

BreadTube Rising: How Modern Creators Use Cultural Formats to Spread Countercultural Ideology

JJ Sylvia IV

Fitchburg State University

Kyle Moody

Fitchburg State University

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J.J. Sylvia IV and Kyle Moody,

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Abstract: In their article, "BreadTube Rising: How Modern Creators Use Cultural Formats to Spread Countercultural Ideology," J.J. Sylvia IV and Kyle Moody analyze the rise of BreadTube. Scholars have argued that YouTube's algorithms lead to greater radicalization (Ribeiro et al.) and bad actors have weaponized algorithms to draw users into conspiracies (boyd, *What Hath We Wrought?*). This article adds to this by linking these practices to the commodification of social media that spread misinformation as adaptations of socially and rhetorically mediated technologies. It analyzes how the economics of YouTube and other platforms demand that user-generated content fit within paradigms of culture and economics. This ideological connection between conspiratorial thinking and economic incentives produced leftist and Marxist counter-narratives. The authors argue that the rise of BreadTube (Kuznetsov and Ismangil; Maddox and Creech) addresses this radicalization by re-deploying the mass-education model using the tenets of capitalism via normalized practices of YouTube algorithms to create pro-socialist and anti-right-wing content.

J.J. SYLVIA IV and Kyle MOODY

"BreadTube Rising: How Modern Creators Use Cultural Formats to Spread Countercultural Ideology"

The Arab Spring uprisings in the early twenty-first century contributed to the ongoing celebration of social-media platforms as harbingers of democracy. This narrative connects to "techno-utopian" and "cyber-libertarian" rhetoric in the US dating back at least to the 1990s, and has been leveraged by the US State Department and multiple presidential administrations to target regime changes (Dyson et al.; Morozov). However, authoritarian regimes across the globe took note of these uprisings and either began or increased their efforts to leverage these social media platforms for their own ends. Some countries, such as China, implemented software that would prevent unfettered access to the internet in the form of the great firewall (Griffiths). Other countries, such as Russia, developed their own strategies for actively using these platforms to their own advantage. For example, the Russian government funded troll armies that first used LiveJournal to spread misinformation among their own citizens and then later expanded their efforts internationally, notably in foreign elections such as the United Kingdom's Brexit and the United States' 2016 presidential election (Toler; Volchek and Sindelar; Giles; Jamieson).

These practices have since spread widely, with governments and activists across the globe working to develop social-media strategies that will support their own causes. Significant time, money, and research has been dedicated to identifying these practices. But since social-media tactics and algorithms change so quickly, as soon as one strategy is made public, the tools being used for this computational propaganda are already being deployed in new ways. The continuing shifts in misinformation presentation and distribution have been linked to growths in conspiratorial thinking, discourse, and real-world activities. This has led to tension as democratic governments and platforms struggle to develop regulations and tools that limit the spread of misinformation while still respecting democratic norms such as freedom of speech.

Although social-media companies such as Facebook will undoubtedly implement AI-based tools to combat the sheer quantity of misinformation being shared, this will not end the tension between creators and misinformation practices. Algorithms are constantly updated, and new SEO tactics and push media strategies mean that tools for computational propaganda are constantly changing. Consequently, this has resulted in changes to different social platforms and creators, such as YouTube creators that must constantly adjust their content and style to fit with growing audience expectations. Furthermore, opponents of misinformation must address the problems of information warfare in the current moment. They must also anticipate new directions via companies and policies that are working to produce a frictionless experience of scrolling, streaming, and constantly pleasing information that strives to keep users within their potential "filter bubbles" and mediated monopolies that are parts of the production of culture for modern popular discourse (Bagdikian; Peterson and Anand). Critical disinformation studies illustrate a means forward for this (Marwick), but Gamergate and the problems that emerged from this historic disruption in discursive warfare were early sites of struggle and will be discussed later in the article.

However, in the midst of this ever-evolving information warfare, relatively little research has focused on the historic and economic paradigms of loosely affiliated content creators that are linked together by cultural signifiers and outsider influencers for leftist uses. These content creators operate within a commercialized media system while also producing democratically distributed "video essays" that function between worlds of expression and commodification. Within this paradigm exists a counter-narrative, one that implements practices of YouTube production and normalized social-media content to promote information literacy and similarly designed content to potentially vulnerable audiences. Developing a deeper understanding of these paradigms offers an opportunity to place these cultural creators within their larger historical context and sheds new light on the controversial practices of the leftist and often Marxist approach adopted by—a loose collection of YouTube Creators that has been deemed BreadTube. Popular news reporting and academic studies have focused on what BreadTube is, which accounts constitute this network, and the type of content presented (Gekker et al.; Kuznetsov and Ismangil; Maddox and Creech), but these analyses largely leave undiscussed the long-established historical and economic communication systems that are connected to this network. We argue that understanding the rise of BreadTube through the intersections of the production of culture, free speech, and computational propaganda helps better explain the existence of and tensions within the BreadTube community.

Harvesting Digital Media from Tensions Between Capitalism and Algorithms

The rise of democratization among communication platforms and Web 2.0 as a social and technological movement brought about a shift in user-generated content as the primary economic and cultural driver of social-media platforms. Sites like YouTube directly benefited from users uploading and sharing content that would drive traffic. Indeed, the very economic model of online production is focused on providing social-networking sites (SNS) as spaces where users can share their content to others and connect them to a group of peers with similar interests (Bird; Jenkins). Researchers previously discussed how social media has collapsed the need for meeting within a shared temporal and geographical space (Shirky). This was critically important to users during the COVID-19 pandemic, where electronic meeting spaces became reliable areas to converge while avoiding physical proximity.

However, this reliance on electronic communication also meant that users vulnerable to misinformation via internet sources were now more likely to encounter it. While the social and cultural repercussions of the pandemic are not yet fully known or understood, it should be noted that COVID-19 has been linked with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and fear (Bendau et al.; Ifdil et al.; Santabárbara et al.; Ahmed). Users that were trapped indoors during the pandemic had to navigate through a continuous feed of information from disparate sources, and some users were left more vulnerable than others. Studies showed that users believed that others were more likely to be exposed to – and affected by – fake news during the pandemic, which is a third-person perception of vulnerability (Yang and Tian); this suggests that the population was more likely to consume fake news or misinformation at some point during the pandemic, and when extrapolated to all users sharing online spaces, this raises the question of who was exposed to false information narratives and content.

The ideological connection between conspiratorial thinking and economic incentives left a relative paucity of leftist and Marxist perspectives that might serve as a counter-narrative. danah boyd has demonstrated in her research that right-wing and conspiracy-based ideologies were able to adapt and thrive within this lacuna:

Many people, especially young people, turn to online communities to make sense of the world around them. They want to ask uncomfortable questions, interrogate assumptions, and poke holes at things they've heard. Welcome to youth. There are some questions that are unacceptable to ask in public and they've learned that. But in many online fora, no question or intellectual exploration is seen as unacceptable. To restrict the freedom of thought is to censor. And so all sorts of communities have popped up for people to explore questions of race and gender and other topics in the most extreme ways possible. And these communities have become slippery. Are those taking on such hateful views real? Or are they being ironic? ("You Think You Want Media Literacy")

Understanding how these fora thrive in terms of strategies of knowledge acquisition—especially among youth—can bring to light how this struggle intersects with the same controversies that are at the heart of cancel culture and free speech. Seen from this perspective, one might better understand a critique of leftist culture as not only disengaging from difficult conversations but actively working to shut them down by banning right-wing speakers and compelling web hosts and credit-card processors to shut down websites deemed problematic.

For those who are trying to understand a complex topic, such practices can come across as not only anti-free speech, but anti-critical thinking. boyd notes that RT, the Russian state television network, has leveraged this exact critique, creating a series of ads with provocative questions, which end with the statement: "Because we believe that the more you question, the more you know" ("You Think You Want Media Literacy"). These ads were themselves eventually banned. Speaking very broadly with full acknowledgement that there have always been exceptions, the political left tended to avoid these tough discussions, often accusing or ostracizing those who disagreed. This meant that it was primarily right-wing fora such as 4Chan that were available to answer questions and have discussions with those seeking information about controversial topics. Left-leaning ideologies were largely not present as a counter-narrative.¹

Just as importantly, those committed to spreading right-wing ideologies online learned to fully leverage not just the power of social media and search-engine algorithms, but also the power of digital storytelling. The rise of the alt-right in the United States coincides with the increased value of YouTube as an entertainment platform and a communications medium. Originally housed on fringe websites such

¹ Here it is worth noting that paywalls prevent access to many of the sources that provide a leftist counter-narrative, such as digital versions of major legacy newspapers or academic journal publications.

as 4chan, the alt-right's rise can be traced back to Gamergate, a loose coalition of amplified voices that were interested in preserving the status quo in the undefined space of gaming journalism. To recap Gamergate would be a large endeavor, but it is mentioned here because its cultural prominence in 2014 and 2015 produced not only visible elements of what we would now call the "alt-right," but also the tactics used to amplify the political dissension that these promote. For example, Gamergate was notable for sympathetic users creating multiple "bot" accounts that would amplify extremist rhetoric that frequently demeaned game developers, journalists, and reviewers (often focusing on outspoken women who filled more than one of these roles). This amplification by a minority of involved parties was followed by greater media coverage of the attacks, which caused the users to continue these tactics that overshadowed the actual number of participants and their political motives. Fake accounts and bots were programmed to attack on behalf of a smaller number of actual human users, making the attack seem much more widespread than it actually was. In short, it helped fine tune the ability to use mainstream press to amplify a message, which, even if covered in a negative light, worked to funnel more people into searching out more information on such views (boyd, *What Hath We Wrought?*). A small percentage of these new searches would ultimately lead to new converts of the movement.

QAnon, a right-wing conspiracy-theory group, has masterfully leveraged interactive storytelling to engage its audience in the process of creating and spreading conspiracy theories (Berkowitz). The information drops shared by Q, the anonymous leader for which the group is named, are vague enough that they allow for significant interpretation by followers. This interpretation might take the form of finding evidence of conspiracies in popular news stories, of predicting the date of various events, or creating viral memes that spread current conspiracies. This method of digital storytelling, which Reed Berkowitz likens to video games, has two major advantages. On the one hand, it is extremely engaging for those participating in the process of interpretation:

Guiding people to arrive at conclusions themselves is a perfect way to get them to accept a new and conflicting ideology as their own. It also instills a distrust for society and the competence of others—and confers an unearned sense of importance on the player. Only the believers can discover what's really going on! Initiates are given the tools—ways to look for ostensibly hidden messages in videos and text, and online communities to share their results—to arrive at "their own conclusions," which are in every way more compelling, interesting and clearer than real solutions. (Berkowitz)

In other words, Q's information drops have essentially become gamified, mimicking the play elements of alternate-reality games that have become popular in the 2000s. However, in addition to the level of engagement this creates, it also makes fact-checking these theories almost entirely pointless for those who have bought into it. There is no one primary or master narrative about which questions of truth are vital. Rather, there are a myriad of conspiracy theories and predictions that are contradictory and inconsistent. If one theory doesn't pan out, this only lends more credence to other ongoing conspiracies. There is no internally coherent truth which could be debunked, but rather an ever-shifting network of engaging conspiracy beliefs that don't require logical or scientific proof. Any solutions to this challenge will require diverting people away from misinformation and redirecting people to different patterns of truth seeking and knowledge sharing. This is one of the ways that BreadTube intervenes in the current issue, as will be detailed more fully below.

Finally, one must consider the economic elements of these approaches. There is a significant opportunity to make money by selling advertising and products related to conspiracy theories. Clare Birchall conceptualizes this as conspiracy entrepreneurship, with a nod to Foucault's *homo oeconomicus* (Birchall). This ability to make money by spreading conspiracy theories can be enticing whether or not one actually believes the information that is being shared, as was demonstrated by Macedonian teenagers sharing pro-Trump fake news during the 2016 US Presidential election (Silverman and Alexander). In a world where false information spreads more quickly than the truth (Vosoughi et al.), there is a huge financial incentive to share misinformation and conspiracy theories. To take just one prominent example, by 2013, Alex Jones was estimated to be making at least \$10 million per year across all of his media and product revenue streams (Brown). Significant amounts of money are clearly at stake.

These mostly right-wing conspiracy groups also operate outside of logic (logos) and use the tenets of both their own charisma (ethos) and emotion (pathos) to spread their messages. Social media platforms are predicated on using emotion as drivers of content and movements; when operated in this way, social movements are achievable, but there are also ramifications to these actions (Bloom and Moskalenko; Shirky). For example, it is impossible to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic without

mentioning the impact of QAnon on American politics, particularly in the wake of the January 6, 2021 attempted insurrection at the Capitol Building. QAnon emerged largely by being normalized, moving out of fringe social platforms like 4chan and 8kun to become embraced by a larger group through mainstream media such as YouTube and Instagram.

The potential of democratic decentralization of communication meant that entrepreneurs could use social-media platforms to conduct business and marketing. The economic appeals of these Q-adjacent accounts and potentially unsuspecting users were done through the interface and mechanics of Instagram, which as a visual mode of communication is more intensive and creates emotional affinity (Bloom and Moskalenko). This was particularly effective at targeting suburban women, as the hashtag #SaveTheChildren was soon co-opted by multiple multi-level marketing (MLM) organizations and self-entrepreneurs on Instagram. These pages also reached out to women's groups through targeted advertising; Facebook pages focused on homeopathic remedies, anti-vaccine organizations, natural birth, and essential oils would be linked to QAnon strategies. Even yoga was linked to these instances, with "pastel QAnon" becoming a major element of the normalization of these conspiracy theories due to its emphasis on entrepreneurship and social marketing à la *homo oeconomicus* (Bloom and Moskalenko).

We can now see that the right-wing has been quite successful in leveraging a tripartite digital-media strategy that includes powerfully persuasive digital storytelling skills, the use of algorithms to spread viral content in order to attract new viewers and income, and a willingness to participate in difficult conversations which those on the left have either largely avoided or, at the extreme, tried to ban. BreadTube's rise must be understood within the historical and economic context of this alt-right tripartite strategy.

Assembling the Ingredients for BreadTube's Counter-Narratives

BreadTube has no strict definition, but can be categorized as a core group of academically minded YouTubers that produce high-concept material with high production values. BreadTube creators produce "video essays," which are film versions of largely talking-head arguments that are linked with video clips and audio segments to argue for a specific point of view. Video essays were popularized as YouTube grew in shape and size, and BreadTube creators soon began releasing content, though they were not always focused on politics. The term originated from an intentional effort to organize this collection of videos on Reddit, with the group's creator choosing the term to obscure the political nature of the group while also serving as a dog whistle for those familiar with Peter Kropotkin's anarcho-communist book, *The Conquest of Bread* (Gekker et al.).

To better understand BreadTube as popularly expressed, we analyzed the channels of four of the most notable YouTube personalities associated with the movement.² These accounts included PhilosophyTube, Lindsay Ellis, Hbomberguy, and Innuendo Studio. For each of these channels, we conducted a textual analysis with an emphasis on the production of culture. A production-of-culture analysis "focuses on how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved," (Peterson and Anand 331). We gave particular focus to how both technology and market forces shaped the production of content for these channels by analyzing the broader channel, the video content of essays labeled as BreadTube-specific, the video comments, and associated social-media and fundraising accounts such as Patreon. The analysis included video comments and other associated platform accounts in order to determine all locations in which leftist ideology might be appearing. We selected the channels and videos based on explicit outside association with the keyword "BreadTube" in popular reporting and forums dedicated to discussing BreadTube. This allowed for the inclusion of accounts that do not explicitly self-identify with BreadTube or socialist ideology.

One of the major themes to arise from this analysis is that none of the accounts intentionally or explicitly align themselves with the BreadTube movement, and instead appear to be more focused on issues related to pop culture at large. The only notable exception to this was PhilosophyTube, which on its Patreon account acknowledges that it specifically aims to include political issues:

There are lots of channels on YouTube that will just summarise famous works of philosophy for you; I want to get people in a position where they can take cutting edge academia and apply it to the real world. So as

² What "counts" as BreadTube remains in dispute. Many of the YouTube channels most publicly associated with BreadTube do not accept that label for themselves. For the purposes of this project, we were not concerned with whether any channel was "authentically" a BreadTube account.

well as the classics like Socrates and Kant I also teach economics, global justice, feminism, the philosophy of gender, politics, art, and more!³ (Philosophy Tube)

Importantly, this political aspect of the videos is not acknowledged on the YouTube channel itself. These channels either have political views embedded within their analysis of pop culture, or—in the case of Innuendo Studios—have “explainer” videos linked between video essays focused on video-game titles. This demonstrates the use of pop culture as an inroad to explaining ideology and viewpoints. These same tactics have been leveraged by the alt-right post-Gamergate and by Russian trolls tasked with interfering in US politics (Sylvia IV and Moody). The reasoning behind the choice of the term BreadTube for the movement echoes this same tactic.

One thing that must briefly be noted is that BreadTube content often utilizes similar visual and aesthetic practices as other commercial producers within YouTube. Thumbnails are a major reason that videos may be clicked because these visuals are often the first thing potential viewers see and are major forces of driving video traffic. Of course, a user is unlikely to be able to determine what sort of political views will be present in a video judging it by this thumbnail alone, unless the creator has gone to great lengths to make this obvious. In this sense, creators like Lindsay Ellis and Hbomberguy utilize practices similar to other pop-culture essayists and video-game YouTubers, with expressive faces and bold typefaces emerging as elements of their videos. Elsewhere, Innuendo Studios uses a more cartoonish presentation in their different videos, such as their series “The Alt-Right Playbook.” This is a simple visual aesthetic that nevertheless illustrates how BreadTube creators operate within the normalized social and cultural structures that determine YouTube algorithms and views among the community.

A second major theme that emerged from this analysis is how these YouTubers receive money for the work that they create. As we discussed earlier in terms of the culture of production, many of the opportunities to make money on one’s content via social-media platforms rely heavily on ad-based monetization, which requires that the content meet certain criteria. Many of the current criteria were introduced after several companies stopped advertising on YouTube because their ads appeared with videos they found problematic. YouTube responded by creating an algorithm that prevents monetization of videos that mention controversial topics such as LGBTQ issues (Pottinger). This has led to demonetization of a wide range of political videos on both the left and right. Therefore, in order to make money through YouTube’s built-in monetization process, videos need to be self-censored. To say this even more clearly, monetization leads to the normalization of behavior.

BreadTube accounts have been conscientious in meeting this particular challenge, often intentionally disabling monetization on their accounts and/or seeking out alternative sources of funding. In some cases, these discussions become explicit. For example, on a video about expertise, PhilosophyTube notes: “I’m pretty sure this video will get demonetised due to the subject matter, so if you could share it that would help me greatly!” (“Who’s Afraid of the Experts?”). As other comments threaded under this noted, this is likely more about increasing the reach of the video through algorithm recommendations rather than about increasing income, as the frequency of recommendations for videos is linked, at least in part, to its monetization status. This points to a link between our first two themes, as it is quite possible that YouTubers may be creating less controversial pop-culture oriented videos on which they can earn money through monetization, while posting more politically themed content that cannot be monetized as part of their larger ideological aims.⁴ There have been some efforts to raise money or share advertisements as part of the videos themselves, such as the fake feud between Lindsay Ellis and ContraPoints, or the advertisement for a streaming service in a PhilosophyTube video (@thelindsayellis; “Jordan Peterson’s Ideology”). However, as in both of these cases, the money is usually donated to charities. At yet other times, the ideological issues behind monetization are addressed explicitly, such as in this Patreon post:

Basically, I’ve always run my channel without worrying too much whether my videos are suitable for ad revenue. The value of running a Patreon has always been that I can cover contentious topics without having to worry if the inscrutable policies of YouTube’s ad system allow me to survive. However, surprisingly, the last few videos have monetized successfully, and this has resulted in money I had no intention of actually getting. I hit the “monetise this” button for a joke to see the funny explanations YouTube gives me along with

³ Using a method that avoids paywalls!

⁴ Further, in late 2020, YouTube began inserting ads even on videos that were not monetized (Southern), eliminating at least one major reason why some channels may have avoided monetization. Other reasons still remain, as noted below.

its "no". I never expected a too-long video about the War on Christmas or the Anti-Vaccine movement to come back with a "yes".

Ultimately, I want to be accountable to my patrons, and no-one else. I am uncomfortable with keeping money made from ad revenue—I really don't like the idea of getting "used" to ads as a source of income. It's a potential negative influence on what content I make, or how I approach making things. So instead, I've decided to give it to someone else. (Hbombguy)

In this case, we see that Hbombguy monetized content, was surprised when the algorithm approved it, and then decided to donate the money made through monetization to an organization working on mentoring LGBTQ+ and BIPOC individuals working in the arts. It is in these moments that we see resistance to even the potential of advertising income to influence creative and/or ideological content of videos. For this reason, BreadTubers have relied instead on Patreon to raise money. Patreon allows anyone to sign up and create recurring donations of any amount to a creator on the platform. This helps creators avoid self-censorship that may occur due to fears of demonetization.

This process creates a productive tension in which crowdfunding on Patreon is being used to support the creation of often anti-capitalist ideological videos on a platform (YouTube) that clearly articulates the corporate control of capital in social media. BreadTube is using the tenets of capitalism via the practices of YouTube algorithms and keyword designs to create content that is pro-socialist and anti-right wing, while opting out of the capitalist practices of advertising revenue and instead seeking direct support from viewers via Patreon. Such independence is important for the reasons surrounding creative control that BreadTubers such as Hbombguy have pointed out. However, it's also important in light of YouTube's control of capital through its overall guidelines for advertising partnerships with creators. For example, YouTube significantly changed the requirements for the YouTube Partners Program in 2018. Previously the requirement was 10,000 lifetime views across subscribers. This requirement was changed to 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 hours of watchtime within the previous 12 months. This change meant that many smaller YouTube channels would no longer be able to make money through monetizing their videos.⁵ This change significantly privileged accounts with much larger followings and made it more difficult for new accounts to launch and gain the following needed to monetize.

This partially explains both the visibility of BreadTube and its prominent production values. In order to gain the views of their followers, BreadTube creators must constantly adapt their content to the ever-shifting social and cultural norms of YouTube, including production values and thumbnail creation. It's also important to note that these creators are now largely tied to their revenue streams from YouTube and its advertisers, along with their patrons on Patreon. They must work to commodify their labor even as they critique the practices.⁶ This is part of the history of internet economics, which reframes and shifts labor into a more conditional status, one that potentially leads to overworking for creators. This also includes surveillance of work on and offline, and even research on prominent creators' social-media accounts. This sort of surveillance and panoptic logic impacts the intellectual property and labor done by creators, which creates a self-referential lens that most YouTube creators now consider normalized, adding to the impact of BreadTube on the site. In short, a major strength of BreadTube is that it critiques the very platform on which it is hosted while adopting the same production practices inherent to the most successful creators. However, this practice is not without some tension, as YouTube also continues to profit from the success of these videos, as explored in further depth below.

YouTube's actions offer a clear example of what Antonio Negri calls cybernetic proletarianisation. The information age has blurred the traditional distinction between manual and intellectual labor, extending the ability to commodify labor even further, so much so that it is able to encompass areas of life such as recreation and rest (Negri; Smythe). This practice extends to some YouTubers commodifying their own family to create profitable videos. Mike and Heather Martin, who run the channel DaddyOfive, lost custody of two of their five children after pulling and recording increasingly cruel pranks on their children to increase views (Gajanan). Of course, YouTube was itself extracting value from the labor of the Martins. From the perspective of an autonomist Marxist such as Negri, who focuses on "self-activity of the working class," this practice demonstrates the increasing reach of the extraction of profit from labor that is enabled by technology (Witthof 85). Placing YouTube within this paradigm helps us better understand how it can be situated within the longer history of Marxist thought and analysis.

⁵ Full disclosure: Co-author Sylvia had a very small monetized YouTube account, consisting primarily of lecture videos from previous classes. That account lost the ability to be monetized as part of this change.

⁶ See Ellis's work on "YouTube: Manufacturing Authenticity (For Fun and Profit!)" for an example of how BreadTube creators break down the very process that distributes revenue to them.

Cutting the Wheat from the Chaff of BreadTube: Socialism and Mass Education

Finally, to fully orient BreadTube within the larger history of socialist movements, it must be understood from the perspective of socialist approaches to education. Karl Marx argued for an education system that combined labor and theoretical knowledge in a way that would create a well-rounded individual capable of understanding multiple disciplines rather than one narrowly tailored topic ("The Socialist Program for Education"). The Socialist Program for Education advocates for a free and open education for all students through college, but argues that a truly well-rounded education is not possible under the current system of capitalism, which perpetuates class and racial division. These tensions can be seen throughout the history of education in America, whether it was banning education about socialism itself in the mid-twentieth century or the push in 2021 to ban Critical Race Theory in the classroom.

On the one hand, we can understand BreadTube as re-deploying the classic mass-education model using the tenets of capitalism via normalized practices of YouTube algorithms and keyword designs to create content that is pro-socialist and anti-right wing. As the videos produced by BreadTube offer an alternative to the significant amount of ideological content that was being deployed by the alt-right, this approach nonetheless exists within the thoroughly capitalist system of YouTube. Therefore, on the other hand, while the left may celebrate the newly available socialist ideology being represented, this approach is not without its own problems or controversies.

One major issue that has surrounded BreadTube since its inception is the prominence of mostly white creators. Calling out the privilege and economic misconceptions at the heart of specific misinformation campaigns, BreadTube nonetheless promoted specific white essayists, even as a loose collective of friends and connoisseurs of culture. In 2019, channel creator Kat Blaque asked, "Why is 'LeftTube' So White?," which prompted others to jump in to criticize much of the racially homogeneous coalition. Examples of these include Cheyenne Lin's "Why Is YouTube So White?," Angie Speaks' "Who Are Black Leftists Supposed to Be?," and T1J's "I'm Kinda Over This Whole 'LeftTube' Thing," along with F.D. Signifier's "Bo Burnham's Inside" and "White Liberal Performative Art".⁷ This has partially limited the impact of BreadTube to a specific moment in time, albeit one that can be linked to shifts in production of video and thematic elements.

However, the problems surrounding BreadTube are not just linked to the production model, which ostensibly runs on capitalism and user donations to provide a discussion of left-leaning ideologies. Creators must wrestle with their own intersectional identities and the potential challenges of cancel culture as they deal with complex and challenging topics that need context and nuance. Lindsay Ellis offers an example of these challenges. After other users highlighted her past work that would not have been seen as acceptable in 2021, she publicly left Twitter. She also left YouTube after controversy arose over her comments regarding Asian-American popular culture and *Raya and the Last Dragon*. Ellis maintains that her channel and online works were taken out of context. Nevertheless, BreadTube's creators are often linked to their privileged status within their essayist works, and this critique may demonstrate the importance of intersectional identity to their work. Already, creators such as F.D. Signifier have examined how BreadTube creators benefited from their whiteness compared to other YouTubers that engage in similar production practices. These critiques occur at the intersection of the class and race divisions inherent in capitalism, as well as controversies surrounding cancel culture.

The tensions inherent within the BreadTube approach can now be seen much more clearly. It addresses leftist ideology that is largely non-existent in primary and secondary education, and likely is taught in only a relatively small number of post-secondary courses. BreadTube is interesting largely because of its educational function—see the PBS Ideas Channel from 2012 to 2017 for evidence of this—while also being reliant on mostly commercial platforms for sustainability. But it's also notable because of how BreadTube has shifted the focus of major commercial voices on YouTube, moving from short-form videos to longer-form video essays and a Patreon subscriber focus.

Before BreadTube, video essays were not a major source of traffic within YouTube. However, after YouTube was acquired by Google in 2006, the company's AdSense increased profitability for some creators. This led to the increase in production values in videos. Furthermore, longer videos became more commonplace as the network shifted towards more freeform content, and the video essays of creators like PBS Digital Studios, Crash Course, and SourceFed illustrated a pivot to video that was

⁷ It should be noted that at the time of writing, most of BreadTube's content creators have a much larger following on their social-media pages than their critics, with the possible exception of F.D. Signifier.

occurring within the digital media space. This helped pave the way for BreadTube to become a major cultural force within YouTube, even if no creator has explicitly integrated the name into their branding.

It needs to be stated that there is no singular popular channel that dominates discursive and rhetorical norms on YouTube. This is by design since YouTube's mission from the beginning was to provide users with a platform for individual expression and videos, and to act as a singular home to user-generated content in video form. However, as the channel evolved and competitors like Vine, Snapchat, and TikTok emerged to draw users to shorter-form video works, YouTube became more focused on longer-form content that was meant to delineate between it and other platforms.

The rise of the video essay was simultaneous with the rise of BreadTube, and therefore the focus of these essays on the channel presents a new possibility for educational models. During the COVID-19 pandemic, new learning models were required to generate educational content for various curricula. Having been a staple of mass-education models via supplementary models for the 2010s, YouTube and BreadTube now provide a potential model for addressing new students as well as wider audiences interested in socialist ideology. Yet the question remains, how successful can the approach be when it based on an inherently capitalist system?

Any Dough Left? The Future of BreadTube

This paper has largely focused on the history of BreadTube and its ilk within the realm of the production of culture on capitalist platforms. However, BreadTube is not without historical precedent. The rise of the mimeograph led to the creation of zines by countercultural movements and figures that nevertheless influenced and shaped multiple media, including predecessors to online journalism and blogs. BreadTube simply represents the current moment of extreme online visibility for modern content creators and audiences. BreadTube is of course part of the bigger collective of YouTube as a social platform and community, but its very nature represents a crossroads for the platform as an information space and as a cultural signifier. Shifting platform demands on competitive sites like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat continually force YouTube creators to change their outreach, content, and messaging. Less has been discussed about how YouTube works to circumvent misinformation, which would provide BreadTube creators with a guide to creating content that would push the form forward.

The future of BreadTube at this point is unknown. It is likely that creators associated with the moniker will continue to focus on video essays published on topics of popular culture. However, as YouTube's algorithm continues to shift with changes in technology and social norms, BreadTube remains an important but imperfect countercultural force to potential misinformation spigots on the platform. Though some have argued that the BreadTube era is winding down (Williams), the very nature of its loose coalition suggests that it will likely continue to exist. It is also well positioned to include a more diverse range of voices. Even with the unknown future of the social medium, there is hope that BreadTube will continue to rise.

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Authors' Profiles

J.J. Sylvia IV is an Assistant Professor of Communications Media at Fitchburg State University, where he teaches courses on human communication, communication law and ethics, data analytics, and digital humanities. His research focuses on the philosophy of communication and analyzing the impact of big data, algorithms, and other new media on processes of subjectivation—how we are created as subjects. His recent work has been published in journals such as *Social Media + Society*, *The International Journal of Communication*, and *Communication +1*. He lives in Worcester, MA with his wife and two daughters. Email: <jsylvia3@fitchburgstate.edu>

Kyle Moody is an Associate Professor of Communications Media at Fitchburg State University, where he teaches courses on social media, message design, new and emerging media, and media history. His research interests include the production of culture through new-media practices, online community formation, information creation and dissemination, and examining how cultural practices are impacted by a changing media landscape. His recent work has been published by McFarland Press and Springer, along with *Iowa Journal of Communication*. He lives in Worcester, Massachusetts with his wife and two children. Email: <kmoody4@fitchburgstate.edu>