

The Various Qualities of Politics in New Media: Political Content on YouTube

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Ever since its surge of popularity in the early 2010s, YouTube has been an important forum for people to express their various thoughts and opinions about a plethora of topics. Of course, it is not perfectly analogous to a public forum, it is owned by a private company after all. Still, YouTube does allow most intellectual content so long as it is lawful, which has given room for communities with “deeper” interests to grow on the platform. Jumping straight to our point, one subset of these communities is the political communities. YouTubers and channels not entirely dedicated to politics have, at times, made political or quasi-political content, mostly related to their own fields of interest. The reaction to this kind of video is interesting to analyze because it is a presentation of politics that the audience might not have fully expected. Not all political content on YouTube is like this, however, sometimes the audience of a channel expects content of political nature, mostly because the channel itself is also political in its nature.

Political YouTube channels have been popularized in the last half-decade and are now pushing up to the 1 million subscriber threshold. These channels can be constructed in different ways. For example, some channels post exclusively scripted content yet some others do live streams and “rambling” videos. Some are mostly audio-focused and others make use of animations and graphs. There is variance in the production side of things as well. Most channels are follower-backed with little resources to allocate to content creation, with some smaller YouTubers struggling even to make ends meet. But if you are a known conservative political commentator who has founded a sham of a YouTube channel pretentiously and incorrectly¹ called a University, which does nothing but regurgitate infamous conservative talking points, you might get backed by oil barons who made a fortune off of fracking for helping them conserve the status quo.² And of course, they vary wildly in political stances as well.

In certain respects, they are a lot like other mediums in which politics are discussed. There are a variety of talk shows, news reports, and interview programs that work just like their old media counterparts. For the most part, old media’s content has better production values, but the essence of the programs is very much the same. And just like in radio and TV, YouTube creates its own stars, be it talk show hosts, political commentators, or just straight-up video content creators. Of course, by the virtue of being digital, YouTube contains fewer Boomers and more aspiring young people, which is a boon for the mainly Gen Z and Millennial audience. In addition, not being on national television grants people a certain sense of freedom which often leads to freer and sometimes more radical content. In return,

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/04/us/politics/dennis-prager-university.html>

² <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2015/05/01/fracking-titans-bankrolling-right-wing-indoctrination-effort-schools-investigation>

away from prying eyes, not-so-well-intentioned people can churn out propaganda with no factual backbone behind it, simply because there are no people pestering them for correctness and common sense. Still, people are more critical towards a YouTube video than towards a TV show, so the effect is somewhat mitigated.

The differences do not end there of course. The most significant difference is that YouTube is a much more connected ecosystem than national TV. Crossovers and joint programs are much more common because the people involved are not celebrities on a massive scale. One important note is that YouTubers not directly involved with politics can directly or indirectly lead people to political content of other channels since the ecosystem is so interconnected. I had previously touched on this topic in another article of mine. In that article, my main focus was that sometimes harmless-looking content led impressionable young people to harmful content. Of course, the reverse is also true. Sometimes, YouTubers lead to young people discovering informative and beneficial content, which is an obvious boon to society at large. However, since the first case leads to more striking examples, we tend to put more consideration into it than vice-versa.

A good example to illustrate why people worry about the harmful political influence of YouTube relates to the former most subscribed YouTuber in the world: PewDiePie. PewDiePie or Felix Kjellberg, is a Swedish YouTuber with over a 100 million subscribers. In the past, there have been a few cases of Felix being alleged of racist and anti-Semitic views, such as when he paid two guys to hold a “Death to All Jews” sign for his video,³ or when he said the n-word with a hard r while playing a video game on a livestream.⁴ His shady politics were brought into even heavier questioning, however, when he made an appearance in the livestream of TheQuartering.⁵ TheQuartering is a YouTuber known for his open alt-right stance and having bullied a cosplayer off of the Magic: The Gathering community, which eventually resulted in him being banned from all events of the said community. Many people found the crossover very dangerous, because PewDiePie creates gaming content, while TheQuartering produces political videos (often with sketchy ideas) that are centered on gaming. This is a perfect example of innocuous content leading young and impressionable people into politically harmful content that might not have influenced them if they had consumed it as more mature and informed individuals. Of course, we will not go so far as to say that “YouTubers are poisoning our children”, but it is good to be careful around them, nevertheless.

Now, it is time to reiterate one of the previous points of this article. There is a lot of factual, well-thought-out, and beneficial political content on YouTube. Just as it might harm the political literacy of the coming generation, YouTube content can also help build up that same literacy. So, why do we more often hear about the problems of this system? The problem is that the toxic content creators of YouTube exploit its algorithm to keep their videos at the

³ <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/youtubes-biggest-star-pewdiepie-causes-controversy-death-all-jews-video-1600569>

⁴ <https://heavy.com/games/2017/09/watch-pewdiepie-in-hot-water-again-drops-n-bomb-during-pubg-stream/>

⁵ <https://www.gamerevolution.com/game-culture/604753-pewdiepie-the-quartering-stream-controversy-youtube>

forefront by appealing to the weak points of people to then sustain themselves off of the rage that is created. The enraged viewer (who has become addicted to anger) is more willing to watch longer videos more frequently. Thus, YouTube keeps pushing toxic creators in order to maximize watch time. However, nothing quite holds the place of quality content. Quick fixes of subpar content in order to feed your anger addiction are definitely no replacement for actually valuable videos, so most people eventually wind up growing out of cheap content and move towards better channels.

In fact, as a counterpart to the alt-right channels, there is a growing wave of left-leaning YouTube channels collectively referred to as BreadTube. Various BreadTube YouTubers have been credited to have moved to explain the radicalization process of the alt-right ⁶ and speak against it, de-radicalizing many people, especially young white men, in the process.⁷

BreadTubers are not an official organization with clear rules of membership, the term is often used by fans of these YouTubers, which means that the community can curate which creators are worth watching. The left-wing collective is often much calmer and collected than their alt-right reactionary counterparts. That is not to say that there are no centrist or right-wing creators that do not appeal to anger and instead focus on creating quality content, there are lots of creators of that direction, yet they are mostly out-voiced by their more brute counterparts. Still, I want to make it clear that the point of this article is not to pat left-wing YouTubers on the back for being more collected and intellectually stimulating than YouTubers of other political views, that would be massively erroneous. Yet, it is good to observe that, by the way of some complex processes, they seem to have become more agreeable in a debatability perspective on average.

No matter what your political views are though, you can find useful political content on YouTube, perhaps to educate yourself and hone your political arguments, or perhaps to use as cheap propaganda or even as a mud-shot against the opposition. In some ways, YouTube is just an extension of television, in others, it shows distinct differences from its predecessors. As with older media, differing political views have developed different characteristics that might change over time, but have become identifying points as of now. Yet, the younger and more impulsive, less popular nature of the platform leads to interesting results, as we have discussed before. The platform is yet young, and we cannot perfectly predict where it will go, will it become more like television, less like television, will it absorb television? We do not know. Yet, that does not matter if we are looking for political content to consume right now, YouTube has swathes of it in varying forms to choose from, and we can reasonably predict that that way of affairs will not change soon.

⁶ <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/dismantling-the-alt-right-playbook-youtuber-explains-how-online-radicalization-works-1.4655174>

⁷ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qvym73/meet-the-youtube-star-whos-de-radicalizing-young-right-wing-men>