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**Ill-Conceived Notions of Digital Humans:
An inquiry of speech habits in neopolitical YouTube**

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Digital Artefact Links:

Main site <http://icnotions.com/>

Project sections <https://icnotions.com/category/project/>

Methodology sections <https://icnotions.com/category/methods/>

Data <https://icnotions.com/category/data/>

Bibliography <https://icnotions.com/category/bibliography/>

Abstract

The present study compares two neopolitical YouTubers closely associated with left- and right-wing political stances: ContraPoints and Stefan Molyneux, respectively. The term neopolitics is used here to describe a niche community of non-expert inquirers, who adopt contemporary approaches to political, philosophical, sociological and anthropological subjects that are identified as exigent to life in the 21st century. Constructivist Grounded Theory was used to examine practices in their speech that frame their meanings and intentions, and strategies that guide the understanding of their audiences. This resulted in six categories common to both creators: facts versus feelings; setting the scene; characters in the narrative; the creator as a character; sarcasm and satire, and; flow. These themes frame a practice of storytelling that creators may use to convey complex ideas in relatable, approachable and entertaining formats. The conclusions offer a foundation from which inquirers can recognise methods which guide the political opinions of digital humans.

Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism.

Signed

Date

Sasha Pineda

Acknowledgements

I'm extremely grateful to Dr Orla Murphy, Dr Mike Cosgrave, and Shawn Day, who encouraged me to persevere with this project and offering feedback at each step. I would also like to thank the friends who read sections of my project to let me know what needed clarifying, helping me to make my work approachable, interesting and useful to those with no experience of psychological inquiries, but who wish to thoughtfully engage with these contemporary notions.

Introduction

Pseudo-celebrities are emerging from YouTube to educate anyone who is willing to listen. The playing field is relatively level on YouTube, in that you don't need to come from a position of power in order to be heard (Brewis in Sarkar, 2019a). All that's needed for success are well-argued ideas, the opportunity for the audience to engage directly, and for the concerns of the audience to be validated (Suler, 2004). This opportunity, however, is not always approached with good intentions. They run the risk of facilitating echo chambers (Nguyen, 2018), of encouraging hate speech (Murthy and Sharma, 2019), and radicalising viewers towards acts of violence (Klein, 2019). The present study examines two creators who, for better or worse, are influencing the political landscape of the digital age.

As Beers Fägersten (2017) explains, there is no presupposition on the phenomena involved in most aspects of YouTube content creation: there is no history, no original from which a copy can be made. There is, however, a progression. It is difficult to track, since one can usually only observe the consequences of thousands of interactions that occur globally and simultaneously. Parallels can be drawn with the pre-digital world (Mulder, 2019), but it is crucial to acknowledge online behaviour as new and different in any study aiming to authentically represent it (Suler, 2004), and a universally recognised lexicon is needed both to describe and engage with it (Wynn in Sarkar, 2019b).

The downfall of this ahistorical movement is a collapse of basic trusts in society. People have become so radically engaged in uncovering 'the truth' that foundations of reality are deemed unreliable, where human accounts are dismissed as infected by emotion, where experts are suspected of lying to the public to force them into submission (Wynn in VICE News, 2019). The political understandings of younger generations are focused on the perceived war on culture waged by social justice warriors and advocates for political correctness, and 'gamers' and neonazis who feel their respective spaces are being invaded (Klein, 2019). There is a community which began with leftist YouTube creators that has spread to Discord, Twitter and Facebook, which are for support, making connections, sharing ideas, and building a culture of acceptance, which has exploded in the past 3 years (Sarkar, 2019b). However, these spaces pale in comparison to the communities of the 'manosphere' (Farrell et al., 2019), climate change deniers

(Brewis, 2019) and new atheists (Klein, 2019) that challenge established knowledge and misdirect hatred to vulnerable groups.

In order to rebuild the trust that society was built upon, stemming from the general consensus that experts know what they're doing, we need a re-conceptualisation of the idea of experts. Anyone with access to the internet can declare themselves an expert, and the knowledge you have doesn't matter so much as the way you express it, and the audience you express it to. This is true of any YouTube community, since at first glance, some of the most biased and bigoted speakers can appear the most trustworthy, and marginalising, unapproachable personalities can have the most well-researched arguments. ContraPoints is not easy to watch, especially if you're not a fan of crudeness, profanity, and overt sexual references. Stefan Molyneux is humble and consistently asserts his advocacy for intelligent arguments and moral ways of living. However, these first impressions do not reflect the reality of the communities they have built. The stories they tell, the emotions they invoke, and the real-world actions they are inspiring remain ambiguous. This study will begin an exploration of how their stories of reality are told.

Literature Review

1. Behaviour

There is extensive work explaining the stark differences between online and digital worlds, as well as the relationship they have with each other. The unprecedented rate at which online communities emerge, evolve, dissolve and expand, however, makes it a difficult area of study for any researcher, even those engaged with close reading the content over years of focused immersion (Annie Kelly, in Squirrell, 2018b; Squirrell, 2018a). John Suler has written for years on various aspects of cyberpsychology, most pertinently describing the online disinhibition effect, explaining how online behaviour is influenced by the following factors: dissociative anonymity, in which the real and online self are seen as separate by the user; invisibility, being physically absent and so unmoved by usual social cues; asynchronicity, in which interactions do not have to be immediate; solipsistic introjection, by which peers can become characters in one's own mind rather than autonomous beings, through seemingly intrapsychic interactions; dissociative imagination, viewing online spaces as closer to fantasy than reality, and; minimization of status and authority, where by everyone begins with an equal opportunity to participate. His 2004 paper was based on years of both observing and participating in online spaces, curating descriptive processes that both researchers and regular members of those communities found useful (Suler, 2000). The factors he identified are attributable in any study of online communities, and are a solid foundation from which we can theorise the reason and methods by which that community operates.

Individual factors such as personality and ideology will influence the disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). This also contributes to how susceptible one is to the effects of echo chambers - "a social structure from which other relevant voices have been actively discredited" (Nguyen, 2018) - and the personalised steps necessary to exit from one. Nguyen (2018) explains that early knowledge-building events can guide one towards an echo chamber, which he likens to a cult. More impressionable individuals will be harder set in the 'truths' they learned at an early age, and less likely to be swayed to consider other perspectives. Similarly, Squirrell (2018a) noted that there were interrelations between incel (self-defined involuntary celibate) community members' predispositions to violent rhetoric, deterministic mindsets, sense of victimisation and

association with the label, which affect individual behaviour they exhibit both on and offline. There is little research into the exact processes that people are experiencing in their own unique journey through the web, which, by algorithmic design, are heavily leading them down ever narrower paths.

We can, however, begin by observing many of the habits that brand an online subculture. More radical communities mimic cult-like mentalities, likely from being locked in echo chambers which actively exclude, undermine or misrepresent outside thinking (Nguyen, 2018) or purposely inflate the most radical notions to upset outside observers (Squirrell, 2018a). Wynn (in Sarkar, 2019b) acknowledges that online humour is a “cloak for extremism” and “a camouflage for sincere fascism,” especially in alt-right communities that began emerging in the early 2010s. Annie Kelly (in Squirrell, 2018b) notes the use of irony by anti-feminist groups as a tool to pass off remarks as jokes if the backlash received becomes too great, but the use is subtle enough that the same rhetoric can also be touted as truth if they are well received. In each of these subcultures, we see the effects especially of minimized authority or social status and of dissociation with reality, through repeated and compulsive activity in online spaces that actively reject anything that may challenge the members’ limited worldview.

There is a constant stream of research claiming that online hate speech *is happening*, but little into the forms it can take and the internalised consequences on commenters or passive readers (Murthy and Sharma, 2018). It has been noted that racialised and misogynistic language plague any social media platform that is not heavily moderated (Farrell et al., 2019; Murthy and Sharma, 2018), but each study which demonstrates this acknowledges the failure of any research team to build an appropriate method for identifying the deeper roots from which this hatred grows and makes itself known in the physical world, or an effective response to this. Murthy and Sharma (2018) believe there are intricate but elusive links between social media and bigotry that academics tend to reduce to either products of web culture or of pathology, as an excuse that dismisses the complexity of the phenomena which reflect undertones in society. In their conclusions, Farrell et al. (2019) identify many shortcomings of their study in developing a complete lexicon of ‘manospheric’ language - the ‘manosphere’ being male-only online spaces, often degrading to women - given the difficulties they experienced in categorising terms, and the

removal of semantics from the reddit posts they had mined. They plan future research in identifying the emergence and uptake of neologisms in such communities, to map meanings across them and identify the source of much of the ‘felt’ misogyny that guide the men’s perspectives.

On a lighter note, there is a unique opportunity for the oppressed to combat this hate speech, which is one possible overlooked advantage of YouTube’s unique ‘community’ set-up. Admirers and adversaries have an equal opportunity to have their opinion heard in a single space with little consequence, given that membership of a group is not required, and user-specific comment history is not traceable. Murthy and Sharma (2018) found various forms of antagonisation based on racist or anti-racist rhetorics, all of which were hostile at a glance, but each instance of which belonged to a different narrative. Their study on an expletive band named ‘Das Racist’ in itself is not generalisable, as the videos themselves provoked racist discussions. The suggestion remains, however, that a nuanced perspective is needed to capture multimodal instances of deceptively similar “sociotechnical events,” which they describe as manifestations of networked racism. In AI studies we see this discrimination reflected, as the technology is unable to distinguish between hate speech (which can occur in undertones on mainstream platforms) and uses of slurs which are adopted as friendly in-group terms (Duarte et al., 2017), similar to the use of swearing by PewDiePie to establish rapport with international viewers (Beers Fägersten, 2017). In this vain, we are close to developing methodologies that appreciate the gradience of the online landscape, but we are still lacking in the precise vocabulary needed to illustrate it fully.

2. Language

It is crucial for a creator to be informed on the language specific to their audience, to remind them that they too are a member of that community, that they are in no way above partaking in the discourse that exists on their channels or related platforms (Sarkar, 2019b). Likewise, it is important to stay on top of out-group linguistic behaviours, since it is difficult to predict what subcultural phrases will integrate with common language (Squirrell, 2018b) and what phrases are in need of clarification (Shaun, 2019).

The first step in understanding emerging online communities is developing a lexicon with which to describe them. Tim Squirrell has extensive work on incel communities, whose spaces are seen most often on reddit or the specially created incels.is, having identified an unusually large, insular vernacular, some phrases from which are being adopted by unrelated communities (Squirrell, 2018b). Farrell et al. (2019) began a lexicon for men's rights groups on reddit with a similar intention, having identified new language styles and intentions in these communities.

The language of an author will guide the interpretations they reach themselves, and how they describe those interpretations in turn influences how readers will react to them (Dicks et al., 2005). The digital allows users and creators to experiment with their speech style; it promises an openness in writing, and its rhetoric is being reimagined as more of an art than a practice, wherein the narrative is not sequential. The reader has authority in the depth and exact path of their exploration, and the writer designs diverse, interactive, and reflexive landscapes. Equivalents of this are seen in each platform, such as on reddit where users can upvote content to shape the feel of their subreddit (Squirrell, 2018a), or on YouTube where the most popular YouTubers, who express most appropriately the interests of their audience, will be recommended more often to users with those interests.

Beers Fägersten (2017) studied English as an "internet language" - one that spans countries, cultures and ethnicities. He reasoned that if you want your content to be popular, it is necessary to speak English regardless of where you are from, and in such cases the language becomes a product that is sold to a community. Pewdiepie, a native Swedish speaker, is the most well known example of this, and in neopolitical corners creators such as The Golden One and Mia Mulder (both Swedish) replicate the practice. In these cases, an influencer must be up to date with linguistic behaviours, to sell to their audience their legitimacy as a relatable voice (Sarkar, 2019b). Aligning with this is the need to develop expressions that the community has yet to verbalise. Right-leaning communities adopted the term alt (alternative) right after its popularisation and normalisation by Richard Spencer, a respected figure (in those circles) who recognised the distancing of younger members from traditional conservative and right-wing politics, and whose enablement accelerated the radicalisation of such individuals (Klein, 2019). In her interview on The Ezra Klein Show, Natalie Wynn, a prominent influencer herself,

identifies this linguistic role in identity formation, and the results we see offline in the shape of the Charlottesville Attack and the domination of the right in US politics - movements which stemmed from a comfortable association with new labels for old-fashioned discrimination. On YouTube, she notices that the language used is explicit, an instance of dissociative anonymity (Suler, 2004) in which there are no consequences to exploring one's suppressed prejudices, and to which there is the possibility for validation.

Digital language contrasts with that of traditional mass media such as television or radio, largely because of the absence of regulation or standards for etiquette. Beers Fägersten (2017) acknowledges the role of swearing in creating a more personal, intimate image for digital speakers, since profanity, while at times used to offend, is also used in informal interactions to strengthen social bonds and group identities. There is a contradiction whereby the most popular influencers will use what seem to be the most marginalising phrases, but this is directly influencing the language of their following who feel closer to the creator as a consequence. Combined with the monologous nature of YouTube content, this may relate to the solipsistic introjection described by Suler (2004), since the vernacular of one's internal dialogue is being vocalised, thus making the user more open to the content being shared with them. The consequences pointed out by the opposition - for example mirrored subreddits who mock the echo chambers on the site (see [r/GenderCynical](#) vs. [r/GenderCritical](#)), and left-leaning YouTuber HBomberguys 'Measured Response' series which refutes the arguments of the right - are not being received by the mainstream as quickly, one reason being the slower move towards a unified, coherent lexicon.

Epistemological Statement

There is no evidence of how many people are being radicalized or de-radicalized, despite publications and studies that say radicalisation is happening (Klein, 2019). Any publications, even in fast-paced media, are always behind on the current situation, and even this project could be outdated by the time it's finished. In my experience, YouTube creators themselves are the most equipped to capture and describe the field they exist in, but whether or not they recognise and respect this power is uncertain. The goal of independent political YouTube channels is often to sell a 'truth' that viewers can use to make sense of the world, but in the past this truth has been independent of facts or evidence that reflect a range of perspectives and human experiences, instead rationalising discrimination that has been cultivated by misinformation (Klein, 2019; Nguyen, 2018). The goal of this study is to note the ways in which language is utilised by creators with different social, political and personal goals.

The misrepresentation of YouTube by mainstream mass media downplays the effect that participation is having on modern discourse, such as honest debate and self-reflection, and muddies the multitude of forms that online hate can take (Murthy and Sharma, 2018). In a market whose goal is to sell fast stories rather than inform, amplifying the hostility of the site has more benefit than demonstrating potential benefits, and actual risks to make oneself aware of. Murthy and Sharma (2018) identify YouTube as a frustratingly unique platform, a community that isn't really community, a participatory medium where connections are not really being made, and wherein responses can take the form of comments or new, isolate videos that are rarely easy to track, and one that attracts disproportionately more anti-social behaviour by being too large to moderate effectively and granting total anonymity to commenters. This inflated aggression has shone a bad light on the platform, caused issues for researchers who wish to categorise and measure its influence, and for everyday users who may not realise the true intent of the creators they follow until they are trapped in a hate-filled echo chamber.

A 'dark enlightenment' has taken the cyberworld by storm, which is a regression to paleoconservatism based on 'intellectualism' (Sarkar, 2019b). The values promoted are often open to interpretation, not overtly advocating for fascism and white supremacy, but vague enough that viewers can easily be drawn to such groups (Shaun, 2019). The ideologies stemmed

from primarily atheist YouTube channels and for some time it was near impossible to distinguish ‘edgy humour’ from what would devolve into sincere bigotry (Klein, 2019; Sarkar, 2019b). The minimization of authority on YouTube created a space for content to be discussed anonymously, in a comment section which is not moderated except in rare occasions by the channel creator (Sarkar, 2019a). A reactionary movement was spread by creators who saw an opportunity to capitalise on the insecurities of (mostly) young, white men whose identities were (in their mind) being attacked (Klein, 2019), and YouTube seemed to meet every criteria necessary for the bigotry to flourish.

Ideologies develop differently on YouTube than on other social media sites, since the focus is on a single creator, and conversations stem from a single source (the video). The highest rated videos tend to be those that capture a concern, interest, sentiment or topical subject, that the target community can relate to in some way (Beers Fägersten, 2017). Similar to reddit, comments and/or posts are sorted by popularity by default, meaning the most popular items will be those that capture core sentiments of the group in question, or spark conversations that the group feels are exigent. On Twitter, which receives the most attention for academic discursive inquiries (Farrell et al., 2019), there may be an illusion of community by using hashtags and following other users, but there is no method by which individual users can organise themselves in discussions on a single, clearly specified topic with a majority of users who have similar discussion goals, and no means by which to exclude irrelevant content that distracts from the core topic. Reddit and YouTube are distinct from Twitter in that they have community boundaries - on reddit, each subreddit has clearly stated intentions and community guidelines, and many will mention that unrelated or ill-meaning material will be removed by moderators; on YouTube, the creator has sole authority on the content of the channel and will often allude to this in their ‘about’ page. The key distinction is the singular primary voice of independent neopolitical YouTube channels, from which all discussion threads diverge.

An important observation of YouTube discussions, Wynn acknowledges (Klein, 2019), is that there is no guise about what the topics are - people are more willing to openly admit that the discussion is on race or gender, rather than violence, taxation, etc., as they would have been on mainstream outlets. Murthy and Sharma (2018) characterise this as neoteric discrimination,

whereby public but anonymous users can actively express opinions to which there is no immediate consequence, and thus they can dissociate from the reality of their actions. For anyone to truly be able to identify the difference between jokes and hate speech, total and long-term immersion in that community is required. As Suler (2000) mentions, there are nuances which an outside researcher will simply not see in an online community if their first experience with that specific community is the research. Murthy and Sharma (2018) explain how this leads to misrepresentations in the mainstream, their example being the misframing of systemic racism as simply incivility based on online disinhibition, thus having little to do with reality. Dicks et al. (2005) and Charmaz (2006) both quote Dey's advice (1999) in knowing the "difference between an open mind and an empty head", describing the need for pre-fieldwork to occur in any ethnography project, so the researcher can be informed on what aspects of the data they are including, and also excluding.

The Creators: A personal statement

Note: all statistics relating to the ContraPoints and Stefan Molyneux YouTube channels change daily. This study will give an idea of the channels' scopes, but the current numbers can be found at each YouTube channel and Social Blade pages, linked here:

ContraPoints YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/ContraPoints/featured>

ContraPoints Social Blade <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/contrapoints>

Stefan Molyneux YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/stefbot/featured>

Stefan Molyneux Social Blade <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/stefbot>

1. ContraPoints

Natalie Wynn, known online as ContraPoints, is an ex-philosopher who 'enjoys mood lighting and set design.' As a transwoman, she is slowly being recognised by the mainstream as a key figure in lgbt communities, but more so because of her ability to explicate and combat the rhetoric of the far-right. Starting her YouTube channel only 3 years ago, currently with 52 videos, she has over 700,000 subscribers and 38 million views, and for some time has been in the top 20 earners on Patreon - a platform for fans to support creators with monthly donations.

About a year ago, a friend recommended I watch ContraPoints along with a selection of other left-leaning YouTubers, including Shaun, Lindsay Ellis and Philosophy Tube, who are colloquially called LeftTube or BreadTube. The first video of this genre I watched was HBombguy's 'CTRL+ALT+DEL - SLA: 3', in which he explores the virtues of self-criticism and cultural reflection through a 'Serious Lore Analysis' of memes, and in which he literally, and graphically, finds himself reborn through a panel from the webcomic CTRL ALT DEL about miscarriage, which has been a popular meme for over a decade. This was my introduction to the avant-garde amalgam of academic inquiries, philosophical and political scrutiny, and absurd, but somehow relevant, undercurrents to life in the digital age. I watched ContraPoints' videos on capitalism, the left and the alt-right in rapid succession, and this was the first time I understood or began caring about politics. From there I began my own introspective journey of my position on the political spectrum, my beliefs about gender, race and human rights, and I developed a vocabulary to describe these new ideas. Reading the comment sections, I saw I was not alone in

this, as people of all races, genders, ages and ethnicities were experiencing LeftTube content in a similar way.

I chose to study ContraPoints because of the massive growth in her viewership even in the past year, and the fact that she is being most recognised outside these niche communities, for example, through featured pieces from the New Yorker (2018), the Atlantic (2019) and VICE (2019), and because of the impact she had on me personally. She uses extravagant costumes, props and sets, and what some might find distasteful performances, resulting in a balance of satire and serious debate that appeals to an audience with multifarious thoughts and concerns. I was curious about the precise tactics she uses that draws in such a crowd, since at a glance, her content is provocative and lewd, yet a significant portion of her videos have over a million views. In analysing her content, I was careful not to project my personal interpretations of her words, focusing on the literal intentions of her speech, especially when and how she used satire or sarcasm, which is a significant theme of all her videos.

2. Stefan Molyneux

Stefan Molyneux is a contemporary and globally influential philosopher. His YouTube videos include presentations, brief thoughts, political and pop media hot-takes, ads for his podcast and documentaries, pop culture reviews, and interviews with special guests or fans in search of guidance. He hosts a radio show - Free Domain Radio - which, according to the website, offers “powerful ideas to all lovers of personal and political freedom.” His popularity on YouTube has seen a steady increase since its inception in 2006, and he currently has over 900,000 subscribers, with over 281 million views.

My first encounter with Molyneux’s content was not direct, but through a 55 minute video entitled ‘Stefan Molyneux’s Fall of Rome - A Response’, by Shaun (a LeftTuber), who calmly and eloquently explains in detail why Molyneux’s 2.5 hour video on ‘The Truth About The Fall of Rome’ contains very little truth, and is in fact a dangerous source of misinformation. I never watched Molyneux’s video in its entirety, since I first watched some of his shorter videos, like his reviews of Wonder Woman and Star Wars, which detail the evil feminist SJW agenda that is bringing about the end of Western civilisation, and decided from these that this

presentation would not be of use to me, and would only be of use to someone needing a source to point to when defending their bigotry. I never developed kind views of Molyneux, but came to understand his appeal, since his promotional videos were friendly and welcoming, and he offers a space for philosophical inquiries that make sense of our existence, in a time where this value is supposedly being lost. He validates the fears of his audience in the face of activists who don't appreciate the privileges Western civilisation created, and foreigners who do recognise that privilege and want to steal it for themselves. Again, I never developed kind views.

I chose Molyneux because he is one of the most popular independent creators in right-wing circles, whose manner I thought was very inviting, given his eloquence and sincere commitment to truth in each video. Regardless of how 'true' his content is, his conviction is assuring and motivating. I believe he is more than just an eccentric character to tune into every now and then, such as Paul Joseph Watson and Sargon of Akkad, two British creators with larger viewerships but far less serious content (in my opinion). That is not to say their real-world influence is negligible, but I believe they are much easier to discredit and ridicule, as many leftist creators frequently do. Molyneux tends to take himself more seriously, and produces longer, more academically-styled material, making it easy to accept as universal, indisputable truth.

During this study, I made every effort to ensure I was approaching his content with an open mind, by considering his content for what it was in itself, rather than what it was to me. I asked myself to specify clearly what each segment was framing, implying or asserting, and what emotion he was assigning to this, rather than guessing at the truth in what he was saying. It would certainly be interesting to see how a fan of Molyneux would execute this analysis, but in my descriptions I stuck closely to the data as it was, since I believe it is crucial to identify how he is using language to offer his truth, so my readers and I can then identify broader tactics of these creators.

Qualitative Research in the Digital Age

Surveys of many online communities are currently impractical and would be unlikely to achieve the authentic responses that are already observable on public platforms (Squirrell, 2018a; Miller, 2015). Online discourse is distinct from the pre-digital, and the same tools and methods of traditional ethnography cannot and should not be used, as they cannot capture “deeply entrenched and networked” landscapes that now exist (Farrell et al., 2019). The social cues that are removed by naturally occurring online engagement, such as adding content independently and a comfort that there are few consequences to one’s words (Suler, 2004), will be removed with the addition of an authority one knows is reading and assessing. For this reason, combinations of data mining and observational discursive analyses are optimal routes, and certainly the most popular. For example, Farrell et al. (2019) mined 6 million posts from subreddits the authors had identified as relevant to the interests of men’s rights activists. In contrast, Beers Fägersten (2017) selected only 3 videos from the thousands in PewDiePie’s repertoire to perform a discourse analysis on his swear word usage.

A researcher must make decisions to achieve a robust and representative sample, especially in studies of online media where there is a virtually infinite supply of data (Miller, 2015). In this spirit, the top videos of some of the most popular channels who self-identify with either right- or left-wing ideologies were selected, based on my own immersion and experience in these communities over the past year and a half. Deliberately “thinking hypermedia” at a time when Web 2.0 was in its infancy, Dicks et al. (2005) realised that others would not be familiar with some technologies, so their first step was in delineating the requirements of users to engage with their content. Likewise, now requirements of the audience must be delineated for researchers to communicate their work to benefit the masses who are showing a desire to engage. My goal is to make my findings accessible to average readers who are as concerned as I am with the state the political corner of YouTube we have found ourselves in. I will be using hypertext and reflective writing that describes my reasoning and motivations, and using what I find to be the most appropriate methodological approach to purely foundational research.

Grounded Theory in the Digital Age

Glaser and Strauss published “The Discovery of Grounded Theory” in 1967, and their work was revolutionary in bridging “the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research”. Their purpose was to promote the habit of approaching data with an open mind, searching for meaning in behavioural patterns, and generating theories from those findings rather than the other way around. They pushed for ethnographic researchers to allow themselves to be surprised by what they find, rather than search for verification of pre-existing theories. Their methods hold strong today; this was the primary qualitative research method I was taught during my undergrad of Applied Psychology, and researchers rely on their teachings across all fields where qualitative methods can be applied. However, the biggest effect digitisation seems to have had on the original publishing is making it available as an open-access PDF (we still used the books when I first used it). Charmaz’s 2006 guide to the practice still assumes the researcher’s analysis will be based on field notes where in the researcher was directly involved, observational research included, and so the process must be tweaked to suit native online discourse. I’m taking this project as an opportunity to explore how their methods might be updated using digital tools in the identification of a population, the collection of data, the coding process, and most importantly, disseminating the findings.

In Grounded Theory, there are numerous contending opinions in how best to implement the method (Kenny and Fourie, 2015). I will be using the Constructivist approach developed by Charmaz (2006), which is considered the most flexible process and acknowledges the “inescapable interactive impact of the researcher on data” (Kenny and Fourie, 2015, p. 1280). For this approach, the researcher must: have an exhaustive data set which continues to grow through the analysis (theoretical sampling and saturation); apply codes to each line of data, to be organised into categories, which will be continuously reflected upon and related to each other (constant comparison); practice memo writing, as a reflective exercise to aid in the construction of the final theory. Charmaz outlines the processes as consisting of at least two phases: initial coding and focused coding. These are the essential steps in constructing a theory that evolves purely from the data.

Dicks et al. (2005) promoted hypermedia as a useful tool for ethnographers, and emphasised the benefits of weaving collection, analytic and representative processes through hypertext and hypermedia. My criteria are somewhat similar to Dicks and her colleagues, who worked with a limited budget, and with limited tech skills, to develop interactive tools to enhance the experience of guests at a cultural heritage site, and who published a book to aid others in digitising their own ethnography. I searched for open source/free software that are easy to use and do not require advanced coding skills (since I have none). Additionally, since my goal is to have a methodology that is not bound by traditional rigidities, I searched for packages which allow more freedom to the user in structuring the analytic process. Unfortunately my options were extremely limited, since many free to use CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) packages did not have features that accommodated Grounded Theory (such as densely descriptive open coding and clear categorisations of those codes), and were text-based, meaning I would need to analyse transcriptions rather than videos themselves.

Luckily, UCC offer a student license for NVivo 12, which met most of my criteria and allowed me to export most of my work directly to my host site. NVivo is one of the few CAQDAS which allows for the coding of videos and social media websites, and it was very easy to import videos directly from YouTube for coding. I had some issues in exporting the files, which I assume is because the projects were much larger than the software is designed to store. Grounded Theory has a much denser coding process than other qualitative methods, and my largest dataset has almost 1200 codes (Molyneux's 'The Truth About The Crusades'). The functions for different levels of coding and note taking also left something to be desired. For example, 'Nodes' can be highlighted with coloured 'coding stripes', but rather than the text itself being colour coded, a sidebar is created which tells you where coding has happened, but not which text corresponds to which 'Node'. And for a reason I couldn't figure out, the colours I manually assigned each 'Node' were not the colours that appeared in the sidebar. These were minor setbacks, however, and I used NVivo to create files to showcase the differences between initial and focused coding, with memos linked directly to the codes, directly alongside the videos. I also created codebooks that sorted the codes into categories for every video, which were useful references in my description of those categories.

I chose Wordpress to host my project since it accommodated all the media I would be using, and allowed me to share the downloadable files for items I was not able to directly share as html. I was able to hyperlink relevant pages within my website, such as quoted codes I included in my descriptions of categories, as well as to my external sources. I chose to annotate my sources openly using the hypothes.is Chrome extension (where available), so readers can follow the path I took in formulating my understanding and approach to the current study.

Collecting the Data

After deciding to focus on Stefan Molyneux and ContraPoints, I examined their statistics to decide what would be needed to draw fair comparisons, using Social Blade and their YouTube pages. Since ContraPoints has a much smaller library (52 versus Molyneux's 3,000+) over fewer years (ContraPoints' earliest video is April 23, 2016, versus Molyneux's on August 14, 2006), but a much higher viewership per video (at the time of writing 11/52 of ContraPoints' videos versus 12/3,000+ of Molyneux's videos have over 1 million views), the most popular videos across their respective YouTube careers were chosen to represent what has brought them the most attention. While they are not the most recent videos from either creator, there is recent activity in these comment sections, confirming that this content is still relevant in shaping the narrative of the channel and ideas of the audience.

Molyneux has more diversity in the type of content that he produces, which can include interviews, clips from his podcast or debates with guest speakers. Since ContraPoints' channel exclusively produces video essays, I only included videos in which Molyneux was the sole speaker, to avoid possible variations between his dialogue and presentational speech. ContraPoints can include guest voice-overs for reading quotes, but this is a stylistic choice rather than an interaction. Even in his most viewed content, the length of Molyneux's videos range hugely, from 30 seconds to 2.5 hours, so I made choices such that the total footage from both ContraPoints and Molyneux were roughly the same.

This brought me to 2 of ContraPoints' videos resulting in 63 minutes 25 seconds (Incels 35:05; Jordan Peterson 28:20), and 3 of Molyneux's videos with 67 minutes 32 seconds (The Story of Your Enslavement 13:10; The Truth About Nelson Mandela 20:23; The Truth About the Crusades 32:58). Hereafter I will refer to the videos as 'Incels', 'Peterson', 'Enslavement', 'Mandela' and 'Crusades'.

Before the analysis, I made sure to watch the videos several times to familiarise myself with the language and tone, for a holistic appreciation of the content. I made some tentative experiments with 'Crusades' to practice coding in NVivo, and found the recommended method of coding by creating 'Nodes' on the video's timeline was inefficient for the closer readings done in Grounded Theory: some codes applied to only one second of content, some segments had

multiple or overlapping codes, and navigating the timeline was difficult with this density. Instead, I used another of the functions to manually enter time segments with ‘Content’ notes in a sidebar for the initial steps of open coding, then used the ‘Node’ function on the ‘Content’ to group my final codes into categories. I have less personal experience with Molyneux’s content, so thought it appropriate to analyse his content first so as not to project my biases by comparing him to analytic notes on ContraPoints, since I’ve consumed much more of her content outside the context of academia.

For the purposes of this study, only the speech acts of the creators will be analysed. The accuracy of the content, the legitimacy of the sources, and the production quality and imagery (in which there are very obvious differences I am not equipped to analyse, see any ContraPoints video for reference) will not be points of discussion, as my primary goal is considering how language and emotion are used by the speakers to convey meaning. Though I will theorise conclusions on how their content affects their wider communities, I will solely discuss this in terms of the creator’s language choices.

The Analysis

1. Initial and Focused Coding

The first step of Grounded Theory is the open or initial coding phase. In this phase, we look for pointers on where the data can possibly take us, using a descriptive language that captures the actions and processes evident in the text. Put simply, initial codes question what the text is ‘doing’. Charmaz (2006) recommends using gerunds in each code, to “gain a strong sense of action and sequence” (p.49), which can later tell us with more certainty what each category is ‘doing’ to represent a theme of the narrative.

In traditionally collected data, such as the examples offered by Charmaz of previously conducted interviews, a directed narrative has been prompted from a subject, rather in this case where a narrative is being offered of the speaker’s own accord, not with the intention of offering the reader insight to the speaker’s personal experience. This makes the coding of natural conversation slightly more tricky, since true sentiments and convictions are more implied than overtly explored. I performed multiple close readings, with even more holistic readings, of each dataset before finalising a language I felt described common themes of speech habits, which I could then organise into themes for each set. Charmaz describes this as a necessary process whereby the researcher asks themselves questions about what patterns are emerging, to inform them of what they need to look for as they go on. This is similar to other qualitative methods which apply a theory to be verified or use pre-existing coding schemas to strengthen pre-existing research, except in this case, every idea is emerging solely from the data. The initial coding process, as Charmaz describes, is quick and intensely descriptive, to capture the first interpretation we make of the data. This provides a rich description from which we can build a multitude of potential theories.

To examine the language I was using in the initial coding, I used the ‘Word Frequency Query’ and noted each gerund I used in an Excel file. For Molyneux’s videos, my initial codes utilised 97 gerunds for ‘Crusades’, 39 for ‘Enslavement’, and 58 for ‘Mandela’. For each, my most used words were ‘emphasising’, ‘implying’ and ‘framing’ (in different orders) and I noticed that many of the words I used were referring to similar ideas. For example, ‘expressing’ could cover ‘sympathising’, ‘desiring’ and ‘wishing’ (each of which I only used once or twice) if I

amended my phrasing of those codes, and it more accurately alluded to an overarching theme of implied personal connections with the content. I went through each video a second time, noting each gerund as I used it, and found I could achieve the same meaning with a much more concise language, ending up with 28 gerunds total for the 3 videos after my final review of the codes. I wrote descriptions for each of these to ensure the meaning in each instance was consistent and I was not using multiple words to capture the same idea. For example, each instance where I explained Molyneux was ‘emphasising’ something, I meant he was “using some tactic to make a certain idea or topic stand out in a sentence, such as shouting, repeating, or speaking slowly.” Similarly, for the ContraPoints videos, I utilised 73 gerunds for ‘Incels’ and 48 for ‘Peterson’, which I refined to 35 for both videos. This made it much easier to see the recurring themes in the videos, and patterns that I needed to look out for in follow-up readings as I continued to add details that my narrowed my focus.

A leading note I found coding the ContraPoints videos were changes in tone, since she could switch from inquisitive to sarcastic to thoughtful in a very short time. I believe I noticed it more so with her videos because her tone is steady and neutral by default, and her shifts in tone are much more obvious since they are rehearsed. After finishing the ContraPoints videos I revisited Molyneux’s to add notes on the changes in tone, which I had skimmed over not realising the large component it played in changing the intention of his words. I had a few notes on this already, but on my next round of coding I listened exclusively to the tone and flow he used for each segment since I had coded for every other action in his speech, as I had for ContraPoints. ‘Enslavement’ especially was loaded with changes in tonality to emphasise certain aspects of the message, such as Molyneux’s submissive offering of indisputable truths of life, to his irritation when framing governmental oppression, with fluctuations between harsh and soft tones to guide the emotional response of the audience. I added adverbs and adjectives to the lists of gerunds I had made for Molyneux and ContraPoints, also adding descriptions to help me see where and how I was using each word.

My run-through of the focused coding for the last ContraPoints video was easily the fastest, since by then I had clear ideas already of what it was I was looking for, and virtually all the descriptions written for the gerunds and adjectives. While I still aimed to highlight any new

ideas that may not have appeared in the other videos, the focused coding was more a matter of deciding what details I needed to add to capture tones or notes I may have missed the first time.

2. Memos and Categories

Through all the phases of coding, I made 3 distinct types of memos, which were reflections and notes to be elaborated on when creating and describing memos. First were the gerunds and adjectives that made up my focused codes, which I stored in a separate Excel file (for these types of memos, I found the separate file easier to navigate than any of NVivo's functions). Charmaz explains that focused codes "pinpoint and develop the most salient categories in large batches of data." (p.46), so this was an essential step to ensure I was doing this. I used NVivo's 'Memo' function for general thoughts, especially when thinking of preliminary categories and points to describe them. 'Annotations' are created directly in the data, and I used these for memos that arose in response to more specific segments, such as examples I could use when describing my categories. Writing the memos for both creators, I found they had many similar approaches to their content, with the differences being the execution. Once I finished my focused coding for both Molyneux and ContraPoints, I merged the two projects so all the videos were in one place, and combined all 'Memos' so I could explore potential categories that described both of them.

I arrived at five categories, which I then tested on my codes for each video. To do this, I created 'Nodes' for each category with the preliminary titles, and used coloured highlights so they could easily be differentiated: facts vs feelings (blue); characters in the narrative (green); the creator as a character (purple); sarcasm and satire (red); and flow (orange). Soon into the categorisation process I found a need for a sixth - 'setting the scene' - to describe the creators' tactics in guiding the audience towards a certain understanding, similar to how they sway their emotions and portray characters, but for the overall sense of the story rather than these specific components. The other categories I had considered in the 'Memos' were merged to broader categories, i.e. 'humanisation' was a component of 'characters in a narrative', 'truth' was a component of 'facts vs feelings', and 'identifying the target audience' and 'weighted statements' both contributed to the categories for characters.

I could easily sort each code into at least one category for each of the videos, and found myself with six full categories which accurately illustrated all aspects of both creators' approaches to storytelling that I had identified. To decide where each code fit the best, I asked myself for each what is the strongest point I can make for this code in the context of one category. The easiest was for 'flow', since this almost exclusively related to the codes I created to describe the tone of the speakers. There were some overlaps with 'the creator as a character' and 'characters in the narrative', since sometimes the creator identified with the characters being described, so I could speak about one code in two different contexts. Similarly for 'facts versus feelings' and 'setting the scene', there were a few tough decisions on what I felt was an offering of evidence to strengthen the argument, compared to what was an aid for the audience to understand a broad context. In some of these cases, I created two codes describing different aspects of the same sentence, such as a statement of fact that was loaded with implications about how you should understand that fact, so I could enter one code as 'facts versus feelings' and the other as 'setting the scene'.

Unfortunately, NVivo did not have an option to neatly export my codes, annotations and categories for each video in one place, so these will be linked separately in WordPress. I also encountered several technical issues in these final stages, the most bothersome being the sidebar not displaying the correct colour I assigned to the categories. While I was unable to make my categorisations shareable in a printed format, I will offer summaries of each here, and will make the codebooks relating to each category available on my website, under the 'NVivo Links' post under the 'Data' category.

The Categories

1. Facts versus Feelings

A mixture of hard facts, anecdotal evidence, quoted experts and generalised speculations are offered by each creator. In some cases, the creators pose their feelings about the facts, or push feelings founded in facts, though it is not always clear which is the case. Facts are used to frame what the creator believes is the most necessary information to understand, versus what can be glossed over or broadly generalised. Molyneux's facts most often center on key dates, locations and specific figures, where as ContraPoints offers definitions and descriptions of key concepts.

Going by the speech alone, it can seem that ContraPoints and Molyneux equally omit appropriate citations and sources from their videos, since Molyneux does not name his sources (some are in the video description) and ContraPoints offers most references or examples on-screen without directly saying they are being displayed. I include on-screen citations as a note for ContraPoints because it is important to show the difference between the demonstrated rigour of investigations by the two. For example, in 'Incels' she makes what seems a vague statement about how incels are portrayed negatively in the media, but has images of headlines from The Guardian, Elle, Glamour and The Star which exemplify this (2:21). As contrast, 'Mandela' contains only vaguely referenced sources, and it is not specified where he is reading from during the video.

Molyneux does offer a visual reference in 'Crusades' for the size of the Muslim caliphate, but there is no source for the map, nor does he go into any specifics, simply remarking "that's quite a lot of non-grey [Muslim-controlled lands] in the map here" (13:12). His listed facts in this narrative include the years of battles involving Muslims in Europe, the names of Christian capitals with some of their leaders (Emperor Tervel 5:23; Emperor Aurelion 7:52; Pope John X 9:30), and listing acts of violence and treachery that Muslims inflicted on Europe. At 17:32 he asserts "the idea that the Christian crusades were some unprovoked random aggression on behalf of bloodthirsty Christians is *madness*; it's blowback for 400 years of ever-expanding ever-invading *Islam*." This fact is recurrent in each description of Muslim-Christian battles, as details are only offered on the side he feels needs justification.

ContraPoints frames many of her facts as information that is commonly known, or information that is true but does not need much detail. At 13:12 in ‘Incels’, she references the definition of ‘catastrophizing’ by psychotherapists, but there is no information of where this definition originated, how valid this definition is, and how accepted the theory is as a whole. ContraPoints tends to include references to individuals or sources that are directly relevant to the topic she is discussing (in ‘Peterson’, the Cathy Newman interview at 2:03), and even some philosophers that have potentially relevant insights (in ‘Peterson’, Judith Butler 18:47), but it's unclear why she chooses not to do this for some concepts. She is clearly capable of researching and articulating ideas that add depth to her inquiry, and presenting these references on-screen or with direct quotes, but for more general ideas the audience does not always see where she is drawing her knowledge from. Her content is closer to an offering of organised speculations than it is an insistence of truth, but that does not dismiss these occasions where suggested readings could help her audience understand her reasoning.

The needs for justification are equally important to both creators, but sought differently. To Molyneux, names, dates and statistics are the foundation of his perspective. To ContraPoints, facts are not as solid as they seem, so understanding a broader context is more important in building a theory.

2. Setting the scene

This can be considered an extension of the facts or feelings that are offered. The creators define the context in which their content should be interpreted with their phrasing, elaborations on facts or examples, broad generalisations about an event or perspective, and, very basically, by how they open their video. Molyneux presents ‘Crusades’ as an objective presentation and a key tool for the audience in their independent search for truth, dramatically emphasising “*this is* the truth about the crusades” (1:16), pausing between each word, before clarifying the context in which this truth is being explored: the long history of Muslim-Christian relations in the lead up to the Crusades. In ‘Peterson’, ContraPoints frames the topics of “reason, power, truth” (1:06) which she emphasises she does not care about, and to which she expresses an exaggerated disinterest. She explains her motives as an effort to encourage more effective leftist critiques of Peterson,

which she does not believe is being done, and can end up strengthening his influence by framing him as a victim of leftists who retort with “very uncharitable interpretations of everything he says” (2:03).

‘Enslavement’ is unique in that there are no obvious facts offered, merely vague premises we must believe are true, and the story is framed as a series of analogies and generalisations about human behaviours of exploitation and domination through history. Molyneux spends the video explaining that economic freedom has been limited and controlled at each step in history, and only alludes to tragedies through background imagery and vague descriptors, such as the “three phase process” which keeps “the tax livestock securely in the compounds of the ruling classes” (7:56), through government education, falsely created hierarchies and the invention of external threats. We can infer his intent to explain oppressive strategies of governments to discipline citizens, but there is no opportunity to really engage with this idea since the premise lacks any detail.

ContraPoints uses ‘Incels’ to explain wider ideologies and stubborn ways of thinking that are necessary before tackling incels as characters. At the start of the video she proposes “let’s talk about bone structure” (1:32), introducing the fixation on physical attributes that will be present through the investigation, and her desire to explain why this fixation exists. In ‘Peterson’, she interestingly focuses more so on the influence and perspectives that arise from Jordan Peterson rather than focusing on him as a character. She frames his work as offering “higher purpose” to alleviate “suffering” (3:26), using a “new, scarier word” for progressive politics (4:43) to categorise his tendency to induce fear through language and phrasing.

3. Characters in the narrative

If the above defined how we should interpret the scene overall, this category explains how we understand the actors within it. These are the farmers and livestock, Muslims and Christians, Mandela and South Africans, incels and Jordan Peterson fans, and people who interact with or are affected by these groups. Molyneux tends to use a dichotomy of ‘good guys and bad guys’, framing strained relationships, noble actors, and villains that must be challenged. ContraPoints,

conversely, frames complicated characters, who are not inherently evil, and who potentially can be sympathised with.

In ‘Crusades’ it’s easy to think that the names mentioned are the characters, such as Roman Emperors and Christian martyrs, but these represent historical facts more so than characters. The real characters that Molyneux portrays here are Muslims, Christians, Europeans, Westerners, and named countries and states in ancient Europe. We understand Muslims to be, in this narrative, invaders, conquerors, an authoritative force that “was spreading” (19:55), that Europe must “repel” (4:33), lest they bring about the collapse of civilisation. There are some distinctions made between Christians and Europeans, since he opens the video with a list of faiths that struggled against Islam in the Middle East that are distinct from Christian capitals (2:34), but ultimately both are framed as victims whose strength and endurance protected the interests of modern civilisation.

A method distinct to ContraPoints is the use of acted characters, who portray the perspective of antagonists in the discussion. In ‘Incels’ and ‘Peterson’, we see Lady Foppington, an “18th century sexual deviant” (‘Peterson’ 0:53) who offers perspectives of early modernists (12:26) on subjects such as social hierarchies and phrenology to frame logical justifications for bigotry, and Abigail, a radical feminist whose interests are defending the sanctity of womanhood from transwomen, which ContraPoints satirises to emphasise her disregard of criticisms on her experience of gender. These characters are interacted with directly, and ContraPoints frames them as intruders to her creative space (literally barging into her room) with whom she has a strained relationship: in response to Foppington’s intrusion she resigns “I need new roommates” in ‘Peterson’ (23:28), and orders Abigail to “leave my f**khole out of this” in ‘Incels’ (19:28) when Abigail interrupts to insist ContraPoints will never be a real woman. Even her portrayal of Peterson could be considered a theatrically-made character, when she stages a conversation with a dummy who responds with robot noises. Despite this dehumanising satire, ContraPoints frames Peterson in these scenes as a role model with valid criticisms of leftist circles, while also highlighting rhetorics she is concerned put marginalised groups at risks, which she urges him to reflect upon. ContraPoints maintains points of an ‘us vs them’ dichotomy, but the audience is offered enough nuance in each perspective to at least consider the validity of their causes.

A central character illustrated by both creators is that of the audience. They are actively and regularly identified as being a part of each inquiry, through phrases like “unfortunately, we have to talk about [“truth, reason, power”]” in ‘Peterson’ (1:14), explaining “the choice of vocabulary tells us how incels think of women” in ‘Incels’ (3:07), “let’s look at some of the facts about this” in ‘Mandela’ (0:54), explaining “when we become afraid of death...we become controllable” in ‘Enslavement’ (0:46), and “let’s dig back into history” in ‘Crusades’ (0:53). There are some instances where assumptions are made about the audience’s demographics or beliefs, such as Molyneux’s image of a US flag while he emphasises the relevance of the content “in *your* country, your *tax* farm”, since Molyneux is himself Canadian, but targeting the content primarily at viewers from the US. ContraPoints begins the investigation of meaning behind Peterson’s language by stating “we all know what Marxism is” (11:03), before going on to define Marxism, albeit concisely, without offering any material to confirm that this is a commonly accepted meaning because it is assumed the audience will have at least a rudimentary appreciation for the theory which she can validate here.

Audiences also have perspectives projected to them, such as when Molyneux asserts “whatever beefs you have with your political regime, you can hardly hold children accountable” in Mandela (2:10) inviting the audience to consider the savagery of Mandela’s involvement in terrorism, and when ContraPoints explains “you can justify your belief by pointing to the shape of a skull” to frame the scientific process of justifying bigotry in ‘Incels’ (6:28). Appropriate responses are also guided by using language that can invoke a certain response, or validating assumed skepticism or preconceptions the audience may have. ContraPoints directly acknowledges potential sources of trauma for incels - “A lot of you are lonely. You’ve been bullied and neglected. You feel left behind by society” (30:45). Not only does this address a subset of her audience, but it frames incels in a new light to the non-incels watching, as their existence is not simply a threat to society or point of ridicule, but one of deep-rooted anxiety from genuine problems in modern society, which can be sympathised with. Interestingly, Molyneux’s equivalent instances appear to further alienate his audiences from rational inquiries of systemic issues, by invoking fear, urgency and sympathy for innocents, such as the ‘Crusades’ plea: “And if there is to be a civilisation in the future, in other words if we’re going to keep what

largely white Western European Christians have developed” (30:05). This secures the group identity of loosely defined “white Western European Christians” who Molyneux validates as sophisticated and morally superior in comparison to ‘the Muslims’, and who must band together to eradicate the threat posed to them.

4. The creator as a character

There are allusions to personal conviction through abrupt changes in tone, clear diversions from scripted content, or moments where the creator shares how they have been personally affected or why they were motivated to make the video. They assert roles for themselves in the video, identify with some groups over others, and demonstrate a knowledge of their audience’s interests by anticipating questions and points that require clarity. As a basic introduction, Molyneux takes the role of a historian and an objective source for viewers, while ContraPoints frames herself as a philosophical inquirer of contemporary, mostly internet-based behaviours and ideologies.

Molyneux opens ‘Crusades’ by asserting the need for a historian “to put things in perspective, because there’s this kinda general historical principle” that vilifies the history of Europe (0:30). He presents his content as a rebuttal of this principle, based on lesser recognised historical evidence, which he has collated through his experience in studying history. Since he offers no sources, only naming one historians he quotes (David Bryan Davis at 26:31), the work is presented as his personal summation of which tellings of history are the most important to present. In ‘Mandela’, he offers both “thoughts” (0:03) and “facts” (0:54), implying his thoughts have been based on these facts, and he offers a list of sources the audience is invited to verify (1:04). He continually expresses personal condemnation for Mandela, calling him a “sociopathic idiot” (17:52), and extends these feelings to the audience, saying at 7:44 “I think this is all really important stuff to understand.”

ContraPoints sometimes offers points she has decided not to elaborate on, but that she recognises as important. In 'Peterson', she explains that the concept of the West is problematic in itself, but chooses not to analyse these implications closely because “we don't have time for that right now” (24:08) Here she demonstrates her interest in postmodern arguments, but equally recognises the audience is likely growing weary of all her explaining, which she jokes about at

14:02: “boy this is a lot of explaining, it’s so much explaining it’s triggering my gender dysphoria”. Despite her sarcastic disinterest into philosophical inquiries, her knowledge and experience are clear in the anecdotes she adds of her reading experiences, such as her tolerance of Hume (12:47) and disdain for Derrida (14:52).

‘Incels’ offers an intimate look into ContraPoints’ real life experiences with dating and toxic online forums, based on her insights from “the unusual position of being a woman who dates men, who used to be a man who dates women” (17:36) and also her early gender transition which she generalises as “a painful, awkward, humiliating stage of life” (24:14). She uses her “relevant experiences” (18:10) of Tinder habits from both male and female perspectives to frame the different emotional responses for the audience, encouraging each to see the others perspective. Her personal knowledge of a toxic lgbt 4chan forum is used to frame how she built her understanding of the incel thought process, and their similar practice of “digital self-harm” which she admits to having “a long history of doing” (29:56). She follows by sharing her efforts to separate herself from these spaces (30:14), her success in improving her mental health (30:14) and an urgent plea for incels to do the same (31:07).

Both creators frame a shared identity with their audience, or a specified subset, such as common associations with early humans in the opening minute of ‘Enslavement’, women who use dating apps in ‘Incels’ (20:32), and, multiple times in every video, the audience as a whole who are performing the inquiry with the creator. In ‘Crusades’, Molyneux vaguely references an in-group of “white Western European Christians” whose legacy is Western civilisation (30:07). He implies a shared threat to Europeans and North Americans (31:49) whose Western privileges are at risk of being lost, which he expresses extreme anger for by shouting “everything we have inherited we will LOSE if we continue to attack ourselves” (32:18). He expresses frustration and genuine passion in his care for preserving Western civilisation, and this closing sentiment is a call for the audience to share this concern. In ‘Incels’, ContraPoints sarcastically frames the group investigation “from one pretend clinician to another,” addressing the audience as an exclusive group she is sharing speculations with. In ‘Peterson’, she makes assumptions that her audience shares her Marxist identity, labelling pictures of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels as “our boys” (13:22) and joking that “of course, as we all know, when Foucault died capitalism did

end forever,” followed by a celebratory image stating “we did it!” (16:04). ContraPoints does include non-sarcastic instances of relating to the audience, such as references to the group inquiry (‘Peterson’ 15:33), but her mockery of her own image and that of certain out-groups or perspectives form a large portion of her content, a theme deserving its own category.

5. Sarcasm and satire

Sarcastic phrasing, satirical renditions and exaggerated tones are frequently found in each video, though executed quite differently. Molyneux tends to ridicule certain perspectives or groups with enthusiasm and a degree of smugness, while ContraPoints’ humour, while still a form of mockery, is much drier and coincides with dramatised disinterest. Molyneux’s instances are spontaneous interjections to his written notes, while ContraPoints’ are core foundations of her script. For both, however, it is a conveyance of their true convictions.

In ‘Enslavement’, Molyneux sarcastically describes the corruption of “your country, your tax farm” since seemingly compassionate acts of the government are “not because he [implied Obama] cares about your liberties”, before more solemnly asserting the true intention that “he wants to increase his profits” (3:25). Molyneux uses sarcasm here to mock the illusion of freedom in the US, the greed of government figures, and the gullibility of the audience for believing they are free, all of which are core assertions of this video. In ‘Mandela’, the ill-placed idolisation of Mandela is referenced through the video, such as his sarcastic condemnation of the death of children at the hands of terrorists, dryly stating “you can scarcely hold children accountable”, and sarcastically undermining the “beefs you have with your political regime” (2:10). Here, the savagery of terrorist activities is emphasised by framing it as irrational targeting of innocents.

For ContraPoints, the characters of Lady Foppington and Abigail are satirical representations of the perspectives she is critiquing, and offer lighter ways for the audience to engage with these ideologies. She encourages them to see the absurdity in their existence, while maintaining the dangerous consequences of that existence. In ‘Incels’, Foppington is used to explain the fixation of skulls by bigoted groups, describing the insecurities of early transitioning transwomen at 25:56, which ContraPoints frames as a false-rationalisation. She earlier explains

this reason “you can justify your belief by pointing to the shape a skull and saying, well that’s the reason why, it’s just nature, there’s nothing that can be done about it” (6:37). The same point is presented as a formal hypothesis and a satirised example, offering multiple ways for the audience to understand it.

More interestingly, she often satirises herself, such as references to her drug use in ‘Peterson’ - “I’m not afraid of his ideas, I’m not afraid of anything, I just smoked a bunch of f**king PCP” (2:36) - and her sexual obsession with Jordan Peterson, who she addresses as “daddy” (2:42, 5:43). She also acknowledges that her content tends to be inappropriate, sarcastically saying “for once I’d like to actually treat this discussion with the seriousness and respect I think it deserves,” before climbing into a bath with a dummy of Peterson sitting opposite her. ContraPoints allows the audience to ridicule her own persona as well as the characters she describes, reducing the formality of her presentations and encouraging viewers to not take her too seriously, since she clearly doesn’t.

6. Flow

The speed and flow of emotions can be a reflection of how the audience is expected to respond, such as the slow, intentional style in ‘Enslavement’, and the variance between the neutral default tone and sarcasm in ‘Incels’ and ‘Peterson’. ContraPoints performs rehearsed and heavily edited content, with few seemingly spontaneous reflections, and breaks the serious tones by acting out satirical personas. In cases where her tone is dramatised, such as her disinterest in the premise of ‘Peterson’, this contributes to her overall flow rather than her tactical use of sarcasm, as I would code in similar instances for Molyneux. These help the audience shift between parts of the discussion that should be taken seriously versus those that can be made light of, where as Molyneux uses fluctuations of emotion as a guide.

The three videos by Molyneux I’ve discussed are completely different from each other in terms of flow, with ‘Enslavement’ being calm and calculated, ‘Mandela’ including stutters and distractions, and ‘Crusades’ being urgent and energetic. In ‘Enslavement’, Molyneux resignedly frames an uncomfortable truth that must be faced, opening with “this is the story of your enslavement, how it came to be, and how you can finally be free.” He gently pauses between

each sentence, and enunciates every word, so the audience has time to take everything in. Molyneux appears distracted and disinterested through ‘Mandela’, often skimming notes and losing track of what he is reading, such as his blunt recital of a UN Human Development report at 12:22. Between these uninspired readings, however, he solemnly asserts that “this is pretty essential and pretty important to understand” (5:15), implying this content is an objective truth that the audience is likely unaware of. In ‘Crusades’, starkly contrasting with the other two, Molyneux is enthusiastic, excited and interested. He pumps up the audience exclaiming the likening of historians to superheroes (0:03) who can “take us off the train tracks of ignorant inevitability and give us some free will in the matter” (1:05). This is broken by his solemn description of the threat that Muslims pose to Western countries, framing how the audience should interpret the seriousness of this threat, and of understanding European history, such as stating at 27:20 “before Western colonialism there was Muslim imperialism, before the Christian Crusades there were a myriad of Muslim crusades which were enormously successful and kept battering down the door of Europe and taking over vast swathes of Europe.”

‘Incels’ and ‘Peterson’ are similar in their shifts from neutral speech to exaggerations to sincere or thoughtful offerings of personal reactions. Responding to Lady Foppington in the opening to ‘Peterson’, ContraPoints is exhausted with the rhetoric of bigots who defend hierarchies based on gender, resigning “ugh, Foppington, are we doing this again?”, allowing the audience to laugh at how tiresome this investigation will be. In ‘Incels’, after a dramatic reading of a post from r/Braincels, ContraPoints plays what’s dubbed “chill jazz” in the video, setting a scene that is relaxed and welcoming, a satirical contrast to the closed, aggressive nature of the communities to be discussed, emphasised by her sexually suggestive introduction to a discussion of celibacy: “hello boys, let’s talk about bone structure” (1:32). As these videos continue, genuine expressions are offered, such as at 28:10 in ‘Incels’ when explaining “that ContraPoints is a big-skulled hon with a voice like nails on a chalkboard” in the eyes of toxic commenters, but ending with a small laugh. This lapse in her otherwise intentionally structured tones frames the humanity of her experiences, especially as it’s offered in the segment describing her trauma from toxic communities. Similar to her sarcastic self-deprecations, the audience is encouraged to laugh with her about the absurdity of her existence.

Discussion

I did not intend to use the same category titles for both creators at the start of this study, but after the coding steps I was surprised by the overlaps in how their videos were constructed. Both intertwine facts and speculations, both include and directly invite the audience to their inquiries, both frame characters and describe broader contexts of their narrative, both insert their own concerns, interests and sympathies, both enjoy sarcastic mockery, and both have clear indications of how they want their audience to emotionally respond. The key difference I've seen from these videos is how the creators view themselves, which dictates how the audience should see them.

At 17:22 in 'Incels', ContraPoints offers an intimate personal detail: "I'm gonna tell you something I've never really come about on this channel, [exaggerated] *so this is like a really vulnerable moment for me*". This is a recurring joke on her channel: she comes out in videos where it's relevant to the subject, acting as if it's the first time, most recently in her video entitled 'Men'. This may not be obvious to the newest viewers who have no prior experience with ContraPoints, but it can be recognised as a joke after regular viewing. This runs the risk of distancing viewers that do not appreciate her satire of creators or influencers who extend 'vulnerable moments' to their audience, since it assumes a lack of authenticity in those moments. On the other hand, her subtle and multitudinal in-jokes and references create a sense of community, since only dedicated viewers will notice all of them and be able to laugh with her. Regardless of the reception, however, self-satire is a core component of her content as she insists that viewers do not consider her a divine source of truth.

Molyneux, at least in these videos, is the exact opposite. Except for his statement at the start of Mandela that he's "certainly no expert" (1:04), he frames his content as absolute truths that cannot be questioned. 'The Truth About' is a popular video series by Molyneux, which, like his videos here, offer alternative perceptions to general understandings of history, politics, celebrities and pop culture, to name a few, and, like this, insist that 'the government', 'the media' and 'the left' are withholding these truths. He demonstrates an acute awareness of the insecurities and anxieties of his audience, demonstrated in his framing of the good guys and bad guys in each video, and the narrow insights he offers to each.

By not breaking his dialogue into edited segments as many YouTubers producing similar content do, his presentation videos contain trailed thoughts, mistakes and backpedaling. An obvious example in ‘Crusades’ is when he says 17th instead of 7th century when introducing the origins of Islam (1:24). We know he meant 7th because he follows saying the year 622, but this was a mistake he was aware of, since we hear him slightly slur the ‘eenth’, that happened early enough that he could have scrapped that video as a first-take and started again. This implies that his videos, while accompanied by notes and points to elaborate on in the moment, are likely not rehearsed. We’re also clued to this in the Mandela video where he frequently stumbles and trails off in thought when he seems to lose track of his notes. On the one hand, this makes his work seem poorly produced and hastily published, void of rigour or care for finer details. On the other, it gives the impression that his videos are honest and informal, and are closer to approachable, engaging and intelligent conversations than they are to academic presentations. They are noble offerings of the knowledge he has collected, knowledge he wants to share quickly so that we, his audience, who have been led astray by leftist media, can enlighten ourselves as soon as possible. He is eloquent, passionate and cares deeply about the virtues of logic and reason (as he understands them), and this shines through when we see him trail from his notes to piece together the most logical truth he can.

Interpretations of ContraPoints’ habits are also subject to a matter of opinion, however. Masochistic epistemology is a term coined by ContraPoints in ‘Incels’, but it isn't clear from the context, since it's presented as a philosophical theory. By failing to credit sources for some theories she offers, it appears to be another generally accepted theory rather than a proposition. This does not necessarily weaken her justification for its existence - this section of the video is basically designed to frame the prevalence of intentionally toxic engagement as a pursuit of truth, which the term represents - but the audience is left to decide, without directly being instructed to do so, whether or not her proposition is sufficiently evidenced based on the examples presented alone. One could interpret ContraPoints along these lines as a progressive philosophical intellect, sincerely committed to investigating and describing contemporary online behaviours, or as someone who is carelessly inventing terms that inflate a problem that isn't

really there. The conclusion reached may depend on pre-existing notions about her as a person, rather than the creator she appears as in a specific context.

Effects of online disinhibition can be applied to some of the habits exhibited by the creators. The audience is not visible to the creators, so the response has to be assumed, and sometimes projected by anticipating or invoking the reaction. Solipsistic introjection occurs when an online user feels “that their mind has merged with the mind of the online companion” (Suler, 2004). While this originally described text-based interactions, the creators may experience something similar, as the audience is portrayed as a character in their story whose emotions, responses and, to an extent, future actions are dictated by the creator without direct interaction. Molyneux does this when he exclaims the danger that Western civilisation faces against violent, foreign invaders, and the complacency of a culture that has become hedonistic and selfishly focused, inciting anxiety, urgency and skepticism where there may have been none previously. ContraPoints does this when directly stating the traumatic experiences that incels have endured, which she asserts she has also experienced, as an offering of validation and an extension of sympathy, despite her experiences with incels being limited to readings of their forum posts.

These exemplify the dichotomy Suler frames of toxic and benign disinhibition (2004). The former is a premise from which violent thoughts can arise, as mainstream sources and generalised conceptions are actively discredited and framed as “utter nonsense” (Crusades 27:53), and the audience is instructed to “stop apologizing, stop defending, start pushing back” (32:10). This is eerily reminiscent of the cult-like characteristics that Nguyen warns are the foundations of echo chambers, that intentionally alienate listeners from conflicting opinions (2018). The latter is an attempt to build a bridge with a community that identifies itself as removed from normal society, by assuring that their experiences are more common than they think, and inviting the broader audience to recognise this, while maintaining that their rhetoric is dangerous and should not be dismissed by incessant mockery. Murthy and Sharma (2019) assert the benefit in recognising these nuanced representations of opinion on YouTube, which is shaping the self-critical practices that modern discourse is adopting.

Conclusion

I said at the start of this study that it will likely be outdated by the time I finished it, and this proved somewhat true. In my final week of writing, ContraPoints released a new video, very similar to ‘Incels’, which would have changed my interpretation of her other content had I seen it sooner. In the same time, Ribeiro et al. (2019) published foundational work in pinpointing paths of radicalisation on YouTube by examining the behaviour of commenters across 360 right-wing creators, including Molyneux. Had this information been available just a few months ago, this study could have taken a different direction. More research may even have come out after that which could change its significance again, in an infinite cycle that will always be just about behind in holistically illustrating the neopolitical landscape of the internet.

That being said, this study achieved its purpose in founding a close inquiry of the strategies of neopolitical creators that guide the understanding of their audience. While much more studies into many more creators would be necessary before any generalisations can be made, I found this study has enabled me to view this genre of content from more nuanced perspectives, by illuminating overlaps that viewers may dismiss. The creators have clear ideas of their audience and design their content accordingly, so it may be difficult for fans to admit that creators they don’t like share qualities with creators they admire. They also have specific, but not obvious, ideas of what their language means, and how viewers should understand it. Molyneux barely offers any suggestion that ‘Muslims’ are diverse in their geographical origins, goals or beliefs, neither historically nor contemporarily, framing them as a unified force focused on stealing the wealth of the West. ContraPoints does not offer a deep analysis of Marxist theory, making references to its meaning and interactions with other leftist ideologies, but not the historical underpinnings or sources where this can be verified. They make assumptions about what their audience either knows already or wants to know, which can guide what they choose to elaborate on, but also what they choose to dismiss, meaning viewers may not be encouraged to challenge the understanding of those concepts that they have already. This could be addressed, however, in efforts to build a universal lexicon.

Lexicons based on prior research are necessary for studies of an emerging community (Farrell et al. 2019; Beers Fägersten 2017). As creators everywhere on the political spectrum

have mentioned, discussions often suffer from a lack of common understanding of ill-defined terms, and ill-conceived notions that arise from them. This study did not aim to quantify the sentiment or emotions of YouTube commenters, as similarly themed studies tend to do (Duarte et al., 2017). This field is drastically unexplored and unrepresented in academia, only really receiving any kind of investigation by mainstream and pop culture news outlets, and even at that the publications are scarce. As I've outlined, parallels can be drawn between social/linguistic behaviours of digital and physical communities, and even between categorically distinct digital communities. However, a working lexicon for neopolitical channels does not exist, nor does a scientific review of their insular behaviours, and conclusions on any aspect of the communities cannot be drawn until this is done.

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