Alternative Influence:

Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report identifies and names the **Alternative Influence Network** (AIN): an assortment of scholars, media pundits, and internet celebrities who use YouTube to promote a range of political positions, from mainstream versions of libertarianism and conservatism, all the way to overt white nationalism. Content creators in the AIN claim to provide an alternative media source for news and political commentary. They function as **political influencers** who adopt the techniques of brand influencers to build audiences and "sell" them on far-right ideology.

This report presents data from approximately 65 political influencers across 81 channels. This network is connected through a dense system of guest appearances, mixing content from a variety of ideologies. This cross-promotion of ideas forms a broader "reactionary" position: a general opposition to feminism, social justice, or left-wing politics.

Members of the AIN cast themselves as an alternative media system by:
- Establishing an alternative sense of credibility based on **relatability**, **authenticity**, and **accountability**.
- Cultivating an alternative social identity using the image of a **social underdog**, and **countercultural appeal**.

Members of the AIN use the proven engagement techniques of brand influencers to spread ideological content:
- Ideological Testimonials
- Political Self-Branding
- Search Engine Optimization
- Strategic Controversy

The AIN as a whole facilitates radicalization through social networking practices:
- Audiences are able to easily move from mainstream to extreme content through guest appearances and other links.
- Political influencers themselves often shift to more radical positions following interactions with other influencers or their own audiences.

When viewers engage with this content, it is framed as lighthearted, entertaining, rebellious, and fun. This fundamentally obscures the impact that issues have on vulnerable and underrepresented populations—the LGBTQ community, women, immigrants, and people of color. And in many ways, YouTube is built to incentivize this behavior. The platform needs to not only assess *what* channels say in their content, but also *who* they host and what their guests say. In a media environment consisting of networked influencers, YouTube must respond with policies that account for influence and amplification, as well as social networks.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

For a short time on January 4, 2018, the most popular livestreamed video on YouTube was a broadcast dominated by white nationalists. More specifically, it was a stream by YouTubers Andy Warski and Jean-François Gariépy, facilitating a debate between a white nationalist and a libertarian. The debate topic was scientific racism, which they refer to as "race realism"—a contemporary incarnation of the long-standing claims that there are measurable scientific differences between races of humans. Arguing in favor of scientific racism was infamous white nationalist Richard Spencer, known for having popularized the term "alt-right."[1] Ostensibly on the other side was Carl Benjamin, a YouTuber who goes by the pseudonym Sargon of Akkad. During the broadcast, the debate became the #1 trending live video worldwide on YouTube, with over 10,000 active viewers. The archived version of the broadcast has been viewed an additional 475,000 times.

The four participants carried out their debate via Google Hangouts, and the video lasted more than four-and-a-half hours; they were joined at various times by other YouTubers. During the broadcast, participants debated a range of positions popular in white supremacist communities, using academic terminology and treating the topics as theoretical discourse. They discussed, for example, whether monogamy was a development of "Western culture" and whether there are biological qualities that constitute "whiteness." Spencer has had years of experience arguing his racial theories and spoke with more confidence than Benjamin. In the live comments and through subsequent reactions on social media, many audience members responded positively to Spencer's performance. "I've never really listened to Spencer speak before," said one user with the pseudonym Nashmau. "But it is immediately apparent that he's on a whole different level." More broadly, commenters praised the debate and expressed excitement about its popularity. "Half a million views in only 3 weeks. I honestly think this is a sign that people are hungry for what's good for humanity," one commenter wrote. They followed it up by stating, "Ethnic nationalism is freedom for everybody."

This debate is part of a larger phenomenon, in which YouTubers attempt to reach young audiences by broadcasting far-right ideas in the form of news and entertainment. An assortment of scholars, media pundits, and internet celebrities are using YouTube to promote a range of political positions, from mainstream versions of libertarianism and conservatism, all the way to overt white nationalism. While many of their views differ significantly, they all share a fundamental contempt for progressive politics—specifically for contemporary social justice movements. For this reason, I consider their collective position "reactionary," as it is defined by its

opposition to visions of social progress.[2] United in this standpoint, these YouTubers frequently collaborate with and appear with others across ideological lines. Together, they have created a fully functioning media system that I call the **Alternative Influence Network** (AIN).

The content creators in the AIN claim to provide an alternative media source for viewers to obtain news and political commentary, outside of legacy news outlets such as cable channels and print media. With this positioning, they are capitalizing on a changing news and information environment. YouTube has become a crucial site for broadcasting political and news-related content. A 2018 Pew Research Center report found that 73% of US adults visit YouTube, with the percentage rising to 94% for 18- to 24-year-olds.[3] As of 2017, YouTube fell behind only Facebook as the social network most popular for viewing news stories.[4] Simultaneously, trust in mainstream media outlets is continually in decline, with only 32% of Americans claiming to trust the media in a 2016 Gallup Poll.[5]

The AIN also relies on YouTube's ability to support a type of "microcelebrity," that is, niche celebrities who are well-known within specific communities. The platform's motto, "Broadcast Yourself," encourages individuals to build audiences and promote themselves outside of the confines of legacy media outlets. YouTube also provides financial incentives for individuals to broadcast and build audiences. Specifically, YouTube has a Partner Program (the YPP) which is open to content creators who have received 4,000 "watch hours" over the course of a year and have at least 1,000 subscribers. YouTube gives these content creators a small proportion of advertising revenue for the videos they post (YouTube keeps the rest). Content creators can also relay their popularity on YouTube into monetary gains on other platforms. One of the most popular ways to do this is through fundraising website Patreon, where fans make monthly donations for the content they support. As a result of YouTube's Partner Program and outside sources like Patreon, individuals can often turn content creation on YouTube into lucrative full-time careers.

Because of their high visibility and marketing potential within communities on social platforms, some content creators become *influencers* in their communities— people who shape public opinion and advertise goods and services through the "conscientious calibration" of their online personae.[6] Influencers often develop highly intimate and transparent relationships with their audiences and then "capitalize on their followers by inserting advertisements for products and services" into their lifestyle content.[7] While the individuals of the AIN are not generally selling goods or services, they adopt the techniques of influencers to build audiences and "sell" them on far-right ideology. For this reason, I refer to these content creators as *political influencers*.

Digital media scholar Crystal Abidin has noted that celebrity and influencer culture is often ascribed a presumed "frivolity" that leads to its underestimation among academics and journalists.[8] However, she argues that online celebrities can often convey deceptively subversive and powerful messages. Indeed, one reason YouTube is so effective for circulating political ideas is because it is often ignored or underestimated in discourse on the rise of disinformation and far-right movements. Yet at the same time, the members of the AIN are experiencing great success, with a countless number of their videos showing up in search results and video recommendations. This means that, increasingly, understanding the circulation of extremist political content does not just involve fringe communities and anonymous actors. Instead, it requires us to scrutinize polished, well-lit microcelebrities and the captivating videos that are easily available on the pages of the internet's most popular video platform.

Influence is not created in a vacuum—it occurs within, and propagates through, social networks.[9] Part of the way influencers build followings is by becoming "nodes around which other networks of opinions and influencers cluster."[10] One of the most effective ways to network on YouTube is by referencing and including other people in video content.[11] In fact, how-to manuals for building influence on YouTube often list collaborations as one of the most effective strategies.[12] These guides suggest guest appearances, guest hosts, and collaborative appearances as strategies for content creators to grow exposure and multiply audiences.

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This report documents the composition of the AIN and analyzes the techniques used by its members to build an alternative news media system, repurposing influencer marketing techniques to impart ideological ideas to their audiences. In part 1, I diagram the AIN: a loose set of approximately 65 YouTube influencers across more than 80 channels. Among these channels, I document the thick network of guest appearances that helps to build audiences and also to move those audiences between channels and political positions. I also show how this networking is driven by, and results in, a set of shared ideas about progressive politics and social justice. In part 2, I showcase how this network provides audiences with an alternative media source meant to counter the traditional news media. Specifically, I show how influencers reject traditional journalistic credibility markers in favor of the intimacy of participatory media. I also show how this alternative media system provides influencers and audiences alike with an appealing, countercultural social identity. In part 3, I show how political influencers have implemented the marketing tactics of brand influencers

to impart ideological content to their viewers. These practices include ideological testimonials, political self-branding, search engine optimization, and the strategic use of controversy. In part 4, I examine the practice of social networking among members of the AIN, and how this social network of influencers enables various types of political radicalization. This can include influencers radicalizing their audiences, each other, or *being* radicalized by their own audience's engagement. Finally, I conclude by considering what steps could be taken to temper the harmful political effects of the AIN. Specifically, I argue that YouTube should reassess both their monetization incentive programs and their content moderation practices.

METHODS

To understand the AIN in-depth, I analyzed both the content of YouTube influencers (that is, *what* they are saying) as well as their collaborations (*who* they are broadcasting with). The latter presented a significant research challenge, as YouTube does not provide metadata about guest appearances. To get around this, I manually collected data from each influencer's video titles, and at times, video content, to determine each of the guests they hosted in their content between January 1, 2017 and April 1, 2018. I found new influencers through a snowball approach: for each guest on an influencer's channel, I would visit their own channel (if one existed) to see who they, in turn, hosted.

Overall, I collected data for approximately 65 influencers across 81 channels. (While there is often a one-to-one relationship between influencers and channels, this is not always the case; some influencers maintain multiple channels, some share channels, and some only appear as guests on the channels of others). I then gathered channel subscriptions and video metadata. Subscriber counts ranged from about 10,000 (for a "pro-white," gender traditionalist woman who goes by the pseudonym "Wife with a Purpose") to about 2.5 million (for former reality television host and current YouTube talk show host Joe Rogan). I watched content from each of these channels and performed an in-depth content analysis on the transcripts for two of them. Overall, I watched hundreds of hours of content from these 65 content creators.

At the time of data collection, this group of influencers was as close as I could get to a snapshot of the Alternative Influence Network. However, the boundaries of this network are loose and constantly changing. Since the time of my data collection, newly popular influencers have begun to collaborate with others in the network, and some of those I tracked in April have since deleted their channels or removed their content. The data also does not represent the full extent of networking and collaboration that occurs between influencers. Many of them, for example, comment on each other's videos; they reference each other's ideas in their content; and they interact on platforms like Twitter and Instagram in addition to YouTube. In other

words, the data I collected is illustrative, not comprehensive. For more detailed descriptions of the influencers discussed in this report, see Appendix A. For a comprehensive list of the influencers and channels included in analysis, see Appendix B.

1

THE ALTERNATIVE INFLUENCE NETWORK

The Alternative Influence Network is a coherent discursive system despite the seeming variety and independence of its members. In this section I show how these figures are connected by an interlocking series of videos, references, and guest appearances. Within the AIN, a hodge-podge of internet celebrities claiming a variety of political positions impart their ideologies to viewers and each other. The boundaries between different political groups of influencers and the ideological positions they promote are often slippery. Many identify themselves primarily as libertarians or conservatives. Others self-advertise as white nationalists. Simultaneously, these influencers often connect with one another across ideological lines. At times, influencers collaborate to the point that ideological differences become impossible to take at face value. For example, self-identified conservatives may disavow far-right extremism while also hosting explicit white nationalists on their channels. Within the AIN, this collaboration generates a cross-promotion of ideas that forms a broader, intertextual common ground. Many of these YouTubers are less defined by any single ideology than they are by a "reactionary" position: a general opposition to feminism, social justice, or left-wing politics.

One primary example of a shared idea that exists across the network is the concept of the "Social Justice Warrior" (or "SJW"). The term is used by influencers across the network, from libertarians to white nationalists. It is strategically flexible: while it was initially targeted at feminists, it is often applied to any number of movements advocating for social justice, including Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ movement, Muslims, and immigrants. In some cases, influencers use it to refer to a vague conglomeration of these movements, or to progressive ideas more generally (in one video, the white nationalist vlogger Colin Robertson defines an "SJW" as an "empty-headed transmitter of progressive ideology").[13]

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Mapping the connections between influencers in the AIN results in a complicated network diagram that demonstrates just how easily an audience member exploring seemingly mainstream "conservative" content can be exposed to explicit white

nationalism. To understand the dynamics of exposure requires first understanding how members of this network espouse different views but are still part of a coherent ideological network.

Among the 80-plus channels I catalogued for this research, I found a highly connected network of influencers across numerous ideological positions. The network includes media pundits with mainstream appeal, such as Jordan Peterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto with a best-selling self-help book. It also includes self-identified white nationalists, such as Richard Spencer. While Peterson and Spencer have never collaborated directly, they have both collaborated with the same influencer, Carl Benjamin. In the introduction, I described Benjamin's debate with Spencer on scientific racism, which took place in January 2018. In a live streamed video from less than a year before, in April 2017, Peterson and Benjamin have a friendly conversation in which they promote gender traditionalism, deny the existence of a gender pay gap, and claim that IQ is the highest predictor of success.[14]

Figure 1 highlights how tightly connected influencers in the AIN are. Each link represents at least one collaboration between two influencers (in other words, one or more instances in which one appeared in a video with another). The visualization showcases the extent to which they create a broader, highly connected, symbiotic media system.

Fig. 1

THE ALTERNATIVE INFLUENCE NETWORK ON YOUTUBE

GUEST APPEARANCES ON THE NETWORK FROM JANUARY 1, 2017 THROUGH APRIL 1, 2018

The graph is a partial representation of collaborative connections within the Alternative Influence Network (AIN)–a network of controversial academics, media pundits, and internet celebrities who use YouTube to promote a range of political positions from mainstream versions of libertarianism and conservatism to overt white nationalism. While collaborations can sometimes consist of debates and disagreements, they more frequently indicate social ties, endorsements, and advertisements for other influencers.

Each line indicates that two connected influencers appeared in the same Youtube video during the period of January 1, 2017 and April 1, 2018, serving as guests, hosts, or collaborators. The size of nodes are determined by the number of other influencers with whom they connect–demonstrating how much a given influencer serves as a conduit for viewers to other influencers in the AIN. The colors of nodes are determined by their total connectivity within the network, or how close the influencer is to all other influencers.
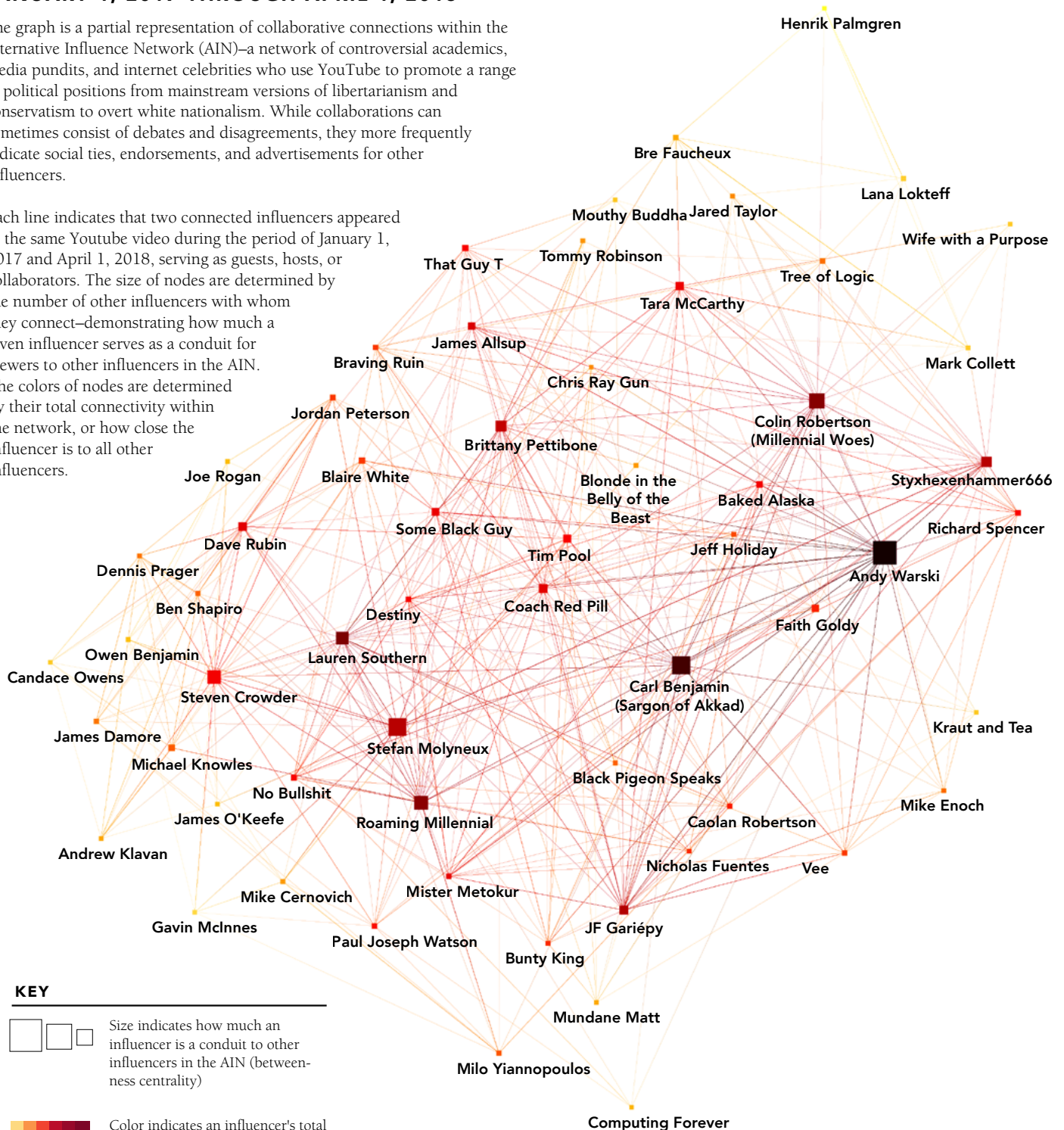

Henrik Palmgren
Bre Faucheux
Lana Lokteff
Mouthy Buddha   Jared Taylor
Wife with a Purpose
Tommy Robinson
That Guy T
Tree of Logic
Tara McCarthy
James Allsup
Chris Ray Gun
Mark Collett
Braving Ruin
Colin Robertson (Millennial Woes)
Jordan Peterson
Brittany Pettibone
Styxhexenhammer666
Joe Rogan   Blaire White
Blonde in the Belly of the Beast
Baked Alaska
Richard Spencer
Some Black Guy
Jeff Holiday
Dave Rubin
Tim Pool
Andy Warski
Dennis Prager
Coach Red Pill
Faith Goldy
Ben Shapiro
Destiny
Owen Benjamin
Lauren Southern
Candace Owens
Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad)
Steven Crowder
Kraut and Tea
James Damore
Stefan Molyneux
Michael Knowles
Black Pigeon Speaks
No Bullshit
Mike Enoch
James O'Keefe
Roaming Millennial
Caolan Robertson
Andrew Klavan
Nicholas Fuentes   Vee
Mike Cernovich
Mister Metokur
Gavin McInnes
JF Gariépy
Paul Joseph Watson
Bunty King
Mundane Matt
Milo Yiannopoulos
Computing Forever

KEY

Size indicates how much an influencer is a conduit to other influencers in the AIN (between-ness centrality)

Color indicates an influencer's total connectivity within the network, or how close the influencer is to all other influencers (closeness centrality)

Fig. 1 (detail)

AIN NETWORK PATHS

These graphs show examples of collaborative connections between influencers of differing ideologies and how these collaborations can create pathways to radicalization.

Network Path 1 illustrates how the "classical liberal" Dave Rubin and the white nationalist Colin Robertson (Millennial Woes) are only separated by two degrees, through the anti-feminist Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad), who has appeared on both of their channels.

Network Path 2 shows how conservative pundit Ben Shapiro is connected to white nationalist Richard Spencer through the vlogger and commentator Roaming Millennial; she has appeared on Shapiro's YouTube show and has hosted Spencer for an extended interview on her channel. For more on how these collaborations can create radicalization pathways, see Section 4 (page 35).
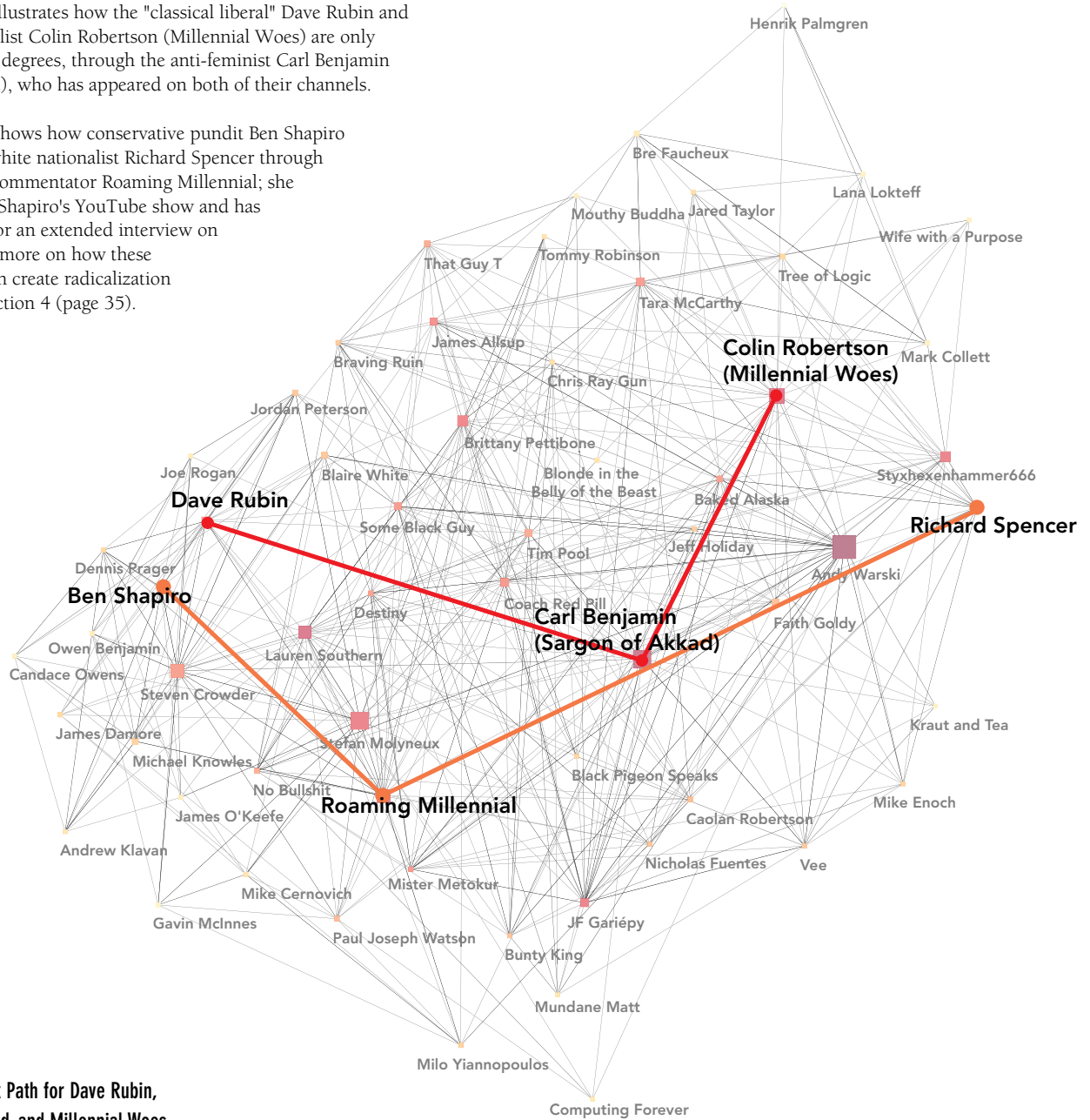
Focus: Network Path for Dave Rubin, Sargon of Akkad, and Millennial Woes

To read more about Network Path 1, see page 12.

Focus: Network Path for Ben Shapiro, Roaming Millennial, and Richard Spencer

To read more about Network Path 2, see page 13.

To understand the importance of links in this graph, consider the role that Dave Rubin plays. Rubin is a comedian-turned-pundit who hosts a YouTube talk show called *The Rubin Report*, which has over 750,000 channel subscribers.[15] Rubin describes himself as a "classical liberal," a variation on a libertarian embrace of small government and individual liberty. As the host of a number of public intellectuals and influencers, Rubin has become a focal point in a community that calls itself the "Intellectual Dark Web."[16] Rubin describes this group not in terms of ideology, but rather as an "eclectic mix of people" devoted to having "the important and often dangerous conversations that are completely ignored by the mainstream." His most frequent guests are the other self-identified members of this "Intellectual Dark Web" group, including the psychology professor Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro, a conservative media pundit. However, Rubin also hosts a range of influencers outside of this subcommunity, including those with more openly extremist views. These guests include Stefan Molyneux, a talk show host who promotes scientific racism, and Lauren Southern, a Canadian citizen journalist who has since been barred from entering England because of her vehement anti-Islam and anti-immigration activism.

Rubin has also hosted Carl Benjamin, himself a heavily connected node of the AIN. Benjamin first made content in the early 2010s focused on criticizing feminist game critics and feminism more broadly. He grew his popularity in 2014 by broadcasting throughout Gamergate, a movement of coordinated harassment against women game critics and designers.[17] Since then, he has continued to grow his following with more anti-feminist, anti-social justice content; his main channel now has over 800,000 subscribers, and a secondary channel has an additional 250,000. Benjamin calls himself a "skeptic," a term originally used to refer to a group of YouTube atheists. Like Rubin, Benjamin has also embraced the image of a "classical liberal," and often discusses his views in terms of social theory. Indeed, it is just as common for Benjamin to partake in intellectual discussions with popular libertarians and conservatives as it is for him to live stream himself "shooting the shit" and making fun of feminists with other gamers.

At the same time, Benjamin frequently collaborates with openly white nationalist YouTubers. In his video with Spencer, Benjamin was presumably debating *against* scientific racism, a stance he frequently echoes. However, by participating in the debate, he was building a shared audience—and thus, a symbiotic relationship— with white nationalists. In fact, Benjamin has become a frequent guest on channels that host such "debates," which often function as group entertainment as much as genuine disagreements.

Furthermore, Benjamin's collaborations with white nationalists often eschew the debate format entirely.[18] He has hosted Jared Taylor, the white nationalist founder

of the magazine *American Renaissance*, and he has appeared on the channel of Colin Robertson, a white nationalist, "alt-right" vlogger who goes by the pseudonym Millennial Woes.[19] In fact, Robertson was one of several influencers to join in on Benjamin's debate with Richard Spencer, arguing in favor of Spencer's ideas of scientific racism. While in that context, they were presumably on opposite sides of the debate, Benjamin's multiple guest appearances on Robertson's channel reveal a friendly working dynamic between the two.[20] Benjamin discussed this in one of his conversations with Robertson, saying that even though he does not embrace white nationalist ideas, "In many ways, we do have similar objectives. . . . We have the same enemies, right? I mean, you guys hate the SJWs, I hate the SJWs. I want to see the complete destruction of social justice. . . . If the alt-right took the place of the SJWs, I would have a lot less to fear."[21]

Robertson's collaborations reflect his own complicated views on conservatives and libertarians. For example, every December he hosts a range of guests in an event he calls "Millenniyule." Most of his guests are fellow white nationalist YouTube influencers, such as Jared Taylor.[22] However, he also hosts a number of "classical liberal" YouTubers such as Carl Benjamin and libertarian ones such as a vlogger who goes by That Guy T.[23]

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This path, from Rubin through Benjamin to Robertson and back again, is just one example of the proximity of influencers in the AIN. One could just as easily trace between the conservative entertainer Steven Crowder and the "pro-white," anti-immigration advocates Brittany Pettibone and Martin Sellner, through the talk show host and scientific racism proponent Stefan Molyneux (in the latter case, Molyneux was interviewing the couple about getting barred from entering the United Kingdom; they were attempting to enter the country in part to interview Carl Benjamin and the anti-Islam advocate Tommy Robinson).[24] Or from the conservative pundits Ben Shapiro and Michael Knowles, hosts on *The Daily Wire*, to Richard Spencer, through the vlogger known as Roaming Millennial.[25] By connecting to and interacting with one another through YouTube videos, influencers with mainstream audiences lend their credibility to openly white nationalist and other extremist content creators. This is both driven by, and results in, a shared set of ideas, which in turn helps create the potential for radicalization— an idea I explore in more depth later in this report.

It is not only these guest appearances and viewpoints, however, that knit together the AIN. They also collectively partake in certain participatory media practices. As I will show throughout the rest of this report, the influencers all draw from a

larger playbook of alternative media practices and influence-growing techniques. To fully understand the role and the power of this network, it is necessary to understand the strategies of alternative media outlets and the practices of building influence online.

BUILDING AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Across the AIN, influencers express a distrust of the "mainstream" news media and a desire to use YouTube to create a better, alternative media system. In some cases, they refer to themselves collectively as the "alternative media." This positioning may seem counterintuitive, as much of their content—from educational videos to livestreamed "hangouts" to personal vlogs—bears little resemblance to the traditional format of news media. However, according to a 2017 study of youth views of news, young people's "concept of what constitutes 'the news' is amorphous and often extends well beyond the content produced by traditional journalistic institutions."[26] This finding accurately represents the more flexible definition of "news" employed by those in the AIN to describe their varied political content.

For the influencers in the AIN, distrust of the mainstream media often turns to outright rejection and hostility. Various influencers decry what they feel is a liberal, progressive, or SJW bias in the mainstream. Others point to cases of journalistic failure and the economic challenges faced by media in digital environments. Some employ antiestablishment reasoning to reject the corporate logics driving many mainstream outlets. By creating an alternative media system on YouTube, influencers in the AIN express a wish not only to provide an additional, alternative option for young audiences, but also to replace their consumption of mainstream news entirely.

To do so, they can capitalize on the broader distrust of news media in the American population. Indeed, among American audiences, only 14% of Republicans have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in the mass media to "report the news fully, accurately, and fairly."[27] The 2017 study on youth views on the news found that teens express "widespread skepticism" about news media and "assume that much of the information they encounter may be inaccurate or biased."[28] Based on this distrust, disillusioned news consumers are turning to alternative sources. In an extensive study on the online news-sharing ecosystem in the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election, researchers found that conservatives were opting out of media sources traditionally considered "mainstream," such as

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The New York Times, and were instead sharing news from a range of hyper-partisan websites such as *Breitbart News*.[29]

The following sections outline two key ways the influencers in the AIN differentiate themselves from mainstream news as a way to appeal to young, disillusioned media consumers. The first way is by rejecting traditional news media norms for building credibility and trust in favor of the norms of participatory culture. These influencers explicitly reject the trappings of institutional prestige, adherence to objectivity and neutrality, and the enforcement of gatekeeping mechanisms that dominate mainstream news media. Instead, they build trust with their audiences by stressing their relatability, their authenticity, and their accountability to those audiences. The second way is by providing a specific social identity for themselves and their audiences. Specifically, they provide a likeminded community for those who feel like social underdogs for their rejection of progressive values, and they provide a sense of countercultural rebellion for those same audiences.

With these approaches, the influencers of the AIN draw inspiration, approaches, and tactics from alternative media systems of the past, and from the participatory practices of social media platforms of today. The underground press of the New Left in the 1960s, for example, pioneered a journalistic approach that focused on storytelling and authenticity rather than objectivity.[30] More recently, YouTube has broadly positioned itself as a counterpoint to mainstream broadcasters and entertainment juggernauts by highlighting the ability for individuals to broadcast on the platform. This attitude often serves "in stark contrast to the production, content, and marketing strategies of traditional media industries."[31] The AIN influencers also draw from the practices of news outlets like Fox News, which has for many years cultivated an oppositional social identity against the "cultural elites" of liberal media, even as it remains the most popular cable news outlet.[32]

ALTERNATIVE CREDIBILITY

Many influencers in the AIN discuss their channels as new kinds of "experiments" in relaying information in more meaningful and accurate ways than legacy media.[33] Specifically, this means they largely reject traditional modes of news media credibility, such as institutional reputation and the ideal of objectivity. Instead, they build trust with their audiences through participatory media practices. These techniques are highly effective: social ties play a larger role in media trust than the reputation of a specific media source, and when people see a news post from someone they personally trust, they are more likely to recommend it to friends, follow it, or sign up for news alerts from it.[34] A recent study on youth news consumers also found that they trust "user-generated" content more than legacy media sources.[35] While political influencers adopt a range of strategies, they stress three qualities in

particular that differentiate them from mainstream media: relatability, authenticity, and accountability.

Relatability

Legacy media "draws on the long-standing familiarity and reputation of their brand" as a source of trust.[36] Outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have built credibility and trust over the course of decades. However, it is precisely this institutional prestige that media creators of the AIN see as a problem. For example, YouTuber and independent journalist Tim Pool argues that a media outlet's institutional reputation can actually act as a cover for bad journalism. "What ends up happening," Pool explains in one video, "is that being behind a brand gets people off the hook for the things they do. A journalist could write something bad, but people see *Washington Post*, they don't see the individual. And if *The Washington Post* doesn't issue a correction then these individuals [readers] will leave with bad information and believing some fake story."[37] In an earlier video, Pool argued that now, "It's about more of a personal level of trust."[38]

Rather than stressing institutional credibility, political influencers highlight how relatable and accessible they are to their audiences.[39] Indeed, as social media scholar Brooke Erin Duffy describes: across communities on YouTube, influencers often highlight their relatability and disavow "traditional markers of status by casting themselves as people *just like us*."[40] Political influencers treat it as a point of pride to not be affiliated with larger, legacy news institutions. In fact, some influencers, including Pool, openly discuss their departures from media and academic institutions to highlight their outsider status as a source of credibility (Pool previously worked at *Vice Media* and *Fusion TV* before striking out on his own).

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These narratives, while compelling, often obscure the skills, capital, and networking opportunities these influencers gained from previous institutional affiliations.[41] And many political influencers still maintain institutional affiliations to academic institutions, think tanks, and media outlets. However, by broadcasting as individuals on the platform, their connections to these institutions are often obscured.

This is the case, for example, with Dave Rubin, the talk show host who gives a platform to many libertarian academics and anti-SJW YouTubers. Rubin has a particular claim to individuality, having publicly showcased his departure from the left-leaning alternative outlet *The Young Turks*. Because he frames his political views in terms of his personal ideological journey and his increased media independence,

Rubin is able to present his ideas as new and, in some cases, even revolutionary.[42]

However, this framing obscures his partnership with a well-funded, highly influential libertarian organization, which provides him with many of the speakers who appear on his show. In 2016, he established a partnership with Learn Liberty, an initiative housed in the Institute for Humane Studies (IHS) at George Mason University.[43] The IHS is heavily funded by the billionaire Koch family and is chaired by Charles Koch; its specific aim is to "cultivate and subsidize a farm team of the next generation's libertarian scholars."[44] Thus, Rubin is able to position himself as a "freethinker" and an "outsider" even as he is promoted by a well-funded organization with the explicit aim of promoting libertarian ideals on behalf of wealthy donors.

Authenticity

In addition to institutional credibility, legacy news media outlets have traditionally built trust through their adherence to the norms of *objectivity* and their devotion to fact-checking.[45] The political influencers of the AIN, on the other hand, generally make no such claims. Instead, they criticize the very concept of objectivity, as well as the mainstream media's claims that they adhere to it. Citizen journalist Lauren Southern has claimed, "I would never *pretend* to be objective like you see CNN do and Fox News do." Instead she calls her approach "gonzo" and says she attempts to convey a "Hunter S. Thompson kind of thing." Dave Rubin cites the incorrect media predictions for the 2016 presidential election as evidence that mainstream institutions "mask their opinions as facts."[46]

Influencers in the AIN instead adopt the strategies of microcelebrities—particularly the cultivation of authenticity through transparency and responsiveness. For example,

> By adopting the practices of genres like vlogging, political influencers are able to cultivate a sense of transparency that is often lacking from mainstream news outlets.

microcelebrities commonly use the intimate genre of "vlogging."[47] Emerging from webcam culture and personal blogging, vlogs adhere to very different tropes than those of traditional news outlets. They are often highly personal, told through subjective storytelling and affective cues, and take place over long periods of time. The very setting of vlogging – traditionally filmed in bedrooms, at kitchen tables, or in living rooms – makes the videos highly personal.

By adopting the practices of genres like vlogging, political influencers are able to cultivate a sense of transparency that is often lacking from mainstream news outlets.[48] For example, they frequently reveal elements of the "backstage" or behind-the-scenes processes at work to their audiences.[49] In one video, conservative vlogger Blaire White starts by telling her audience, "Hey, guys. So if I look different, it's because I have different lighting, and it's supposed to be like beauty lighting, but I feel like I just look

so pale."[50] Tim Pool often includes segments that feature him buying the electronic recording equipment that he plans on using to film future events (he also films daily vlog episodes in his living room and hosts a weekly group podcast around his dining room table).

Detached from the cable news cycle, the content on YouTube also takes on a different temporal rhythm from the mainstream news. As media scholars have noted for decades, the television format often encourages shortened, simplified "sound bites" that obscure the nuances of topics in the news.[51] In contrast, citizen journalists may attend an event and livestream it in its entirety over the course of several hours. Political conversations can last many hours as well, resulting in extremely in-depth discussions of political theory and abstract ideology (this was the case with the debate between Richard Spencer and Carl Benjamin, which lasted over four hours).

As social media scholars have noted, the very idea of *cultivating authenticity* is itself a contradiction.[52] Authenticity has become such an effective way of building influence that powerful media institutions, both progressive and conservative, have begun to take notice. Recently, it has become a key topic at conservative media conferences like RightOnline (also funded by the Koch brothers). The goal of the event is to teach a new generation of media makers how to build influence and spread conservatism.[53] Attendees can find presentations and panels specifically on the topics of "being authentic" and "being likable," as well as "establishing a clear media persona and story about oneself."[54] In this way, the trappings of authenticity can be cultivated and exploited by institutional power, even as political influencers use them to promise freedom from that same power.

Accountability

The AIN engages directly with its audiences in a way that traditional news outlets do not—through comments and social media posts, but also directly in video content. Traditionally, legacy media outlets have used gatekeeping mechanisms and a level of distance from their audiences as a way to establish expertise and authority. In contrast, many political influencers explicitly court feedback in order to build trust and rapport with their audience. Audience feedback is directly built into YouTube's interface: audiences react to content in the form of likes, dislikes, comments, and channel subscriptions.

In keeping with vlogging genre norms, many influencers speak directly to their audiences and ask them for their opinions and feedback in the comments section of their videos. A common genre among the influencers is the "Q&A" video, in which hosts answer viewers' questions.[55] In some cases, they recruit their audience's help in covering issues. At the end of a video criticizing the mainstream media, Blaire White

told her audience to "make sure you comment below with some other examples of mainstream media news outlets lying."[56] In another case, White asked her viewers to help keep her on schedule making videos. "In 2018, I'll be uploading once a week if not more. . . . If I mess up, scream at me, harass me, bombard me with comments and messages and make me feel terrible about it."[57]

Ultimately, political influencers acknowledge their audiences as an important part of their media community on YouTube, and they stress the importance of the audience's role in promoting their goals. Dave Rubin invoked this to his audience at the end of one video about the so-called "Intellectual Dark Web": "You, watching this right now, are actually part of this Intellectual Dark Web. If you engage with these ideas, and you're trying to figure out what the hell is going on, then you are as much part of this thing as I am."[58] He then asked his audience to tweet and post about these same ideas, to continue to promote his channel and his political causes.

ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL IDENTITY

The political influencers of the AIN use the media they create to establish a type of alternative media community among their audiences. These content creators use collaborations with other influencers and responses to audience feedback to cultivate a sense of loyalty. In fact, media scholars have argued that information consumption is less about factually correct or incorrect information than it is about rallying around a collective *social identity*. Media scholar Daniel Kreiss, for example, argues that Fox News and *Breitbart News* have been so successful in part because they provide a metaphorical "family" to those who reject mainstream news.[59] This is powerful from a political perspective because a family provides "a sense of identity, place, and belonging; emotional, social, and cultural support and security; and gives rise to political and social affiliations and beliefs."[60]

For contemporary news outlets, identity signaling can act as both a means of creating strong viewer ties and a way of staking out their territory in a saturated attention economy. Media scholar Reece Peck has documented this in the case of Fox News, which uses "cultural referents," like references to country music stars, to evoke a specific class-based and racialized identity (specifically white, working class, and male).[61] Peck calls this approach "cultural populism" and argues that Fox uses it to rally their audiences in opposition to their competition, whom they brand as out-of-touch, coastal "elites."[62]

The political influencers of the AIN also promote a social identity that helps them build influence and attract audiences. Specifically, they signify an identity of both social underdogs and a hip counterculture—courting young audiences looking for a community with a level of rebellion.

Social Underdogs

The political influencers of the AIN consistently project the idea that nonprogressives are "persecuted against" because of their beliefs. Sociologist Francesca Tripodi observed this trend among conservative Christian news consumers, writing that while none of the participants had personally been harassed or targeted for their beliefs, they were collectively "galvanized by the overarching notion that the intolerant 'Left' was silencing conservative expression."[63]
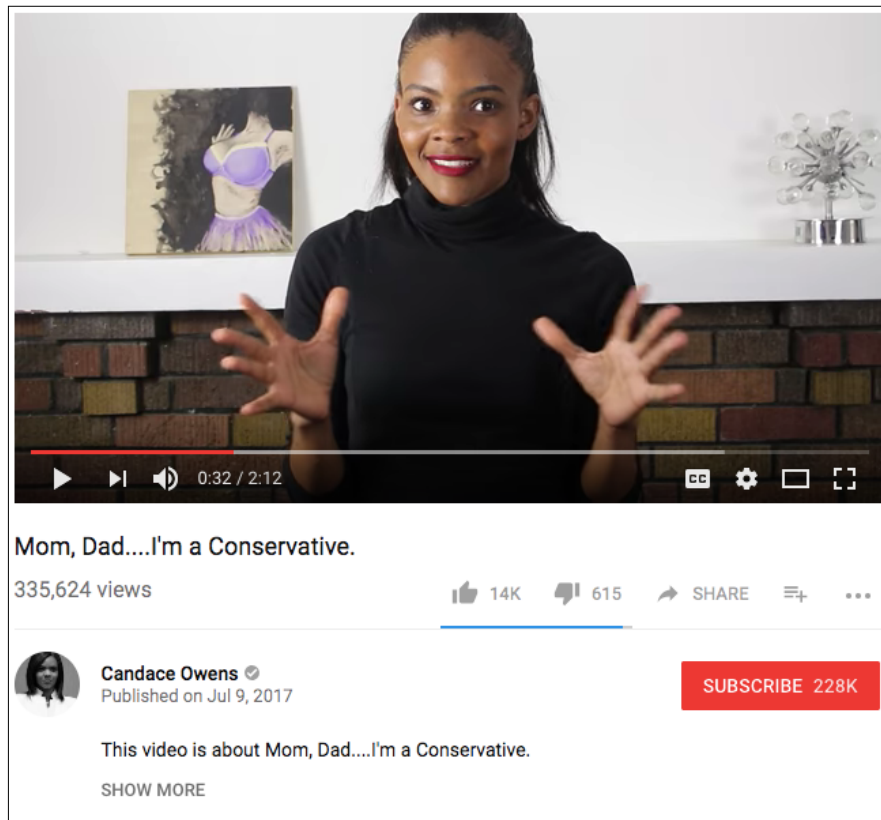

Fig. 2: YouTube vlogger Candace Owens comes out to her parents that she's conservative.

One popular trope among conservative-identifying members of the AIN is the embarrassment or shaming that comes along with admitting one's political views publicly. Conservative YouTube vlogger Candace Owens, who uses the pseudonym Red Pill Black, launched her YouTube career with a facetious video about telling her parents she's conservative (*Fig. 2*). In the video, titled, "Mom, Dad….I'm a Conservative," Owens acts out two sketches about "coming out" in 2017.[64] In the first, she comes out to her parents as gay and is greeted with love and support; in the second, she "comes out" to her parents as conservative and is met with judgment and concern.

A similar sentiment has been circulated by James Damore, the Google engineer who was fired in July 2017 after sharing a memo promoting biologically determinist misogyny as an explanation for gender disparities within the company.[65] Both as part of the memo and in subsequent media appearances, Damore has expressed concern that he was being discriminated against at Google for being conservative; he claimed Silicon Valley is an "ideological echo chamber" that needs more "ideological diversity."[66] While many in the AIN criticize and mock progressive social movements for what they see as a "victim mentality," they also simultaneously position themselves as the genuine victims in society.

Some political influencers have tied this "social underdog" position to the idea that YouTube is attempting to "de-platform" them—in other words, kick them off the platform. In early 2018, YouTube changed its monetization policies as a way to prevent "spammers, impersonators, and other bad actors" from exploiting the system.[67] The changes were described as a reaction against a series of videos targeted at children that imparted highly disturbing content. However, these policies have also affected several political influencers platforming the AIN. Many of them have expressed anxieties about their ability to continue making a living off of videos. These influencers are far from the only content creators affected (those in LGBTQ communities, for example, have also experienced challenges).[68] However, demonetization continues to fuel their specific narrative that major institutions – including technology platforms – have a liberal bias.

> ...they purposefully craft a shared identity based on hipness and edginess, and they signify a countercultural identity that largely draws from youth movements of the past.

The "social underdog" may be appealing to some, but it also erases a number of systemic power differentials in society and connects to even more extremist ideas. For example, the position of "social underdog" is also reflected in white nationalist and supremacist discourse. These groups often describe themselves as victims of racial, gender, and class oppression posed by the gendered, sexualized, and racialized "other"—specifically, women, LGBTQ, African Americans, and Jews.[69] The nature of this connection is discussed in more detail later in this report.

Countercultural Appeal

Many of the political influencers of the AIN attempt to appeal to young, tech-savvy audiences. To do so, they purposefully craft a shared identity based on hipness and edginess, and they signify a *countercultural identity* that largely draws from youth movements of the past. An editor of the conspiracy theory media outlet *Infowars*, Paul Joseph Watson, made a video explicitly stating these appeals, called "Conservatism is the New Counter-Culture." In the video, he draws comparisons to the New Left

countercultural activists of the 1960s and the punk rock scene of the 1980s (*Fig. 3*).[70] While the members of the AIN espouse drastically different political views than either of the countercultures they draw from, they use their avowed populism to align with the antiestablishment sentiment of both past movements.

Richard Spencer strategically capitalized on this countercultural positioning when he promoted the "alt-right" throughout the 2016 election, describing the movement as "edgy and dangerous, it's cool and hip. It's that thing our parents don't want us to do."[71] This positioning has also been used explicitly to excuse the seriousness of the racism and sexism associated with "alt-right" positions like Spencer's. Notorious provocateur Milo Yiannopolous and his co-author Allum Bokhari wrote an article about the "alt-right" claiming that those who identified with the term were no more bigots than "death metal devotees in the 80s were actually Satanists. Just as the kids of the 60s shocked their parents with promiscuity, long hair and rock'n'roll, so too do the alt-right's young meme brigades shock older generations."[72]

Fig. 3: Paul Joseph Watson video from February 2017.

Political influencers in the AIN have also built on their opposition to "PC culture" and the "language police" by co-opting one of the fundamental political causes of the New Left in the 1960s: the Free Speech Movement. The original Free Speech Movement was a long-term student protest that took place at University of California, Berkeley throughout 1964 and 1965. Now, many of the political influencers in the AIN call "political correctness" a "suppression of free speech" and claim that policies implemented by social platforms and colleges alike are a threat to the First Amendment.

There are genuine conversations to be had about free speech online and on college campuses, and legal scholars have argued that we need to reassess our understandings

of the First Amendment in the contemporary information environment.[73] However, the positioning of those in the AIN as defenders of free speech is laden with contradictions. Influencers in the AIN often bully and make fun of other influencers they disagree with and sometimes encourage their viewers to do the same.[74] Because they sit at the intersection of ideological disagreements and personal conflict, the influencers can often criticize social justice by targeting individuals and treating them as proxies for progressive ideology. They can then trivialize this approach by referring to it as "drama" or political debate.[75]

Indeed, the entire countercultural positioning is misleading: these influencers are adopting identity signals affiliated with previous countercultures, but the actual content of their arguments seeks to reinforce dominant cultural racial and gendered hierarchies. Their reactionary politics and connections to traditional modes of power show that what they are most often fighting for is actually the status quo—a return to traditional gender and racial norms, or a belief in the individual over an understanding of group oppression. In this way, they can paradoxically align hyper-traditional ideals with the rebellious positioning of past countercultural movements.

PROMOTING IDEOLOGY THROUGH INFLUENCER MARKETING

Content creators of the Alternative Influence Network use the techniques of online influencer culture not only to gain trust with their audiences but also explicitly to *promote reactionary ideology*. This reflects the larger phenomenon of online influencer marketing: microcelebrities on social media develop highly intimate relationships with their followers before inserting advertisements and marketing items into their content. As outlined in the introduction, the influencers in the AIN adopt the techniques of influencer marketing, but instead of selling products or services to their audiences, they sell political ideology (hence my use of the term "political influencers").

These strategies reveal a tension underlying the content produced by these influencers: while they present themselves as *news* sources, their content strategies often more accurately consist of marketing and advertising approaches. These approaches are meant to provoke feelings, memories, emotions, and social ties. In this way, the "accuracy" of their messaging can be difficult to assess through traditional journalistic tactics like fact-checking.

> ...the influencers in the AIN adopt the techniques of influencer marketing, but instead of selling products or services to their audiences, they sell political ideology

The following sections outline some of the major techniques political influencers adopt from influencer marketing to promote reactionary ideologies to their followers. Specifically, they recount ideological testimonials that frame ideology in terms of personal growth and self-betterment. They engage in self-branding techniques that present traditional, white, male-dominated values as desirable and aspirational. They employ search engine optimization (SEO) to highly rank their content against politically charged keywords. And they strategically use controversy to gain attention and frame political ideas as fun entertainment.

IDEOLOGICAL TESTIMONIALS

Many political influencers of the AIN frame political issues in terms of personal stories. These stories operate as *ideological testimonials* akin to product testimonials in advertising. One popular testimonial trope among right-wing political influencers is the transformation from "leftist" to a member of the political right. Many of these

parables center on specific moments of change, often phrased as "awakenings" in which influencers were confronted with the "fallacies" of "the left" and saw a better path forward.

This is how Dave Rubin describes his own political transformation. He frequently discusses a political awakening he had in 2014, after watching an episode of *The Bill Maher Show* featuring the philosopher and "Horseman of Atheism" Sam Harris.[76] In his appearance on the show, Sam Harris got into an argument with fellow panelist and guest Ben Affleck about contemporary Islam. In the clip, Harris criticizes modern liberalism for its unwillingness to condemn aspects of Islam. After Affleck calls these comments "gross" and "racist," Harris responds that "we have to be able to criticize bad ideas" and that "Islam at this moment is the motherload of bad ideas."[77] Rubin claims that after the episode was aired, the onus was put on Harris and Maher to prove that they weren't bigoted, and he says the event illustrated "lazy thinking" on the part of progressives. The incident led to Rubin's falling out with *The Young Turks*, after which he began producing content independently and moved more and more toward libertarianism.

These testimonials frequently, perhaps counterintuitively, come from influencers who are women, people of color, and/or members of LGBTQ community. In these cases, the influencers often reframe progressive issues of social justice into conservative narratives of individual self-betterment. These testimonials fundamentally deny systemic oppression of vulnerable populations by *positioning oppression and victimhood as a choice that can be overcome*.

This is the case with the conservative, anti-SJW influencer Blaire White. White is an out trans woman whose videos often consist of her making humorous and snarky responses to feminist and social justice content. White differentiates her personal experiences as a trans woman from what she sees as the "victim mentality" of the groups she derogatorily calls "SJWs." In contrast, she positions her own coming out and transitioning experiences in terms of the conservative ideals of individualism and personal betterment. She even says that before her transition, she was herself an SJW and adopted the victim mentality, but that through her personal experiences, she was able to take control of her life and eschew that "toxic" approach: "If there was ever a point where I was prone to being a stereotypical trans victim and just perpetually offended," she said in one video, "it died off when I started taking my life into my own hands and realizing that I am capable of overcoming things."[78] In this sense, she positions her coming out as the moment of awakening in which she gave up the "victim mentality" of "the left."

Influencer Antonia Okafor used a similar strategy when she appeared in a video for conservative media nonprofit *Prager University* (known colloquially as *PragerU*). In

the video titled "Black, Millennial, Female and…Conservative,"[79] Okafor talks about how she used to be an Obama-supporting Democrat before she "decided to start asking questions." She reframes her conservative belief in individual responsibility under the guise of "female empowerment," by saying, "I decided that the very definition of empowerment required me to take responsibility for my own life. I wasn't going to be anyone's victim." She argues that she started voting Republican because it is the party that views her "as an empowered individual, able to shape my own destiny, not as a member of a victim group." Overall, as with any effective testimonial, she claims the transformation has made her a happier and more fulfilled person: "The more questions I asked, the less popular I became. But here's the funny thing. I started feeling better about myself."

The ideological testimonial is also popular among more extremist influencers. Among these YouTubers, many refer to the process of abandoning older, progressive politics as "taking the red pill." This was the case, for example, for the YouTuber who goes by the pseudonym Blonde in the Belly of the Beast, who posted a video called "My Red Pill Journey." In her case, she began getting "redpilled" because she felt the black students at her high school "self-segregated" and had different "demeanors" than the white students. These included, as she describes, more dropouts, teen pregnancies, and physical fighting—three tropes that are common among white supremacist
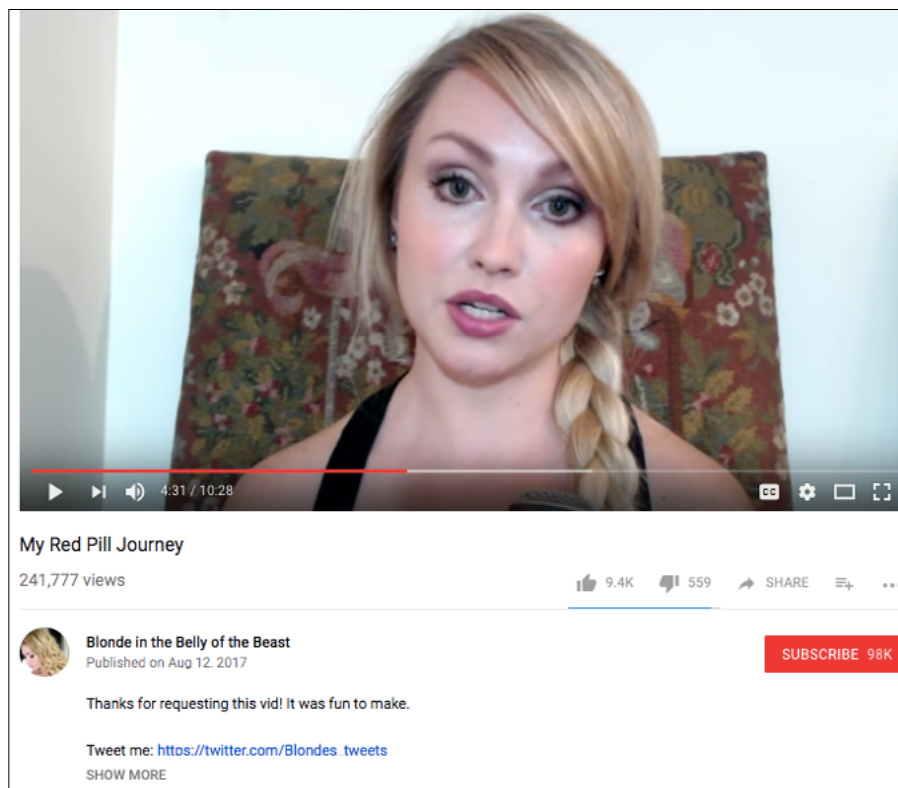

Fig. 4: YouTuber who goes by "Blonde in the Belly of the Beast" uses personal stories to frame her political ideology in terms of personal growth and self-betterment.

depictions of black people.[80] She then discusses going to university and reading Western classics, which led her to develop a "deep, lasting reverence and loyalty to Western civilization" and "a sense of pride for being descended of Western people." As with the conservative testimonials, Blonde describes how her "redpilling" made her life better; she says she became better educated, ate well, exercised, and took care of herself. This includes acting "more feminine" and smoothing out relationship issues she had because she was previously "too dominant."

These personalized stories are particularly powerful when they come from influencers who have built affective relationships with their audiences. Often told through highly detailed and personal narratives, these testimonials cannot be fact-checked because they speak to "lived experiences." At the same time, they support larger narratives of racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry.[81]

POLITICAL SELF-BRANDING

"Self-branding" is an extremely important part of influencer culture. It refers to a conscious impression management strategy that deploys "cultural meanings and images drawn from . . . the mainstream culture industries."[82] By creating a "publicizable personality," influencers are better able to appeal to a market of potential viewers.[83] Just as with advertising more broadly, there are politics inherent in self-branding: in order to build followings, influencers across industries and platforms often appeal to tropes that reinforce traditional gender and racial roles. For political influencers of the AIN, the political ideals implicitly embedded in advertising become explicit. Blending the "glamour" of celebrity with the intimacy of influencer culture, they broadcast gender traditionalism and performed "whiteness." In this way, influencers display the way they *live their politics as an aspirational brand*.

> Blending the "glamour" of celebrity with the intimacy of influencer culture, they broadcast gender traditionalism and performed "whiteness." In this way, influencers display the way they live their politics as an aspirational brand.

For example, white nationalist women influencers often use self-branding strategies to highlight traditional, white notions of femininity. These influencers call themselves "trad" wives (with "trad" acting as a shorthand for "traditionalist"). "Trad" women create content about the ideals of staying at home, supporting their husbands, and raising children. One example is the influencer Ayla Stewart, who runs a channel called *Wife with a Purpose*. In her channel description, she writes: "Ayla, is a stay-at-home, homeschooling, home birthing, mother of six children . . . #TradLife #WhiteCulture."[84]

Meanwhile, some male political influencers brand themselves as hypermasculine. The Golden One, for example, is a unique blend of men's rights activist, white nationalist, self-help guru, and fantasy enthusiast (*Fig. 5*). He fashions his politics around hyper-traditional gender roles, commitment to physical fitness and martial arts, and a self-aggrandizing mythology drawn in part from *The Lord of the Rings* and the tabletop miniature wargame Warhammer 40,000. In addition to political commentary, he posts advice on eating and fitness. The Golden One is heavily influenced by a "live your life like an RPG" (short for "role-playing game") mentality, a sentiment that has grown in some gaming communities since the release of popular digital RPG Skyrim in 2011. His branding not only reflects hyper-traditional gender roles and archetypes from Nordic mythology; it also taps into the self-branding strategies that appeal to gaming and bodybuilding communities.

AIN influencers also extend their personal brands beyond the confines of YouTube, often maintaining profiles on multiple platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, and

Fig. 5: The Golden One showcases his muscular body alongside superimposed Western mythological figures.

Discord. In these cases, they adapt their personal branding strategies. For example, on Instagram, a number of political influencers in the AIN "emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture, such as glamorous self-portraits."[85] Martin Sellner and Brittany Pettibone – a "pro-white," anti-immigration "celebrity couple" – use Instagram and YouTube to showcase their relationship as the embodiment of "trad" relationships and gender performances (*Fig. 6*). While Pettibone and Sellner may appear like many other good-looking young people posting flattering images on Instagram, on YouTube they openly advocate a total end to immigration.[86] By emulating techniques used by mainstream celebrities and fashion bloggers on

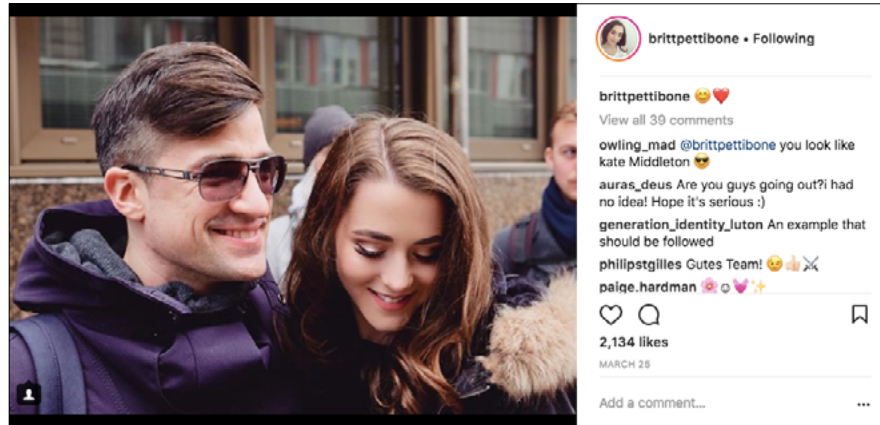Instagram, they minimize the significance of their racist views.

*Fig. 6: YouTubers Martin Sellner and Brittany Pettibone use
the self-presentation strategies common among Instagram influencers.*

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

By promoting testimonials and partaking in self-branding, political influencers are able to use the visual and narrative capabilities of digital media. Political influencers are also able to strategically use politicized keywords for marketing purposes. Specifically, the influencers in the AIN try to get their content highly ranked in search results. Businesses have devoted significant marketing resources toward this process, calling it search engine optimization (SEO). Some political influencers in the AIN use SEO strategies to exploit "data voids," or search terms that lack robust results.[87] In this way, they use SEO to "hijack" certain issues and provide specific messages to potential new audiences.

In a 2018 study of YouTube's search algorithm, researchers Bernhard Rieder, Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández, and Òscar Coromina document how this phenomenon looks in practice.[88] For automated searches conducted over the course of the summer of 2016, they found that the query "Gamergate" consistently brought back content from figures who supported the event and its harassment campaigns, such as Milo Yiannopoulos and Carl Benjamin. They also found that the term "refugees" brought back content specifically from anti-Islamic immigration YouTube influencers, including Black Pigeon Speaks and the outlet *Rebel Media*.[89] When I made the same searches in the spring and summer of 2018, I found that very little had changed since the time of the previous study; influencers of the AIN had highly ranked results for both search terms (see *Fig. 7*).

In my searches, I also found that influencers are explicitly using terminology affiliated with progressive social justice movements and are therefore appearing in search results for those terms. A number of popular videos from conservative influencers use the terms "social justice," "liberal," and "leftist" in their videos titles, as well as more specific terms like "intersectionality." Currently, a YouTube search for any of those terms will bring back content from conservative and libertarian political influencers within the top 10 YouTube search results. The search results for "social justice," for example, include a video from *PragerU* entitled "What is Social Justice?" hosted by Jonah Goldberg, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.[90] In the video, he echoes libertarian critiques of social justice in the format of an educational video (*Fig. 8*). Other results include a video from the libertarian YouTube channel *ReasonTV* titled "Stossel: Jordan Peterson vs. 'Social Justice Warriors'" and a video from anti-SJW influencer Roaming Millennial titled "Why Social Justice is CANCER." In fact, all of the top 10 video results for "social justice" are criticisms of social justice from reactionary channels (*Fig. 9*).

Fig. 7: *The top results for a search of "Gamergate" made in incognito mode on July 12, 2018 include many perpetrators of harassment and conspiracy theories, including mundanematt, Sargon of Akkad, Milo Yiannopolous, and Internet Aristocrat.*

STRATEGIC CONTROVERSY

As with established news outlets, political influencers are competing in an "attention economy" in which "the most valued content is that which is most likely to attract attention."[91] As a result, many influencers seek to gain attention by capitalizing on controversy. For example, Jordan Peterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, has strategically relayed a moment of controversy into high levels of influence (as well as monetary reward). In 2016, Peterson was at the center of a controversy because of his outspoken opposition to Canada's proposed Bill C-16,
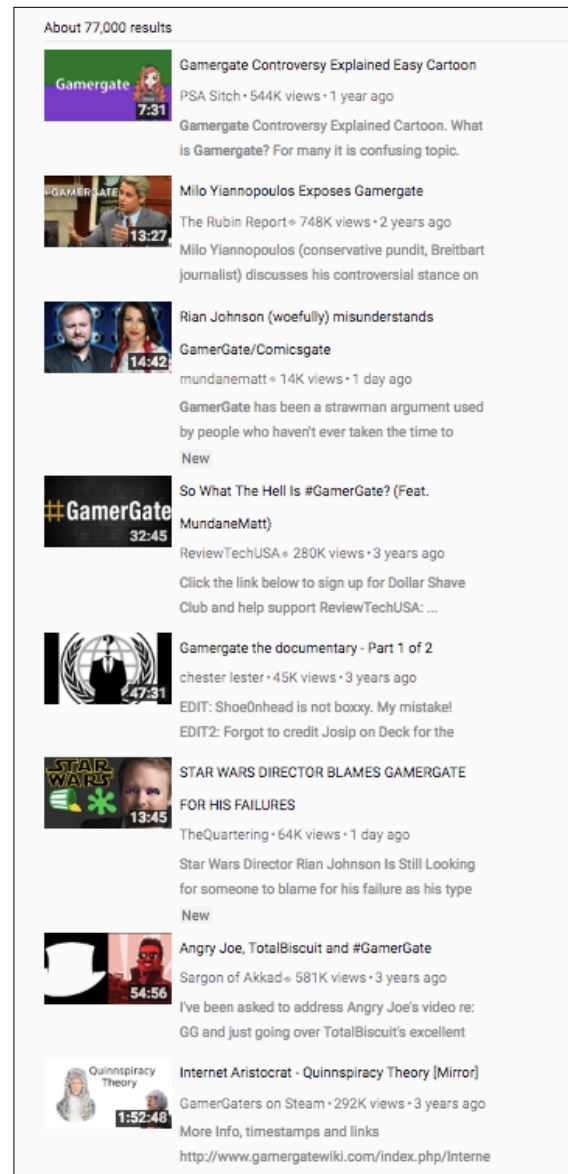
which sought to add gender expression and gender identity as protected identities under the Canadian Human Rights Act. Peterson claimed it would force him to use certain gender pronouns and would thus infringe on his freedom of speech. (Others have said his claims fundamentally misrepresent the nature of the bill.)[92]

By strategically taking a public stance on a hot-button issue, Peterson was able to use the backlash to his advantage on YouTube, where his channel now has over one million subscribers. Peterson identified this strategy when, in an interview, he said that he had "figured out how to monetize social justice warriors."[93] In another video, he makes a similar claim, saying that his audiences "came for the scandal and stayed for the content."[94]

Others generate controversy directly within their content through filmed counterprotests, which borrow from the genre of YouTube stunt videos. One prominent example is the far-right citizen journalist and activist Lauren Southern. In one instance, Southern crashed an anti-rape activist event called SlutWalk with a poster that read "There Is No Rape Culture in the West." (*Fig. 10*).[95] More recently, Southern's demonstrations have become increasingly
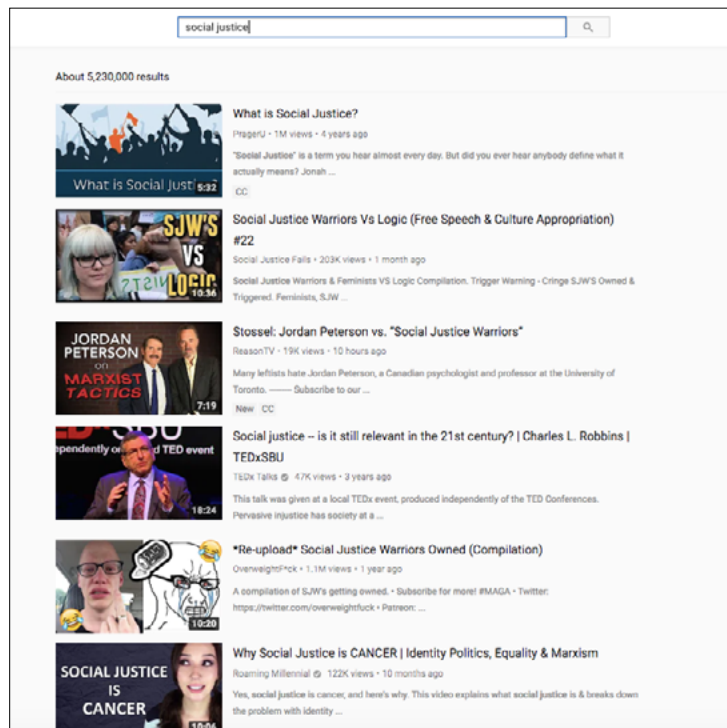

Fig. 8: A screenshot from a PragerU video criticizing social justice; the video appeared as the first result on YouTube for the search term "social justice" (Google Chrome, Incognito in the US, June 19, 2018).

Fig. 9: YouTube search results for "social justice" (Google Chrome, Incognito in the US, June 19, 2018).
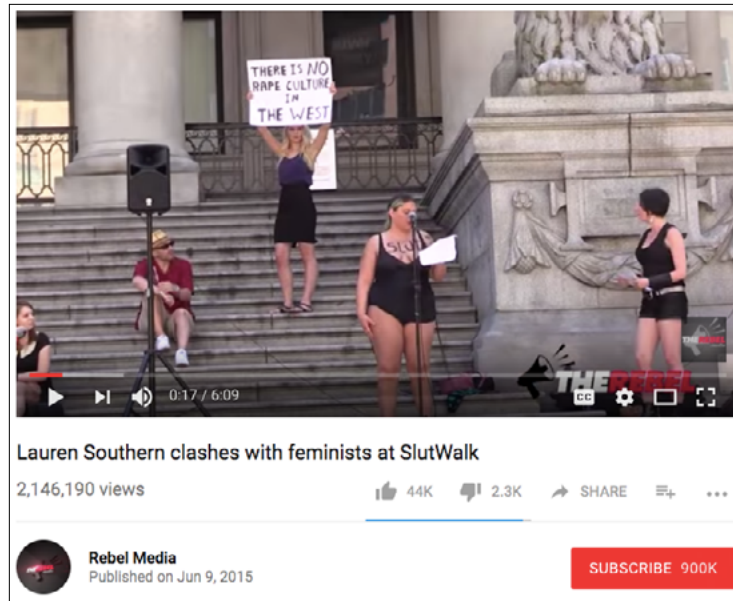
Fig. 10: Lauren Southern creates controversy at an anti-rape event in a video posted to Rebel Media's channel on June 9, 2015.

focused on her anti-immigration, anti-Islam stances. In 2017, Southern filmed her participation in an anti-immigrant action alongside a group far-right European activists (including Martin Sellner). The group boarded a boat, set off flares, and held up an anti-refuge banner while attempting to hinder a ship rescuing stranded refugees.[96]

Some political influencers generate controversy by broadcasting debates between other influencers. In early 2018, an entire debate-focused genre emerged on YouTube called "Internet Bloodsports." Many of these "Bloodsport" debates featured political influencers of the AIN and blurred entertainment, political discourse, and far-right ideology. A number of influencers used this media to build their own followings and name recognition on YouTube. Nowhere was this a clearer case than with Andy Warski, the YouTuber who hosted the scientific racism debate between Richard Spencer and Carl Benjamin (*Fig. 11*). At the time, debates and "drama" had been taking place between AIN influencers for months, related to the topic of scientific racism. Because of the relative influence of the participants, Warski advertised this specific debate as the ultimate showdown on the topic, a spectacle worth viewing regardless of the outcome.[97] The debate was marketed for its entertainment value, despite the academic and frequently pedantic tone of the conversation, as well as its extremely long run time. Because of the video's high viewership, Spencer subsequently dubbed the debate the "Unite the Right of YouTube," likening its significance to the march that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017.[98]
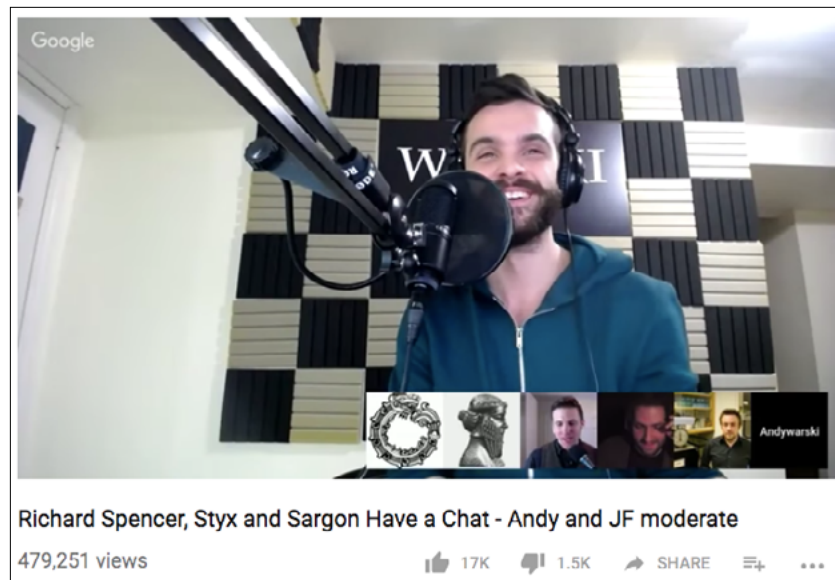
Fig. 11: Andy Warski hosts a debate between Richard Spencer and Carl Benjamin, streamed live on January 4, 2018.

The implications of this strategy go beyond the fact that they capitalize on controversies in order to bring in viewers. It also means that, when viewers actually engage with the content, they see it framed as lighthearted, entertaining, rebellious, and fun. This can be highly effective for young audiences embracing a countercultural identity, but it fundamentally obscures the impact that issues have on vulnerable and underrepresented populations—in Peterson's case, the LGBTQ community; in Southern's case, rape victims and immigrants; and in Warski's case, people of color.

FACILITATING RADICALIZATION THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING

The Alternative Influence Network provides a pathway for the radicalization of audience members and content creators alike. "Radicalization" is a fraught term, and in a contemporary US context is most often affiliated with Islamic extremism. While members of the AIN do not use the term "radicalization," they do often discuss their own processes of destabilization from previous worldviews. In some cases, once their previous worldview is dismantled, they embrace alternative frameworks for understanding the world, such as white nationalism (see, for example, Blonde in the Belly of the Beast describing her shifting understanding of the world in "Ideological Testimonials").

They refer to this process as "taking the red pill," an allusion to a scene in the movie *The Matrix* when the protagonist sees truths about the world that have previously been hidden from him. White nationalists often describe this as a stepwise process. For example, in one possible pathway, they may start by rejecting the mainstream media and "PC culture"; then embrace anti-feminist ideas; then embrace scientific racism or the idea that racial oppression is not real; and then finally, the idea that Jewish people wield positions of influence and harbor malicious intents against white people. (They often refer to these processes as addressing the "woman question," the "race question," and the "Jewish question," or alternatively as "getting redpilled" on any of these individual issues.)

> ...when libertarian and conservative influencers invite white nationalists onto their channels, they expose their audiences to alternative frameworks for understanding the world.

The previous two sections have begun to show how the influencers of the AIN take part in this stepwise radicalization. For example, influencers often encourage audience members to reject the mainstream media in favor of their content, thus priming their audiences for a destabilized worldview and a rejection of popular narratives around current events. Then, when libertarian and conservative influencers invite white nationalists onto their channels, they expose their audiences to alternative frameworks for understanding the world. Thus, audiences may quickly move from following influencers who criticize feminism to those promoting white nationalism. This is why the high concentration of the networking between influencers can prove so powerful.

Several critics have written about the role of the YouTube recommendation algorithm in this radicalization process. They have demonstrated how the algorithm can nudge viewers into accessing extremist content through recommended videos. In an op-ed for *The New York Times*, technology scholar Zeynep Tufekci called YouTube "The Great Radicalizer," showcasing the ways the algorithm drove her to more and more extremist content during an experiment.[99] Another article from an ex-YouTube employee argued a similar case, claiming that "fiction is outperforming reality" in large part because of the thumbnail video recommendations on the platform.[100] While these articles identify a real problem, they treat radicalization as a fundamentally technical problem. What the section below showcases is that radicalization on YouTube is also a fundamentally social problem. Thus, even if YouTube altered or fully removed its content recommendation algorithms, the AIN would still provide a pathway for radicalization.

AUDIENCE RADICALIZATION

Because of the overlapping pattern of guest appearances in the AIN, it is remarkably easy for viewers to be exposed to incrementally more extremist content. However, many influencers fundamentally deny that their collaborations serve as endorsements or even amplifiers of other influencers' content. This is the case, for example, with Dave Rubin. While Rubin himself mainly espouses support for small government and criticizes social justice in broad terms, he sometimes hosts guests who are openly anti-immigrant, espouse scientific racism, or directly identify with the "alt-right." Rubin claims that hosting these guests is not an endorsement of them or their positions.

Rubin says that he thinks it is necessary to expose his audiences to dangerous ideas so they can make fully informed decisions for themselves. He argues that "good ideas always beat out bad ideas if you let the light shine on both of them."[101] This reading of the situation treats his show as a journalistic endeavor and endorses the view that "sunlight is the best disinfectant." This interpretation has been challenged by media scholar Whitney Phillips, who has shown the damaging impact that exposure to extremist ideas can have. In a recent report on media coverage of white nationalists, Phillips argues coverage of extremist content is more likely to be like giving oxygen to a fire.[102]

> ...social networking between influencers makes it easy for audience members to be incrementally exposed to, and come to trust, ever more extremist political positions.

Because the AIN is a *social* network as much as a professional one, collaborations can carry more weight than they would in a traditional news media environment. Influencers often introduce their guests as friends and describe their personal relationships to the audience. This type of social networking between influencers

makes it easy for audience members to be incrementally exposed to, and come to trust, ever more extremist political positions.

In one illustrative example of this process, Dave Rubin hosted the Canadian right-wing influencer Stefan Molyneux for an interview (*Fig. 12*). Molyneux is a libertarian YouTuber and the host of *Freedomain Radio*, a call-in talk radio show. In his YouTube videos, Molyneux openly promotes scientific racism, advocates for the men's rights movement, critiques initiatives devoted to gender equity, and promotes white supremacist conspiracy theories focused on "White Genocide" and "The Great Replacement." When Molyneux appeared on Rubin's show, Rubin did not directly endorse his views, but the host also did not challenge them in any substantive way. Rubin largely let Molyneux dominate the terms of the conversation. Take, for instance, this clip from the interview, when Rubin first brings up Molyneux's beliefs about IQ:

> Rubin: People think that there is somehow a racist element to it. . . . Do you want to make your basic argument around race and IQ?
>
> Molyneux: It's like saying 'do you want to make your argument that the sun is the center of the solar system?' It's like, well it's not a personal thing, like this is not an idea I have come up with.
>
> Rubin: I'm glad you countered with that, because in a way my question accidentally was almost a setup.[103]

Later in the interview, Molyneux claims to be "heartbroken" about race and IQ, saying, "This is one of the most difficult facts I've had to absorb in my life." Rather than challenging Molyneux's racist claims, Rubin continues to take him at his word and treat his racism as fact:

> Rubin: But is there evidence that it's genetic?
>
> Molyneux: Yes.
>
> Rubin: Genetic in what regard? I mean if we took the brain of a 25-year-old black man and the brain of a 25-year-old white man, what is it that they're doing that…
>
> Molyneux: They're different sizes.
>
> Rubin: Yeah?

Molyneux: Yeah.

Molyneux then goes on to argue that IQ remains stable for ethnicities across environmental factors. Rubin follows up with a question about these factors without ever addressing Molyneux's claims about brain sizes. Throughout the interview, Molyneux promotes ideas of scientific racism that have been used to justify racial hierarchies and oppression for centuries. In fact, many of the arguments are exactly the same as those made by Richard Spencer in his debate about "race realism" with Carl Benjamin two months later. By letting him speak without providing a legitimate and robust counterargument, Rubin provides a free platform for white supremacist ideology on his channel.

Further, in the video description, Rubin posts a number of links to resources "provided by Stefan's team" about race and intelligence and encourages viewers to "do more research on your own." Among other promotional materials, Rubin lists Stefan Molyneux's Twitter account as well as the name of his book. This directive to audience members to learn for themselves is particularly troubling when put into context by recent research on information-seeking habits. For example, Tripodi has shown that Google returns radically different results based on small differences in search queries for controversial topics—a process which often reaffirms the bias of the searcher.[104] This is precisely the experience that political influencers support with the search engine optimization techniques described above. For example, at the time of writing, searching for the term "IQ" on Google returns videos featuring Stefan Molyneux on the first page. In a search for "IQ" on YouTube specifically, five of the top seven results are from political influencers in the AIN, including Molyneux and Jordan Peterson. Similarly, the first result for "race realism" in YouTube search results is from the white nationalist publication *American Renaissance*. Therefore, those doing their own research on the terms and topics introduced by Molyneux are likely to discover content supporting the same racist arguments.

Fig. 12: *Stefan Molyneux promotes scientific racism on The Rubin Report in a video posted on November 9, 2017.*

It would take more empirical research to determine the extent to which guest appearances like Molyneux with Rubin effectively radicalize viewers. However, some user comments suggest the videos they watch have indeed influenced them, given them justifications to support their views, or convinced them to subscribe to a new influencer's channel. Take, for example, the following comment made about Molyneux's appearance on *The Rubin Report*:

> I never heard of this guy before & they started off talking about how he is super controversial & hated but I watched the whole thing & I didn't hear anything that I would consider controversial. He seems to be extremely intelligent . . . I'm going to subscribe to his channel & check him out.

INFLUENCER RADICALIZATION

So far, this report has focused on the strategies political influencers use to persuade their audiences of their reactionary viewpoints. However, political influencers also attempt to persuade each other. This can be a particularly effective tactic for those who hope to spread extremist ideology; if they radicalize another influencer, their message can have access to an entirely new audience. Another factor that influences the political commitments of influencers is that the AIN has an active and responsive audience. This audience enforces a type of accountability on influencers, and this accountability means that audiences can push influencers toward more extremist viewpoints—in other words, radicalization can happen in reverse.

We can see this process at work within another *Rubin Report* segment, one that took place long before Rubin hosted Stefan Molyneux in late 2017. At the beginning of 2016, Rubin hosted an interview with the libertarian and conservative radio commentator Larry Elder.[105] During the segment, Elder (who is African American) tries to convince Rubin that racism does not exist in contemporary society. Rubin initially pushes back, citing police brutality as an issue that affects black communities. In response, Elder lists a number of statistics meant to debunk the claim, arguing that if anything, white cops are less likely to shoot black citizens for fear of being labeled racist. Rubin then backs off, saying he thinks racism is still a problem but that it "may not be systemic . . . in the macro sense."

Among the comments on Rubin's videos, there are many posts which celebrate this segment for being the moment Larry Elder "redpilled" Dave Rubin on systemic racism. A number of users have posted segments of the interview to their own YouTube channels with titles like, "The moment LARRY ELDER changed DAVE RUBINS Mind Forever" [sic]. Rubin himself has talked about the impact this conversation had on him. In the spring of 2018, he had Elder back on his show and

told him:

> That moment where you really beat me senseless about systemic
> racism . . . I view it as my best moment and my worst. It was my worst
> because I came to an intellectual fight without the proper equipment,
> and it was my best because . . . it was a learning moment for me and
> for everyone else.[106]

Additionally, audience feedback can drive political influencers to produce *more
extremist* content. The easy feedback systems on YouTube lead to discursive loops, in
which influencers build audiences that ask for, or reward, certain types of content.
For many of the political influencers in the AIN, the more extremist content they
make, the more of an extremist and dedicated audience they build. Such audiences
can, in turn, drive political influencers to deliver ever more extreme content.

Blaire White's channel began with videos recounting personal stories and experiences
that made her question the maxims she had learned from popular feminism. "I do
concede that certain situations may lend certain privileges or benefits towards men,"
she said in her channel's first video, posted in December 2015.[107] "However, I feel
like these instances are very much overstated." In her fifth video, posted January
2016, she answered questions submitted by her viewers. One of them asked, "Would
you ever do a video with Sargon of Akkad?"[108] At this point, White was still building
a following, and Carl Benjamin (Sargon of
Akkad) had already built a following based
on his anti-feminist content in gaming
communities. She responded by saying a lot
of people had asked for this, but her fans
needed to ask him. She directs them to tweet
at and message him. The very next video she posted, a week later, takes a much
harder line against feminism—titled "Feminism Is Pointless," it begins with White
calling feminism "cancer" and showing how it spreads "like a virus."[109]

> **...audience feedback can drive
> political influencers to produce
> more extremist content.**

Over time, White also began incorporating the slang used on the anonymous message
boards 4chan and 8chan, where discourse is often openly racist, sexist, and anti-
Semitic. For example, "trap" is a term used widely in such spaces to refer to trans
women who "trick" cisgender, straight men into sleeping with them. The LGBTQ
media advocacy group GLAAD has listed the term as an example of defamatory
language, writing "such descriptions are inaccurate, defamatory, and insulting."[110]
Nevertheless, in a 2017 video, White opened her video with, "Congratulations, you
degenerates. You finally got me to make the video. We're finally going to address the
question that's as old as 4chan. . . . Are traps gay?"[111] She overlaid the video with
images of tweets, comments, and posts asking her the same question. Over time,

then, her content has moved from general critiques of social justice to explicitly offensive content targeted directly at audiences known to be openly bigoted.
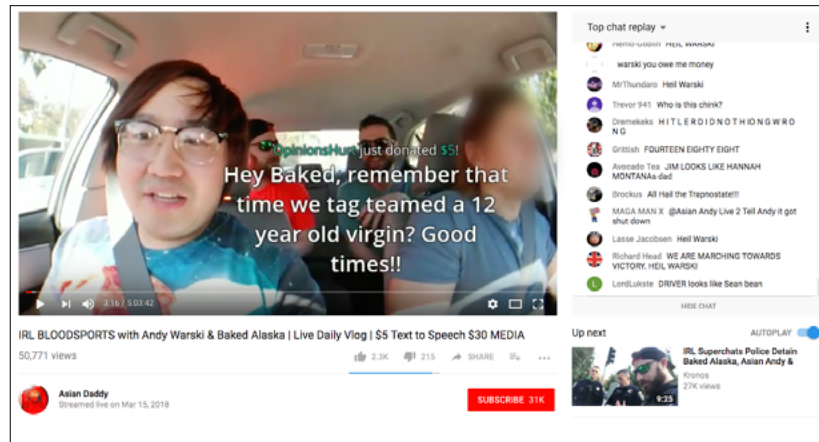

Fig. 13: The YouTubers Andy Warski, Baked Alaska, and Asian Andy respond to offensive user comments in real time, in a video streamed live on March 15, 2018.

The ideological loops between influencers and audiences can also take place within the course of a single video. Many of the YouTubers in the AIN make use of YouTube live stream, broadcasting to their followers in real time (users can later archive these videos so they remain accessible). In these cases, viewers can comment on influencer's videos in real time, and the influencers often respond within the video.

YouTube monetized these interactions with the introduction of Super Chat in 2017. Super Chat is a feature that allows users to pay money to have their comments highlighted and pinned on a comment stream.[112] Super Chat is a particularly appealing feature for content creators because it is another way to monetize their content, even if their videos overall have been demonetized by the platform. A recent article in *Buzzfeed News* counted the Super Chat intake from two far-right videos, finding they each brought in $4,000 (of which YouTube takes a cut).[113]

In these contexts, viewers often purposefully make shocking or offensive comments in an attempt to get the influencers to read them on screen (*Fig. 13*). In one particularly disturbing video from March 15, 2018, political influencers Andy Warski and Baked Alaska, along with live streamer Asian Andy, filmed themselves wandering around Los Angeles for five hours.[114] They called the event the "IRL Bloodsports" ("IRL" refers to "in real life"), and they set up a speaker with an automated voice that read Super Chat comments as text-to-speech. Within minutes, offensive comments were automatically being read out loud in front of their Uber driver. In many cases, these comments were specifically crafted to avoid any keyword filters or censorship attempts set up ahead of time from the live streamers or from YouTube. See, for example, the following comment which was read in full during the video: "Hey Baked, remember that time

we tag teamed a 12-year-old virgin? Good times!!"[115] Overall, this system is one in which both individual influencers and YouTube as a corporate entity are incentivized to draw in money through extremist and/or offensive audience-driven content.

CONCLUSION

This report has shown how a particular network of political influencers perpetuates far-right ideology on YouTube and other social media platforms. Specifically, individuals from academic and media institutions and reactionary or extremist movements have used participatory digital media to broadcast to new audiences and rebrand old, often bigoted and discriminatory ideas. Content creators have employed the tactics used by brand influencers, along with social networking, to establish an alternative to mainstream news, convey their ideas to audiences, and monetize their content. As a result, audiences and influencers alike are accessing, producing, and supporting extremist and often harmful content.

There is an undercurrent to this report that is worth making explicit: *in many ways, YouTube is built to incentivize the behavior of these political influencers*. YouTube monetizes influence for everyone, regardless of how harmful their belief systems are. The platform, and its parent company, have allowed racist, misogynist, and harassing content to remain online – and in many cases, to generate advertising revenue – as long as it does not explicitly include slurs. YouTube also profits directly from features like Super Chat which often incentivizes "shocking" content. In other words, the type of content and engagement created by the AIN fits neatly into YouTube's business model.

Political influencers often fundamentally understand this. While they posture as being underground and facing censorship from YouTube, they also know they are being given a major platform from which to broadcast their views. On May 23, 2018, Paul Joseph Watson tweeted a photo of himself holding up a plaque YouTube sent to him for surpassing one million subscribers (*Fig. 14*). He added a caption, "YouTube secretly loves me."

Fig. 14: Paul Joseph Watson displays a plaque given to him by YouTube.

Internet scholar Tarleton Gillespie has written that websites such as YouTube advertise themselves as "open, neutral, [and] egalitarian."[116] The term "platform" itself has helped YouTube position itself as a neutral utility that helps facilitate "free speech" and "openness." The website similarly seeks policies that offer it protection for hosting user-generated content while simultaneously facing minimal liability for what those users say. This report has shown how these attempts at objectivity are being exploited by users who fundamentally reject objectivity as a valid stance. As a result, platforms like YouTube have an imperative to govern content and behavior for explicit values, such as the rejection of content that promotes white supremacy, regardless of whether it includes slurs.

While much more research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of specific responses, Paul Joseph Watson's tweet suggests one concrete step YouTube can take in response. The platform currently provides Silver, Gold, and Diamond awards for content creators who have reached 100,000, 1 million, or 10 million subscribers, respectively. At this point, the platform reviews channels to make sure they do not have copyright strikes and do not violate YouTube's community guidelines. At these junctures, the platform should not only assess *what* channels say in their content, but also *who* they host and what their guests say. In a media environment consisting of networked influencers, YouTube must respond with policies that account for influence and amplification, as well as social networks.

Discussing images of the "alt-right" or white supremacism often conjures a sense of the "dark corners of the internet," filled with "anonymous commenters" who don't dare show their faces, operating on forums like 4chan, in the comments sections of YouTube, or behind "egg avatars" on Twitter. In fact, much extremist content is happening front and center, easily accessible on platforms like YouTube, publicly endorsed by well-resourced individuals, and interfacing directly with mainstream culture.

APPENDIX A:
INDEX OF AIN INFLUENCERS

(written with Brian Friedberg)

The following Appendix introduces the influencers who are explicitly named in this report; it does not include all of the influencers analyzed in this research, nor all of those listed in the data visualization in Fig. 1.

Internet Aristocrat (now known as Mister Metokur) is an unidentified YouTuber who posted influential conspiracy theories during the Gamergate events in 2014. He now goes by the pseudonym Mister Metokur and appears in "Bloodsports" debates alongside openly far-right guests.

Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad) is a British vlogger and "anti-SJW" content creator. Throughout the Gamergate movement, he posted content critical of feminist game critics and academics. He has since become a prominent member of the skeptic community and promotes "classical liberalism." In January 2018, he appeared in a debate with Richard Spencer on the topic of scientific racism.

Taleed Brown (That Guy T) is a libertarian vlogger who expresses sympathy for black nationalism and ethno-nationalism more broadly. He has appeared on the white nationalist Colin Robertson's channel (Millennial Woes) during the "Millenniyule" series in December 2017.

Steven Crowder is an American, Christian conservative commentator and talk show host. On his channel, he broadcasts political comedy sketches and stunts, such as those in which he appears on college campuses asking participants to "change his mind" about controversial political topics.

James Damore is an American former Google engineer. At Google, he gained notoriety after the leak of his memo about the company's diversity initiatives. He does not have his own YouTube channel, but he has appeared as a guest on the channels of multiple influencers, such as Dave Rubin, Milo Yiannopolous, and Stefan Molyneux.

Larry Elder is an American libertarian radio host and commentator. He has appeared on libertarian and conservative YouTube channels, such as *The Rubin Report* and *PragerU*, where he has argued against the existence of systematic racism in the United States.

Marcus Follin (The Golden One) is a Swedish self-help influencer who posts a blend of men's rights, white nationalist, and fantasy enthusiast content. On his channel, he promotes hyper-traditional gender roles, commitment to physical fitness, and mythology.

Jean-François Gariépy is a French-Canadian YouTuber who promotes scientific racism and ethno-nationalism. In early 2018, he co-hosted a number of "Bloodsports" debates alongside Andy Warski on the latter's show *Warski Live*. He has since left to host content on his own channel.

Timothy Gionet (Baked Alaska) is a social media personality who has published anti-Semitic content online and who marched at Unite the Right in Charlottesville. On YouTube, he has hosted live streamed debates between far-right personalities. He has also appeared alongside Andy Warski in the "IRL Bloodsports."

Rebecca Hargraves (Blonde in the Belly of the Beast) is a conservative, anti-feminist vlogger who also frequently employs white nationalist arguments.

Sam Harris is an American philosopher and neuroscientist who hosts a podcast called *Waking Up with Sam Harris*. He is known as one of the "four horsemen" of the New Atheist movement. He is also a frequent critic of contemporary Islam and often appears alongside self-identified members of the "Intellectual Dark Web."

Stefan Molyneux is a Canadian talk show host who promotes scientific racism, advocates on behalf of men's rights, and criticizes initiatives devoted to gender equity. He also frequently promotes far-right conspiracy theories.

MundaneMatt is a YouTuber who was a primary organizer of harassment against Zoe Quinn throughout Gamergate. He still actively posts "anti-SJW" content and frequently appears alongside far-right YouTubers on live streams and debates.

Antonia Okafor is an American, conservative activist who often advocates on behalf of "campus carry" laws. She has appeared in *PragerU* videos describing why she is a black, millennial conservative.

Candace Owens (Red Pill Black) is an American conservative commentator and Director of Urban Engagement at Turning Point USA, a conservative activist group focused on mobilizing college students. She hosts a vlog series in which she criticizes the Democratic Party and racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter.

Jordan Peterson is a Canadian public intellectual, author, and professor of

psychology at the University of Toronto. He gained mainstream media attention for opposing the gender equity Bill C-16 in Canada in 2016. He has since published a best-selling self-help book called *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. He frequently appears alongside other self-identified members of the "Intellectual Dark Web."

Brittany Pettibone is an American political commentator who frequently collaborates with her boyfriend Martin Sellner and her friend Lauren Southern. Her content features her tours of Europe in which she engages in anti-immigrant protests.

Tim Pool is an American citizen journalist who often covers political protests. He previously worked for *Vice News* and *FusionTV* before launching his independent YouTube channel. In his content, he frequently criticizes legacy media outlets and provides commentary on news media production processes.

Colin Robertson (Millennial Woes) is a Scottish white-nationalist vlogger. For the past several Decembers, he has hosted an event called "Milleniyule" in which he invites a range of white supremacist, libertarian, and conservative guests onto his channel.

Joe Rogan is an American comedian and the host of *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast. On his show, he hosts guests with a wide range of political views. Some of these include conservative and libertarian YouTubers, as well as self-identified members of the "Intellectual Dark Web."

Dave Rubin is an American YouTube talk show host who frequently hosts libertarian and conservative guests. He is a self-defined "classical liberal" who values individual liberty and small government. He has a partnership with the libertarian organization Learn Liberty, a subsidiary of the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University. He is also a self-identified member of the "Intellectual Dark Web."

Martin Sellner is an Austrian far-right leader and the co-founder of *Generation Identity*, a far-right European youth organization. His high-profile relationship with Brittany Pettibone has been well-documented on both of their channels, and he has organized both online and offline protests against immigration advocacy groups.

Ben Shapiro is an American conservative commentator and former editor-at-large at *Breitbart News*. He founded and hosts videos on *The Daily Wire*, where he promotes conservativism from an Orthodox Jewish perspective. He sometimes appears in content with self-described members of the "Intellectual Dark Web."

Lauren Southern is a Canadian citizen journalist and former contributor to the online outlet *The Rebel Media*. She publishes anti-feminist, anti-Islamic, and anti-

immigration content and frequently collaborates with the influencer Brittany Pettibone.

Richard Spencer is an American white nationalist leader and celebrity who popularized the term "alt-right." He hosts a filmed podcast from his YouTube channel Altright.com.

Ayla Stewart (Wife with a Purpose) is an American "pro-white" vlogger who promotes traditional gender values ("trad life") and Christianity. Her channel mixes lifestyle content with political ideology.

Jared Taylor is an American white nationalist and the founder and editor of the magazine *American Renaissance*. On the magazine's YouTube channel, he frequently promotes scientific racism, anti-immigration, and white nationalist content.

Andy Warski is a Canadian YouTube talk show host who facilitates live streamed debates between influencers on his show *Warski Live*. Alongside his former co-host Jean-François Gariépy, he formalized the "Internet Bloodsports" debate series.

Paul Joseph Watson is the British editor-at-large of the conspiracy theory media outlet *Infowars*. He also posts his own content to his YouTube channel, in which he criticizes social justice movements, mainstream news media, and mainstream entertainment.

Blaire White is an American, conservative vlogger who posts content criticizing social justice movements. She often discusses her identity as a trans woman who opposes contemporary LGBTQ activist movements and denies the existence of nonbinary gender identities.

Milo Yiannopolous is a British media provocateur with ties to white nationalists. He was formerly a senior editor at *Breitbart News* but resigned after publicly making comments in support of pedophilia.

APPENDIX B:
NETWORK VISUALIZATION

Note (as of the publishing of this report): Some influencers have multiple channels, some influencers host specific shows within their channels, and some influencers do not have their own channels but appear as guests frequently enough that I have included them in the network. In addition, there are some members of the AIN discussed in this report whose guest appearances were infrequent and thus did not appear in the visualization.

INFLUENCER NAME	CHANNEL NAME(S)	SHOW/SERIES NAME
Andrew Klavan	The Daily Wire	The Andrew Klavan Show
Andy Warski	Andywarski	Warski Live
Annand Virk (Bunty King)	Bunty King	
Antonia Okafur		
Ayla Stewart (Wife with a Purpose)	Ayla Stewart Wife with a Purpose	
Ben Shapiro	The Daily Wire	The Ben Shapiro Show
Black Pigeon Speaks	Black Pigeon Speaks; Navy Hato	
Blaire White	Blaire White	
Blonde in the Belly of the Beast	Blonde in the Belly of the Beast	
Braving Ruin	(No longer active) Braving Ruin; Braving Ruin Archives; Braving Ruin Live	
Bre Faucheux	Bre Faucheux	This Week on the Alt-Right (formerly)
Brittany Pettibone	Brittany Pettibone	
Brooks Heatherly (No Bullshit)	No Bullshit; No Bullshit 2	
Candace Owens (Red Pill Black)	Candace Owens	The Declaration (formerly Myth of the Coon)
Caolan Robertson	Caolan Robertson	The Culture Report
Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad)	Sargon of Akkad Live; The Thinkery	This Week in Stupid
Chris Maldonado (Chris Ray Gun)	Chris Ray Gun	

Coach Red Pill	Coach Red Pill; CRP Streams/Backup; Coach and Benway Podcast	
Dave Cullen (Computing Forever)	Computing Forever; The Dave Cullen Show; Computing Forever Archive	The Dave Cullen Show
Dave Rubin	The Rubin Report	The Rubin Report
Dennis Prager	PragerU	
Derrick Blackman (Some Black Guy)	Some Black Guy; Derrick Blackman	
Faith J Goldy	Faith J Goldy (formerly The Rebel Media)	
Gavin McInnes	Gavin MicInnes (formerly The Rebel Media)	
Henrik Palmgren	Red Ice TV	
James Allsup	James Allsup	
James Damore		
James O'Keefe	Project Veritas; Project Veritas Action	
Jared Taylor	American Renaissance	
Jean-François Gariépy	Jean-François Gariépy	
Jeff Holiday	Jeff Holiday; YouTube Saints; Jeff Holiday 2 Electric Boogaloo	
Joe Rogan	PowerfulJRE	The Joe Rogan Experience
Jordan Peterson	Jordan Peterson	
Kraut and Tea	Kraut (no longer active)	
Lana Lokteff	Red Ice TV	
Larry Elder		
Lauren Southern	Lauren Southern (previously The Rebel Media)	
Marcus Follin (The Golden One)	The Golden One	
Mark Collett	Mark Collett	This Week on the Alt-Right
Martin Sellner	Martin Sellner; Martin Sellner GI	
Matt Jarbo (Mundane Matt)	MundaneMatt; Mundane Chats; Forbidden Knowledge	
Michael Knowles	The Daily Wire	The Michael Knowles Show
Mike Cernovich	Mike Cernovich	
Mike Enoch		
Millennial Woes	Millennial Woes; MW Live; MW Off-Duty	Millenniyule (seasonal)
Milo Yiannopolous	MILO	The Milo Show
Mister Metokur	Mister Metokur (formerly Internet Aristocrat)	

Mouthy Buddha	Mouthy Buddha	
Nicholas J Fuentes	Nicholas J Fuentes	America First
Owen Benjamin	Owen Benjamin	
Paul Joseph Watson	Paul Joseph Watson	
Richard Spencer	Altright.com	Alt-Right Politics
Roaming Millennial	Roaming Millennial	
Sam Harris	Sam Harris	Waking Up with Sam Harris
Stefan Molyneux	Stefan Molyneux	Freedomain Radio
Stephen Christopher Yaxley-Lennon (Tommy Robinson)	(formerly The Rebel Media)	
Steven Bonnell II (Destiny)	Destiny	
Steven Crowder	StevenCrowder	Louder with Crowder
Styxhexenhammer666	Styxhexenhammer666	
Taleed Brown (That Guy T)	That Guy T	
Tara McCarthy	The Reality Calls Show	The Reality Call Show (no longer active)
Tim Pool	Tim Pool; Timcast; Subverse	
Timothy Gionet (Baked Alaska)	Baked Alaska; Baked Alaska Livestreams; (formerly) The BA Experience	The BA Experience
Tree of Logic	Tree of Logic; Tree of Logic – Livestreams	
Vee	Vee; Vee Live Stream	

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DATA & SOCIETY

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ENDNOTES

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