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Thinking for themselves: Bootstraps discourse and the imagined epistemology of reactionary YouTube audiences

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Biography

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Disclosure statement

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Abstract[1]

In recent years, popular interest in disinformation has coalesced around a series of high-profile events, starting with the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in 2016. While Facebook and Twitter drew the most scrutiny in the immediate aftermath of these events, attention has turned in recent years to YouTube as a source of right-wing disinformation and radicalization. While the bulk of the extant literature on this topic has focused on the supply of right-wing content on YouTube—including quantitative studies examining the impact of the recommendation algorithm and qualitative studies exploring the rhetoric and micro-celebrity practices of reactionary channels—few studies have examined what draws viewers to the videos they watch. This paper aims to fill this gap in research by analyzing interviews with 18 current and former fans of US-centric reactionary YouTube channels. Based on these interviews, I introduce the concept of *bootstraps epistemology* as a way of understanding right-wing approaches to accessing political truth and knowledge.

Keywords: YouTube, conservatives, news consumption, bootstraps discourse, epistemology

1. Introduction

Following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, a flurry of journalism and research was produced on disinformation and possible foreign influence in the US information sphere (egs. 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 channelled users towards conspiratorial and sensational content in order to increase watch time and

[1] A condensed, 5-page version of this article was published online by University of North Carolina's Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP). The short article (Ma, 2023) was included in the conference proceedings collection for the International Communication Association's pre-conference event "What comes after disinformation studies?" which took place in May 2022.

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 amongst academics on the topic. Despite the increased attention on YouTube as a source of right-wing disinformation, at the time of writing, no academic studies have sought out viewers of these channels to better understand how and why people come to watch them. To address this research gap, this paper shifts the focus from the supply of right-wing and far-right disinformation on YouTube to the demand side of the equation (Munger & Phillips, 2020), asking the questions: What draws viewers to reactionary YouTube channels? And what do these channels offer viewers that other forms of media do not? In order to answer these questions, this paper focuses on a collection of popular US-centric reactionary YouTube channels that make up an "alternative influence network" (AIN) on the platform: a term coined by Rebecca Lewis (2018) to describe the highly networked, cross-referential nature of the right-wing YouTube ecosystem. I use "reactionary" as the primary descriptor of these channels as it captures how popular right-wing YouTubers are typically reactive: that is, working against the "woke" mob, social justice warriors, and the liberal establishment (including the mainstream media, Democrats, and academia). In order to study what draws viewers to these channels, I conducted 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. 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 least corruptible 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: a shared, idealized narrative adopted by the community to describe how they have come to know what they know. Throughout our conversations, respondents described their political journeys as highly idiosyncratic processes of personal research, rational deliberation, and intellectual combat. I call this narrative of political formation *bootstraps epistemology*. Within this context, reactionary YouTube channels helped interviewees to bypass the dogma and superficiality of mainstream news outlets and modelled how the principles of bootstraps epistemology could be put into practice. Building on the extant literature on the right-wing media ecosystem and YouTube radicalization, I contend that reactionary influencers are key disseminators and beneficiaries of this imagined epistemology, which both resonates with right-wing values and further entrenches skepticism towards institutional sources of news and information.

2. Background

2.1 The right-wing media ecosystem

This article draws on the work of political communication scholars and historians who have studied the rise of the right-wing media ecosystem, distrust in establishment news outlets, 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. Greenberg (2008) describes how modern day journalistic norms became hegemonic following WWII, with a collection of national news organizations—led by the *New York Times*—embracing values like objectivity[2] and non-partisanship and eventually becoming

[2] Although objectivity has been widely accepted as a journalistic ideal in US newsrooms since the mid-20th century, scholars have long noted that the work of reporting inevitably involves interpretation and moral evaluation on the part of journalists (Callison & Young, 2019; Tuchman, 1972).

institutionalized as the "mainstream media" by the mid-1950s. At the same time, a collection of anti-New Deal radio personalities laid the roots for a growing conservative media sphere that would only grow in popularity in the following decades (Hemmer, 2016). Throughout the 1950s, these right-wing broadcasters were buoyed by the energy of McCarthyism and the funding of oil tycoon H.L. Hunt; they would later present a vocal challenge to the growing liberal consensus on racial integration and President Kennedy's political agenda in the 1960s. 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 (2019) 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). This characterization of the "establishment" media remains ubiquitous throughout the conservative news ecosystem today (Confessore, 2022).

With the founding of Fox News, Rupert Murdoch capitalized on this tradition of anti-establishment conservative media critique by launching 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 "interpellat[e] its audience as the 'authentic' working class majority" (p. 5). Unlike political commentators on the left who emphasized their rigorous research and analysis, 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 US viewers and, since 2002, Fox has dominated the cable news landscape in terms of both ratings and profits. Young (2019) links the popularity of Fox and right-wing talk radio to a growing body of psychological literature (eg. Jost & Amodio, 2012; Chirumbolo, 2002) showing that conservatives have, on average,

a higher need for closure and a more acute sense of threat salience than liberals, both of which are satiated by the moral certainty and clear-cut antagonists of what Berry and Sobieraj call (2014) outrage programming.

Over the past three decades, the tilting of broadcast news towards outrage and other opinion-based programming—made possible by the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987—is correlated with decreased levels of trust in news media writ large. 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 sense of distrust has been leveraged by right-wing digital media companies to sell hyper-partisan, sensational, and conspiratorial news narratives to conservative audiences, many of whom were already primed by Fox and talk radio to be deeply distrustful of establishment outlets. This network of digital news brands makes up a highly insular and self-reinforcing "right-wing media ecosystem," wherein misinformation and conspiracy can circulate with relatively little intervention (Benkler et al., 2018). Forming one subsection of this ecosystem, reactionary YouTubers have inherited the outraged, anti-establishment tone of conservative media pundits of the past while leveraging the tools of micro-celebrity to entrench themselves as trustworthy, transparent sources of news and information.

2.2 Reactionary YouTube channels

The arguments advanced in this paper draw on interviews with individuals who watch, or used to watch, reactionary YouTube channels. The term "reactionary" (Robin, 2011) captures how prominent right-wing YouTubers are largely oriented around reacting to a host of political antagonists—progressive activists, liberal politicians, the mainstream media, Hollywood, 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 (R. Lewis, 2018; Ma, 2021). Reporting on the reactionary YouTube ecosystem has focused on the platform's

recommendation algorithm, which various individuals have cited as leading them down right-wing and far-right "rabbit holes" (Roose, 2019; Evans, 2018). As a result, much of the quantitative literature on the topic has centered around proving or disproving the radicalizing effect of YouTube's algorithm. Various studies have come to differing conclusions on this question. 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, after which it saw a steady decline, whereas more mainstream conservative and liberal channels gained viewers in that period. They argue that these findings demonstrate the greater importance of audience preference over algorithmic influence on channels' popularity. Echoing these findings, Hosseinmardi et al's (2021) paper analysed 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.

Within these quantitative studies, radicalization is operationalized as the consumption of increasingly 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 by trafficking in white supremacist talking points and racist tropes (Ma, 2021). These "anti-woke" personalities are far from fringe, with the most popular channels in this category—for example, Tim Pool—regularly receiving hundreds of thousands of views per video. Lewis (2020) has documented how these high-profile YouTubers engage in micro-celebrity practices in order to cultivate an aura of authenticity and trustworthiness while differentiating themselves from

mainstream news outlets, which they characterize as superficial, sensational, and biased in favour of liberals. In contrast to corporate-owned and allegedly biased legacy media, reactionary YouTubers frame themselves as independent speakers-of-truth and "standard-bearers of Facts and Reason" (Hong, 2020, p. 88). While reactionary YouTubers emphasize their independence and authenticity, many of the most popular figures within the AIN are affiliated with conservative media brands such as BlazeTV, Rebel News, and the Daily Wire. These digital media companies have used YouTube to build large audiences, advertise their fee-based subscription services, and promote their roster of right-wing pundits. Thus, "anti-woke" YouTubers are increasingly embroiled in profitable and professionalized digital media companies (Fischer, 2020; Fischer, 2022), making them a highly influential and understudied class of political actors within the right-wing media ecosystem.

2.3 Engagement with news in a digital era

Before delving into the data and methods of this paper, it is important to situate this study within the literature on the motives and beliefs underlying individuals' engagements with news media, especially in digital environments. Here, "engagement" refers not to the quantifiable "engagement metrics" sought by advertisers, creators, platforms, and news outlets, but to the diverse ways that online publics seek out, stumble across, interact with, and respond to digital news content in their everyday lives (Steensen et al., 2020). This audience-centric strain of communications research can be traced back to the uses and gratifications approaches of the 1940s. In contrast to the media effects paradigm, which dominated the field in the early 20th century, those studying "uses and gratifications" conceived of individuals as active agents in their media consumption, whose habits reflected underlying motivations, interests, and priorities (Katz et al., 1973). Following these scholars, I consult with media consumers directly about why they watch YouTube videos, trusting individuals to be aware of their own motives and desires.

The digital media landscape has provided new avenues for people to engage with current events and political discourse, ranging from passive to highly active. On the passive end of the spectrum, journalism scholars have highlighted how a segment of social media users rely on their online networks to surface relevant news and information. Adopting a "news finds me" folk theory of news discovery (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), these individuals do not feel the need to access the news directly because "they will be exposed to sufficient information through their peers and social networks" (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). In this way, digital media enables those who are generally unmotivated to seek out news and political discourse to nonetheless absorb the "big events" of the day through their social media use. Complicating theories of online "echo chambers," recent research on selective exposure suggests that news stories encountered on social media tend to represent a diverse range of views when compared to other settings (Barnidge, 2017; Kitchens et al., 2020; Flaxman et al., 2016). However, these stories often come from digital-first, hyper-partisan, and anti-establishment outlets, which rely on social media networks for dissemination (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019). Thus, accessing news via social media generally leads individuals to more partisan coverage than what they would find from accessing mainstream news sources directly (Flaxman et al., 2016).

In addition to exposing people to news stories, digital technologies also enable more active engagements with politics and current events. For example, Tripodi's (2018) work shows how search engines provide a new arsenal of tools for those aiming to "do their own research." Her ethnography on conservatives in the US southeast found that right-wing news readers and viewers engage in a process she calls *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 enabled her participants to "fact-check" claims made in the media, using search engines like Google or content-sharing

platforms like YouTube to facilitate their research[3]. Finally, scholars have documented how the affordances of social media can be leveraged to crowdsource, and amplify, conspiracy narratives and disinformation, with highly engaged actors on fringe websites like 4chan crafting materials that are then strategically spread, out of context, onto other platforms (Krafft & Donovan, 2020; Starbird, 2017).

Building on these studies, particularly Tripodi's, this paper looks at practices of media literacy, fact-finding, and truth-seeking among a wider demographic of internet users. In particular, this study draws attention to congruencies between information-seeking behaviour and political beliefs. Drawing together research on the right-wing media ecosystem, platform affordances, and digital news consumption, in the following sections I aim to show how interview respondents relied on an "imagined epistemology," which resonated with their political dispositions, in order to guide their engagement with news and information.

3. Methods

3.1 Data collection and analysis

This article draws on semi-structured interviews with English-speaking adults who regularly watch, or used to watch, reactionary YouTube channels, conducted over a two-year period from October 2020 to July 2022[4]. Starting in August 2020, I queried the names of popular reactionary YouTube channels using Facebook and Reddit's search functions (See Appendix). The search terms were derived from Lewis's (2018) "alternative influence network," with a focus on the most popular channels within this network of creators. I inputted details of relevant fan and discussion groups in an Excel spreadsheet. Using pseudonymous research-specific accounts, I then attempted to join

[3] Although search engine users often think of these websites as objective reservoirs of information (Tripodi, 2018; Toff & Nielsen, 2018), scholars have shown that their results are far from neutral and shaped by the purchase of advertisements, racial and gender bias (Noble, 2018), and search engine optimization strategies (Tripodi, 2022).
[4] Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Oxford Internet Institute's Departmental Research Ethics Committee in July 2019 (approval reference number SSH_OII_CIA_19_060).

these communities. On Facebook, I joined 12 public groups and requested to join 16 private groups, of which I was ultimately approved to join 9. On Reddit, I identified 23 relevant subreddits and joined each of these. One Reddit moderator for a large YouTuber fan community informed me that discussions were more active on Discord and invited me to join their Discord server, which I did.

For each of these groups, I posted a recruitment message and identified myself as a researcher with the University of Oxford interested in interviewing members of their community. 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 low uptake with this method, I transitioned in February 2021 to posting an online questionnaire as a recruitment tool. The questionnaire 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 they were interested in being interviewed.

The questionnaire strategy proved 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 throughout the recruitment process, of which 15 individuals ultimately completed interviews. I also interviewed 3 individuals from within my network of contacts who met the study's criteria. For participants recruited through online forums (N=15), I remained pseudonymous throughout the recruitment process, signing off on emails and messages as "The Oxford YouTube Research Team." During interviews, I kept my identity obscured by leaving my camera off and never disclosing my name. Four of the interviews were conducted asynchronously over email or text chat, while the rest (N = 14) were conducted synchronously over various forms of voice call (ie. Discord, Jitsi, Zoom). The tables below summarize key demographic details of participants (self-disclosed) at the time of interview.

Table 1: Gender of respondents

Gender	*N (respondents)*
Male	18
Female	0

Table 2: Race of respondents

Race	*N (respondents)*
White	15
Indian	1
Prefer not to say	2

Table 3: Age of respondents

Age	*N (respondents)*
18-19	2
20-29	6
30-39	8
40-49	2

Table 4: Current engagement with YouTubers

Engagement with YouTubers	*N (respondents)*
Used to watch reactionary YouTubers but no longer do	2
Currently watch reactionary YouTubers	16

Table 5: Place of recruitment

Place of recruitment	*N (respondents)*
Reddit	8
Discord	4
Facebook	3
Researcher's personal network	2
Referral	1

Table 6: Occupations of respondents

Occupation/Industry	*N (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 7: Country of residence of respondents

Country	*N (respondents)*
USA	8
UK	5
Canada	2
India	1
Lithuania	1
South Africa	1

The semi-structured interviews began with an oral consent process, lasted between 45 and 80 minutes, and were conducted with a loose interview schedule that included questions concerning the respondent's main sources of news and information, their engagement with YouTube channels and other social media platforms, their participation in online discussion groups, and their political views more broadly. The text of asynchronous chat-based interviews was copied into Word documents, and I transcribed all of the synchronous interviews in full based on audio recordings. I then 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* (Charmaz, 2006). Ultimately, after 18 interviews, I reached a point of theoretical saturation on the topics relevant for this study.

3.2 Limitations

In evaluating my interview data, one stark reality is that all my interviewees were men. This outcome is perhaps unsurprising given the overrepresentation of men as viewers of right-wing YouTube channels. For instance, based on data gathered via Tubular[5], 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 with 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 and other minority groups. However, given the potential risks of this approach (Doerfler et al., 2021), I decided to prioritize my own safety and well-being as a non-white female researcher throughout the data collection process, which meant maintaining a degree of distance from the communities I studied.

With that said, I believe the novel insights presented in the data outweigh the potential limitations of the sample. Studies on online hate and extremism are disproportionately weighted

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

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 shown that audiences can interpret texts in unexpected ways (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974; LaMarre et al., 2009). Speaking to audiences is even more important when it comes to content, like those of reactionary YouTubers, that is rife with irony, hyperbole, and the potential for polysemy (Ma, 2021). 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 differing ages, geographical 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.

4. Findings

4.1 Inadequacies of mainstream media

In the following sections, I summarize themes which emerged from my interviews with respondents, focusing in Sections 4.1 to 4.4 on the attributes that make up what I call "bootstraps epistemology": an imagined epistemology, articulated by my respondents, that elevates 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 an interview from May 2021, James[6], a Canadian software developer in his early 40s, described being drawn to right-leaning YouTubers because of the shortcomings of cable news: "It's like they all get

[6] Names of respondents have been altered to protect their confidentiality.

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 spewing 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 establishment media, respondents also complained that the news 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 in October 2021: "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 in-depth analysis of figures like Ben Shapiro, Jordan Peterson, and others filled a gap in Fox News's offerings. Respondents also described turning to YouTube for information amidst highly contentious news events like Gamergate[7], 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.

[7] Gamergate was a 2014 controversy, ostensibly about ethics in gaming journalism, that was driven by anti-feminist sentiment and backlash against the supposed encroachment of "social justice warriors" into gamer subculture. Gamergate saw one of the first instances of networked harassment, with female developers and games journalists being targeted (Massanari, 2017).

4.2 Rejection of dogma

Critiques of mainstream media are common amongst 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 interviewed took a very different approach; for them, the best way to access truth was to reject dogma and to forge their 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 leftist approach to politics, in opposition to the right's staunch individualism. He cites the repetition of talking points across liberal media outlets as proof of this point. Although studies have shown that reactionary YouTubers also rely on a series of recurring arguments (Ma, 2021; Lewis, 2018), respondents frequently articulated the idea that their favourite YouTuber 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. Such was the case for Terry, a software engineer in his 20s living in Texas, who moderates a YouTuber fan Discord server in his spare time. Speaking to me in June 2021, 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 debated—very difficult conversations, and [my colleagues] 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*… 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.

Like James, Terry describes 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 views 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"*).

Indeed, respondents often disparaged liberal ideology by comparing it to religion—as something that needed to be taken on faith, rather than proven through empirical investigation:

> 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 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. (Brett, 30, USA; July 2022)

> 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… 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; July 2022)

In both these excerpts, respondents compared leftist viewpoints to cultish religious beliefs. Brett describes how liberals adhere feverishly to party doctrine, while Douglas uses the example of "the transgender debate" 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.

4.3 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, in June 2021, when I asked Mitchell how he would describe his political views, he responded:

> That's a troublesome one because when it comes to economics and social policies I generally agree with the Republicans. I guess I consider myself an independent, but it's been a long time since I've voted for a Democrat… 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 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 showing 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 towards 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 bore 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 phenomenon 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 in September 2021 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.

As with Mitchell, Sunit is reluctant to assign himself a political label, 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, Alius, a respondent based in Lithuania responded this way when asked about how he came to have his 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 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, because I see that I was wrong. (Alius, 30s, Lithuania; July 2022)

Alius demonstrates absolute confidence in his ability to evaluate facts, and to reassess his own opinions once he has processed new information. If a YouTuber fails to convince him of something, it is because that YouTuber has failed to "present facts"; his own life experiences, biases, and interests do not figure into this calculus.

Anthony, a respondent in his mid-40s living in the UK, put it even more succinctly, when asked in November 2020 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, Anthony is able to overcome the idealism of the masses and see "how things are," the true impact of government policies. In this way, respondents elevated the rational self as the purest, least corruptible, source of political belief. Throughout my interviews, respondents insisted that their political journeys were highly idiosyncratic, shaped by their own reasoning and assessment of the facts, rather than outside influences like the media, family, or wider community.

4.4 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, whereby weighing up stories from different outlets on opposing sides of the political spectrum helps him to access the truth. This media literacy practice 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 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; March 2021)

> If there is a story that I've 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; July 2022)

This finding echoes research showing that conservatives consult a more diverse range of news sources than liberals (Schradie, 2019; Tripodi, 2018). It is worth noting, however, that exposing themselves 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:

> 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 David Pakman. 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. (James, 40, Canada; May 2021)

> I do like to keep a decent mix… Just off the top of my head… 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 getting the other side of the perspective as well, even though it generally makes me laugh… (Mitchell, 34, USA; June 2021)

In both these cases, respondents watch left-leaning commentators with an adversarial orientation, deploying conservative media criticism against the sources they themselves consult. Notably, neither

James nor Mitchell 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.

Respondents also reported seeking 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. Respondents frequently mirrored their favourite YouTubers on this issue, embracing debate as an important intellectual and political activity. For instance, Brett, a 30-year-old technician and veteran living in Oklahoma told me in July 2022:

> 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 is able to 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. Through rigorous debate, the story goes, the best ideas will naturally rise to the top, and the bad ideas will be discredited and abandoned.

Ultimately, across interviews, 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.

4.5 YouTubers and bootstraps epistemology

Taken together, the principles summarized in Sections 4.1 to 4.4 form a general orientation towards politics that I call *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 tend to attribute poverty to personal characteristics such as a lack of drive or poor work ethic, rather than to structural inequalities (Smith & Stone, 1989; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013). Today, the phrase "picking yourself up by the bootstraps" is used in political discourse to both advocate for (Roth, 2020) and critique (Reich, 2019) policies that cut government assistance in the name of establishing absolute meritocracy and preventing state-dependency. Building on popular and scholarly uses of this metaphor, I propose bootstraps epistemology as a concept that captures how similar logics of individual responsibility, self-reliance, competition, and suspicion of government interference pervaded respondents' narratives of their own political formation. Thus, 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.

Given this view of politics, respondents gravitated to YouTube as an "alternative," less compromised source of news and information in comparison to the mainstream media. In their content, YouTubers often reference principles of bootstraps epistemology—skepticism of legacy news media, emphasis on debate and intellectual rigour—which further entrenches their status as reliable sources among viewers (Hong, 2020; Lewis, 2020). When asked what they enjoyed about their favourite YouTube commentators, respondents most frequently referenced their interesting, authentic perspectives compared to the repetitive offerings of mainstream media. In particular, interviewees emphasized how YouTubers were able to go in-depth on issues that were usually over-simplified by legacy news outlets. Mitchell, the 34-year-old living in Virginia, told me:

> 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 I learned that watching people like Sargon [of Akkad] on YouTube… 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*.

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 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. In this way, YouTubers fill a gap in the right-wing media ecology for cerebral reactionary content that is marketed towards younger,

politically-engaged, and highly-online audiences. For viewers, it affords a feeling of getting "more of the news from the news."

Terry, the software engineer living in Texas, drew attention to the unique guests and perspectives offered by YouTube channels. Speaking about Tim Pool's 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… 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 they felt were immune from critique by establishment sources. 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 reactionary 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 (Lewis, 2020).

Working outside of establishment news institutions also helps 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—all of which are easily facilitated through digital affordances like hyperlinks and screenshots. For instance:

> He also cites news articles and 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. (Jakub, late 20s, UK; October 2020)

> 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; July 2022)

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 (Hong, 2023).

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… because he does kind of exactly what I do with the media sites, but he does it for a living… 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 echoes that might be happening throughout the different media sources. (Terry, 20s, USA)

This performance of journalistic rigour and integrity is central 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. StevenCrowder, 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. Thus, viewers turn to reactionary YouTubers as "independent" voices, who are unbeholden to the institutional and ideological constraints of establishment media. These influencers provide viewers with in-depth, engaging political commentary that models how they themselves might put bootstraps epistemology into practice.

5. Discussion: Bootstraps epistemology and the hierarchy of knowledge

The concept of bootstraps epistemology advances conversations taking place within political communication and internet studies on how digital technologies are shaping individuals' engagement with news and information. The extant literature on the right-wing media ecosystem has shown that this highly insular network of digital outlets flouts journalistic norms while discrediting mainstream news institutions, building on a robust US tradition of conservative media critique (Benkler et al., 2018; Peck, 2019). This paper adds that the positioning of right-wing "alternative" influencers within this network—as commentators existing outside of the corporate media structure and liberal dogma—resonates with viewers' conservative political values, namely self-reliance and individualism.

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 life 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 article, I introduce bootstraps epistemology to name this brand of epistemic individualism, which is taken up not only by conspiracy theorists but also by broader publics who seek to find truth outside of institutional sources.

The adoption of bootstraps epistemology is not politically neutral; its underlying logic fosters 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 one relates to those around them. Among my 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:

> Everyone's opinion is not equal. Some people have put more thought into them than others. Like for instance… 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… 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 daily news cycle. 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 underlie 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 (Mills, 2014; TallBear, 2014). In their videos, reactionary YouTubers position themselves as the inheritors of the Enlightenment tradition—disciples of Fact and Reason—while disparaging their political opponents as emotional, dogmatic, and self-serving (Hong,

2020). Adopting a narrow conception of rationality, these figures 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. In a similar vein, my mostly-white, all-male interview respondents spoke authoritatively about minoritized groups—Black people, Muslims, trans people—as *affectable*[8] 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 (Ferreira da Silva, 2007; Medina, 2017). At the same time, this conception of knowledge empowered my respondents to confidently engage 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.

To cultivate their thinking and argumentation skills, my respondents relied heavily on reactionary YouTube channels, which they perceived as being more cerebral, more interesting, and more rigorous than mainstream outlets. Even as the most popular YouTubers within the AIN adopt the trappings of scientific and journalistic rigour—citing sources, consulting primary documents, engaging in "on the ground" reporting—their highly individualistic, adversarial approach to evaluating truth claims diverges from how these disciplines operate in practice (Hong, 2023). According to these YouTubers and the viewers I spoke to, only the heroic "independent"—unencumbered by the constraints and biases of institutions—can guarantee objectivity, rigour, and factuality. By contrast, the fields of academic research and journalism[9] operate in and through

[8] Here, I borrow language from Ferreira da Silva's (2007) book *Toward a global idea of race*, in which she argues that racial logics are inextricable from early modern Western philosophy. This worldview elevated the white European subject as transparent—possessing agency, interiority, and reason—while Europe's various "others" were cast as *affectable*—subject to the forces of nature.

[9] These fields are certainly informed by their own imagined epistemologies, which STS and journalism scholars have analysed over the years (egs. Reed, 2010; Ekström & Westlund, 2020). This paper does not seek to rank these approaches against one another but rather to show how reactionary influencers adopt certain signifiers of scientific and journalistic rigour while obfuscating the collective norms and standards that regulate these fields in practice.

institutions, which, for better or worse, collectively regulate how knowledge claims are evaluated (Longino, 1990; Callison & Young, 2019). For example, the process of peer review holds academic researchers accountable to a broader community of scholars, who assess studies based on their methods, conclusions, and engagement with existing literature. Within the social sciences, researchers also recognize that, to fairly evaluate a study's merits, reviewers should take into account the epistemological norms and methods of the author's discipline (Mallard et al., 2009); that is to say, researchers tend to understand, at least in theory, that there is not one way to arrive at social scientific knowledge. By contrast, purveyors of bootstraps epistemology insist that only a narrow genre of "hard facts"—devoid of judgment-clouding feelings and emotions—can lead individuals to the truth (Hong, 2020). Wielding these facts against their opponents, reactionary YouTubers eschew the work of consensus building and pursue instead confrontation, intellectual triumph, and the humiliation of political enemies—activities that, not coincidentally, also generate high rates of engagement and algorithmic amplification on the platform (Rathje et al., 2021; Vaidhyanathan, 2021).

Within this highly combative discursive environment, viewers' sense of intellectual mastery can be accompanied by feelings of social isolation. In this study, a majority of interviewees described watching videos primarily on their own—at least in the first instance—on a laptop or mobile phone. Respondents 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, a young man living in London named Liam, explicitly identified this dynamic as contributing to his period of right-wing radicalization around 2016: "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 ridiculous. And you meander through it, and you become a normal person. But that doesn't happen when you're involved in this stuff." On YouTube, Liam was confronted by a networked ecosystem of reactionary voices, all of

whom reinforced his increasingly extreme political beliefs. Crucially, under bootstraps epistemology, being alone in his beliefs served as evidence of independent thought in the face of widespread groupthink, rather than as a cause for concern or reflection. In this way, bootstraps epistemology advances a vision of politics that can both intellectually empower and socially isolate its adherents.

6. Conclusion

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 (Tripodi, 2022). 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.

The interview data presented in this paper also complicates narratives of the YouTube radicalization pipeline: rather than falling down "rabbit holes" into fringe, extremist views, respondents described longstanding fan relationships with reactionary YouTubers. Notably, this study finds that YouTubers appealed to viewers not only through their arguments or charismatic personalities but also by advancing an imagined epistemology that strongly resonated with viewers' underlying political values. As such, I contend that the discourse of bootstraps epistemology is more likely to be taken up by right-leaning communities than left-leaning ones, although this hypothesis

will need to be tested empirically in future studies. Under this epistemology, harmful reactionary narratives can quickly calcify, as individuals interpret progressive arguments as ill-informed dogma while insisting that their own views stem not from outside influence but from their own reasoning.

Finally, this article provides an example of the insights that can be gained by speaking to individuals who consume "alternative" media, rather than limiting our analyses to the problematic texts themselves. While the latter is crucial to understanding the problems of mis- and disinformation, we cannot develop a holistic understanding of how these texts circulate in people's lives without consulting them directly. I believe the concept of bootstraps epistemology—and increased attention to the epistemological underpinnings of reactionary and conspiratorial beliefs more generally—can help scholars and activists to better understand the problem of disinformation and better target their interventions.

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Appendix: List of Facebook and Reddit search terms

Ben Shapiro
Blaire White
Breitbart
Brittany Sellner
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