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Article

Bread and Plots: Conspiracy Theories and the Rhetorical Style of Political Influencer Communities on YouTube

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Abstract

Based on the assumption that social media encourages a populist style of politics in online communities and the proposition that populism and conspiracy theories tend to co-occur, this article investigates whether this holds true for YouTube influencers, particularly on the less investigated left-wing spectrum. The article provides qualitative case studies of four different groups of political content creators on YouTube whose content makes use of or analyzes popular culture. The article concludes that a populist style plays a far less central role in left-wing communities on YouTube than on other platforms or within right-wing communities.

Keywords

BreadTube; conspiracy theories; popular culture; populism; social media; YouTube

Issue

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1. Introduction

The CIA has paid left-wing YouTubers talking about games and TV shows to undermine communism, and, at the same time, Disney is using critical race theory to brainwash children into serving the Chinese communist government—Claims like these may seem ridiculous, yet the impact of social media on political discourse cannot be underestimated. As the alt-right grew out of niche online message board activities that hardly seemed worth taking seriously but due to their media savvy-ness were able to “spread their ideas more diffusely and penetrate the mainstream” (Winter, 2019, p. 47), even those political discourses on social media sites such as YouTube may come to impact mainstream politics more than we might like—So, what ideas are they spreading and how?

Political YouTube channels are a form of social media grassroots activism—a recent mode of engagement whose impact was felt not only in well-known hashtag campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo, but also where they were detrimental to democracy as with the growing number of QAnon believers or the vari-

ous backlashes centered around representation in video games spread under #GamerGate. At the same time, what Kenneth White (2016, p. 269) calls the “scourge of populism” was noticed within recent American politics, especially during the Trump era of 2017–2021 with many political candidates aiming to speak as the *vox populi*, the voice of the people. The rise of populism not just in the US but globally has widely been perceived negatively, as many see it as “rejecting diversity, individual rights and the separation of power,” thus favoring “an illiberal form of democracy” (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 332). Consequently, it has led researchers to question the driving factors behind this development. This issue of *Media and Communication* demonstrates the growing interest in the role of online communities in new forms of populism.

2. Popular Culture, Populism, and Political Activism

In addition to the rise of populism and social media, the aforementioned phenomena of QAnon and #GamerGate illustrate the increasing intersection of political polarization with conspiracy theories (CTs; Bergmann & Butter,

2020, p. 337; Kenneth White, 2016, p. 278) and popular and fan culture. Much attention when it comes to popular culture, fandom, and its role in political engagement on social media has been focused on right-wing aligned phenomena such as #GamerGate, which has focused on games as a political arena that were debated by fans and those trying to gain the political approval of fans and has contributed to the rise of the alt-right (Bezio, 2018), or QAnon, which has been suggested to illustrate how “political party allegiance can operate as a fandom” (Reinhard et al., 2021, p. 1153). Generally, popular culture increasingly works on all levels of political discourse—from teenage fans to seasoned politicians—both as a vehicle to discuss politics on social media (Wurst, 2021) and as the “battleground” of “the new culture wars” which constitute a “post-millennial spin on the extreme partisan polarities of the 1980s and ‘90s” (Proctor & Kies, 2018, p. 127). QAnon, #GamerGate, and many other such instances have commonly been described as consequences of and contributors to the new populist movements (Bezio, 2018). Marwick and Partin (2022, p. 2), for example, call “QAnon’s interpretative practices...populist expertise,” while Bezio (2018, p. 563) observes that the “same kind of exclusionary neo-conservative language which enabled Trump” and Brexiteers to garner widespread support was echoed in GamerGaters’ insistence that “they were disenfranchised, felt ignored, and wanted to see a systemic change from what they viewed as the corruption of the games industry by feminists and progressives.”

Research in fan studies, on the other hand, has mainly engaged with the progressive activism of pop culture fans (Hinck, 2019). Compared to research on the aforementioned intersection of fandom and right-wing politics, little is known about leftist fan communities on social media. The left, in general, seems to not have found similar mainstream recognition, nor a lasting impact through online activism and pop culture engagement—at least beyond the hype around US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who was often described as the Democrat’s populist candidate (Staufer, 2021), or the pro-Corbyn movements in the UK, which both constitute an example of what Dean (2017, p. 323) calls “politicized fandom.” However, according to Rae (2021, p. 1118), there is a growing presence of new left-wing movements which are sometimes, controversially, described as the “alt-left” “by those trying to create a false equivalency with the ‘alt-right,’” while “no one involved in progressive politics has adopted” the term—It stands to question if they are indeed in many ways similar to the alt-right movements on social media.

3. YouTube, Conspiracy Theories, and Research Question

These observations lead me to question whether populist rhetoric, which seems to be central to the alt-right (Bezio, 2018; Rae, 2021), plays an equal role in new

left-wing online communities—Is such rhetoric necessary to succeed in the attention economy of the social media landscape more generally, or if not, how do left-wing online communities engage their audiences in alternative ways? As “attention is quantified and monetized [sic] in a world saturated with media” (van de Ven, & van Gemert, 2020, p. 2), this leads content creators to vie for our attention, resulting in what Volcic and Andrejevic (2022, p. 1) call “commercial populism.” This, they suggest, is “fostered by (but not unique to) social media” (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2022, p. 7) and may “help explain the relationship between polarization and conspiracy theory that is likely to outlast the Trump presidency” (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2022, p. 4).

Particularly YouTube has received much attention both for playing a “significant role...in institutional politics” (Uldam & Askanius, 2013, p. 1190) and a “key radicalization media [sic]” (Varda & Hahner, 2020, p. 139), often being a key source of the aforementioned polarizing misinformation and CTs (Aupers, 2020, p. 474). Video content can also often spread on other social media platforms as GIFs, screenshots, or memes. YouTube has been suggested to potentially work as a “radicalization pipeline” (Ribeiro et al., 2020). On the surface, YouTube has lost relevance when it comes to white supremacist and conspiracist content, due to new policies banning such videos and creators from the platform, so that now it seems the “recommendation algorithm favors content that falls within mainstream media groupings” (Ledwich & Zaitsev, 2019, p. 7); yet, this may favor content that uses more implicit ways to spread political messages, such as presenting more as pop-cultural entertainment. For example, Lewis (2020, p. 201) found that right-wing influencers combine “micro-celebrity practices with a reactionary political standpoint,” which “positions them as more credible than mainstream media.”

As the given examples may already suggest, it has been proposed that populism and CTs are inextricably connected. Despite some authors claiming that CTs may be a defining feature of populism, “the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory remains understudied” (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 330). CTs assume that powerful figures are secretly enacting an evil plot to gain power—such as the QAnon deep state conspiracy, micro-chipping citizens via vaccines, or the “great replacement” of white people, to name a few examples. They may help populist politicians “fashion themselves as anti-establishment figures because both populism and conspiracy theory are stigmatised by the mainstream and the elites” (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 333). However, there is disagreement about whether they are more prominent in right-wing than left-wing populism (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 340).

Before taking a closer look at political communities on YouTube, it is necessary to quickly establish what I consider populist style: Following Moffitt (2016, p. 28), for my purpose, I agree that “the best way to understand contemporary populism is as a political style” that

employs “appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite,’ ‘bad manners’; and crisis” (p. 8). He emphasizes how the “others will be linked to ‘the elite,’” while the populist “really knows” what the “people are thinking” and will show “disregard for ‘appropriate’ modes of acting in the political realm” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 44). Additionally, they “aim to induce crisis through dramatization” and often “rely on emotional and passionate performances” rather than “rationality” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 46). As Rae (2021, p. 1120) argues, “the populist style of politics shares the key traits of media logic,” and the “internet facilitates more direct connections between populists and the people,” explaining why “social media has become a central campaigning tool for populist candidates” (Rae, 2021, p. 1121). As an audiovisual format on YouTube, the style of presentation plays a central role in the success of content. It is apt to focus on populism as a political style and less on its role as a political ideology or logic.

Given these observations, I am interested in the treatment of CTs by politically inclined, particularly left-wing, content creators from the Anglosphere on YouTube: Do such channels use a populist style to engage their communities? How do they use polarizing topics such as CTs to spread left- or right-wing ideologies?

4. Case Study Selection and Methodology

As mentioned previously, we know comparatively little about left-wing communities on YouTube that are based more on pop-cultural entertainment as well as the strategies such political YouTube communities use to draw users in. However, given the increasing influence of fandom on civic activism (cf. Hinck, 2019), it is particularly interesting how content creators who have cultivated a fanbase—as evidenced, for example, by dedicated message boards and financial support via Patreon and other patronage services, donations during livestream events, or merchandise shops—engage their audience in divisive political issues, such as LGBTQ equality or Covid-19 vaccinations. Given that, at least superficially, a horse-

shoe model of ideology holds true under specific circumstances (cf. van Elsas et al., 2016) and that a populist style has proven successful for many politicians and online movements such as the alt-right and may particularly thrive due to the affordances of social media, we might expect them to similarly occur on the left spectrum as well.

There are four main communities of content creators I am interested in, described in Figure 1, which all have in common that they predominantly focus on the so-called “culture war issues.”

This focus means they mainly engage with topics of gender, sexuality, and race and the surrounding representations in media and fan or political discourses. Out of these, the so-called “Dirtbag Left” (DL) are most commonly described as populist, with the name a “hat tip to the vulgar populism that undergirded the content they created” (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 377). Consequently, I expected a clear contrast between the DL and other popular leftist edutainment creators (i.e., as opposed to political news coverage) to arise, with the populist style describing the DL appropriately. Given the observed closeness of populism and CTs mentioned above, I also expected the DL to not openly endorse CTs but hint that there might be truth to them as part of their populist appeal. This is, however, not what I observed. Taken together with the style of other, highly successful leftist channels, this suggests that at least on YouTube, social media may not automatically favor a populist style, despite the demands of the attention economy and that, at least on the left, connections between populism, CTs, and the ability to garner a large audience are weaker than assumed.

This article focuses on a qualitative content analysis of selected videos connected to CTs from channels representing popular political online communities on YouTube as listed in Table 1. A list of channels for the categories I was interested in was created based on which channels were grouped together in academic literature, journalistic articles, and fan wikis, as well as my personal

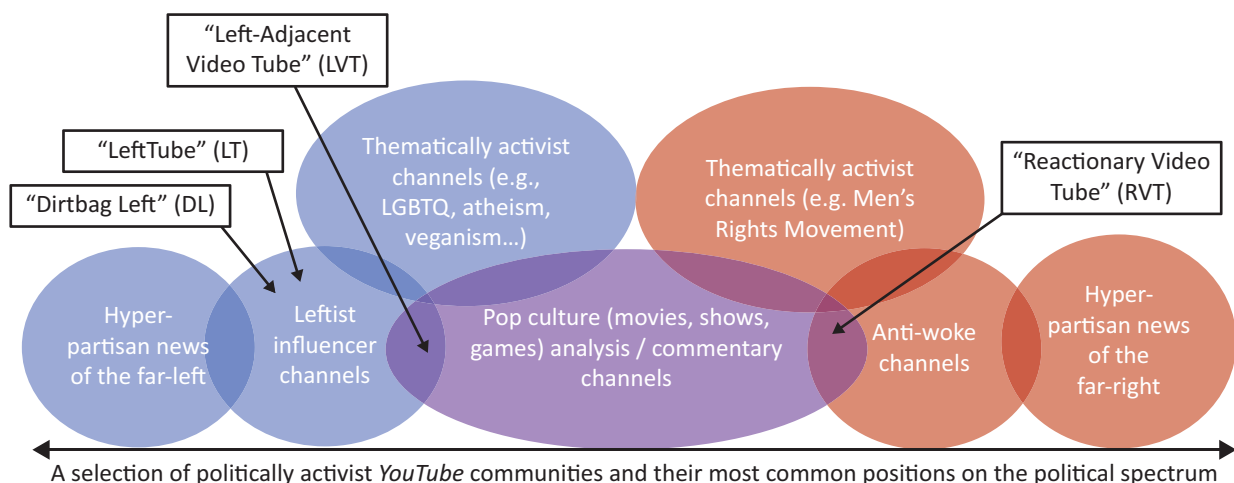


Figure 1. A selection of politically activist YouTube communities and their most common positions on the political spectrum.

Table 1. Central channels observed, with the number of subscribers in millions (M) and thousands (K), as of August 2022.

Reactionary Video Tube Channels	Left-Associated Video Tube Channels	LeftTube Channels	Dirtbag Left Channels
The Critical Drinker (1.32 M)	Lindsay Ellis (1.2 M; inactive)	ContraPoints (1.59 M)	HasanAbi (994 K)
TheQuartering (1.25 M)	Sarah Z (535 K)	PhilosophyTube (1.18 M)	Destiny (448 K)
It's A Gundam (692 K)	James Somerton (224 K)	Hbomberguy (1.04 M)	Vaush (405 K)
Nerdrotic (507 K)	Jack Saint (198 K)	Folding Ideas (733 K)	ChapoTrapHouse) (100 K)
Geeks and Gamers (341 K)	José (165 K)	Shaun (568 K)	Xanderhal (71 K)
Robot Head (333 K)	JessieGender (161 K)		

familiarity with the discourses in and surrounding the channels' fanbases on Twitter and Reddit. Who is part of LeftTube (LT), adjacent leftist channels, and "Dirtbag" channels is contested, as academic groupings are often based on characteristics of the channels while groupings by fans are often based on a shared audience. I prioritized my ethnographic observations for my decisions.

For the leftist channels, I selected videos from 2018 to 2022 mentioning or referencing CTs in the title or video description to watch closely. For the reactionary channels, on the other hand, transcripts of videos from the two most popular channels published between 2021 to 2022 that addressed pop culture fan conflicts, e.g., superhero movies that received backlash, were keyword-searched for mentions of CT-related words and the relevant transcripts read closely. This was necessary due to more hidden engagement with the topic and much higher content output by channels of this category. Finally, based on the field of cultural studies, this article offers close readings (i.e., analyzing videos similarly to literary texts) of videos representative of popular content, illustrating how the content creators engage with this polarizing topic of CTs and highlighting common themes, and situates the videos' textual content and cinematic presentation within its context in the larger content creator economy on social media and recent political discourses of the Anglophone sphere.

There are many spaces in which new left-leaning online movements have occurred. However, the community of content creators known as "BreadTube," and the DL have been particularly prominent and visible, featured in several journalistic outlets such as *The New York Times*. They are part of a larger ecosystem of political channels associating with each other, for example, due to collaborations or shared fanbases, or opposing each other, for example through debates and response videos.

Saarela (2020, p. 6) thus describes them as "socially [constructed] within a canon"—Nevertheless, there are commonalities in presentation style, political stance, and contents discussed that I will point out in the following sections.

5. Introducing Right-Wing Ideology and Conspiracy Theories Through Pop Culture

Despite my primary interest in left-wing channels, the existence of left-leaning pop culture commentary channels and their lack of engagement with CTs and populist rhetoric is notable mostly in contrast to more right-leaning pop culture commentary channels. There are several very successful YouTube channels—which I will call "Reactionary Video Tube" (RVT)—that are part of the "anti-woke" community on YouTube and are known to "not explicitly endorse far-right ideologies" but may act as a "gateway to the far right" (Hosseinmardi et al., 2020, p. 1), although they often work as an "increasingly popular...category of its own" (Hosseinmardi et al., 2020, p. 8). Explicitly right-wing content is not the focus of this article as there already exists a large body of work on it (as summarized in the previous sections), and many content creators, especially those engaging with CTs, have moved off-site, either voluntarily or due to being banned (Giansiracusa, 2021, p. 90). Unlike primarily political right-wing channels with their aforementioned radicalization potential, RVT channels tend to self-describe as "non-ideological or even liberal 'free thinkers'" (Hosseinmardi et al., 2020, p. 1) and deal with cultural aspects of pop cultural products such as movies and video games and have thus received less attention. However, they often draw from right-wing talking points and fit my expectations of a connection between populist style and CTs.

These RVT channels are reactionary, as they express a desire to return to an earlier status quo, are critical of increased diversity in casting choices and storylines in popular movies and consider media as it used to be of higher quality—expressed, for example, in video titles such as “Why Modern Movies Suck” (Jordan, 2022). Yet, while they may claim that pushes for diverse representation and “politically correct” language are unnecessary or harmful due to society already being equal, they do not advocate for the exclusion of people of color or queer people from society or the media, thus remaining seemingly apolitical. Two popular channels analyzing popular culture with over one million subscribers are TheQuartering (aka Jeremy Hambly) and The Critical Drinker (aka Will Jordan). The rhetoric of these pop culture video communities tends to make use of the populist style, i.e., often drawing a stark distinction between the (true) fans and “the Hollywood elites” who are imposing an agenda upon audiences. A common criticism is that modern movies act as political propaganda, for example when Jordan (2021) describes that the Marvel series “leaned far too heavily on identity politics, aggressively trying to lecture their audience about the evils of modern culture rather than presenting a fun story” which would let viewers “form their own opinions.” This implies that the elites do not know what their audiences truly want. These videos often predict diverse movies failing at the box office or frame even commercially successful popular movies or comics as failures, thus implying that audiences, in general, do not want to see diverse representation and painting the film industry as in a state of crisis. The style of these videos, which are often produced in large quantities of several uploads a week or day, usually does not feature references to research or extensive sets but is often just recordings of someone sitting in front of their camera, which underlines their appeal to the “common fan”—despite the channels’ content usually being scripted and the likelihood of the content creators using “clickbait” style titles, thumbnails, and content on purpose, not out of authentic outrage and anti-fandom. Although it may be, to some degree, a performance, Sandvoss (2019, p. 140) suggests “anti-fandom constitutes a form of political participation that...privileges the antagonisms at the heart of populist...mobilization.”

As part of their intentionally brash, “politically incorrect” style, RVT also makes use of conspiracy rumors, emphasizing a tendency for these elements to co-occur. These may both be fandom-related, such as assuming that Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilm, wants to destroy Star Wars (Hambly, 2021b), or they may draw from broader CTs, such as that “Chinese overlords” and their “communist government” are not only an influence on Western cinema but have also “infiltrated our education system” and may even plan to “raid the United States,” drawing from ideas of the anti-communist “red scare” and anti-Asian “yellow peril” (Hambly, 2021a)—sentiments which have also influenced anti-vaccination

CTs of the virus being a Chinese bioweapon (Li & Nicholson, 2021). Furthermore, accusations about “cultural Marxism” in Star Wars films, a CT from “the very fringes of the American far-right” which links “political correctness” with “a sinister plot to destroy Western civilisation” (Busbridge et al., 2020, p. 723) have even spread far enough outside of fan circles that journalistic outlets such as *Forbes* (Kain, 2017) reported on. While these theories are never explained explicitly, such allusions nevertheless strengthen already existing CT beliefs common to right-wing political communities and reinforce an anti-elitist suspicion of Hollywood producers, like when Hambly (2022) in “Massive Backfire! Disney Pushing Woke Agenda Has Employees & Families Quitting in Huge Numbers!” accuses Disney and politicians of trying to “brainwash” children by putting inappropriate content such as “critical race theory” and “gender ideology” and diverse representation in children’s entertainment. Both terms are highly polarized and associated with the populist right, for which they serve as “symptoms of a broader crisis” and work to mobilize against a shared enemy image (Kováts, 2018, p. 530). Such pop culture reviewing channels can thus also act as political communities in spreading white supremacist-leaning ideology despite their, at first glance, apolitical subject matter and self-presentation as objective commentary on Anglophone entertainment from the US and the UK.

6. Critical Pop Culture Commentary on the Left

On the other side, left-wing pop culture commentary does not follow this pattern. To focus on differences between the left and right in a similar context, I first analyzed channels that focus more strongly on progressive representation in popular culture, e.g., discussing diversity of gender in Marvel movies and explicitly taking a progressive or reactionary position. These must be distinguished from channels that do indeed mostly focus on the content of movies, e.g., hugely popular CinemaSins with over nine million subscribers, or the smaller Saberspark with 1.6 million subscribers. Many channels that do not directly engage with politics are nevertheless considered part of the so-called “LeftTube” by a shared fanbase and regular collaborations such as guest voices in other creators’ videos, despite their work focusing more on pop culture commentary. One example is the now inactive video essayist Lindsay Ellis who is a friend of LT creator Natalie Wynn, or Jessie Gender (aka Jessie Earl), who regularly interacts with LT content creators. I thus considered them “Left-Associated Video Tube” (LVT). Like the RVT channels, they may not explicitly endorse political candidates or parties but mainly focus on (gender, sexuality, and race) representation in media. They typically outspokenly support feminism, anti-racist action, and LGBTQ-activism, and are often critical of capitalism and issues of classism, thus promoting progressive to leftist ideology.

The most popular LVT channels are less successful than the RVT ones, and they do not employ populist rhetoric or style: Their humor is polite, not rude, even though they connect to their audience through “low” popular culture. They do not work in binary ideas of “them” vs. “us” or exhibit anti-elitist stances. Several scholars such as Roose (2019) have theorized that YouTube’s algorithm “played into the hands of far-right creators,” leading, for example, from criticism of Star Wars’ “left-wing bias” to right-wing ideas. Thus, it became attractive for left-wing YouTubers to similarly focus on the same issues to “get their videos recommended to the same audience” (Roose, 2019). One would therefore assume they might employ a similar style, yet this is not the case. In addition, LVT channels caution against the dangers of conspiracist beliefs with a particular focus on the close relation between transphobia—often discussed in the context of Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling and trans-exclusionary radical feminism—and CT belief. This underlines their aforementioned political focus on issues of gender, race, and sexuality. The “gender critical” movement is relevant for fan audiences, due to Rowling being a well-known advocate. In her video on “Exploring the ‘Gender Critical’ Radicalization Pipeline,” Earl (2021) highlights a quote from an article by political research analyst Heron Greenesmith that “anti-trans ‘feminists’” make use of “antisemitic trope[s which] manifests as the conspiracy that transgender advocacy is funded by George Soros” (Greenesmith, 2019). “Billionaire philanthropist George Soros” is often accused in CTs of financing endeavors to “promote the dark plans of an international financial elite” (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 338). Further, Earl (2021) highlights PhD researcher Christa Peterson saying anti-trans “rhetoric provides an entry point into far-right politics...” where CTs serve as a “legitimization engine.” While discussed extensively on YouTube and other social media communities (e.g., Conrad, 2022), little academic research so far exists on “the convergence of anti-trans agitation with far-right militias and terrorist groups, anti-vaxxers, and QAnon conspiracy theorists” (Miles, 2022). Rather than resorting to simplifications common to a populist style, LVT channels engage in academic dialogue. Thus, for LVT, pop culture serves as the main draw to engage with polarizing issues such as CTs where relevant to their main interest of representation in entertainment without resorting to a populist style or CT rumors to engage their audiences.

7. The “Dirtbag Left”: Vulgar but Nuanced

I then turned to a place where I was sure to find populist rhetoric on the left. As described previously, the DL is known for engaging in “populist rhetoric to appeal to their listeners and to drive a political base behind” their preferred candidates (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 385)—This is, however, not what I found. According to Menon and DeCook (2021, p. 384), the DL focus on

“hatred of mainstream liberalism.” They have been criticized as “a leftist base that not only devalues...women’s issues but also often carries forward right-wing conspiratorial talking points, such as ‘rigged’ systems” (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 378) and often do not care about “issues of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny” (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 385) as the so-called LT channels do. YouTube is not necessarily where their main presence can be found, with many finding equal or more success on podcasting platforms, where the term also originated with the ChapoTrapHouse podcast (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 376). Together with my following observations of these channels not fitting the populist style label, this suggests that YouTube may not lend itself to populist content as much as other platforms—This may possibly be due to the aforementioned moderation policies and algorithms spreading “mainstream” content more widely, due to affordances of a visual-heavy medium or the viewing preferences of communities already using the site regularly.

The DL do, by and large, not produce video essays. Instead, they use debates, speaking into the camera directly or response videos to other YouTubers as their primary formats. As with all communities described in this article, membership in the community is usually ascribed by common consensus by fans, with Destiny (aka Steven Kenneth Bonnell II), Vaush (aka Ian Kochinski), or Xanderhal (aka Alexander Haley) considered parts of the DL. The DL content creators tend to be mostly white men from Anglophone countries who pursue a rather aggressive and vulgar style, often intentionally being “politically incorrect.” Thus, they are usually associated with being anti-elitist and speaking for the common people, which may explain the populist label. Criticisms that they may use CT as part of their rhetoric and thus act as “key ways that far-right ideas can creep into left-wing discourse” (Ross, 2021) have mostly been in reference to popular podcasts such as TrueAnon or Red Scare and do not match my observations on YouTube.

Although the DL is commonly described as an expression of modern left-wing populism, it is mostly the aspect of “bad manners” as well as a more down-to-earth presentation in videos with a low production value that positions them closer to populism than other leftist channels. At least on YouTube, a sense of them speaking for “the people” against “the elite” is not a distinct feature. When it comes to their engagement with CTs, there are three key things to note: Most DL engagement with CTs happens elsewhere. On YouTube, they may refer to CTs ironically or for attention but neither endorse nor systematically debunk them as other leftist channels do. While the DL on YouTube does not endorse common CTs like anti-vaccine CTs, they also avoid explicitly condemning them, except in the most extreme cases. Thus, they walk the same fine line as with anti-political correctness, trying to meet those who can still be influenced to change their political persuasion by positioning themselves as

both above “conspiracy nuts,” but also open to the fact that there might be “some truth” to certain theories in order to gain viewers that may have been leaning right-wing or conspiracy theorist.

We can see this, for example, in Bonnell’s (2022) three-hour long debate “Where Do You Draw the Line: Debating a Covid Anti-Vaxx Poker Player,” advertised with the quote “I would choose to die” in the thumbnail. Despite the clickbait-sounding title and image, the debate is colloquial and science-based. The debate partner himself is moderate in his beliefs and explains he does not “think there’s some like grand cover-up of countless and endless severe side” and deaths, but he has heard many stories of side effects from people he trusts. Bonnell reasons with him, for example, explaining concepts of confirmation bias and explaining that “the whole point of like a peer-reviewed published journal” is that anyone can challenge the data. Haley’s (2022) smaller channel is also “Debating a Deranged Conspiracy Theorist Florida Man on Omegle.” Despite the title’s claims, the man also states he doesn’t “think it’s a hoax” but wonders “why...so many people [are] dying after getting the vaccine.” He is worried about his freedom being restricted and the vaccine having been rushed. Haley similarly challenges the man’s beliefs, although he later concludes that “that guy is a victim of probably...a whole lifetime’s worth of propaganda.” During the debate, we additionally see him smoking and talking about his experience taking crystal meth, and the live chat recorded during the live stream shows the chat similarly making fun of his debate partner. While such debates try to draw in viewers with the promise of irrational CT believers and consequently present them in a bad light, these people appear more vaccine-hesitant than CT believers. While the DL creators’ style employs bad manners, at least in its YouTube iteration, it does neither show characteristic populist traits such as anti-elitism nor a claim to speak for the people. While CTs such as anti-vaccine beliefs are given room in a debate and are not thoroughly debunked, they are by the premise of the videos alone framed negatively.

8. Left-Wing Intra-Community Conflicts and Strategic Conspiracy Theory Use

Interestingly, despite DL channels proving to be neither populist nor more likely to endorse CTs, LT creators themselves became part of a CT by fellow leftists on YouTube when political commentator Jimmy Dore accused LT (and some DL) content creators of acting in service of the CIA to explain the success of highly popular leftist channels such as PhilosophyTube (aka Abigail Thorn). Jimmy Dore is a professional political commentator hosting *The Jimmy Dore Show* with over one million subscribers. His show features “a mix of live monologues and skits lampooning elite political culture, followed by interviews with guests and dialogue with his wife and co-host” (Higdon & Lyons, 2022, p. 44). He is considered part

of “populist left media” (Higdon & Lyons, 2022, p. 43). Despite Higdon and Lyons considering him part of the DL, in my observations, such content creators are usually considered neither part of the DL nor LT by fans as they produce news shows more akin to mainstream political television and tend to attract a different audience. He also does not participate in collaborations with LT or DL content creators. Therefore, it makes more sense to consider him part of hyperpartisan news as described by Rae (2021) than part of the YouTube influencer communities, which he has accused of being part of a CT.

His claim of the CIA funding several leftist influencers was discussed both by LT creators such as Sophie From Mars in her video essay “Conspiracy on the Left” (Sophia McAllister, 2022) that takes rhetoric and visual inspiration from the accused Thorn’s videos, as well as DL associated content creators such as Kochinski (2021) in his reaction video called “Philosophy Tube’s (and My) Deep State CIA Breadtube Ties Have Been EXPOSED.” Their reactions follow the patterns typical for their respective communities: Kochinski mocks the accusations, asking “how deep in the conspiracy road you have to be to believe the idea that the CIA...wants to take you down by algorithmically boosting a video from a popular YouTuber,” while the reaction by Sophie From Mars is a more nuanced exploration of why leftists may fall victim to CT belief, both historically and on YouTube. She explains common academic theories about CT belief to her audience, emphasizing a model of CTs “emotional truths” that “reflect...group social conflicts” which can explain CTs arising between the fractured communities of the new left on YouTube. This incident reaffirms that CTs are a powerful strategy for “produc[ing] collective identities” by “increasing ingroup vs. outgroup distinction[s]” (Thórisdóttir et al., 2020, p. 308), being used here to “other” certain sets of left-wing content creators by framing them as “not true leftists.” We may best understand the style of LVT, LT, and, to a degree, DL YouTube channels as not only “a leftist response to [the] alt-right” (Kuznetsov & Ismangil, 2020, p. 204) by similarly engaging with polarizing topics in a media-savvy way, but also as opposition to hyperpartisan news and their populist strategies: distancing themselves from such channels’ tendencies towards “sensationalism, personal bias towards a particular leader”—or particular content creators—“and an antiestablishment attitude” (Rae, 2021, p. 1128).

9. The New Online Left: Debunking Conspiracy Theories With Nuance

Finally, LT, part of which is often referred to as BreadTube by its fan community, is dominated by video essays, often featuring costuming and visual effects and academic theory. Saarela (2020, p. 12) describes LT as using “popular culture as a hotbed for left-wing critique and knowledge production.” Kuznetsov and Ismangil (2020, p. 206) suggest LT’s ideology is best understood as critical

of capitalism that promotes hope that “another world is possible”—a stark contrast to the pivotal role of a state of breakdown central to the populist style as described by Moffitt (2016)—and may serve as “a gateway to socialist thinking” (Kuznetsov & Ismangil, 2020, p. 207). LT has a more diverse (although still by and large white and either from the US, Canada, or the UK; Saarela, 2020, p. 11) set of content creators engaged in issues of “social justice,” who are trying to present their arguments in a well-crafted, polite, and inclusive manner (albeit often still intentionally vulgar for comedic effect). Despite the often-high production value and foundation of videos in (extensively researched and cited) academic theory (Saarela, 2020, pp. 13, 46), these channels are trying not to appear elitist, but rather bridge the divide between those who have had access to academic education (with many content creators holding degrees in subjects of the humanities) and those who did not. By trying to break down concepts in a manner that is easy to understand as well as entertaining, such as by references to pop culture and use of memes, jokes, and playfully “dunking” on common “intellectual dark web” public figures (Hosseinmardi et al., 2020, p. 1; Saarela, 2020, pp. 48, 52), Saarela (2020, p. 63) proposes LT is able to adapt left-wing ideas “to an online audience.”

When it comes to CTs, they tend to explicitly debunk them, while also showing empathy for those who believe in them. Instead of populist rhetoric, the draw to engage even layman people with these topics is often in the theatrical production: Eye-catching costumes or sets, sketches, personal anecdotes speaking from authentic experience, and pop culture jokes distinguish such video essays from professional documentaries, creating a more intimate experience as they inhabit both the identity of “an audience member, and one as a critic” and “address a personal connection to their chosen media topic” (DeFazio, 2021, p. 58). Two recent videos from popular BreadTube video essayist Abigail Thorn underline this: In “Vaccines & Freedom,” she tries to present herself both as authentic and transparent, explaining her personal involvement in a series of unpaid interviews with vaccine-hesitant individuals with the Royal Institute, which were “not at all what (she) expected from the mainstream depiction of this issue” (Thorn, 2022). She presents these different viewpoints through actors and explains both the process in a way “so there is nothing hidden” and the limitations of these interviews (Thorn, 2022). CTs play a minor role in both a joke about being “paid for by George Soros”—referring to a fear commonly cited in anti-Covid-19-vaccine CTs—and refuting that no subject thought that “the vaccine contains microchips” (Thorn, 2022). Otherwise, she debunks common fears around the vaccine like that “it was developed too quickly” (Thorn, 2022). The leftist orientation of the channel influences the essay in so far as she points out the problems with “pharmaceutical companies, and the economy generally,” “not being designed to serve human need” but rather to “maximize profit”

and how this disadvantages poor people who lose faith in institutions (Thorn, 2022). With empathy, she argues that, consequently, particularly marginalized people will use “alternative media sources that validate their feelings” and distrust in the healthcare system (Thorn, 2022). There is no dichotomy between the people and those in power, only the criticism of the capitalist system.

Another video, “Who’s Afraid of the Experts,” discusses together with comedian Adam Conover how many people might feel that experts are “elitist and...have their own interests at heart” and are thus rejecting experts (Thorn & Conover, 2020). CTs are discussed as part of this skepticism: They see CTs being all about “emotional truth,” not facts, but making for a “better story” and thus difficult to debunk without offering a better narrative (Thorn & Conover, 2020). Other videos by LT creators nevertheless try their hand at debunking, dealing with varied subjects such as flat earthers (Brewis, 2019a; Olson, 2020) or climate change denialists (Brewis, 2019b; Wynn, 2018). However, the tendencies are the same: While extreme beliefs are made fun of, the creators show great empathy for those believing in CTs without endorsing such beliefs or offering them a platform. In Wynn’s (2018) “The Apocalypse,” for example, she offers resources for her audiences to debunk denialism and makes it clear that her stance on the claim that “there’s still scientific controversy about the cause of climate change” is a simple “there isn’t.” She plays the role of her opponent in this Socratic dialogue herself. While she uses jokes about “reptilian overlords” and other more outlandish CT beliefs which frame CTs as ridiculous, she does not point the finger at individuals and does not make these CTs more well known as such allusions can only be understood by those already versed in CTs. The video is scripted, and the language is more sophisticated than in the DL debates, although interspersed with disruptions in register for effect: In this video, she uses variations of “fuck” four times for effect, while at other instances in the same video using a bleeping-sound or replacing swear words with less offensive alternatives. The criticism offered in these videos is systemic, and there is an acute awareness that there is no singular “will of the people,” but rather it encourages empathy for pluralistic opinions. These LT creators have found up to over one million subscribers without resorting to a populist style, thus demonstrating an alternative way to make political topics appealing to the masses in online communities.

10. Conclusions

My survey of these channels has suggested three key findings. First, populist rhetoric is more likely to be associated with right-leaning or reactionary YouTube channels than left-wing channels—even in communities such as the DL, commonly considered left-wing populism on other platforms. Second, a populist style does co-occur with a higher likelihood of engaging with CTs, not just

in traditional but also informal political spaces such as video essays and pop culture commentary—However, YouTube influencers seem less likely to espouse CTs compared to other platforms or hyperpartisan news generally. Both of these observations are likely due to the new online left on YouTube arising in opposition to the new online right (Saarela, 2020, p. 52) and “mainstream” news and trying to be as distinct as possible. Third, despite appeals to populism being a good strategy for success in the attention economy (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2022), in left-wing communities on YouTube, alternative strategies may prove even more successful: A look at popular political communities on YouTube suggests that while the brash populist, CT-embracing and popular culture-referencing style of the alt-right has been hugely successful on social media, the left also uses alternative strategies to create fan followings when it comes to LT content creators. Thus, at least on YouTube, it seems that populism and its closeness to conspiracist beliefs are not natural outcomes of competition in the attention economy of social media. It remains to be seen whether such non-populist leftist social media influencers will have a tangible impact on mainstream discourses in the same vein the new online right did or whether the success of their concept is limited to the platform of YouTube.

Nevertheless, it is clear that widespread assumptions—as described at the beginning of this article—that engaging in a populist style is the natural consequence of political movements trying to garner an audience on social media, as well as expectations of this applying equally to right- and left-wing movements, do not hold true for all platforms. We need to be mindful both of individual platform affordances as well as the norms of the communities already established there. I have also shown that political discourses extend into pop culture fan communities through creators blurring the lines between political education, pop culture commentary, and pop culture-referencing entertainment. Thus, it is necessary to not only pay attention to citizens acting as fans of political leaders but also to the way fan communities get drawn into or arise around new forms of political edutainment, such as those provided by the RVT, LVT, DL, and LT channels described here, if we want to understand the role of online communities in political movements.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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