

# Slicing BreadTube

Project Subtitle

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# Summary of Key Findings

We have analysed a newly emergent community of left-leaning, mostly long-form YouTube video content creators, that are colloquially referred to as 'BreadTube' by some of their fans on Reddit. BreadTube has ostensibly arisen as a response to the proliferation of conservative (particularly alt-right) content on YouTube around 2016 and the perceived lack of leftist response. Our goal was to examine some popular claims made in the press and in interviews with prominent BreadTubers; in particular:

1. The existence of a cohesive network of creators, who recognise each other and, in turn, are recognised by their fans.
2. The use of 'key-words hijacking' techniques to appeal to and address the "disenfranchised young white male" audience of the alt-right.
3. The emergence of "conversion" narratives where said members of the audience change their opinion in response to the BreadTube content.
4. A unifying aesthetic present among the creators.

We have managed to confirm the existence of said network and some common aesthetic signifiers (1,4). We found indications that BreadTube shares a YouTube issue space with the alt-right (2). We were not able to confirm or deny any conversion happening, but content analysis of one of the central BreadTube channels (T1J) shows a switch of initial political stances to a more progressive one, partially through engagement with other BreadTubers.

Some additional findings emerged outside of the initial pursuits of this project. Namely, our project found a disparity between the coverage of BreadTube within mainstream media and the actors most cited by the r/BreadTube. We have not been able to draw any solid conclusions about the ways in which YouTube recommendations algorithms affect user behaviour on the platform. This research question can be addressed in future research.

## 1. Introduction

YouTube hosts a variety of content, serving as one of the largest open access video platforms online, particularly in the English-speaking world. Even though the platform has been prioritizing family-friendly apolitical content, the site has attracted the attention of journalists by hosting politically radical content. The testimony of a young YouTube user, who fell down the "alt-right rabbit hole" (Roose, 2019) gained mainstream coverage in June 2019 further invigorating public discourse on the subjects of platform moderation, free speech and political radicalization online. While coverage of reactionary politics from the right has been abundant and occupied internet and traditional media space over the last few years, coverage of leftist political subgroups has been lacking. This phenomenon widely applies to academic research in this area. Noting this research gap, we pivot to a network of prominent Youtubers that have popularised left-wing content creation on the platform. The loose label "BreadTube" has been ascribed to this network. In this research project we look at what this label means and to what ends it has been used by different actors.

Prominently, Reddit users began to refer to a "BreadTube" in its own right in May 2018, when the subreddit of the same name was also created. At first a mitigated label, the community slowly grew in size and

interest as more people were exposed to and initiated into the content released by this network of creators, most often from other left-wing media such the ChapoTrapHouse podcast. In December 2018, the feature of Natalie Wynn (of the YouTube channel “ContraPoints”) by the Economist catalyzed the growing popularity of BreadTube and the subreddit r/BreadTube saw a massive rise in its subscriber count and general activity. Now, slowly, mentions of the community and their working in “reorienting” the political discussion on YouTube are starting to appear. (McManus, 2019) Therefore, it is prime time to turn to the political consciousness of this community and assess its relevance to the current media landscape.

## 2. Research Questions

What is BreadTube according to different sources? Namely, Reddit, YouTube content from selected relevant creators, mainstream media coverage, the YouTube algorithm.

## 3. Methodology

### Localising and defining BreadTube

The first step was to delineate and define our research object. Following the logic of digital methods, we sought to repurpose the ‘digitally born’ (Rogers 2013; Marres 2017) environment of the r/BreadTube subreddit to understand which channels were considered to be part of this network by the community.

Using OILab’s 4Cat tool, we [scraped all of r/BreadTube](#) for all posts. Following that, we used the tool’s YouTube metadata module to extract all video links found in the message board. Then, we created a pivot table counting the appearance of each YouTube channel on the board. The 50 most mentioned channels were further selected to serve as a basis for a crawl to examine how the BreadTube’s creator community itself charts its boundaries.

In order to do so, we used DMI’s YouTube Data tools, and in particular the Channel Network Module. Starting from the topmost 50 r/BreadTube channels, we crawled the featured/ subscribed channels for each of the seed channels, and then for each of the results (crawl depth 2). The resulting network showcased a self-selection of channels based on interests and communities, which were considered more reliable due to the opt-in mode that requires a creator to manually indicate which other YouTube channels they recommend (‘featured channels’) or subscribe to. We selected an initial base of 50 channels editorially, after manually scanning through the list and recognising some of the channels from preliminary research. Crawl depth 2 produced an expansive and heterogeneous network, resulting in a total of 2341 interlinked channels (after the removal of 4 YouTube-specific automatic channels such as ‘Music’ or ‘Games’). Spatialising the networking in Gephi’s Force Atlas 2 resulted in a visible cluster of co-linked BreadTube creators, bordering a semi-separate clusters of mainstream liberal channels and less politically inclined YouTube creators.

From within the BreadTube cluster, 90 channels with the highest in-degree in this network<sup>1</sup> were chosen to evaluate whether they were recognised in the BreadTube community. Channels within these 90 that either

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<sup>1</sup> In-degree in this case indicates that these channels were the most highly featured and subscribed to channels *by* channels that had been highly shared on r/BreadTube,

appeared on [Breadtube.tv](#)<sup>2</sup> or on a '[Master List Of Left-Wing Youtube AND Podcast Channels](#)' found on r/BreadTube were extracted. The subreddit master list used is also highlighted on [RationalWiki's page for BreadTube](#). Cross-referencing channels that are recognised by both content creators *and* the Reddit community resulted in a list of 28 channels that were used to create the "MostSubBreadtube" dataset for further analysis throughout this project.

## Mainstream Media Coverage of BreadTube

This part of our methodology began by creating a "Firefox Research Browser" with custom settings. This clean browser had the language set to English and the location set the United States. A selection of keywords was entered into Google News, and the results were input in a shared Google Sheets document - included in the Appendix. The sum of the results includes the first two pages of Google News for each separate query, except for results categorised as "false positives," which bore no relation to BreadTube or the broad YouTube politics sphere, and were thus immediately filtered out. Our team selected Google News as opposed to the main Google search engine as guided by the notion of the "web sphere," according to which the web essentially functions as a public sphere (Rogers, 2013) The keywords included "breadtube" and "lefttube" as general category indicators. Then, we qualified our search by gathering the results for specific members of the BreadTube community, using the 28 channels listed in the "MostSubBreadtube" dataset as a point of reference.

Next, the "CrowdTangle" tool to determine the total interaction for each of the articles collected based on social media shares. In a separate column we classified the source of the articles based on the type of the source; the categories consisted of: "Mainstream Media," "Culture and Tech Press," "Conservative Media," "Left Media," "University Press," "Local Media," "Foreign Media" and "Blog." These categories were determined based on an analysis of the individual news sites. After reviewing the resulting dataset, we decided on creating a visual representation of these results on Gephi. Following the same settings as mentioned in the section above, the Gephi model showcases the relations between the YouTube channels featured in the press (22 green nodes) and the press sources that featured them (61 pink nodes). Connective threads also reveal which channels have been featured by the same press source.

## Reddit

The role Reddit and the individual content creators' fan communities on Reddit played in the assembling of the "BreadTube" label was another starting point for our analysis. To analyse the birth of BreadTube as term as well as the community dynamics within the newly created subreddit /r/BreadTube, Google BigQuery was used as a way to query Reddit.

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<sup>2</sup> Breadtube.tv is an aggregator website that consists of channels and videos that are submitted and organised by users of r/BreadTube. The site describes itself as a "collaborative effort of Creators, Subscribers, Moderators, Developers, Designers, and Coordinators working together to list content that is posted on r/BreadTube and related mediums" on their 'about' page.

BigQuery is a large-scale online data storage facility that works in conjunction with Google Storage to allow for the analysis of large datasets. Google BigQuery queries through a specialised SQL (Structured Query Language) coding language. Reddit research is conducted on Google BigQuery by querying a dataset captured by Jason Baumgartner from Pushshift.io which covers almost the entirety of Reddit (Hagen, 2018). A recorded version of Reddit can thus be queried in a variety of ways in order to extract relevant data for analysis.

Query methods allow for the building of an objective timeline that tracks the level of interest in the query according to subreddit mentions, contextualising the place of BreadTube within Reddit's platform culture. As the inception of the /r/BreadTube dates from 24 April 2018, the time period studied was from May 2018 to April 2019, the most recent dataset possible. In order to do this, Google BigQuery was used to query the Reddit dataset for the term "breadtube", month by month for the time range. 11 queries were made, and the top 20 resulting subreddit for each month were downloaded as CSV files. The data was then compiled into one table for the time range, and then RAW Graphs were used to visualise this dataset.

## Content Analysis: **Aesthetic Coding Matrix**

To analyse content, we had to face the necessity of creating a methodology capable of aesthetically categorising and quantifying a vast variety of narrative styles and formats.

After initially comparing the videos manually, two pairs of oppositional aesthetic themes were identified, then mapped onto a semiotic square (Greimas, 1974; Clifford, 1988), which was then reformulated as a matrix for axial coding, which expresses variation between the four poles described below (Sanders, 2016; Charmaz, p.62, 2006 ). Five coders employed this matrix to analyse the videos created by 28 key Bread-Tubers. Four historical videos were analysed by each Bread-Tuber in order to investigate whether their individual and communal aesthetic has changed over time. The aforementioned matrix was mapped according to the following oppositional aesthetic themes, and can be seen in Figure 1.

### **Y Axis**

#### **1. Theatrical**

This pole represents that the video features high-production values, explicit instances of acting and dramatic, narrative techniques.

#### **2. Non-Theatrical**

This pole represents that the video has a 'bare-bones' aesthetic, which relies exclusively on narration or voice-overs to present its content.

### **X Axis**

#### **1. Talking Heads**

This pole represents that the video employs a typical vlog style format, where the creator or creators speak directly to the camera.

## 2. Clips

This pole represents that the video exclusively uses clips, images, puppets or animations to present its content. The creator is either absent or represented via a stand-in (e.g. a cartoon image or personal photograph)

As the matrix was graded from -2 to 2 on both axes, it expresses these oppositional themes in degrees. This matrix was employed to code videos of the following type.

To select content to analyse according to this matrix, we took as starting dataset the 28 creators selected from our initial research, and selected for data entry points that would allow us to observe different key elements within the Breadtube chronology, such as the “boom” of the community” in December 2018, but also chart a general progression of content. These four dates were as follows:

1. **Last:** The most recent video uploaded by the creator as of July 5th, 2019.
2. **First:** The first video uploaded by the creator to their channel.
3. **Most Popular:** The video with the most views according to Youtube uploaded by the creator
4. **Post-December 2018:** A video that was uploaded by the creator at some point during (or immediately after) December 2018.



Figure 1. The Aesthetic Coding Matrix

## 5. Findings

### Youtube Network

In order to follow the relations between said channels, we extracted from Youtube data a network of featured /subscribed channels from the top 50 channels extracted from r/BreadTube. The results as seen in figure 2 chart a wide network spanning different alignments of a variety of content creators that intertwine themselves both with the atheist movement dating back to the early 2010s that Natalie Wynn of ContraPoints has cited as one of her primary motivations for starting her channel, (Wynn, 2019) but also more popular media creating daily content on current affairs.

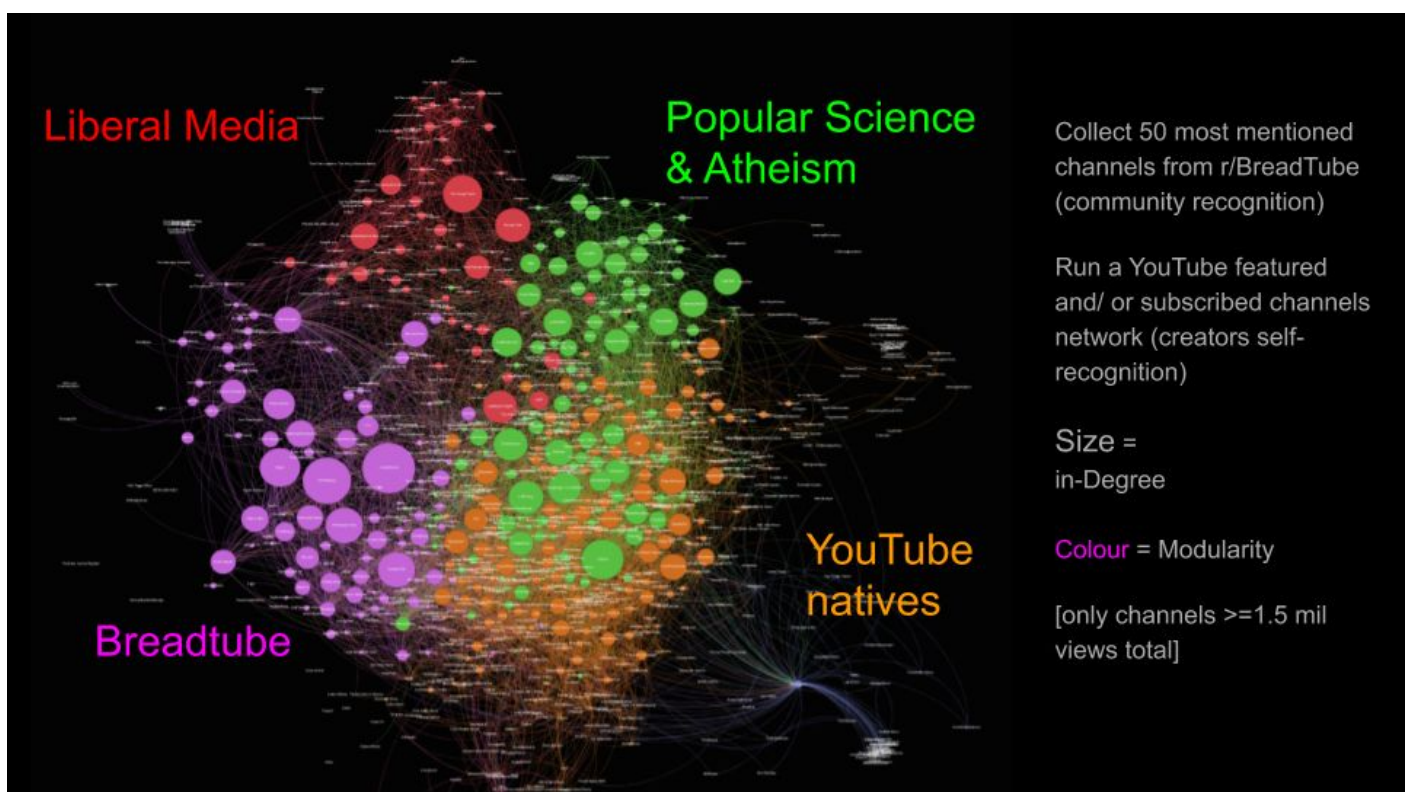


Figure 2. Clusters of featured/ subscribed channels.

Nevertheless, through sorting by modularity class, we see a distinctive community of channels that we have identified as Breadtube. Honing into this network, (Figure 3) allows us to see the most influential co-linked actors of the group, namely ContraPoints, hbombguy, Shaun, Philosophy Tube or Lindsay Ellis. The proximity of certain nodes to the other communities within this network indicates their placement as a whole within the YouTube community, with certain Breadtube channels being insular and connected only to similar content.







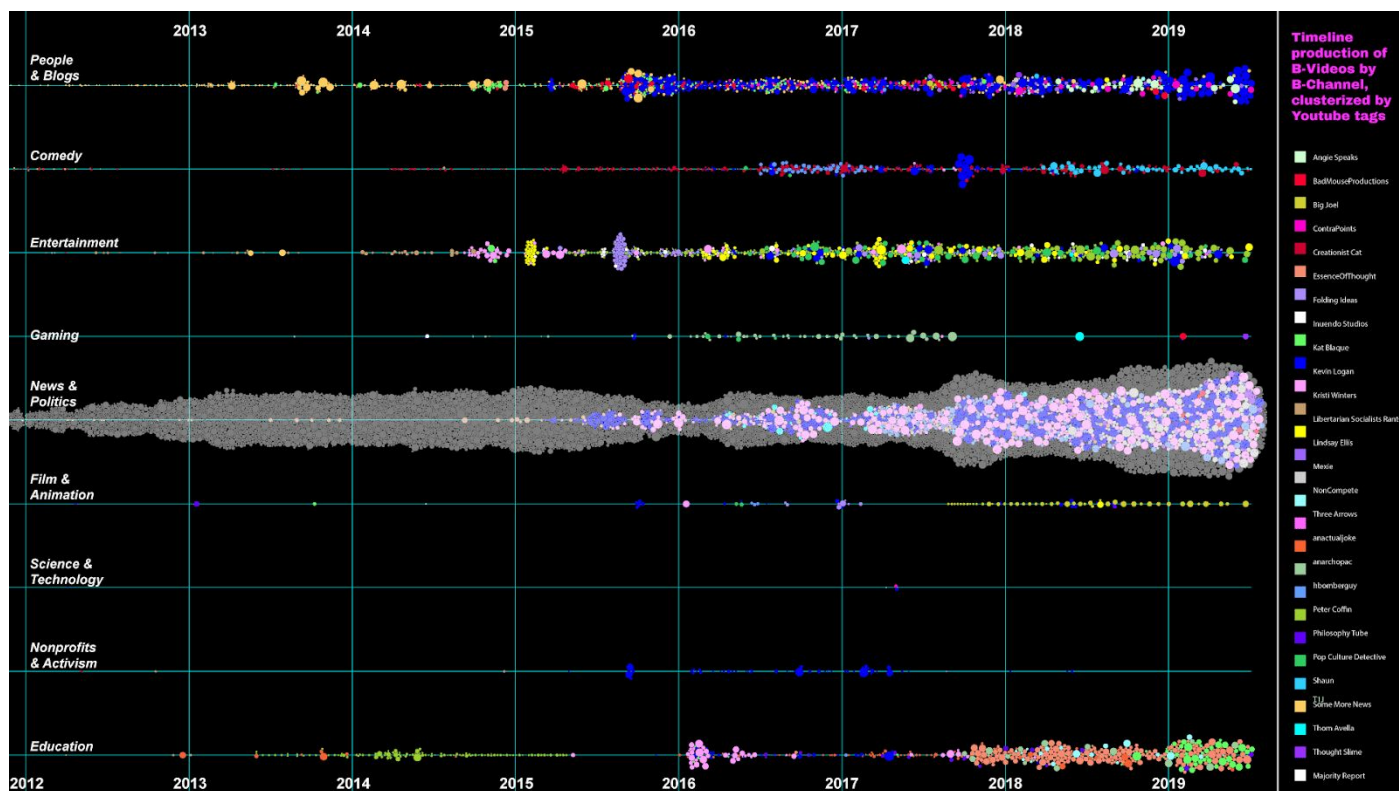


Figure 4. The progress of Breadtube's category tags

## Press and mainstream coverage

A review of the data we got out of studying the coverage of Breadtube in mainstream media and press sources yields four key points. To begin with, Breadtube features in Mainstream Media (43 results) about as much as it features in dedicated Culture and Tech press (42 results). Left Media (13) have also shown interest in Breadtube, next to a general interest in online leftist cultures. Blogs (4), Conservative (4), Local (3) and Foreign (4) media sources also reported on Breadtube but significantly less so. Moreover, Breadtube is written about almost exclusively through coverage of distinct YouTube channels and the personalities running them. Most characteristically, “hboerberguy” was featured in 19 articles, the majority of which were dedicated to a specific charity gaming stream he ran on January 18th, 2019. In similar fashion, “ContraPoints” was listed in 18 articles as a proponent of counter-reactionary content, and “Philosophy Tube” was reported on in 13 articles, which largely discussed his own contribution to “hboerberguy”'s charity stream, and the educational content he produces. “The Majority Report” also received substantial attention from the press (featured in 18 articles), but the coverage focused on his current affairs-oriented content more so than the channel in itself.

Regardless, most of the media attention for BreadTube focused on individual content creators, and their status as influencers within the wider left political sphere online. Their individual contributions and capacity to amass an audience through counter-reactionary rhetoric form most of the headlines, indicating a tendency to present BreadTube channels as influencers of a leftist brand within the wider internet sphere.



perspective”. The expansion of the community can be seen as starting from December 2018, correlating with the mainstream coverage of certain actors in this network, namely an article from The Economist covering creator Contrapoints.

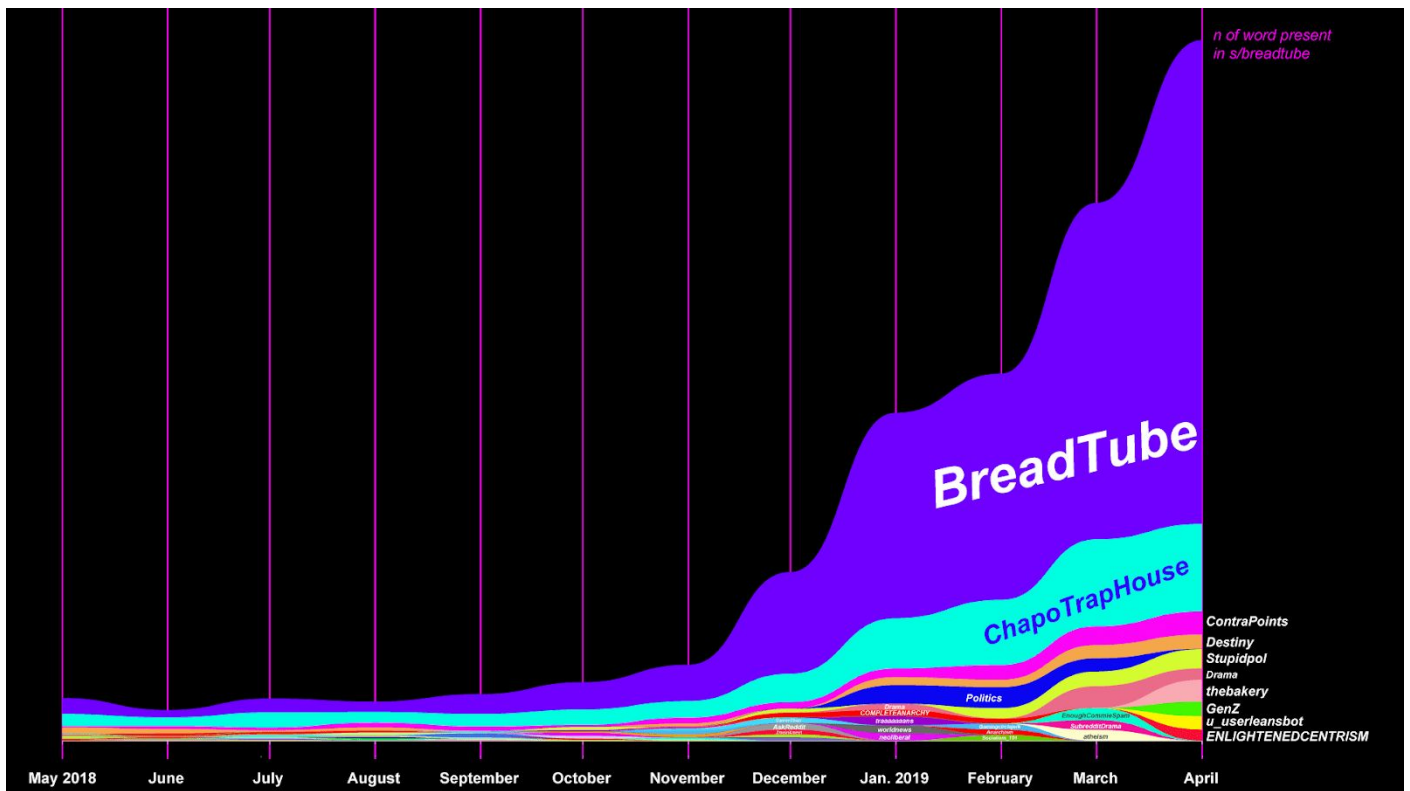
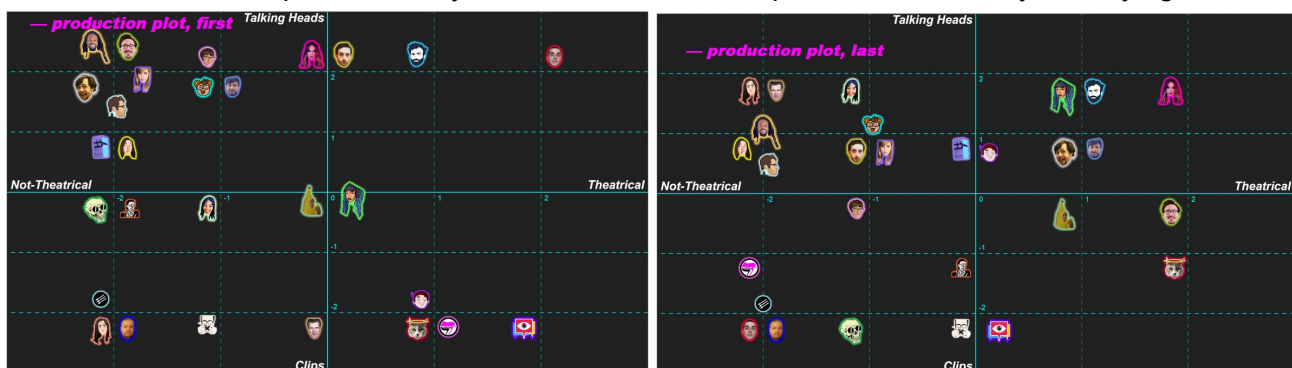


Figure 5. The progress and explosion of BreadTube since its genesis

## Content Analysis

### 1. Aesthetic Journey

After having coded the content of 28 “BreadTube” creators, patterns were looked for within our aesthetic matrix results. Since both first and last video were looked at, an attempt to find a homogenic move towards a certain aesthetic or production style was considered as a potential community-identifying metric.



Figures 6 & 7. The aesthetic coding of first and last uploaded videos by BreadTuber creators.

Thereby, we looked at the aesthetic journey of a few emblematic channels, such as ContraPoints, Philosophy Tube or Creationist Cat. We see a general tendency towards a more theatrical approach to content-creation, and a hesitant movement away from videos composed of clips to videos showcasing the author in a more “talking-head” format.

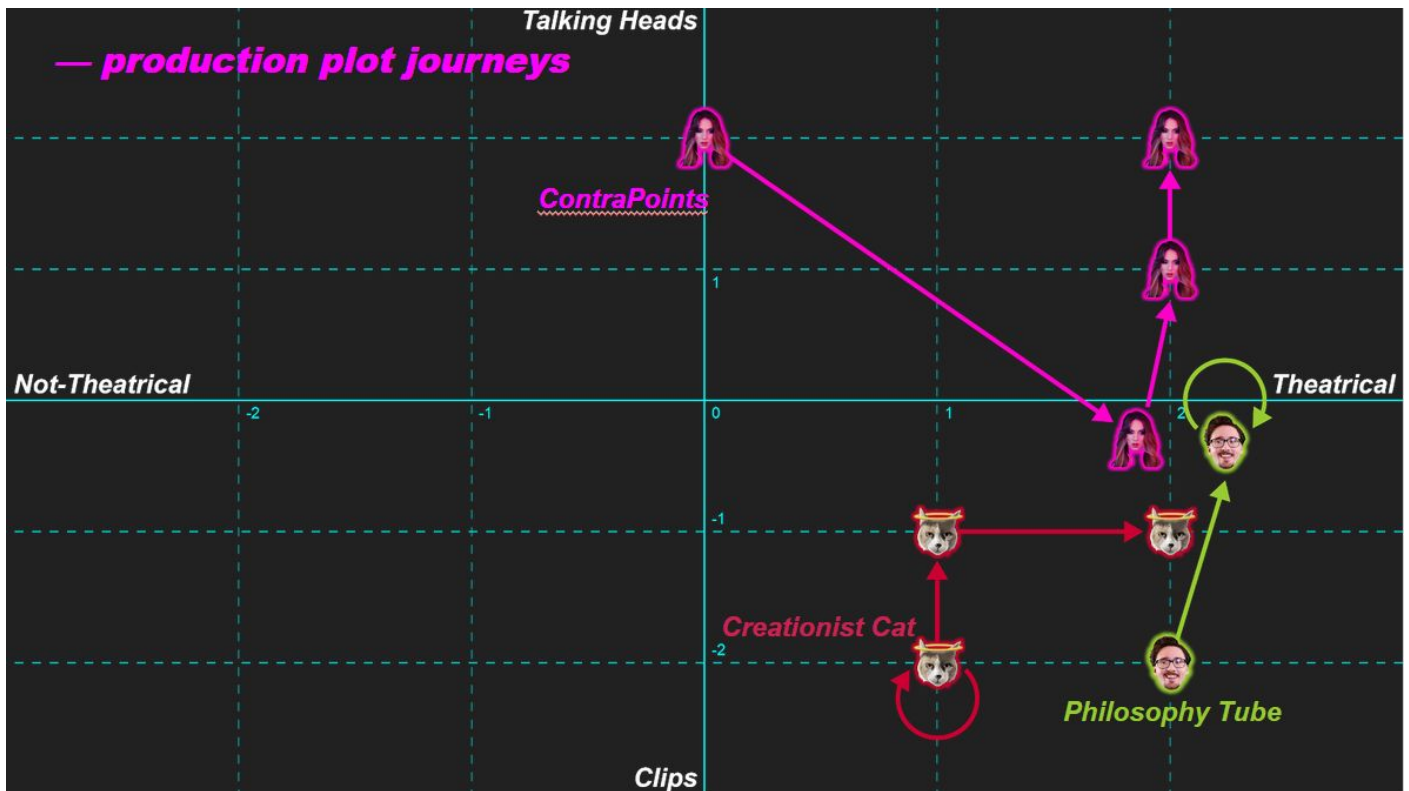


Figure 8. The aesthetic journey of 3 BreadTubers

## 2. Topics and Signifiers

In regards to the actual video content from the 28 creators, the aesthetic coding matrix was produced, which we consider a finding in itself. The challenge of coming up with a mathematical model for quantifying aesthetics and production value allowed us to gain insight into the community and its norms. Once this was done, we looked also for common themes and signifiers that could tie the community together. These were as follows:

### Topics

#### 1. Anti-Capitalist Sentiment, Rhetoric and Arguments.

The video features some form of the critique of capitalism or general anti-capitalist sentiment

#### 2. Climate Change

The video features discussions on the impact or causes of climate change.

#### 3. Transgender Rights

The video features discussions on transgender rights or identifies and critiques political opponents to transgender rights.

### *Signifiers*

#### **1. Milk**

The video features consumption or presence of milk or confectionary syrup.

#### **2. Fictional Elements**

The video features use of cartoon, puppets, props or costumes, for narrative, dramatic or comedic effect.

#### **3. Vaporwave Aesthetic**

The video employs an aesthetic that homages or directly references the vaporwave movement. Common examples include pink to blue colour gradients, references to 'retro-futuristic' technical artefacts from the 1990s and graphics that represent 'cyberspace' or other imagined electronic spaces.

## 6. Discussion

Our lack of ability to precisely pinpoint what the "BreadTube" community is and what qualifies as "BreadTube" content points to the lack of clarity surrounding this network of creators and who decides who gets to "belong". We aimed to obtain answers to this question by looking at Youtube's definition of a network, mainstream press coverage of the issue, within the eponymous subreddit itself, and through content hegemony and aesthetic markers, but our findings give only preliminary insight consolidating the theory that the issue space of BreadTube is far from a homogeneous one.

Even though it represents a niche interest to some capacity, it seems like BreadTube is slowly cultivating a place for itself. Firstly, the relationship between BreadTube, Liberal Media and the Atheist community is notable. The prevalence of the Atheist community predates BreadTube, and has evolved, in recent years, beyond the scope of religious topics. In our visualizations Atheist channels are represented along with popular science channels. This correlation is not by chance but it indicates the first steps of the politicization of the atheist community on YouTube. What followed was the critique of Liberal Media by a number of members of the Atheist community, who began to target "SJWs" (Social Justice Warriors) more and more fervently, leading to the expression of some conservative leanings. BreadTube creators became aware of this trend and began to pick up on these videos, in an attempt to target the same audiences and provide a "contra point." The first of Natalie Wynn's (publicly available) videos on the platform bears the name "Feminism Did Not Destroy Atheism" and it posits a leftist response against the anti-feminist sentiments of "centrist" creators.

Additionally, our findings demonstrate that there is a correlation between some BreadTube creators and other well-established YouTube "native" channels such as "Coffee Break" and "Every Frame a Painting."



The focus of these channels is largely not political, but rather cultural, many of them being critiques on films, music, video games and popular culture. This indicates the cross-fertilization of BreadTube in non-explicitly-political internet spheres and communities. Even more so, this is evidence of the breadth of BreadTube content seeing as independent creators evolve within the platform based on their individual interests. The individual-oriented evolution of BreadTube creators goes to show that BreadTube is not strictly a collective, or rather, it stretches the definition of what it means to develop leftist rhetoric on YouTube.

It is within Reddit that we see the most effort at unifying this community, or at least providing a space for the discussion of content of this type regardless of individual preferences, politics or taste. It is the only platform that we have observed that has interacted with r/BreadTube as a singular entity. Therefore, it was critical to gain a clear understanding as to how and why this subreddit came to be. To find this out, we contacted the user responsible for creating the subreddit. The user responded, and told us that the motivations behind creation r/BreadTube were to bring together “sparse and unconnected” individual Youtubers that were creating content of a similar thematic continuity, and create a space for discussion of those “*kinds* of videos”. (emphasis original) He states: “Every video has a comment section, but there was no place where you could have all the videos together in one place and talk about the things they were talking about”. In terms of naming the community, his intention was to steer away from signalling a clear-cut and historical political identity by avoiding the term “left-tube” that other commentators had previously used. (“It would signal to everyone who did not consider themselves ‘left-wing’, that this was a place for “the left”.) He also mentions his own interest in political theory and his role as one of the moderators of the subreddit dedicated to the thought of Noam Chomsky.

[\[-\]](#) to /u/-----otalp----- sent 3 months ago

Hello!

I hope you don't mind me asking, but I'm doing some research on the left-side of YouTube, and obviously breadtube is a large part of that. As you created this subreddit, I was hoping to find out what it was that prompted you to create this community and your motivations for doing so? Is there a story behind it that you think I should know? I'm a student studying digital culture :) Let me know if you want anymore information.



[Permalink](#)

[\[-\]](#) from /u/-----otalp----- sent 2 months ago

I used(and still do) run [r/chomsky](#), a subreddit for Noam Chomsky whose academic work spanned dozens of fields. The discussion on that sub focused on politics, history, media studies, philosophy, cognitive science, linguistics and other things.

It was also clear that there were individual YouTubers making videos about things like this, but they were sparse and unconnected. Also, there was no real discussion place for those *kinds* of videos. Each video has a comment section, but there was no place where you could have all the videos together in one place and talk about the things they were talking about.

I coined the term "breadtube". The original push was to name it some variation of "left-tube", but I wanted to stay away from that since it would signal to everyone who did not consider themselves 'left wing', that this was a place for "the left". Bread seems an odd and apolitical choice, and someone digging into it will find that it doesn't reference Marx or Lenin or Socialism or whatever is typically associated with the left, all while acting as a dog whistle to people who know what "bread" is.

It was designed to be a meme and spread in ways other words wouldn't have, though I was surprised with the extent it did, 'breadtube' appearing in the New York Times a year after I made the sub was certainly not what I would've imagined

[Permalink](#) [Delete](#) [Report](#) [Block User](#) [Mark Unread](#) [Reply](#)



Considering the intent behind the creation of this space, but also the reputation of Reddit's platform dynamics at large (Massanari, 2017, Marantz, 2018, Nithyanand, 2017), it will be compelling to follow whether this will be a forum will remain a space aimed at political discussions and intra-ideological questioning, or incite inter-ideological conflicts with ideologically contrasting spaces on the platform (Freelon, 2010). The results show us that the role of community dynamics in Reddit's platform culture served both to create r/BreadTube as a new community for those interested in this network of Youtubers, but also to contest and antagonise them from the other side of the political spectrum as well as within ideologically similar spaces.

### *The influencer phenomenon: Youtube as a platform*

The mainstream media coverage of BreadTube also leads to a couple of interesting discussion points. Mainstream media and press seem to revel in making elaborate profiles of BreadTube creators, further elevating their celebrity status, and primarily remarking on their ability to harness an audience. Their dedication to charity is placed at the forefront, and their politics are represented as the "anti-alt-right," the counter to reactionary politics. ContraPoints, Hbombguy, Philosophy Tube, they become BreadTube posterchildren, drawing attention to their political ideals through their personal accomplishments and aesthetics. The relationships between them are equally important. The press makes a point of making connections among creators and emphasizing the existing alliances. It is much less likely (identified only in 2-3 articles) that BreadTube as a community is reported on. YouTube itself reinforces this power structure. Viewers become exposed to an individual channel. Should they want to trace the connections between the creator they are watching and other creators, the creators themselves have to facilitate this by featuring other channels. The comment sections also bring together users watching the same video or following the same channel, leading to a lack of "horizontal" communication.

What is cited as one of the reasons behind the creation of r/BreadTube is the lack of horizontal communication on the original platform, Youtube. Reddit's community-oriented structure thus serves to compensate the highly individualised experience of being a Youtuber user. Indeed, the video-hosting platform permits a relationship of relatability and enables social interaction between author and follower, albeit within an asymmetrical relationship that has given rise to the "influencer" marketing phenomenon (Xiao, 2018). Questions of authenticity, performance and self-presentation are rife in scholarship about the influencer movement, but what BreadTube does is radically cast away these mechanisms of relatability in order to enhance and draw attention to the artifice of the self, and therefore efface it from conversation. The hyper-performed aesthetics of BreadTubers at large create content that is not about the creator in question, most often, as they instead go through costume changes, rifle through characters and change their environment. While this is both reflective of the expectations of high production-value content and the means through which BreadTubers can attract and engage their audience, it is also a solipsistic movement that goes against traditional influencer culture on Youtube. While this cannot be generalised of all BreadTube creators, (and a notable exception is Kat Blaque, though her role in the network is often contested) it is most often that we either see this kind of hyper-aestheticised behaviour, or a completely "clip-based" approach that lacks the feature the creator completely.

Nevertheless, influencer-user relations are defined not only by authenticity and self-presentation, but by the dynamics of fandom and fan-based subcultures. Especially on Youtube, fandom cultures curate a sense of

“Participatory pleasure” Pernod writes, which “depends upon multiple levels of agency for both the producer and the consumers”. (Penrod, 2010) Nowadays, fandoms are trans-platforms entities, as is the case with channel ContraPoints dedicated subreddit, r/ContraPoints. Therefore, it is crucial in contemporary approaches to consider the platform cultures of all sites where digital fandom manifests, and think about the dynamic role users play in defining and creating a cohesive community.

## 7. Conclusion

In closing, this report has established some key insights that came out of the preliminary study of the leftist-oriented YouTube community colloquially known as BreadTube. Having partially responded to the question of how BreadTube is represented by different actors across digital platforms and media, we would like to conclude by presenting some ensuing concerns we wish to address in future research projects.

Firstly, given the volume of content we examined, which was produced by BreadTube-affiliated creators themselves, we did not have the opportunity to also delve into BreadTube-polemic content. Studying reactionary responses to BreadTube content and creators could further solidify how BreadTube is perceived by its opposition. Additionally, there is still a lot of research to be done regarding how BreadTube fares in the context of YouTube algorithms. Given that the conditions for monetization and exposure have been occupying a lot of creators, it is imperative to examine whether YouTube treats BreadTube content as a unified group with regards to tagging, monetization, and the recommendations algorithm. Are there other platform-specific affordances which affect how BreadTube content presents and spreads or, is perhaps, concealed and inhibited on YouTube? Also relating to the platform, we have not been able to find conclusive evidence that BreadTube content has hijacked reactionary content. This remains a great concern for research on leftist online political content on YouTube.

Moreover, we were able to devise some aesthetic markers and a rubrik to observe the evolution of the aesthetics of BreadTube video content. Yet, we were not able to determine how the audience of these videos interacts with these aesthetics. Last but not least, future research could pay closer attention to the comment section of BreadTube-affiliated videos, and note trends which may occur within that space. Would that be a space to look for audience accounts of radicalization within left-oriented online spaces? Or even accounts of de-radicalization from reactionary communities online?

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