analysis of current events and politics from a conservative perspective. Reactionary YouTubers, then, are

[40] The Sun News Network was active in Canada for just under four years, between 2011 and 2015 (CBC News, 2015). Sun News columnist and show host Ezra Levant went on to found the right-wing digital media brand Rebel News in 2015.

only the latest in a long line of anti-establishment conservative voices who position themselves in opposition to the mainstream media. In addition to the populist vocabulary inherited from previous generations of right-wing commentators, they also deploy a range of micro-celebrity tools to bolster their claims of trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (Lewis, 2020).

In the sections that follows, I embrace Marwick's (2018) sociotechnical model of media effects, which encourages scholars to consider actors, messages, and affordances in their analyses. Marwick argues that addressing the question of why some people share "fake news" requires a holistic approach to media effects that goes beyond an individual's access to factual versus deceptive information. Rather, individuals are active in their media consumption and share stories that "support their pre-existing beliefs and signal their identity to like-minded others." This chapter adopts Marwick's approach by focusing on the individuals who watch YouTube videos (actors) alongside the content itself (messages) and the platform that hosts it (affordances).

3. Analysis

This chapter draws on semi-structured interviews with adults who regularly watch, or used to watch, reactionary YouTube channels, conducted over a two-year period from October 2020 to July 2022. In order to maximize my chances of recruiting respondents, I posted recruitment messages in a number of fan communities that were not strictly dedicated to "alt-lite" channels (see Appendix 6 for the search terms used in Facebook and Reddit to surface relevant groups). These search terms were derived from the seed list of "alt-lite" channels presented in Chapter 3 but also included the most popular channels within Lewis's (2018) Alternative Influence Network. Among the 18 respondents, engagements with "alt-lite" channels varied. Some watched these channels daily, while others checked in only occasionally, favouring more mainstream conservative channels, like Ben Shapiro's Daily Wire, daily news digests like Tim Pool's Timcast, or "skeptic" channels like the Amazing Atheist. All respondents watched "anti-woke" and "anti-SJW" content in one form or another and, as such, fall under the category of "reactionary YouTube audiences."

3.1 Mainstream media biases and inadequacies

In the following sections, I summarize themes which emerged from my interviews with respondents, focusing in Sections 3.1 to 3.5 on the attributes that make up what I call "bootstraps epistemology": an imagined epistemology articulated by my respondents that elevated the rational individual as the purest, least corruptible source of political truth and knowledge. Throughout my interviews, respondents repeatedly emphasized their skepticism towards institutional sources of information. Most prominently, a majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the mainstream media. In my interview with James[41], a Canadian software developer in his early 40s, he described being drawn to right-leaning YouTubers because of the shortcomings of cable news: "It's like they all get their talking points in the morning, and they all just beat on that for the next week, and then they move on to the next thing... And they keep just pushing this same narrative." Multiple respondents observed that the mainstream media, social media companies, and Democratic politicians all parroted the same liberal "narrative" which was fixated on identity politics, criticizing Trump, and promoting COVID-19 restrictions. This characterization of "the establishment" appears throughout populist conservative outlets from Fox News to Breitbart.

In addition to this well-established critique of the mainstream media, respondents also complained that news media lacked in-depth investigations into topics and relied on superficial and sensational content to make money. Notably, Fox News was not exempt from this criticism. While some respondents did watch Fox News occasionally, they were also quick to point out the channel's shortcomings. For instance, Joe, a high school senior living in Texas told me:

> I used to watch Fox News. I don't watch Fox News anymore… I don't like the sensationalism. The only real thing I like is investigative journalism where they'll actually seek to find some sort of truth in it rather than trying to push some opinion.

Even though Joe identified himself, only slightly jokingly, in our interview as "a bit of a hick," Fox's low-brow populist voice did not appeal to him, even though the news channel often played in his family home. Like many others, his drive to find detailed, well-sourced commentary led him to look on YouTube, where the more cerebral, in-depth analysis of figures like Ben Shapiro, Jordan Peterson, and others filled a gap in Fox News's offerings.

[41] Names in this chapter have been altered to protect the confidentiality of respondents.

Respondents also described turning to YouTube for information after major news events like Gamergate, the Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as a way of circumventing the mainstream "narrative" on these events. This was especially true for younger respondents, who described becoming politicized during these periods and using the internet to better understand current events. For example, Terry—a Texas-based software engineer who moderates a YouTuber fan Discord server in his spare time—described an uptick in political talk at his workplace in 2016, ahead of the US presidential election:

> I wasn't really political at that point because I was really young. And I hadn't paid attention. I was kind of on my grind, focusing on my work, getting established in my career, so I kind of had my head down. But then, all of a sudden, the people I was working with were all up in arms about things that I didn't understand.

In light of the conversations taking place at his work, he started to read up on the election, looking at mainstream sources like 538[42]:

> Everybody was unbelievably confident that Hilary was gonna win this. Speaking of 538, there was like just a sliver of a percent chance that Trump might win. And guess what? It blew everybody out of the water. Everybody was shocked... So that's when I started paying a lot more attention. Because I was like *there's something here*. This is propaganda. If all the polls are saying that this is incredibly unlikely to happen and yet it happens… then obviously there's some element of either falsehood or propaganda. There's something going on here that isn't quite right. So it was at that time that I was established in my career, able to have a little bit more free time, so I started to engage with this stuff and that's when I started getting into Tim Pool.

In Terry's recounting, it was the mainstream media's failure to accurately report on the state of the electorate in 2016—and the subsequent liberal consensus that rose around this reporting—that prompted him to seek information elsewhere. Another respondent, Liam, described a similar process wherein ubiquitous discussions on the Brexit referendum pushed him to do research into politics and current events. As a young man living in London in his early 20s at the time, the first place he thought to look was on YouTube:

> I remember typing into YouTube things like "Brexit," "what does Brexit mean?" Or typing in, you know, "immigration" and a lot of these talking points[43]. And I remember at the

[42] 538 is a news outlet founded by statistician Nate Silver that focuses on opinion poll analysis

[43]Notably, for Liam, the issue of Brexit was already framed around questions of immigration by the time he decided to seek out information on YouTube. In *The Propagandists' Playbook*, Tripodi (2022) shows how conservative actors can leverage these framings to boost their content in search result. By searching "Brexit" and "immigration," Liam may have inadvertently adopted keywords that fell into a conservative "ideological dialect." Outlets like Rebel tag their

> time—it's very different now because the algorithms have changed—but at the time, the top results were all by things like Rebel Media.

Watching these pro-Brexit videos uploaded by Rebel Media, Nigel Farage, and others on YouTube put Liam at odds with his peers and friends in London, where the sentiment was overwhelmingly pro-Remain, especially among young people (Kellner, 2016).

> And then Brexit happened. And I had been told by people around me that Brexit was this crazy racist fringe thing. Suddenly 50% of the country vote for it and I'm like *well it can't be that fringe*. And after watching all the videos, I thought it was pretty cool. And the same thing happened with Donald Trump. In the lead-up to that, everything was energized and politicized like nothing I'd ever seen before.

Both Liam and Terry began to rely more on YouTube channels, like Tim Pool and Rebel Media, in periods where they felt politics intruding into their daily lives. They turned to YouTube to better understand ongoing political conversations, gravitating towards information that contradicted the liberal consensus forming around them. In their view, the right-leaning YouTube channels they discovered were ultimately validated by election results, prompting them to lean on these sources even more.

Similarly, a South African respondent named David shared how media coverage on the COVID-19 pandemic alerted him to biases in the mainstream media. He was familiar with hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) after taking it as an anti-malarial drug during a trip and frequently researched medications because of his many allergies. He was struck by how quickly the media condemned Donald Trump after he promoted HCQ as a potential COVID-19 cure:

> They'd put false headlines; they'd misquote the man and outright lie about what he'd said… The media, even here in South Africa was claiming that he was telling people to take it, when he simply said it looked promising. I don't like Trump, I wouldn't have voted for him if I was an American citizen, but boy did they make me sympathize with him. They lied about almost everything he said, even in articles where they have videos of him saying the opposite. It's dystopian, I didn't think things were *that* broken.

He added, "I like how Tim Pool put it: Trump probably was just reading the newspaper and saw that there were promising results, and so he said *it looked promising*."[44] In each of the above cases,

content with these types of coded keywords, so that their videos come up when people with potentially conservative leanings search for information on YouTube and other search engines.

[44] David's characterization of Trump's hydroxychloroquine claims provides only a partial view. Between March and August of 2020, Trump repeatedly made unsubstantiated claims about the drug's effectiveness, saying it was a "game

respondents highlighted a disjuncture between mainstream media reporting on issues and what they perceived to be the reality or groundtruth of the situation. For Terry and Liam, election predictions that did not come to pass implied that establishment media was out-of-touch with majority opinion. Meanwhile, for David, his own experiences with hydroxychloroquine led him to interpret news coverage of Trump's statements as overblown and biased.

Even as David describes becoming politically activated *as a result* of biased COVID-19 news coverage, he also filtered his understanding of news reporting *through* Tim Pool's commentary. As such, his relationship to mainstream news formed a self-reinforcing loop: his skepticism towards the news drove him to seek information elsewhere, while the information he found on YouTube reinforced his concerns about media bias and ultimately led him to distrust those sources even more. In this way, reactionary YouTube channels profit from sowing distrust in mainstream media among viewers; doing so cultivates a greater reliance on "alternative" sources like themselves as a means of accessing the unfiltered truth.

3.2 Rejection of dogma

Critiques of mainstream media are common among most politically engaged communities, both on the right and the left. Prescriptions on how to navigate this problematic information landscape, however, vary. While it is common in progressive circles to hear refrains like "center the most marginalized" or "listen to those most impacted" (Táíwò, 2020), the respondents I spoke to took a very different approach to understanding various political situations. For them, the best way to access truth was to reject dogma and to forge one's own political identity through rational thought and deliberation. Study respondents expressed the idea that ideology itself was a leftist concept that could and should be avoided. For instance, James, the Canadian software engineer, spoke in a disparaging way about the left's ideological consistency: "The left is all about the collective… like the theme of their entire movement is *us as a group* banding together and presenting a united front. So it's just part of their ideology to be a collective and all be pushing in the same direction at the same time in the same way." James looks upon the idea of "the collective" as an inherently

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changer" and should "be put in use immediately." In May 2020, he publicly announced that he was taking hydroxychloroquine to ward off COVID-19 (Cathey, 2020).

leftist approach to politics, in opposition the right's staunch individualism. He cites the repetition of talking points across liberal media outlets as proof of his point. While the repetition of talking points is also common across the right-wing media-sphere—as shown in Chapter 4—respondents frequently articulated that their favourite YouTubers arrived at their views through a process of rigorous research and analysis, unlike their liberal counterparts.

Respondents living or working in liberal areas differentiated their approach to politics from those of their peers and colleagues. Terry described the culture at his tech workplace as very liberal, especially when it came to feminist issues like women in STEM. When asked about how he arrived at his current political views, he said:

> [There were] a lot of real life circumstances where I saw people talking about things that should be highly, highly debated—very, very difficult conversations, and they were summarizing them in very simple ways. Like, for example, abortion: *Oh it's good! We should protect the rights of abortions and people should get abortions. It's a positive thing.* You know, that to me struck an odd chord… That's an interesting take for people to have! And it was the common one. It was the correct one, right? So I think it was the sum of a lot of instances like that that drove me to really look at my values and try to establish them, not necessarily tie them to an ideology but to examine what's going on. (Terry, 20s, USA)

Like James, Terry described the political views of liberals as dogmatic and overly simplistic; he himself felt pressure to adhere to the "correct" position that abortion "is good." This workplace consensus was at odds with his own pro-life stance, which he had held since childhood growing up in a conservative Christian home. However, in our interview, he did not connect his pro-life instincts with his upbringing; rather, by his account, he arrived at his political orientation through self-reflection ("*really look at my values*") rather than dogma ("*tie them to an ideology*").

One way that respondents described liberal ideology was to compare it to religion: something that needed to be taken on faith, rather than proven through empirical investigation:

> I'm saying this as a non-religious person, but I think as religion dies in the West it is inevitably going to be replaced by another pillar of faith. And on the left that pillar of faith is politics… Because of how many people on the left are literally, like they make their entire life politics. Like going on Reddit, arguing about politics, going on the news arguing about race. Or being an activist for racial justice. They're literally turning it into a pillar of faith. (Brett, 30, USA)

> The idea of [sigh] the transgender debate… So it doesn't matter what biological assignment is given at birth. A doctor can't look at you and say you're male or female. You have to choose to be male or female, or anything else that they suddenly started claiming five to

> seven years ago it even existed. It didn't exist before that. And to me it's like, how can you make that argument without backing it up with facts and logic? And they don't. They just actually dissolve into a more, honestly, a more spiritual argument that says *well I just feel*, or *I believe this*. (Douglas, 32, USA)

In both these excerpts, respondents compared leftist viewpoints to cultish religious beliefs. Brett describes how liberals adhere feverishly to party doctrine, while Douglas uses trans identity to illustrate how liberal political stances defy logical explanation. For my respondents, then, political ideology is something that liberals cling onto, policing each other's adherence to a narrow set of near-religious tenets. In contrast, their own views, and the views of the YouTubers they watch, have been formed through a process of reflection and rational deliberation.

3.3 The idiosyncrasy narrative

When asked about how they arrived at their current political views, respondents emphasized their highly individual, non-partisan paths. I call this the *idiosyncrasy narrative*: the insistence that *I have arrived at my political ideas on my own,* and not through affiliations with parties, movements, or any other groups. Respondents drew attention to the idiosyncrasy of their political views by avoiding identification with political parties and other labels. For instance, when I asked Mitchell how he would describe his political views, he responded:

> Um oof. That's a troublesome one because generally when it comes to economics and social policies I generally agree with the Republicans. Or I guess I consider myself an independent, but it's been a long time since I've voted for a Democrat. I have in the past. It's just been a while. But I'm not a religious person. So that is one thing that I always kind of get in a bind up with a lot of Republicans… I'm not in it for the church. I'm in it for my country, and that's why I guess I feel like politically homeless.

Despite consistently voting Republican, Mitchell, a 34-year-old man living in Virginia, identifies as an independent. The feeling of being "politically homeless"—not adequately represented by any political party or movement—was a common refrain among respondents. This self-description resonates with political science research, which shows that most self-identified "independents" in fact lean strongly towards one party or another in their voting practices and policy preferences (Magleby et al., 2011; Iyengar & Westwood, 2014). Klar and Krupnikov (2016) argue that people are drawn to the label of "independent," despite their strong political leanings, because of the positive social value that comes with identifying as such: "Independents are perceived as 'free

thinkers' who are 'more open to the truth' and able to set aside the 'dogma' of partisanship" (p. 8).

This reasoning was borne out in my interviews with respondents, many of whom rejected not only party affiliations but ideology itself, as previously discussed. While Klar and Krupnikov studied the phenomena of political independents across the ideological spectrum, in my interviews, the reasoning behind respondents' political independence cohered neatly with their anti-woke politics. In contrast to partisans, and progressives in particular, who adhere dogmatically to a prescribed collection of beliefs, respondents emphasized that their political views were rooted not in ideology but in rationality, practicality, and facts. For instance, Sunit, an 18-year-old high school senior living in Northern India, started watching videos when he became interested in economics. Because of the dominance of Western voices on YouTube, he ended up watching the lectures of American libertarian economists, such as Thomas Sowell. Watching these lectures then led him to reactionary personalities like Ben Shapiro and Jordan Peterson. When asked about how he arrived at his political views, Sunit responded:

> My political views mostly come from just seeing what works really. It's not that I carry a banner for libertarianism; I just don't like the current progressives, the current populists. I just believe in personal freedom... I agree somewhat with the liberals and somewhat with the conservatives. But right now, I would say it's happening worldwide, both the sides are really radicalizing quickly. So for me, libertarianism is much more stable.

As with Mitchell, Sunit is reluctant to assign himself a political label, insisting that he does not "carry a banner for libertarianism," despite his affinity for libertarian content. A number of participants described arriving at their current political views based on objective measures like "seeing what works." According to their narrations, careful research and deliberation allowed them to see past partisan propaganda and access "the reality" of policy decisions. For instance, below are responses from two interviewees when asked about how they came to have their current political views:

> I think my political views are shaped by facts first. So if, for example, I see some YouTuber who says something that I don't agree with, or I can find information that does not support his point of view… that means that that YouTuber failed to convince me because he didn't present facts. Although sometimes I [might] believe something because I was not given some information, and when another YouTuber comes along and says "Well look, this information that you hold dear is actually wrong. And here's something that is provable

> that the information is wrong…" And then I look into it myself. I do thorough research (or at least somewhat thorough research), and I find information that contradicts my current opinion. [Then] I change my opinion as well, because I see that I was wrong. (Alius, 30s, Lithuania)

> Yeah it'll be influenced by the stuff that's in the news cycle, the stuff I hear talked about, the stuff I watch on YouTube, but I don't really mimic those opinions. I'll listen to it, then I'll give it a good think. (Joe, late teens, USA)

Both respondents quoted above emphasize that they do not simply absorb the messages that they hear from various sources. Alius, for instance, claims that his politics are "shaped by facts first." He demonstrates absolute confidence in his ability to evaluate facts, and to reassess his own opinions once he has processed new facts. If a YouTuber fails to convince him of something, it is simply because that YouTuber has failed to "present facts." His own life experiences, biases, and interests do not figure into this calculus. Joe, the high school senior living in Texas, expresses similar ideas: although he may be influenced by the content he watches, he does not simply "mimic" the opinions of others. Rather, he processes these opinions by thinking about them deeply before coming up with his own views.

Another respondent put it even more succinctly, when asked what factors led him to adopt his current political beliefs: "Rationality. Understanding the difference between how things are and how most people think they should be. Policies often produce results that the majority see as counter-intuitive." By employing his rationality, this respondent is able to overcome the idealism of the masses and see "how things are," the true impact of government policies. Throughout my interviews, respondents insisted that their political journeys were highly idiosyncratic, shaped by their own rationality and assessment of the facts, rather than outside influences like the media, family, or wider community.

3.4 Confronting opposing views

In order to arrive at the truth through rational thought and deliberation, my respondents emphasized the importance of taking in a diverse range of political perspectives. They did so primarily by reading and watching a variety of news sources. For instance, Terry, the 20-something software engineer living in Texas, described his media diet:

> I consistently read the New York Times, CNN, Fox, the Daily Wire, Epoch Times, MSNBC, pretty much every major mainstream media news outlet… Especially if there's a current event going on, I'll say, "What's CNN saying about this? How are they talking about this?" And in some cases what I can do is piece together what every single perspective is saying, identify the things that are consistent, and then kind of yank the truth out of the opinion and the narrative and the spin that pretty much every mainstream site is gonna give you.

Here, Terry describes a process of news triangulation[45], whereby weighing up stories from different outlets on opposing sides of the political spectrum helps him to access the truth. This media literacy practice of triangulating sources was echoed by several respondents when asked what their main sources of news and information were:

> It would usually be like social media feeds: so what comes up on my Facebook, YouTube and Reddit pages. So I try to mix up what kind of things I follow. So on Facebook I try to make sure I follow some right-wing pages, some left-wing pages, and a lot of it is just like what my pages share. So for example, I've got quite a lot of left-wing things on Facebook, so I'm seeing a lot of news from a left-wing slant. (Matt, mid-20s, UK)

> If there is a story that I have heard, have doubts about authenticity, and want to check for myself I'll search it out, getting at least three sources that generally disagree (example: Fox News, CNN, and Mother Jones) (Lee, 34, USA)

It is worth noting, however, that being exposed to a range of news outlets did not mean that respondents internalized all of these sources in the same way. On the contrary, several respondents articulated frustrations with the left-leaning news sources they interacted with. For instance:

> I try to consume as much from both sides, and I'm probably doing less and less of a good job of doing that lately because it's getting so tiring. Like I used to try to actively watch the Young Turks and Secular Talk and Pakman... what's his name? David Pakman. Like they're left-wing personalities but they used to have independent voices like 2-3 years ago, but now they just seem to be all talking about the same things at the same time in the same way as if I turned on CNN or MSNBC or *The View* or whatever. Like they just parrot the same crap… So yeah it's getting harder to watch them even though I try to, just to get the other side. (James, 40, Canada)

> I do like to keep a decent mix… Just off the top of my head, as far as people who you wouldn't consider right wing, I also do watch Philip DeFranco's daily show to get a counter side because he can be a bit more left leaning, still kind of closer to the center. And I enjoy sort of getting the other side of the perspective as well, even though it generally makes me laugh… (laughs) (Mitchell, 34, USA)

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[45] Despite the high rates of mis- and disinformation circulating in right-wing spaces (Bounegru et.al, 2017; Faris et al. 2017), scholars have found that conservatives tend to consult a more diverse range of news sources than liberals (Schradie, 2019).

In both these cases, respondents watch left-leaning commentators with an adversarial orientation, reminiscent of Hall's (1973) oppositional reading position from his encoding/decoding framework. Reactionary YouTubers encourage and validate this oppositional orientation towards the news through their own critiques of mainstream media. By watching this YouTube content, respondents become well versed in conservative critiques of mainstream media and deploy these critiques, even against the sources they consult. Notably, neither James nor Mitchell, quoted above, particularly enjoy consuming left-leaning content—in fact, Mitchell describes the content as laughable—but the principle of hearing from the opposite side is important enough to them both that they continue to seek it out.

3.5 The importance of debate

Respondents also sought out opposing viewpoints in order to sharpen their own thinking and argumentation skills. The frame of "debate" came up repeatedly as a way that respondents conceptualized political discourse. "Alternative" political commentators on YouTube frequently engage in debates with one another; the genre allows them to—in the best-case scenario—display their knowledge and intellectual prowess, generate publicity, and reach new audiences. On occasion, short debate clips, in which a YouTuber "owns" or "destroys" their opposition, can go viral, racking up millions of views. One respondent spoke about discovering right-wing YouTube channels through these clips: "My first exposure to Ben Shapiro, and what became the Daily Wire content, was YouTube videos of his speeches on college campuses, answering progressive's questions and ideologies and confronting them on their territory, in their backyard." Steven Crowder's most viral videos also involve him going onto college campuses, making inflammatory statements, and confronting progressive students and faculty members.

In this way, the genre of "debate" looms large in online right-wing spaces. Respondents frequently mirrored their favourite YouTubers on this issue, elevating debate as an important intellectual and political activity. For instance, Brett, a 30-year-old technician living in Oklahoma told me:

> I legitimately enjoy arguing with people. It's because I feel like it helps keep my mental acumen sharp. I'm a person that does not like to stagnate. And I like to be proven wrong sometimes. I like to be shown information. And you won't learn new things and you can't

> keep your mind sharp unless you actively challenge yourself. I'm willing to talk about anything with anyone on the condition that they're willing to entertain any thought.

For Brett, debate is a way of maintaining intellectual acuity and ensuring he can defend his views. Notably, he believes debates are only worth having with people who are "willing to entertain any thought." In this way, the construct of debate is often accompanied by a specific view of politics as a competitive activity that operates best when no ideas are off limits. This conception of politics is also captured in idioms like "sunlight is the best disinfectant" and "the marketplace of ideas." Through rigorous debate, the story goes, the best ideas will naturally rise to the top, and the bad ideas will be discredited and abandoned. Matt, an army personnel in his mid-20s living in the UK, articulated such a view on politics:

> I kind of have the mindset, like if it's a good idea you should be able to prove it, essentially by debating it. And I also have the idea that if something is a really bad idea, as long as everyone can say what they want, it shouldn't be too hard to stamp out. Because if it's a truly bad idea, you should be able to debate it as such…
>
> I think debating is so important because it reinforces your knowledge and understanding of topics. Because you get to understand another point of view. If you understand what racists believe and why they think what they believe, it produces such a better strategy. And chances are you can even change your mind.

Despite the lip service paid to the importance of "having an open mind," reactionary YouTubers are rarely convinced by others to adopt new views. Similarly, respondents seemed to seek out opposing viewpoints in order to better argue for, and defend, their pre-existing political beliefs—rather than to challenge or interrogate them. While some respondents conceded that they had once held silly or idealistic views in the past, none articulated that their current political views were still in flux or open to change. Thus the "marketplace of ideas" served primarily as an origin story of sorts: a narrative adopted by respondents to explain how they arrived at their current political beliefs while disparaging the close-mindedness of leftists and progressives.

3.6 YouTubers and bootstraps epistemology

Taken together, the principles summarized in Sections 3.1 to 3.5 form a general orientation towards politics that I call bootstraps epistemology. Echoing the idea of "picking yourself up by the bootstraps," this term captures how similar logics of individual responsibility, self-reliance, and competition pervade respondents' understanding of their own political formation. Given this view

of politics, respondents gravitated to YouTube as an "alternative," less compromised source of news and information. When asked what they enjoyed about their favourite YouTube commentators, respondents most frequently referenced their unique, authentic perspectives compared to the repetitive offerings of mainstream media. In particular, they emphasized how YouTubers were able to go in-depth on issues that were over-simplified by mainstream news. Mitchell, the 34-year-old living in Virginia, told me:

> I didn't have internet access or cable in my home until I was 19 years old. And so the news that I got growing up was always just whatever's on the TV, whatever's printed in the newspaper and that news can be awfully curtailed and a lot of stuff is left out. And I learned that watching people like Sargon on YouTube… If it's printed in the newspaper, there's more news than what was printed. There's more to that story. And I found that a lot of times watching creators on YouTube that they would take the time to delve into a story. If you're watching cable news they might cover a major story for 5 minutes, 7 minutes at the most if it's a big story. Whereas somebody on YouTube might spend a half hour covering that same topic. And I feel like because of the freedom that YouTubers have to cover the content they do, I'm able to get *more of the story and more of the news from the news*. [Emphasis added]

Mitchell identifies how the medium of video streaming gives YouTubers the flexibility and freedom to cover events and issues in more depth than mainstream sources. Whereas the latter are constrained by space, industry norms, and assumptions about short attention spans, YouTubers present an appealing alternative. Not only does the platform technically enable channels to upload long, meandering conversations, but the company itself incentivizes longer videos by rewarding YouTubers (through ad revenue) for keeping people on the platform (Bergen, 2022). These affordances and incentives intersect to produce a media landscape that is slower-paced, and more conducive to in-depth discussion, than television or radio. For viewers, it affords a feeling of getting "more of the news from the news."

Terry, the software engineer, drew attention to the unique guests and perspectives offered by YouTube channels. Speaking about Tim Pool's daily show on YouTube, he said:

> He brings on really interesting guests. So he has guests that talk about anything from Bitcoin to Antifa, he'll have people that are on the ground filming Antifa. You get a lot of those videos that circulate on Twitter and stuff like that. He'll have the people that took the videos on his show. And I want to hear what they have to say because they're in the midst of all that, and they're an objective observer. So I want to see what they're saying because a lot of times they have some interesting insights.

Multiple respondents highlighted YouTubers' proximity to events happening on the ground. In particular, Terry and others observed that YouTubers were able to accurately report on property damage caused by Antifa and Black Lives Matter, groups that were apparently immune from the critique of biased left-leaning media. Thus, from the view of respondents, YouTubers were free not only from the rigid logistical constraints of legacy media, but also from the institutional biases of these companies. Popular YouTubers like Steven Crowder, Lauren Southern and others often upload videos where they take to the street for "on the ground" reporting. These first-hand accounts resonate with principles of bootstraps epistemology—seeking evidence for yourself, accessing "unfiltered" information—while YouTubers' non-institutional status lends an aura of credibility and authenticity to these reports that evades legacy media outlets.

Working outside of establishment news institutions also helped YouTubers to present themselves as non-partisan voices committed to intellectual and journalistic rigour above all else. Indeed, many respondents highlighted how YouTubers adopted and upheld journalistic norms like citing their sources, consulting primary documents, and issuing corrections. For instance:

> He also cites news articles, and sometimes scientific studies to prove his point, which is always good. I know they're not always reliable and it's difficult with, like, mass media being so polarized nowadays to get an unbiased article, but I like that he tries at least, to put some science behind what he claims. Or some research. (Jakub, late 20s, UK)

> Tim Pool has always been very transparent with his reasoning, and his process. He is very consistent in calling out his own errors and issuing corrections. I have a lot of respect for Tim Pool's ethic. Never had an issue with a fact check with Tim Pool. (Alius, 30s, Lithuania)

Thus, the adoption of journalistic norms by YouTubers helps them to align themselves with the objectivity of mainstream news, even as they distance themselves from the alleged bias and corruption of the outlets themselves.

This liminal insider/outsider status gives YouTubers an advantage when it comes to cultivating trust and loyalty. Speaking about why he appreciates Tim Pool's content, Terry said:

> I like watching his content, or rather listening to it for the most part, because he presents a variety of different sources and he does kind of exactly what I do with the media sites, but he does it for a living. So he'll go through and read every single thing that he can find, and he'll actually identify when a piece of news starts here and then gets quoted by this institution and then this institution and then Daily Mail is talking about it and then this UK paper is talking about it. So he'll actually go down the chain and figure out who's

> quoting who and when. And he'll figure out what the first actual report was and kind of get down to the dirty details and not really read the, you know, the echoes that might be happening throughout the different media sources. So I appreciate that. (Terry, 20s, USA)

This performance of journalistic rigour is integral to legitimizing reactionary YouTubers in the eyes of viewers. Even self-avowed comedians, like Steven Crowder, make an effort to cite their sources of information and frequently criticize mainstream outlets for not doing the same (e.g. Crowder, 2019). Notably, in the excerpt above, Terry describes how his favourite YouTuber not only adheres to journalistic norms but also to principles of bootstraps epistemology, like consulting multiple sources in order to piece together the truth. As such, Terry is able to rely on Tim Pool as someone who both shares his values *and* has the time to do the in-depth research that Terry does not.

Respondents also expressed trust in the integrity and moral character of YouTubers. For instance, Terry spoke about how YouTube commentators were less beholden to corrupting financial interests:

> A lot of the stuff on YouTube, it's got a different kind of goal in mind. People don't post political content on YouTube to get paid and everything else. They post it because they have something to say. And that's not really something that happens a lot of the times with the mainstream stuff.

As established in Chapter 2, YouTubers are increasingly professionalized influencers who rely on ad revenue, sponsorships, and crowdfunding to monetize their content. Despite this trend, in interviews, respondents like Terry foregrounded YouTubers' drive to seek truth and genuine political exchange. Later in the interview, Terry described how his favourite YouTube commentators do their work for different reasons than their mainstream news counterparts. He said:

> [With mainstream news,] they'll never talk about interesting subjects like political philosophy or ideology. And that's really what I enjoy about a lot of political content on YouTube… They won't really try to put the blame anywhere most of the time. They'll talk about it the way it is. Then they'll push what they have to say, what their beliefs on the subject are. That's something I really tend to enjoy. So I'd say it's sort of fundamentally different in some ways.

Like other respondents, Terry appreciates the more intellectual tenor of YouTubers' videos on politics, when compared to the mainstream news. His description of right-wing YouTubers includes two seemingly contradictory characteristics. On the one hand, YouTubers "talk about it

the way it is," without applying a partisan spin or seeking to assign blame. On the other hand, "they'll push what they have to say," offering their own unique point of view. Thus, YouTubers' trustworthiness is not rooted in a 20th century conception of journalistic "objectivity"; rather, YouTubers can be trusted in part *because* they disclose their own points of view and own up to their biases. This view was echoed by several other respondents:

> I just typically don't trust the perspective of, say, the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* or anything… largely because they typically won't admit to their biases. One of the primary things that I appreciate about the Daily Wire, even above Fox News, is that they're biased, but they own up to their bias. They can admit to their bias up front. And then they filter their news through their bias. So you at least you know where they're going to come from in their stories. And I'm fine with that. (Douglas, 30s, USA)

For Douglas, the self-avowed impartiality of outlets like the *New York Times* actually draws attention to their hypocrisy and dishonesty; their left-wing bias is all the more egregious when contrasted with their lofty rhetoric about journalistic ethics. On the other hand, commentators for the Daily Wire speak from a decidedly conservative perspective and the admission of this bias makes them more trustworthy, not less.

4. Conclusion: Bootstraps epistemology and the legitimation of hierarchy

To summarize, bootstraps epistemology refers to the belief that an individual can only access political truth and knowledge by rejecting inherited dogmas and pursuing a highly individualistic process of research and rational deliberation. This process involves sifting through competing ideas, evaluating them against one another, and exposing one's own views to opposition. By positioning themselves as "alternative" voices who exist outside of the corporate media structure and liberal dogma, reactionary YouTubers appeal to and reinforce this sense of epistemic individualism among viewers.

The definition of bootstraps epistemology introduced here resembles what Jane and Fleming (2014) call "conspiracy thinking." In their book on conspiracy theories, they argue that the proliferation of such theories in contemporary society can be explained in part by the increasing complexity of socio-political and technological phenomena—from climate change to the COVID-19 vaccine—which need to be interpreted for everyday people by a variety of specialists. At the same time, Western epistemological norms are shaped indelibly by Enlightenment ideals, which

emphasize “first-hand inquiry, independent thinking, and a scepticism about information passed down by authorities and experts” (p. 54). Within this landscape, Jane and Fleming argue, conspiracy thinking represents a continuation, not a disruption, of Enlightenment ideals, a way of shifting authority away from institutions and towards “the individual subject as the arbiter and final court of all knowledge claims” (p. 48). While Jane and Fleming focus their arguments on conspiracy theories and the communities that form around them, the epistemic tensions they identify emerge in other, more mainstream spaces as well. In this chapter, I introduce bootstraps epistemology to name this approach to politics and information-seeking, which is taken up not only by conspiracy theorists but also—to varying degrees—by broader publics who seek to find truth outside of institutional sources.

The adoption of bootstraps epistemology is not politically neutral; its underlying logic breeds a competitive, hierarchical understanding of the world. Indeed, the belief that one has accessed the truth because one has studied harder, researched more, and thought more deeply about a subject than others has repercussions for how a person relates to those around them. Among respondents, several expressed the sense that they were better equipped to make political decisions than their fellow citizens. This anti-democratic impulse was articulated most clearly by Brett, the 30-year-old technician living in Oklahoma:

> But everyone’s opinion is not equal. Some people have put more thought into them than others. Like for instance, I don’t mean to sound pretentious… but my opinion is obviously more well thought out than others. I obviously have put a lot of work in to develop my opinions and thoughts. Whereas a normie Republican or even a normie Democrat voter probably hasn’t. They’re just sitting there, watching TV, watching the news and getting their opinions from there without thinking very much. Like what are the philosophical implications of this? What are the potential economic ramifications of this? They don’t actually know. They’re being told what to think. And then they’re taking the thing from Tucker Carlson or Rachel Maddow or whatever to the poll box and they’re not actually thinking for themselves. Why should my vote equal theirs? Why should my opinion be considered equal to theirs?

Brett explicitly associates uncritical “normie” partisans with watching television, characterizing these audiences as passive recipients of information, perpetually caught up in the news of the day. His favourite YouTube channels, on the other hand, have prompted him to think more deeply about “philosophical ideas,” showing him the dynamics of power that underly current events.

Under bootstraps epistemology, his better developed, more theoretically coherent views entitle him to more power within society.

Even those who did not articulate anti-democratic ideas so explicitly in interviews still invoked a hierarchy of knowledge in which they sat at, or near, the top. In this way bootstraps epistemology inherits not only the skepticism and individualism of Enlightenment-era philosophy but also its exclusionary foundations (See Chapter 2, Section 2.2). In *Toward a global idea of race*, Ferreira da Silva (2007) argues that racial logics are inextricable from early modern Western philosophy, which centred "reason" as the locus of human endeavours. This worldview elevated the white European subject as *transparent*—possessing agency, interiority, and reason—while Europe's various "others" were always *affectable*—subject to the forces of nature.

In their videos, reactionary YouTubers embrace the legacy of the transparent subject, positioning themselves as the "standard-bearers of Facts and Reason" (Hong, 2020, p. 88), while disparaging their political opponents as emotional, dogmatic, and self-serving. Adopting a narrow conception of rationality, these figures cast marginalized people as "biased" while they, mostly white men, are assumed to occupy a position of neutrality. In a similar vein, my mostly-white, all-male interview respondents spoke confidently about minoritized groups—Black people, Muslims, trans people—as *affectable* others: those who could be acted upon but were not truly agents in their own right, capable of articulating their own experiences and determining their own paths. Thus, bootstraps epistemology cannot be extricated from broader social hierarchies that mediate whose voices are imbued with "reason" and whose are not (Medina, 2017). At the same time, this conception of knowledge empowered my respondents to speak with confidence on a range of issues based on their mastery of abstract principles (free speech absolutism, libertarianism, meritocracy) and their ability to apply these principles in a logically consistent way.

YouTube is certainly not the only venue where this brand of epistemic individualism circulates; however, reactionary YouTube channels play an important role in the maintenance and evolution of bootstraps epistemology. The platform gives creators the flexibility to produce innovative, engaging political commentary while incentivizing long-form content—reaction videos, debate streams, video essays—that keep people on the site, consuming ads. Given the platform's ubiquity and slower-paced political discourse, YouTube presents an obvious place to

search for perspectives not represented in the mainstream media, attracting those interested in unorthodox ideas and in-depth discussions. The most popular right-leaning voices on YouTube further cement this sense of skepticism towards establishment media by continually critiquing mainstream news coverage of current events and positioning themselves as uncorrupted alternatives to the legacy news machine. Thus, reactionary YouTubers both perpetuate bootstraps epistemology and benefit from its popularization. In the Conclusion to follow, I will place bootstraps epistemology into conversation with ideas introduced in previous chapters, stepping back to evaluate what these findings can tell us about the role of reactionary YouTubers and their audiences within the broader political landscape.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

1. Introduction

This thesis sought to fill gaps in the scholarly literature on the nature and impact of "alt-lite" personalities, the significance of YouTube as a site of political influence, and the reception of reactionary videos by audiences. In pursuing the overarching question, "What discourses about race circulate within and around "alt-lite" YouTube channels?," I undertook the first systematic qualitative analysis of "alt-lite" creators—based on over 250 videos—and the first academic research effort to interview right-wing YouTube audience members: a group that has been widely theorized upon (eg. Munger and Phillips 2022) but never engaged as research participants. Undertaking this process of qualitative analysis provided me with unique insights into how racial discourses function in and around "alt-lite" videos.

In this concluding chapter, I summarize the thesis's key contributions, drawing together findings presented in earlier chapters and theorizing on their broader implications. I argue that "alt-lite" YouTubers traffic in white grievance politics but anchor themselves within "mainstream" conservativism through appeals to ideological and professional respectability. Ideologically, these figures represent the latest iteration of post-civil rights "racial reaction" discourse, which seeks to rehabilitate white supremacist ideas within a colourblind status quo. Professionally, "alt-lite" YouTubers perform both journalistic and intellectual rigour throughout their videos to maintain credibility with viewers. YouTube provides a unique and potent space for disseminating this ideology of white grievance, giving creators the tools to cultivate authentic, "alternative" voices and rewarding them for the production of edgy content. Ultimately, "alt-lite" personalities preach a reactionary gospel that simultaneously provides viewers with a sense of mastery over complex socio-political issues while cultivating feelings of alienation and social atomization. Finally, I will explore how the consumption of online reactionary content bleeds into offline realities and interactions.

Consider, for instance, my interview with Isaac: a 20-year-old who had recently started working at a car dealership. In our conversation, Isaac told me that he had planned to attend the January 6 Stop the Steal rally in Washington DC. In his spare time, Isaac moderates a YouTuber fan Discord server, where members chat about everything from politics to cryptocurrency to

memes. Although he did not particularly support the Stop the Steal movement, he was interested in live streaming the protest as a form of documentation; his interest in political YouTube videos had prompted him to give video streaming a try himself. He said, "Obviously I didn't know what would happen that day. But a lot of people had a feeling that something would go wrong… We were worried someone might do a drive by, or plant an explosive and blow people up, or some sort of terrorist attack." Despite these potential risks, or maybe because of them, he remained committed to the trip. However, he was ultimately unable to attend the protest because, in his telling, his bank blocked the transaction when he tried to buy a train ticket to Washington DC[46].

Prior to the January 6 rally, Isaac had attended a Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest in his town, similarly for the sake of "documenting" the event. While at the protest, he was confronted by an acquaintance from high school who knew of his right-leaning political beliefs. Concerned that the organizers might be alerted to his presence—and that he might get kicked out of the gathering—he approached them himself to clear the air: "I had a discussion with the woman who was sort of leading the protest, and we had a conversation. Just sort of left it at, 'We don't agree. We think that at the end of the day we're just human; we have every right to exist.' Stuff like that." Isaac walked away from the experience satisfied with the conversation he was able to have. I can only surmise what the conversation felt like for the BLM organizer, who went through the emotional and logistical effort of organizing a protest to condemn police brutality and affirm the preciousness of Black life, only to be confronted by a would-be political streamer hoping to debate her for his YouTube channel. Throughout this chapter, I will shift my focal point away from right-wing actors and onto those who are interpellated by the objectifying gaze of reactionary ideology. In doing so, I hope to close this thesis by foregrounding how reactionary rhetoric shapes and constrains the lives of marginalized people.

2. Situating "alt-lite" in the right-wing information ecosystem

This thesis started with a question about a particular collection of right-wing internet personalities: those who have been called "alt-lite" by "alt-right" activists, journalists, civil society groups, and

[46] I was unable to find any evidence or reporting online about banks pre-emptively blocking purchases ahead of the January 6 riots.

researchers. Although "alt-lite" YouTubers form a vaguely identifiable cohort, these figures remain relatively dispersed within the online ecosystem and differ in terms of ideological extremity—at least in their outward presentations. At the time of writing, all the YouTubers studied in this thesis remain active in terms of content production, although on different platforms and to varying degrees of success. Some, like Gavin McInnes, Stefan Molyneux, Computing Forever[47], and Milo Yiannopoulos have been deplatformed from YouTube following negative press coverage and updates to YouTube's policies. McInnes now runs his own subscription service, where he hosts a range of far-right pundits including Milo Yiannopoulos. The profitability of the service is unclear, although McInnes continues to book high profile guests like Kanye West (Madarang, 2022) and engage in performative stunts like faking his own arrest (Spiegelman, 2022). Stefan Molyneux has kept a relatively low profile since being deplatformed but continues to produce content for his own website, where he has amassed a large following thanks to his YouTube fame. Following his deplatforming from all major social media sites, Yiannopoulos publicly proclaimed that he was "broke" (Uberti, 2019). Since then, he has continued to chase the limelight, self-publishing two books and attempting to rebrand himself as "ex-gay" (Spocchia, 2021).

Meanwhile, others within the "alt-lite" cohort have managed to successfully integrate themselves into the wider conservative media ecosystem, as described by Benkler et al. (2018). The most popular digital ventures within this ecosystem are not only far-reaching but also well-funded. In the period under analysis in this thesis (2017-2019), Steven Crowder and Lauren Chen (aka. Roaming Millennial) both hosted YouTube shows for Blaze Media: a right-wing media company formed from a merger between Glenn Beck's The Blaze and Mark Levin's CRTV. In 2020, BlazeTV, the company's digital news and entertainment network, had 450,000 subscribers paying an average of US$102 a year (Fischer, 2020). Meanwhile, YouTuber Ben Shapiro's rival network the Daily Wire boasted over 1 million paid subscribers to its streaming service DailyWire+ as of November 2022 (Fischer, 2022). The Daily Wire's roster of commentators includes Candace Owens, Michael Knowles, and Matt Walsh, all of whom have their own large YouTube followings. In Canada, Ezra Levant's Rebel News—which launched the careers of Lauren Southern and Faith

[47] Dave Cullen, the individual behind Computing Forever, continues to make content for YouTube on his second channel called "The Dave Cullen Show." This channel focuses predominantly on pop culture criticism and, at the time of writing, has 204,000 subscribers.

Goldy and provided a platform for Tommy Robinson and Gavin McInnes—maintains its operations through crowdfunding as well as occasional grants from US institutions, like the anti-Muslim Middle East Forum (PressProgress, 2017). These digital-first outlets have the advantage of low operating costs and exemption from broadcasting regulations, making them easier to sustain than cable news channels, for instance (Gerson, 2015).

The conservative information ecosystem (Tripodi 2022) is bankrolled not only by subscription fees and crowdfunding but also by significant investments from conservative elites, who are committed to building an alternative to the "establishment" media. For instance, Breitbart News—which launched the careers of Milo Yiannopoulos and Ben Shapiro—received a $10 million investment from the billionaire Mercer family in 2011 (Cadwalladr, 2017). Meanwhile PragerU and the Daily Wire both received significant seed funding ($6.5 and $4.77 million, respectively) from the billionaire Wilks brothers, who made their fortunes in the fracking industry (Dembicki, 2022). In recent years, ultra-wealthy individuals like Donald Trump and Peter Thiel have made major investments into new social media platforms for conservatives or, like Elon Musk, have wholesale purchased existing platforms for the sake of transforming them into "free speech" zones. These well-funded digital ventures have diversified an already-robust conservative media industry, with traditional players like Fox News and conservative talk radio continuing to dominate in their respective spheres.

This web of media organizations and funders provides significant institutional support for "alt-lite" and other reactionary YouTubers. Despite their relative leanness, digital outlets like BlazeTV, Rebel News, PragerU, and the Daily Wire represent a meaningful progression pipeline for would-be conservative influencers. These outlets massively increase the reach—and earning potential—of the up-and-coming creators they platform, introducing them to new audiences and potential collaborators. Conservative media networks and funders also represent a safety net for those in the fold, providing influencers with alternative platforms for hosting video content if their YouTube channels are ever demonetized or deplatformed altogether (Donovan et al., 2018). Thus, the right-wing information ecosystem has built-in buffers for high-profile YouTubers, enabling them to push the boundaries of platform policy without risking their livelihoods completely—a recourse that does not exist to the same extent for left-wing creators.

Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars that flow through this digital media ecosystem, reactionary YouTubers are viewed by fans as independent and authentic voices. YouTube's affordances, and its place in the cultural imagination, help creators to maintain this good will in a number of ways. Reactionary micro-celebrities leverage the affordances of social media sites—comment fields, live streams, discussion groups—in order to build loyal audiences. Those who get their start on YouTube also lay claim to an underdog status that sets them apart from pundits on mainstream media. Even when YouTubers land lucrative deals with right-wing media networks, most continue to film in the same locations, with the same crews, maintaining continuity for long-time viewers. Thus, YouTube lends an aura of alterity to creators that distinguishes them from TV or radio personalities, even as they benefit from the funding, support, and networks of large institutions and donors.

3. Contributions to scholarship

3.1 Theorizing "alt-lite" discourse

I was motivated to pursue this thesis by a lacuna in the research literature on the category of "alt-lite." I was curious about what this cohort of YouTube personalities could tell us about the state of white supremacist discourse in our increasingly platformized society. To address this research gap, I watched over 75 hours' worth of YouTube videos, across 14 channels that were designated as "alt-lite" by scholars and civil society groups. Drawing on this intensive period of data collection, in Chapter 4, I showed how "alt-lite" YouTubers articulate white supremacist ideas that cast white people as both inherently superior and unfairly victimized within Western societies. However, they adopt mitigating rhetorical strategies in order to soften and obfuscate their far-right views. In Chapters 5 and 6, I explored how these channels transgress the norms of polite public discourse by adopting an edgy, provocative tone in their videos, while simultaneously highlighting their journalistic and intellectual integrity. Building on these findings, I propose that "alt-lite" rhetoric—like that of the alt-right—traffics in white grievance politics and racial "othering." However, these figures adopt a range of tactics that help them to maintain both ideological and professional legitimacy in the eyes of viewers.

To maintain ideological respectability within mainstream conservatism, "alt-lite" personalities make use of *mitigating rhetorical devices*, *ironic racial provocation*, and *appeals to free speech*. In doing so, they build upon previous iterations of post-civil rights "racial reaction" discourse, which sought to preserve or obfuscate racial hierarchy while maintaining a veneer of colourblind civility (Anderson, 2020; Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Since the 1970's, racially inflected "code words" deployed by US politicians—"law and order," "big government," "the silent majority"—reinscribed national (white) conceptions of the *self* and *other* amidst mass movements for equality that rendered explicit racial appeals taboo (Omi & Winant, 2015). "Alt-lite" influencers inherit and extend these discursive strategies, rehabilitating white supremacist ideas in their videos while being careful not to alienate their "colourblind" conservative viewers.

For example, the tactics of mitigation described in Chapter 4—highlighting relationships to people of colour, superficially embracing Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders, aligning with some minoritized groups in order to denigrate others—serve as a perfunctory nod to the post-civil rights consensus on race, giving YouTubers the latitude to denigrate minorities in other contexts. Similarly, their weaponization of "free speech" gestures towards respect for civil liberties while advocating for a world where trans people, Muslims, and other minorities have materially fewer rights. In addition, the culture of trolling and irony so prevalent online provides new rhetorical affordances for "alt-lite" creators that were not available to previous generations of white grievance peddlers. This edgy internet culture enables them to puncture the façade of racial decorum more brazenly—saying the quiet part out loud—while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability.

In order to cultivate an aura of professional credibility, "alt-lite" YouTubers anchor their provocative, far-right rhetoric in performances of journalistic and intellectual rigour. For instance, nearly all of the YouTubers studied in this thesis make a show of citing their sources, often in lengthy video descriptions, which digital affordances like hyperlinks and screenshots easily facilitate. Many bring on guests who are "on the ground" at major news events or go out onto the streets themselves to interview, or sometimes antagonize, passersby. Unlike outrage personalities on Fox or talk radio—most of whom embrace a "low brow" tone—even the most provocative "alt-lite" YouTubers oscillate between jester and philosopher personas, embracing a more cerebral

demeanour when making key arguments. These figures emphasize their intellectual prowess through the rapid-fire deployment of statistics, news headlines, and academic studies to advance their arguments. The professional legitimacy of these YouTubers is also shaped by YouTube's incentive structure, in which ad revenue is linked to watch time. As described in Chapter 6, this encourages the production of long-form content that is more conversational and slower-paced than television or radio, drawing in those seeking a more in-depth approach to political discourse.

Through these indicators of respectability—both in form and in content—"alt-lite" YouTubers manage to cultivate a degree of gravitas that gives them license to cross boundaries, denigrate minorities, and indulge in provocative humour elsewhere in their videos. Taken together, these findings reveal how "alt-lite" YouTubers maintain the trust and attention of audiences by re-packaging white grievance politics as subversive, smart, and new. In doing so, they fill a gap in the right-wing media ecology for reactionary content that is marketed towards younger, politically engaged, and highly-online audiences.

3.2 Politics as "content"

Neil Postman famously argued in his 1985 book *Amusing ourselves to death* that the medium of television demands a specific epistemology, which casts all information as entertainment. As an audio-visual medium, Postman explained, television requires constant variety and discourages silence and contemplation. Without fully embracing the technological determinism of Postman's thesis, we can acknowledge that the logic of "content" is accompanied by its own set of demands and limitations. While television programs and YouTube channels both aim to reach large audiences in order to sell ads, online content has an additional incentive: maximizing engagement in the form of likes, comments, shares, and responses, as these metrics tend to garner algorithmic favour on social media platforms. As scholars have shown, the content most likely to receive high rates of engagement online tend to be politically antagonistic and emotionally salient (Rathje et al., 2021; Schradie 2019).

On YouTube, this business model has meant that public feuds, takedowns, and personal accusations tend to perform well when compared with more sober, less dramatic content. Reactionary YouTubers have unsurprisingly latched on to this formula for success, leveraging the

name recognition of well-known progressives or liberal media brands in order to raise their own profiles (Bergen, 2022). In Chapter 1, I described how many of the YouTubers who now form the Alternative Influence Network (R. Lewis, 2018) were propelled into the limelight following Gamergate and the pivot-to-video strategy of the mid-2010s, which saw Vox, Buzzfeed, and other media outlets releasing video content about racism. Reacting to fairly standard liberal critiques about the representation of women in video games or the treatment of people of colour in US society, right-wing influencers unleashed a wave of racist, misogynistic bile, which was actively amplified by YouTube and launched a cohort of reactionary creators to internet stardom.

Targeted by Gamergate enthusiasts for years, Anita Sarkeesian has shared how a whole cottage industry of demeaning "takedown" videos sprung up around her channel, dissecting her every move for the sake of obtaining views (Valenti, 2015). In a video titled, "My boss is a racist robot," Black feminist video essayist F.D. Signifier shared that his culture war-adjacent videos—for instance those critiquing right-wing figures like Jordan Peterson—were algorithmically amplified on YouTube, far beyond his videos about Black art, television, and film—his preferred topics of discussion (Signified B Sides, 2022). Perversely, this process incentivizes him to make more combative, politically antagonistic videos, while punishing him through demonetization when such content is deemed too edgy for advertisers, a double-bind that many YouTubers face (Gillespie & Caplan, 2020).

Within this algorithmically mediated landscape, right-wing channels are rewarded for making content that directly confronts and undermines progressive movements, individuals, and ideas (Lewis et al., 2021). Among the videos sampled from each channel for critical discourse analysis, the ones with the most views reliably depicted the most dramatic and confrontational encounters. For example, on Milo Yiannopoulos's channel—where the median number of views per sampled video was just under 52,0000—his two most viewed videos were titled "Milo thrashes heckling Muslim women at New Mexico" and "Milo leaves Australian Muslim activist in sobbing heap," which received 3.2 and 5.6 million views[48], respectively. This pattern holds across the four sampled "alt-lite" channels. This ecosystem is fed by the appetites of viewers, yes, but also by the entire YouTube monetization and amplification machine, which enables *platform-facilitated racial*

[48] These figures reflect view counts at the time of data collection in February 2020.

backlash: a process in which the dynamics of social media incentivize the production of white (and male) rage. YouTube, here, is not only a host for racist backlash, but a powerful driver and amplifier, having created the market for reactionary response videos that "alt-lite" YouTubers now serve.

This politics-as-content model of discourse produces ripple effects throughout online and offline communities. Consider Isaac—the early 20s moderator of a YouTuber fan discord—who I introduced earlier in the chapter. In our interview, Isaac disclosed that he wanted to live-stream the January 6 rally in Washington D.C. and the Black Lives Matter protest in his hometown not because of his political convictions but because he thought it would make for good content: "I wanted to be down there because I figured it would be a massive event and one that would be somewhat historic and having footage would be pretty cool." It was clear from our conversation that the potential for violence and danger only made the prospect of live-streaming the event more appealing, not less.

It is no accident that Isaac wanted to attend and document the Stop the Steal and BLM protests, despite not supporting either of these movements: these polarizing topics are implicitly promoted by YouTube, especially when they lead to disputes and confrontation. Although most of the study's respondents did not go on to make their own videos, they embraced a debate-oriented approach to politics that mirrored the bellicose tone of their favourite YouTubers. Thus, the production and consumption of politics as "content" on YouTube cultivates a gamified version of the public sphere wherein participants are rewarded for outwitting, embarrassing, and ultimately defeating their political opponents. For right-wing accounts, successfully engaging in this contest frequently involves humiliating, caricaturing, and dehumanizing minoritized groups and individuals—performances which yield strong reactions, garner engagement, and ultimately elevate their status within the attention economy.

3.3 Complicating online radicalization narratives

This thesis problematizes models of online radicalization that emphasize the gradual movement of individuals from the ideological centre (i.e. "colourblind conservative") towards the periphery (i.e. "white supremacist"). By adopting a systemic understanding of white supremacy, my research

finds that racist discourse pervades “alt-lite” channels, even those not typically categorized as extreme or “far right.” Among my respondents, a majority positioned themselves within the political mainstream, calling themselves “classical liberals” (N=4), some flavour of “centrist” or “moderate” (N=7), “Republican” (N=3), and even “left-leaning” (N=2). Furthermore, my interview respondents did not, in general, describe a consistent rightward trajectory in which “alt-lite” voices served as one step. Rather, they described longstanding fan relationships with YouTubers, who they returned to on a weekly, even daily basis as a source of news, entertainment, and analysis.

In general, respondents were drawn to YouTube not necessarily by the ideas they were being introduced to but by the personalities delivering those ideas. These attachments to online personalities can make viewers more skeptical of what they see and hear in the mainstream media, thereby destabilizing their sense of what counts as reliable information. This epistemological shift, sometimes called being “red-pilled[49],” opens viewers up to “alternative” avenues for accessing truth and knowledge. Loyalty to reactionary YouTubers can also make viewers more tolerant of extreme or offensive views, not only from their favourite influencers but also from others who are seen as “playing on the same side” within a highly networked YouTube ecosystem. In Chapter 5, I showed how reactionary personalities have successfully leveraged the frame of free speech to generate solidarity from their viewers, even when those same viewers may be ambivalent about the content itself.

How viewers engage with their favourite channels is another important dimension of YouTube sociality. In this study, all respondents described watching videos primarily on their own—at least in the first instance—on a laptop or mobile phone[50]. Respondents in this study consumed an average of 2.5 hours’ worth of YouTube content every day without necessarily speaking about those ideas with others in their offline community. One of the respondents, Liam, explicitly identified this dynamic as contributing to his period of right-wing radicalization: “You know, people have views about things, and they go down to the pub with their friends, and they say them, and their friends go, “Shut the f-ck up, it’s ridiculous.” And then you go, *ok maybe it’s*

[49] Used by right-wing communities online, the metaphor of the “red pill” likens the discovery of far-right beliefs to the awakening of Neo in the film The Matrix (Ganesh, 2018).
[50] Scholars have shown how the intimacy of YouTube as a medium is conducive to fostering para-social attachments (Kreissl et al., 2021; Rihl & Wegener 2019).

ridiculous. And you meander through it, and you become a normal person. But that doesn't happen when you're involved in this stuff." This mode of solo media consumption also reinforces *bootstraps epistemology*, a term I introduced in Chapter 6 to capture how respondents and YouTubers elevated the individual knowledge seeker as the ideal subject of politics. Within this framework, being alone in one's beliefs serves as evidence of independent thought in the face of widespread groupthink, rather than as a cause for concern or reflection.

In interviews, respondents shared how new ideas discovered on YouTube could quickly calcify, especially as they felt socially inhibited from talking about controversial topics offline, even with friends. Adding to these inhibitions, YouTubers paint a picture of a censorious, punitive speech environment in which their ideas are likely to be socially, or even professionally, sanctioned. This worldview alienates viewers from those around them over time while simultaneously fostering a strong sense of personal mastery over highly complex socio-political issues. Overall, then, the reactionary YouTube ecosystem supports a highly combative, hyper-rational online culture that both intellectually empowers and—given the right conditions—socially atomizes its mostly-male audiences. These data sources complicate narratives of the YouTube radicalization pipeline. Rather than falling down "rabbit holes" into fringe, extremist views, respondents were socialized by YouTubers into an "alternative" political vocabulary and epistemology (Daniels, 2009). This widespread reactionary YouTube culture embraces traditional US values—market logics, individualism, and freedom from government—while advancing fascistic ideas of who does and does not belong within the nation.

4. The ripple effects

Taken together, the world imagined by reactionary YouTubers can be an alienating, lonely place. Society, they tell us, is ruled by an elite class of liberals, who control the media, education institutions, and (sometimes) government. These liberals seek to upend Western culture by championing "woke" social justice issues and demonizing straight white men. The era of US cultural and economic dominance, characterized by free markets, traditional "Judeo-Christian" values, and free speech absolutism, is coming to an end. And while those watching the videos may

feel like they have accessed the truth, they also feel unable to discuss this truth with those around them for fear of social ostracization.

In May 2021, one of the Discord administrators I interviewed made an announcement in his YouTuber fan server. The tone of the announcement was deeply sincere, in contrast to the "shit-posting" that dominated most channels on the server. In the post, he affirmed that everyone in the group had value, emphasized that life was precious, and shared that he had once self-harmed; he assured members of the group that his DMs were always open if people wanted to talk. He commiserated that under the status quo, "we don't really have agency," that most people go about their lives "mindlessly," and that this sense of powerlessness can "eat away at the soul." The post received mostly positive reactions. The administrator's post captures how reactionary ideology can inculcate a sense of enlightenment while simultaneously fomenting feelings of helplessness, even nihilism—a toxic combination of knowing too much and not being able to do anything about it. In addition, these feelings are arising in the context of high rates of loneliness and alienation among Americans (Ninivaggi, 2019).

Scholars have researched how these feelings of isolation, resentment, and helplessness can breed violence—sometimes called stochastic terrorism—which appears uncoordinated on its face but is in reality deeply networked and rooted in ideology (Munn 2019; Lindsay, 2022). This violence, of course, is not randomly directed. Reactionary ideology proclaims loudly, at every opportunity, who the enemies are: the cultural and political "ruling class," with its thinly veiled association with Jewish people; queer people who seek to "indoctrinate" children; Black Lives Matters activists and immigrants who are trying to destroy Euro-American ways of life. This ideology has proven lethal on many occasions. In 2021 and 2022 alone, the shooting of a Kurdish cultural centre in Paris; the shooting at Tops grocery store in Buffalo; the Colorado Springs nightclub shooting; the truck attack on a Muslim family in London, Ontario; and sadly many other murders have been connected to far-right ideologies.

But even where reactionary violence is not lethal, it can still burrow into a community and cause harm. In US classrooms, teachers must tread carefully when talking about the country's history or the existence of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities—they have seen the irate parents at school board meetings and perhaps have encountered reactionary talking points

from their own students. University professors, including those within my own networks, are subject to harassment campaigns when they teach ideas that are deemed to be too "woke." Black activists who worry about ongoing state violence must also contend with individuals online and offline who minimize and deny their experiences. Queer people face a barrage of media items that accuse them and those they love of being groomers, a rhetorical association that makes them vulnerable to verbal and physical attacks. Claims of election fraud—bankrolled by the billionaire Bradley family (Mayer, 2021)—and widely circulated on social media have galvanized a range of voter suppression tactics that disproportionately disenfranchise people of colour. In all of these cases, right-wing news brands and personalities have leveraged social media in order to dominate public discourse and constrain the realm of what is politically possible. These examples remind us that research on reactionary rhetoric is important because this discourse harms marginalized people; white supremacist discourse communicated through YouTube channels reverberates beyond the homes of individual viewers, into the schools, churches, and wider communities that they inhabit, informing how people think of themselves and others.

5. Charting a way forward

As with all internet research, the "alt-lite" ecosystem described in this thesis represents just one small slice of the right-wing information landscape at a specific moment in time. Since beginning data collection for this thesis, shifts have already occurred on YouTube, some well documented, others murkier and more ambiguous. For instance, four of the YouTubers originally included in my seed list of "alt-lite" channels have now been banned from the site. In January 2019, YouTube announced that it would reduce algorithmic recommendations to content classified as "borderline": videos which approach but do not cross the line of company policy, such as clickbait and conspiracy theories (YouTube, 2019a). By the end of 2019, they announced that they had successfully reduced non-subscriber traffic to this content by 70% (YouTube, 2019c), although scholars like Lewis (2021) have pointed out that the lack of hard figures and transparency around what qualifies as borderline content make these figures difficult to interpret. In 2021, YouTube removed the dislikes bar from the user interface, so it is no longer possible to see a video's likes to dislikes ratio as a regular user. These recent changes have catalyzed a range of downstream

impacts and present plenty of research opportunities for scholars interested in online discourse and platform governance.

At the same time, such policy updates represent tweaks around the edges. They have also been applied inconsistently, often in response to bad press coverage, with figures like Gavin McInnes deplatformed as the Proud Boys gained widespread notoriety while others like Steven Crowder—who also traffics in racist talking points, as this thesis has shown—continue to rack up millions of views. More transformative changes that get to the heart of YouTube's white supremacy, conspiracy, and disinformation problems have gone unexplored at the company level. For instance, YouTubers have highlighted the tension between the company's stated commitment to fostering an inclusive (and advertiser-friendly) environment and its ongoing incentivization via the recommendation algorithm of edgy, combative, and risqué videos (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). Ultimately, the goal of reducing harmful disinformation and the goal of maximizing view time at all costs are at odds with one another, as other researchers have argued (Vaidhyanathan, 2021). In the coming years, YouTube and other social media platforms will need to confront this contradiction or sustain a status quo that actively incentivizes toxic, harmful content.

In 2019, after years of bad press around promoting hate speech, YouTube finally adopted a policy prohibiting supremacist content, or "videos alleging that a group is superior in order to justify discrimination" (YouTube, 2019b). This announcement was followed by several waves of deplatformings, which took down the channels of Stefan Molyneux, Richard Spencer, and Gavin McInnes. While these channel takedowns were a good and necessary step to reducing the spread of white supremacist discourse on the site, YouTube's policy remains remarkably devoid of power analysis. That is, speech acts are assessed on their face, without considering the context of who has said what to whom, and what are the impacts. Under this policy, a video stating that Black people are superior to whites would be treated the same as a video containing the inverse. This continued race-neutrality lacks a sociological understanding of how and what supremacist speech actually causes harm. While statements on Black superiority subvert and transgress assumptions within the dominant culture—and are therefore unlikely to entrench harmful prejudices—statements on white superiority build upon centuries of anti-Blackness and perpetuate racial stereotypes that continue to cause harm around the world. In order to tackle racist, sexist, queer-

phobic, anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic discourse in the future, platforms will need to incorporate an analysis of power into their moderation and monetization policies.

Outside of legislation and platform governance, there is also space for activists and civil society practitioners to target the systems that fund and support dangerous, reactionary rhetoric. Groups like the UK-based Stop Funding Hate have used crowd-sourced tactics in order to pressure large brands to withdraw their advertisements from anti-immigrant publications like the *Daily Mail*. Stop Hate for Profit, a campaign led by a coalition of civil society groups, adopted similar tactics to target Facebook's advertisers. Progressive activists and content creators are also doing the crucial work of engaging those who may be drawn to reactionary politics through video essays, podcasts, and deep canvasing. This thesis has shown how viewers of reactionary YouTube channels feel constrained by a highly punitive speech environment, where there is no discursive space to engage with their "controversial" ideas. In order to be effective, then, counter-programming targeted at those vulnerable to far-right ideologies will need to meet people where they are and earnestly engage them on their beliefs without the threat of social ostracization or material punishment. Although this work is undeniably taxing, progressive creators and activists have already found creative ways of getting their messages across. On YouTube, channels like ContraPoints blend video essays with elements of cabaret and sketch comedy, successfully marketing themselves to those who turn to YouTube for both entertainment and education. Together, these efforts seek to tell a different story about inequality and unfairness within society—one where people's opportunities are constrained not by minoritized "others" but by intersecting and mutually constituted systems of capitalism, racism, and hetero-patriarchy—so that we can work together to dismantle them.

6. Avenues for future research

In this thesis, I undertook a process of qualitative analysis and triangulation that sought to corroborate findings across different sources of data. Despite the plethora of studies on the right-wing information ecosystem, relatively few analyze both media messages and audience reception. I believe that analyzing both these domains—along with platform affordances—strengthens the rigour of qualitative media studies research. For example, in Chapter 5, I was able to compare the

claims of "alt-lite" YouTubers about their use of racial provocation with the testimonies of viewers who watched these performances. Despite the YouTubers' insistence that these edgy materials started broader conversations or were dismissed outright as a joke, viewers mostly felt that these stereotypes, although at times distasteful, reflected unstated truths about racial difference. Similar mixed-methods approaches could be fruitfully applied to a host of topics related to disinformation, conspiracy, and polarization in order to avoid deterministic accounts that privilege technological novelty over user agency and historical context. Analyzing these domains together helps us to understand how online messages, mediated by technological platforms, circulate in people's everyday lives and interactions.

The findings from this thesis hint at many potentially fruitful avenues for future research. First, this project has, in many ways, centred whiteness as its analytical focal point; the channels I studied belonged predominantly to white YouTubers, almost all of my respondents were white, and the main subject of critique was white supremacist discourse. I believe this focus was warranted given that much of the research on right-wing and far-right movements fails to explicitly name whiteness and white supremacy as animating forces (Mondon, 2022). With that said, it is undeniable that people of colour also play an important role within these spaces. Figures like Candace Owens, Enrique Tarrio, and Andy Ngo not only disseminate far-right talking points but also provide cover for other reactionaries, who point to them as evidence that their movements are not driven by white supremacy. Further research into the positioning, discourse, and reception of these figures would help paint a picture of how diverse identities can be instrumentalized within reactionary political projects.

Second, I have highlighted throughout this thesis that both the YouTubers I study, and the respondents I spoke with, are predominantly men. Given the highly combative, masculinist approach to politics in "alt-lite" spaces, this male dominance among producers and consumers does not come as a surprise. However, multiple scholars have shown that far-right narratives also hold sway among women (Daniels, 2021; Blee, 2021). Future research should seek to understand how these ideologies are packaged online in gendered ways that cater to the interests and sensibilities of women. More work can also be conducted to show the interaction between misogynist ideology and white supremacist discourse in online spaces. Some writers have suggested

that the former serves as a gateway into the latter (Romano, 2018) but the evidence of this phenomenon remains inconclusive.

Third, more research is needed to shed light on the links between online media consumption and offline mobilization. Most of the interviewees in this study fell within the mainstream of political discourse and none saw themselves as political activists. Most liked to engage in political discussions online but very few went out onto the streets to protest or campaign for a particular party or cause. Recent events have shown, however, that online discussion can spill over into offline organizing, as seen by the mobilization of the Proud Boys, who were brought together by a shared interest in Gavin McInnes' political project and who, since 2017, have been a visible presence at offline gatherings including the January 6 riots. Qualitative research with individuals active in these groups will help scholars to better understand the links between right-wing online communities and offline behaviour, activism, and violence.

Finally, a significant research gap exists on how and why people walk away from reactionary and far-right political movements. Among my interview respondents, two individuals thought of themselves as having been "de-radicalized," one after learning about a disturbing attack connected with the far right and another after exposure to progressive narratives on streaming platforms. However, the concept of deradicalization fell outside the scope of this project, so I did not seek out other respondents from within this group. The stories of these respondents, and many others, however, suggests that individuals currently drawn to right-wing narratives online can and do change their minds. In a similar vein, research on successful progressive movements—from abolitionists to trade unionists—can help shed light on concrete alternatives to the status quo and provide roadmaps for how to engage people in the work of liberation. Further research into these processes, and interviews with those who have turned away from reactionary politics, can help policymakers and activists to tailor their interventions.

7. Reversing the gaze

When I started my PhD, my college assigned me an academic mentor, someone who was meant to guide me through my studies without being actively involved like a dissertation supervisor. I met with this mentor a few times, all friendly interactions, although I could tell from the start

that—based on our academic interests and disciplines—I was unlikely to receive substantive guidance from this person. Nevertheless, I enjoyed our occasional interactions and appreciated having another familiar face around college. After a few months, we fell out of touch; I moved from Oxford back to London, and as far as I was aware, he moved on from Oxford as well. Not seeing any job announcement on social media, I speculated that he had left academia altogether.

I was taken aback to see him resurface on one of my social media feeds several years later, when I was in my final year of the PhD. My ex-advisor, we can call him Tyler, had indeed transitioned out of academia and, to my surprise, into the realm of anti-woke online content production. After a little further digging, I saw that his social media feeds and YouTube channel were now dedicated full-time to anti-trans, anti-feminist, anti-academia, "West is Best" talking points. What surprised me about this discovery was not that an Oxford academic could make such a transition—my own experience at the university has shown me that the institution was rife with colonial apologism and white fragility[51]—but rather that I had spoken to Tyler only three years earlier about my research, and we had exchanged some rueful chuckles about Jordan Peterson. But here he was, spewing talking points that went beyond what even Jordan Peterson would endorse. I joked with my partner, Chris, that my research-related conversations with Tyler had perhaps proven too instructive.

Re-acquainting myself with Tyler's online persona, I contemplated the various forces that would incentivize an academic to rebrand himself as a reactionary commentator. There were a number of pull factors: the demand for anti-woke content, an online ecosystem set up to popularize this material, Tyler's own dissatisfaction with the academic status quo, and the social capital that his academic credentials lent him within reactionary circles. Thus far, I have not made it my business to decipher what right-wing YouTubers *really think*—although some of my respondents had thoughts and insights on this topic—focusing instead on the nature and impact of their content. Still, watching Tyler's videos, I was struck by how unlikely it was that this man

[51] In January 2023, Nick Bostrom, a professor at Oxford known for his work on the philosophy of "longtermism" came under fire after racist emails of his were made public. In one of these emails, he matter-of-factly makes the claim that Black people are "more stupid" than whites (Gault, 2023). At the time of writing, he continues to serve as the Director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford.

believed much of what he was saying online. Yet here he was, trying like so many others to hop on the reactionary YouTube bandwagon to make his name and his pay cheque.

In this thesis, I considered the question, "What discourses about race circulate within and around "alt-lite" YouTube channels?" Over the course of my four and a half years of completing my PhD, I witnessed the genesis of one such YouTuber before my very eyes. Tyler's evolution from Oxford academic to online reactionary highlights one of the central arguments of this thesis: that YouTube bestows an aura of independence and alterity, even to those with the most social, political, and financial capital within our society. Despite his elite academic pedigree, on YouTube, Tyler was able to rebrand himself as a renegade and outcast. He trumpets anti-trans, anti-feminist, "West is Best" ideas that are widely held but articulates them as though they are transgressive secrets to be whispered only among the enlightened few.

In this way he follows in the footsteps of "alt-lite" creators like Steven Crowder, Gavin McInnes, Lauren Southern, Milo Yiannopoulos and many more. Each of these personalities uphold fundamentally retrograde, long-standing and discredited ideas about various "others." But through constantly invoking their own persecution—by "woke" activists, by social media platforms, by the mainstream media—they cast themselves as outsiders and rebrand these old ideas as new. For those who watch their videos, these YouTubers satisfy a craving for "independent" voices who appear to be uncompromised by financial and institutional constraints. In reality, the most successful "alt-lite" YouTubers are highly compensated for their content, a reality that continues to draw individuals to the space in pursuit of micro-celebrity and financial rewards.

Once this content is uploaded to YouTube, it enters a sprawling ecosystem designed to disseminate and amplify far-right political content. This network of channels socializes viewers to see institutional voices as highly suspect while embracing alternative epistemologies that emphasize individual research and exclusionary conceptions of rationality. While destabilizing people's trust in institutions does not always lead to reactionary politics (Bauer & Nadler, 2023), right-wing actors are better placed to take advantage of this destabilization given the robust and lucrative alternative media ecosystem they have already established. This ecosystem has harmed marginalized groups

and democracy itself in untold ways, while providing a path to micro-celebrity for those like Tyler, Isaac, and countless others who seek to leverage the culture wars to their advantage.

Pushing back against white supremacist, misogynist ideology will require action on multiple fronts: platform power will need to be circumscribed in order to curb the worst excesses of the attention economy; progressive journalists, educators, and storytellers will need to continue the work of counter-messaging; and education institutions will need to divest from colourblind frameworks that obscure more than they enlighten. As for researchers, although the reactionary online ecosystem may seem vast and impenetrable from the outside, we need not be awed. While these figures may gaze out at the world as though masters of the universe, it is important that, from our own vantage points we gaze back. We reverse this gaze to better understand their discourses and movements, to draw attention to their harmful impacts, to design effective interventions, and ultimately to make a different world possible for our loved ones and those who come after us.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Keywords and images for CDA sampling

List of keywords

- Affirmative action
- African
- Aliens
- Allah
- Alt-right
- Alt-lite
- Anti-semit*
- Appropriation
- Asian
- Black
- Black Lives Matter
- Chinese
- Covington
- Diversity
- Great Replacement
- Ghetto
- Identity politics
- Illegals
- Indian
- Intersectional*
- Islam, Muslim
- Jew*
- KKK
- Micro-aggressions
- Migrant, Migration
- Multicultural*
- Native
- Nazi
- No-go zone
- Race, racism, racist, racial
- Refugee
- Reparations
- Sanctuary cities
- Shariah
- Shithole
- Skin color
- Slavery
- Terrorist
- Unite the Right
- The Wall
- White, White nationalism

List of key-images

- Blackface
- Dressing up as a religious minority
- Picture of non-white person featured prominently (clearly visible, not in a crowd shot or one of several guests)

Appendix 2: Rhetorical device codes (CDA)

Rhetorical Devices	Description
Barbarism	Implying or explicitly stating that non-Western cultures are backwards or savage
Caricature	Painting a highly exaggerated, stereotypical picture of a person or group
Civil rights	Referencing the civil rights movements in a way that bolsters right-wing talking points
Claiming persecution	Claiming that they have experienced discrimination due to their identity
Colourblindness	Claiming that they do not see race or care about race at all
Conservative POCs	Highlighting the diversity of the conservative movement (especially by referring to specific individuals) to disprove accusations of racism
Debunking	Disproving commonly held ideas (versus an individual piece of media, see "takedown")
Defending minorities	Highlighting the persecution of minorities in non-Western countries or by progressive movements
Disavowal of racism	Openly stating that they are not a racist/do not hold racist beliefs
Disorientation	Highlighting their confusion, and even offense, at the arguments advanced by progressives
Dog whistle	Hinting at the racial otherness or inferiority of a group without explicitly mentioning race
Double standard	Claiming that they are being held to a higher standard than others
Elevating debate	Emphasizing the importance of open debate (and free speech) in reaching the truth
Former liberals	Highlighting stories about liberals who have converted to conservatism
Groundtruth	Claiming that they have seen/experienced the "reality" of the situation on the ground
Low-budget	Executing something poorly/cheaply to create a DIY feel
Mitigation	Doing/saying something that minimizes or softens their point
Model minority	Highlighting ethnic minorities who have "succeeded" in the West
Parody	Re-making a piece of media but changing elements to make a statement (but not necessarily making fun of the original itself)
Personal relations	Highlighting personal relations with non-white people to disprove accusations of racism
Positive stereotypes	Highlighting positive stereotypes about non-white people
Power of marginalized	Highlighting the power that supposedly marginalized groups have over white men
Provocation	Doing/saying something outrageous that will likely offend people
Proximity to Blackness	Highlighting awareness/knowledge of Black culture/Black people to bolster non-racist credibility
Referencing humour	Referring to one's own work as humorous/satirical/ironic as a defense against accusations of bigotry
Reverse racism	Claiming that white people are the victims of racism
Satire	Mimicking progressives, and other groups, in a hyperbolic way in order to ridicule and criticize them
Statistics	Using statistics in order to advance their argument

Takedown	Refuting a progressive text/video by disproving individual statements one by one
Trolling	Doing/saying something outrageous (that they don't necessarily believe) in order to trigger a reaction in people; the reaction is the punchline
Visual gag	A joke told purely visually
White saviours	Highlighting the scientific/political/humanitarian achievements of white people throughout history, especially to show how these have benefited non-white people
Worse over there	Claiming that people (especially women, minorities) in the West shouldn't complain because things are much worse in non-Western countries

Appendix 3: Sampled videos for critical discourse analysis

Video Title	Channel	Views	Date uploaded	Comments	Type	Keyword/ Key image	Length (mins)	URL
MILO At UC - Colorado Springs: Why The Dems Lost The White Working Class	Milo	290,130	26-Jan-17	945	Public speaking	"White"	103	https://web.archive.org/web/20190509033047/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szi1TolCIaI
CNN Rebuttal: Yes, Deport Illegal Immigrants/Criminals | Louder With Crowder	StevenCrowder	1,643,631	19-Apr-17	6480	Talk show	"Illegal immigrants"	14	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6aUKarnouQ
Allah Is Gay' - Here's What Happened in Luton	Lauren Southern	938,902	22-Mar-18	20,694	On the street	"Allah"	7	https://web.archive.org/web/20191223041037/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxjH5hZYTbQ
GAVIN McINNES QUITS THE PROUD BOYS	Gavin McInnes	600,340	21-Nov-18	10,372	Speaking to camera	Image of Black people	36.5	https://web.archive.org/web/20190205171603/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGrPjx2V_TA
GOML - THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY ISN'T AFRICAN ENOUGH	Gavin McInnes	186,470	05-Feb-19	2064	Speaking to camera	"African"	20	https://web.archive.org/web/20190206030009/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2FdBmTGHsk
A Message From Congresswoman Ilhan Omar (D-MN)	Milo	341,805	24-Feb-19	4332	Sketch	Dressing up as Ilhan Omar	2.5	https://web.archive.org/web/20200707122536/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PG89dsCUoig
VOX REBUTTAL: Affirmative Action Debunked! | Louder with Crowder	StevenCrowder	831,118	11-Dec-19	6543	Talk show	"Affirmative action"	27.5	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dJf6IuUCeY

Note: The number of views and comments were gathered during the data collection period in early 2020 (February to April) and reflect the video's statistics at the time of first viewing. Since the data collection period, Gavin McInnes's and Milo Yiannopoulos's channels have been deplatformed. Lauren Southern is still active on YouTube at the time of writing; however, she has made some of her most controversial videos private in order to re-brand herself as a more moderate figure.

Appendix 4: Rhetorical device codes among total videos viewed and sampled videos (CDA)

N.B. Videos were coded purely for the purpose of guiding CDA sampling. As such, these codes are not suitable for quantitative analysis or inference.

Rhetorical Devices	Videos containing device among total viewed (N=175)	Sampled videos (N=7) containing device
Caricature	29	3
Barbarism	25	2
Takedown	18	3
Claiming persecution	17	2
Dog whistle	16	1
Defending minorities	15	2
Statistics	14	1
Provocation	13	1
Conservative POCs	12	1
Reverse racism	11	1
Personal relations	10	2
Double standard	10	2
White saviours	10	1
Proximity to blackness	10	0
Groundtruth	10	0
Satire	9	2
Disavowal of racism	8	1
Colourblindness	7	1
Referencing humour	7	1
Civil rights	6	1
Worse over there	6	0
Elevating debate	6	0
Debunking	5	0
Trolling	5	1
Mitigation	5	0
Model minority	4	1
Low-budget	2	1
Power of marginalized	2	0
Visual gag	2	1
Positive stereotypes	1	0
Parody	1	0
Disorientation	1	1

Appendix 5: Critical discourse analysis guide

1. Structure analysis

- What is the subject of the video? What is the context (ie. national news, an election, social media trend)?
- How long is the video? Is it divided into sections?
- What kinds of norms/conventions are employed?
- Who is the implied audience?
- What kinds of intertextual references are made?

2. Fine analysis

- Argumentation
    - What are the main arguments advanced by the video? Are they explicitly stated? If not, how are they signaled?
    - What is the logic by which the conclusion is reached? What kind of evidence is marshaled?
    - What kinds of claims do not require evidence because they are "common sense"?
    - What kinds of paradoxes emerge?
- Collective symbolism
    - How are people and groups referred to? What traits or qualities are attributed to them?
    - What is the perspective or point of view of the speaker? How do they frame their own racial identity?
    - Are some groups denigrated or othered? How is this justified or rationalized?
- Rhetorical tools
    - What is the overall 'tone' of the video?
    - Is the subject matter framed humorously? How so?
    - Is the video ironic? Are there specific ironic moments, or a general ironic tone? What are the said and unsaid meanings? How are these meanings related? How is the unsaid meaning signaled or implied?
    - How are stereotypes or other denigrating ideas framed? Are they somehow intensified or mitigated?

3. Visual analysis

- What is the setting of the video? What does this communicate? What is the visual 'tone'?
- What are the visual markers of genre?
- What are the shared visual "resources" that creators draw upon to communicate with their target audience? Who might have access to these "resources" and who might be excluded?
- What kinds of symbols or icons are used? What is connoted by these? Are certain features or objects foregrounded?
- What kinds of images or objects are attributed to different groups?
- Do the visual elements of the video cohere with or disrupt with what is being said? Do the visual elements of the video help to generate an ironic or unsaid meaning?

Appendix 6: List of Facebook and Reddit search terms

Ben Shapiro
Blaire White
Breitbart
Brittany Sellner/Pettibone
Candace Owens
Carl Benjamin
Compound Media Network
Computing Forever
Daily Wire
Dave Rubin
Dinesh D'Souza
Ezra Levant
Freedomain Radio
Gavin McInnes
Groypers
Intellectual Dark Web
Lauren Chen
Lotus Eaters
Mark Dice
Michelle Malkin
Mike Cernovich
Mug Club
Nicholas Fuentes
No Bullshit
Paul Joseph Watson
Proud Boys
Proud Boys Girls
Pseudo-intellectual with Lauren Chen
Rebel Media
Rebel News
Roaming Millennial
Sargon of Akkad
Styxhexenhammer
Styxhexenhammer666
The Rebel Media
The Rebel News
Tim Pool
Turning Point USA

Appendix 7: Full text of participant recruitment questionnaire

User engagements with political YouTube videos

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q2 **General Information** The purpose of the study is to better understand how conservative and/or politically controversial content on YouTube is understood by viewers and what kinds of responses these videos generate. This research is being carried out by a team at the Oxford Internet Institute, which is a department under the social sciences division at the University of Oxford. We appreciate your interest in participating in this questionnaire. You have been invited to participate as you are over 18 and are a member of an online group that discusses political ideas and/or YouTube videos. Please read through this information before agreeing to participate (if you wish to) by ticking the 'Yes, I agree to take part' box below. You may ask any questions before deciding to take part by contacting the researchers at youtuberesearch@oii.ox.ac.uk. If you choose to participate, the following questionnaire will include 15 questions for you to answer. The questions will address your level of engagement with YouTube and other social media platforms, how you interpret the content you watch, and your own political views. This should take about 20 minutes. No background knowledge is required. If you choose to leave your contact details at the end of the questionnaire, the researcher may get in touch with you after receiving your initial answers in order to ask follow-up questions. You can decide at that point whether or not you would like to answer those questions. **Do I have to take part?** No. Please note that participation is voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you may withdraw at any point for any reason before submitting your answers by pressing the 'Exit' button or closing the browser. All questions are optional. **How will my data be used?** The data you disclose that could identify you (e.g. age range, gender, country, contact details) will be kept confidential. Your IP address will not be stored. The responses you provide will be stored in a password-protected electronic file on the University of Oxford's OneDrive for Business cloud service and anonymised quotes may be used in academic publications. Identifiable information will be deleted as soon as it is no longer required for the research. Research data will be stored for three years after publication or public release. **Who will have access to my data?** The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights. **Who has reviewed this study?** This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC Number: SSH_OII_CIA_19_060). **Who do I contact if I have a concern or I wish to complain?** If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please email the research team at youtuberesearch@oii.ox.ac.uk, and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and

give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible: Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee
Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk
Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD
Please note that you may only participate in this survey if you are 18 years of age or over.

○ I certify that I am 18 years of age or over (1)

Q1 If you have read the information above and agree to participate, with the understanding that the data (including any personal data) you submit will be processed accordingly, please click the box below to get started.

○ Yes, I agree to take part (1)

Page Break

Q2 How much time approximately do you spend on YouTube on an average day?

○ Less than 1 hour (1)

○ 1-3 hours (2)

○ Over 3 hours (3)

Q3 Please list 1-3 of the political YouTubers who you currently enjoy watching.

____

Q4 What do you enjoy about their perspectives?

____

____

____

____

____

Q5 Do you have any points of disagreement with the YouTubers you watch? If so, what are they?

____

____

____

____

____

Q6 Has watching YouTube videos impacted your political views? If so, in what way?

____

____

____

____

____

Q7 Where did you come across this questionnaire?

○ Facebook (1)

○ Reddit (2)

○ Discord (3)

○ Other (4)

Q8 How often do you check, post, or comment in online forums related to politics (ie. Facebook groups, sub-Reddits, Discord servers)?

____

____

____

____

____

Q9 What do you enjoy, or not enjoy, about taking part in these groups?

____

____

____

____

____

Q10 How would you describe your political views?

____

____

____

____

____

Q11 How old are you?

- ○ 19 or under (1)
- ○ 20-29 (2)
- ○ 30-39 (3)
- ○ 40-49 (4)
- ○ 50-59 (5)
- ○ 60 or over (6)

Q12 What is your gender?

____

Q13 Do you have a university degree?

- ○ No (1)
- ○ Yes (2)
- ○ I am currently enrolled in a degree-granting program (3)

Q14 What country do you live in?

____

Q15 How do you identify racially?

____

Q16 Is there anything else you would like to add?

____

____

____

____

____

Q17 The researchers may wish to contact you with follow-up questions and/or opportunities to be interviewed for the study. If you are open to being contacted after completing the questionnaire, please write your email, Reddit username, or Discord handle (username followed by # and four digits) below.

____

Q18 Thank you for completing this questionnaire. If you have any questions or concerns, please email youtuberesearch@oii.ox.ac.uk.

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix 8: Sample interview schedule

Set-up

- Introductions
    - Did you have a chance to look through the Participant Information sheet I sent? (If no, give them time to read it)
- Signposting
    - Oral consent script (proof that you agree to take part in the study)
    - Questions about your level of engagement with YouTube and other platforms, how you interpret the content you watch, your participation in online communities, and your political perspective
    - Sound good?

Read oral consent script

Introduction (5 minutes)

1. Tell me a bit about yourself: Where are you from? Are you working or studying? And what are some of your hobbies?
2. Can I confirm you're over the age of 18?

Engagement with YouTube and other platforms (10 minutes)

1. How much time approximately do you spend on YouTube in any given day?
    a. Are there other social media platforms you visit regularly?
2. What are your main sources of news and information (online or offline)?
3. In the survey, you mentioned that your favourite YouTuber at the moment is Styxhexenhammer666. Can you tell me what you enjoy about watching his channel?
    a. What sets him apart from other YouTubers?
4. Are there any other YouTube channels you visit regularly?
5. Do you remember how and when you first came across these channels?

Interpreting content (15 minutes)

1. On a scale of "Always agree" to "Never agree" how often would you say you agree with Styx?
    a. Always agree
    b. Mostly agree
    c. Sometimes agree
    d. Rarely agree
    e. Never agree
2. What are your main points of disagreement with him?
3. In the survey, you mention that you enjoy Styx's "focus on populism and globalism." Can you tell me more what you mean by populism and globalism?

4. In the survey, you mention that Styx "has shown me the flaws of globalism and regulation" and "made me moreso an extremist." Can you tell me a bit more about how Styx has influenced your own politics *and what you mean by extremist*?

Participation in online communities (10 minutes)

1. You indicated in the survey that you came across the survey on Reddit. How often would you say you check Reddit?
    a. Do you ever upvote, post or comment?
2. What are your favourite subreddits to visit at the moment?
    a. How would you describe the conversations there?
3. We're having this conversation on Discord, so I was wondering if you also spend time on Discord servers?
    a. Are there specific servers you enjoy?
4. What would you say are some of the main differences between Reddit, Discord and [mainstream platforms]?

Politics and identity (15 minutes)

1. How would you describe your political views?
    a. How did you come to have these views? Any defining moments?
    b. You mention in the survey that you're a Southern Baptist and evangelical Christian. Can you tell me more how your religion influences or has influenced your politics?
2. Do you talk about politics a lot offline, for instance with your friends or family?
3. Would you say you're politically active? For instance do you campaign for a party, attend protests, post about political issues on social media etc?
4. What issues are most important to you, politically?
5. You mention in the survey that you're based in the United States. Can I ask what region in the country you're based in?
6. How would you describe your class?
    a. How has this shaped your political views?
7. *How do you identify racially? [Has responded that they are white in the survey]*
8. Is there another aspect of your identity that you think is important? (For instance your job, your nationality, your hometown?)

Close

1. If you have any feedback, feel free to let me know or you can send me a message on Discord.
2. I may be in touch in the coming weeks with follow-up questions.

Do you have any final questions for me?

Appendix 9: Oral consent script

Type 1: Oral Consent only

Where separate written participant information has already been read by the participant beforehand, oral consent is then sought.

I'm from the University of Oxford and I wanted to talk to you about my doctoral research, which was summarized in the Participant Information Sheet I sent you earlier. To recap, the broad aims of my project are to better understand how controversial right-leaning YouTube videos are generally understood and how they affect viewers.
Are you still interested in taking part in the project? *[Await confirmation*]. Now I'd like to confirm some of the details of the project to make sure you understand what's involved for you. Can I have your permission to record this consent process? *[Await confirmation]:*

- This study is about right-leaning YouTube content and it's being used for my doctoral thesis.
- If you agree to participate, I'll need you to take part in a digital interview lasting approximately 1 hour. I may also contact you with follow-up questions.
- You don't have to agree to take part; you can ask me any questions you want before or throughout; you can also withdraw from the study at any stage without giving a reason.
- It's possible you'll find aspects of this interview uncomfortable as I'll be asking you about your opinions on issues related to politics and race. You can skip a question at any point if you don't feel comfortable answering.
- Only the researcher will have access to the interview data. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all of the interview data will be permanently deleted.
- You are aware that an Oxford University Research Ethics committee has approved this research project and know how to contact me (in the first instance) or the committee in case of any concerns or complaints. I have given you the project's ethics reference number and relevant contact details.
- I won't keep any of your details for longer than necessary. I won't use your name or any identifying details in the final study.
- Can I have permission to quote you directly but anonymously in research publications? *[Await confirmation]*
- I will store any information you provide safely and confidentially on a password-protected folder. I will keep the research data for 3 years after publication.
- I would like to be able to use your anonymized interview transcripts in future studies, and to share these transcripts with other researchers if required.
- I would like to audio record the interview for research purposes.
- You're aware that my written work will be published online in the Oxford Research Archive.
- The project findings may also be published in an academic journal, book, or informal post.

Are you still willing to take part? [*Await confirmation*] Do you give your permission for me to audio record the interview? [*Await confirmation*] Do you give your permission for me to contact you by email following the interview to clarify information? [*Await confirmation*] [*Await confirmation]* So if you're happy with all of that, and have no more questions for now, let's begin.

Appendix 10: Sample Participation Information Sheet

YouTube Research Project
Oxford Internet Institute
youtuberesearch@oii.ox.ac.uk

CUREC #: SSH_OII_CIA_19_060

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study Title: Humour, rationality, and conservative content on YouTube

We'd like to invite you to take part in our research study. Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read this information, and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information, please ask us.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study is a doctoral research project that is currently being completed at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII). The purpose of the study is to better understand how conservative and/or politically controversial content on YouTube is understood by viewers and what kinds of responses these videos generate. The research is specifically interested in the role of humour and rationality in these videos. In addition to analysing YouTube videos and comments, the researcher will speak to people who watch (or used to watch) these videos in order to understand how they are generally interpreted. The project is being conducted by a doctoral student at the OII.

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited to take part in this research project for one of the following reasons:

- You are a member of an online group that discusses conservative political ideas and/or YouTube videos
- You have been referred to the researcher as someone who watches conservative political YouTube videos
- You have been referred to the researcher as someone who used to watch conservative political YouTube videos

You will be one of 10-15 people interviewed for this research project. All of the participants will be English-speaking adults (over 18).

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. If you have any questions prior to participating, you are welcome to ask the researcher. If you decide to withdraw from the study at a later stage, you can do so without giving a reason. All you need to do is inform the researcher of your decision to withdraw.

What will happen if I decide to take part?

If you choose to participate in the study, the researcher will be in touch to schedule a time for a digital interview. Before the interview takes place, the researcher will read to you an oral consent script and audio record your response, if you consent to being recorded. Once you have given your oral consent, the interview will begin. The interview will last for 60 minutes and will be audio recorded, with your consent. In the first section, the researcher will talk a bit more about the study and ask you to introduce yourself (5 minutes). Next, you will be asked questions about your engagement with YouTube and other social media platforms (20 minutes). After that, the researcher will ask you questions about specific YouTube videos and/or YouTubers (20 minutes). In the final section, the researcher will ask you more general questions about your political views and identity (15 minutes). After the interview, the researcher may get in touch with you to follow up on certain ideas or schedule a follow-up interview. You can decide at that point whether or not you would like to answer these questions or take part in another interview.

Are there any possible disadvantages or risks to taking part?

There are no direct risks to taking part. The study will involve the discussion of potentially sensitive political issues such as racism or sexism. If you become uncomfortable with the interview questions at any point you can choose to skip a question or withdraw from the study altogether. The researcher will take every precaution to protect your confidentiality. The interview will take place on an encrypted platform that does not require you to submit personal information. The recording and transcription will be saved in a password-protected folder on an encrypted device. All participants will be anonymized in the final study, with any identifying details removed.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The interview will provide an opportunity for you to reflect on your consumption of political YouTube videos and explain to researchers how you understand and interpret these videos. This subject is under-studied by academics and your participation in the interview will contribute to a better understanding of how people engage with conservative content online.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, your participation in the study will be kept confidential. Only the researcher will have access to the recording and transcription of the interview. This interview data will be kept in a password-protected folder on the University of Oxford's OneDrive for Business cloud service. The data will be stored for three years and then will be permanently deleted. All participants will be anonymized in the final study, and no identifying details about you will be included. Responsible members of the University of Oxford may be given access to data for monitoring and/or audit of the study to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations.

Will I be compensated for taking part?

You will not be compensated for taking part in the interview. However, there is no financial cost to taking part, as the interview will be conducted online on a free-to-use, encrypted platform.

What will happen to my data?

Data protection regulation requires that we state the legal basis for processing information about you. In the case of research, this is 'a task in the public interest.' The University of Oxford is the data controller and is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. We will be using information from the interview in order to undertake this study and will use the minimum personally-identifiable information possible. We will keep identifiable information about you for three years after the study has finished.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

Participation in the study is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any point of the research process. The only thing needed for withdrawal is to let the researcher know verbally or in writing that you would no longer like to take part in the study. Once you have withdrawn from the study, all interview data will be permanently deleted, including transcripts and recordings.

What will happen to the results of this study?

Participants will not be identifiable from any report or publication placed in the public domain. At the end of the study, the researcher will submit the findings as a part of her doctoral thesis. Findings may also be published in academic journals, informal online posts, and conference proceedings.

What if there is a problem?

The University of Oxford, as Sponsor, has appropriate insurance in place in the unlikely event that you suffer any harm as a direct consequence of your participation in this study.

If you wish to complain about any aspect of how you have been approached or treated, or how your information is handled during the course of this study, you should contact the researcher (youtuberesearch@oii.ox.ac.uk), or you may contact the Oxford Internet Institute's Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) at drec@oii.ox.ac.uk.

Who is organising and funding the study?

The researcher's doctoral work is funded by the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the Oxford Internet Institute.

Who has reviewed the study?

The study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC).

Further information and contact details:

Please contact the researcher by e-mail at youtuberesearch@oii.ox.ac.uk.

Thank you for reading this information.