Article

YouTube and Political Ideologies: Technology, Populism and Rhetorical Form

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Abstract

Digital (participatory and shareable) media are driving profound changes to contemporary politics. That includes, this article argues, important changes to the production, dissemination and reception of political ideas and ideologies. Such media have increased the number and political range of 'ideological entrepreneurs' promoting forms of political thought, while also giving rise to distinct genres of political rhetoric and communication. All of this is affecting how people come to be persuaded by and to identify with political ideas. In developing and justifying these claims, I draw on the Political Theory of Ideologies, Digital Media Studies and Rhetorical Political Analysis. I begin by showing how a populist 'style', induced by broadcast media, has been intensified by digital media, affecting ideological form and content. Next I consider, in detail, a particular example – YouTube – showing how it shapes political, ideological, communication. I then present a case-study of the UK-based political YouTuber Paul Joseph Watson. I show how the political ideology he propagates can be understood as a blend of Conservatism and Libertarianism, expressed in a Populist style, centred on the 'revelation' of political truths and on a promise of therapeutic benefits for followers. In a closing discussion I argue that this may be understood as a kind of 'charismatic' authority, and that such a political performance style is typical of these kinds of media today.

Keywords

political ideologies, rhetoric, populism, digital and social media, YouTube

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Introduction

Understanding and assessing the effects on political processes of digital, participatory and shareable media is a key challenge for Political Studies. An early wave of optimistic work on the democratic potential of what were once 'new' media has been replaced by investigations into how the Internet is challenging the conduct of democratic politics at a number of levels. These include theoretical and analytical reflections on how the Internet

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changes 'the character of political power and legitimacy' (Runciman, 2017: 5), connects to our democratic aspirations (Coleman, 2017) and interacts with systems of news, information and government (Chadwick, 2017). There are studies of the impact of digital media on specific political processes including elections (Margetts, 2017), parties (Dommett, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2018b) and campaigning (Dommett and Temple, 2018). Valuable interdisciplinary research into how the visual and affect-driven aspects of digital political culture alter people's experiences of politics (e.g. Dean, 2019) connects with an expanding literature within media and digital studies on the politics of platform designs and uses (Massanari, 2015) and of the 'connective' and 'affective' communities to which they give rise (Papacharissi, 2015). This article draws on and contributes to such assessments of the effects of digital media by adding to them research informed by the political theory of political ideologies (e.g. Finlayson, 2012; Freeden, 2005, 2006; Freeden et al., 2012) and by rhetorical theory and analysis. Digital media stimulate growth in 'ideological entrepreneurship' (individuals earning a living from disseminating political ideas), change the qualities and characteristics of political rhetoric and affect how people identify with political positions and ideologies. Understanding this is a pressing concern.

To develop and explain these claims, I first situate the argument in relation to contemporary research into political ideologies, particularly the 'turn' to studying populist 'style' and the mediatisation of politics. Style, I suggest, is part of what rhetoric scholars call 'ethos', the explanation and justification of claims by grounding them in the 'ethical' character of speakers and propositions and their relationship to that of audiences. Research shows that audio–visual media emphasise the personality and character of political actors, demanding of them an identifiable 'style' and, I argue, make political rhetoric and argumentation centre ever more on appeals to ethos. In the second section, I consider how structural features of social media (the organisation of the production and consumption of communication) intensify this focus on ethos. Taking YouTube as an example, I show that it requires users to emphasise their persona or ethos, and create particular sorts of relationship with audiences/consumers. In a third section, I drill deeper still, analysing an exemplary instance of YouTube political–discursive production: that of the prominent British right-wing online activist Paul Joseph Watson. Locating Watson's thinking within an ideological context (of Libertarianism, Conservatism and Populism) I explain the rhetorical style through which he communicates his 'political theory': the construction of an 'antagonism' against a 'new class' and an emphasis on 'secrets' and revelations. This, I show, is united and 'grounded' in the performance of an ethos of one brave and bold enough to reveal 'the truth'. The appeal of Watson's rhetoric lies in the promise that identifying with this ethos is of therapeutic value to the individuals who subscribe to this world view (and to his YouTube channel).

In a subsequent discussion section, I connect these three stages of the analysis. I argue that Watson is an exemplar of a political style in which the rhetoric of ethos is brought to the fore and political identification with it is presented as a kind of personal therapy. Platforms such as YouTube induce this kind of political performance in which people appear as authoritative, interpreters of what is 'really' going on, inviting viewers to experience this truth for themselves. This 'charismatic' style (Weber, 1946), in development before the explosion of digital media, is intensified but also individualised by social media technologies.

The article thus brings together and integrates research from three (sub)fields: the political theory of political ideologies, rhetorical political analysis and sociologies of digital media. In so doing, it contributes to the wider theory and analysis of politics in the era of

digital communication through the provision of an original case study of a novel political–rhetorical form (the reach and significance of which is underappreciated), by showing that platforms such as YouTube affect the form taken by political communication, and with the argument that this is reshaping ideological 'style', form and content in ways that Political Studies needs to attend to.

Populism and Mediatisation: Form, Style and Rhetoric

Social and digital media are novel, but not wholly so. To understand the effects of these technologies on communication practices, we need to put them into a larger context (Williams, 1973) including that of pre-existing practices, and established relationships between media and politics. Here, I do that through a consideration of contemporary theories of the link between a populist form or style of ideology and media communication.

A cleavage runs between those who see populism as primarily a *form* and those for whom it is primarily a *content*. For the former – best represented by the discourse theory associated with Laclau – populism is a structural moment of 'the political', positing a 'people' in opposition to that which hinders them in their political development (Laclau, 2005); varied political demands and struggles can be united under the name of the people and organised in line with this populist logic. For the latter, exemplified by Mudde, it is a particular if 'thin' ideology, organised around the concept of 'the people' and characterised by a moral register which opposes the inherent 'goodness' of popular sovereignty to the essential wickedness of elites (e.g. Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015). A third, complementary, approach sees Populism as a 'style' – defined as 'the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 387). This is characterised by three key features: the appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite'; bad manners; and invocations of crisis, breakdown or threat. The value of this analysis is, first, its emphasis on how an ideology is manifested and communicated. Communicative style is like a hinge, joining general ideological form with specific ideological contents. Second, it helps us see how the media 'stage' makes possible and constitutes such stylised performances, and that if we want to understand populism, ideologies and political style, we need also to understand 'mediatisation' (Couldry, 2013).

The extensive and intensive nature of media communication is such that it is not merely an external influence on an otherwise distinct political sphere; media run through and orient all sorts of political relations and actions. Politics has been 'mediatised' and the representation of political representation, as it were, forces the latter to adapt to the former. For example, politics on television is experienced and evaluated not only as politics but also as television; political actors able to adapt to the presentational codes that make for 'good' television will flourish in place of those who cannot (see Debray, 2007). Of particular significance is television's domestic nature. Consumed in the home, focused on the image of a 'talking head' addressing the audience, it demands the communication of personality and intimacy (Ellis, 1982; Williams, 1973).

The effects of this on political communication in the second half of the twentieth-century are well-documented. Empirical analysis of language-use in Party Election Broadcasts since the 1960s shows a marked increase in 'prefabricated sequences of words' (standard phrases typical of conversation), four times as many first-person pronouns and three times as many second-person pronouns, indicative of informalization (Pearce, 2005). Atkins's and Finlayson's (2012) study of party leaders' conference speeches also found political arguments adapted for television – written so as to win news

coverage and to prove the 'ordinary' character of leaders through anecdotes, personal testimony and forms of argument made popular by television talk-shows. Clarke et al. (2018) show how popular judgements of what makes a 'good politician' have come to centre on ideas of 'normality', how 'like us' or 'in-touch' politicians are' (Chapter 8).

Political language has been adapted to the forms and norms of television discourse, and political figures have become celebrities (Street, 2004). Like other media 'stars', they are known, recognised, and identified with, as embodiments of social types (see Dyer, 1986) and as performers of 'stylised forms of individuality, which offer a temporary focus for identification and organization by fluid collectives (or 'audiences')' (Corner and Pels, 2003: 8). Relentless media coverage mixes public roles with private behaviours leading to the 'informalisation' of charisma, and everyday details of politicians' appearance come to seem as informative or significant as policy claims (Pels, 2003: 45). In the language of rhetorical analysis (Finlayson and Martin, 2008), the mediatised reorientation of political communication around personality leads to the foregrounding of 'ethos'. Here, 'style' acquires political–ideological significance. Ethos is the rhetorical proof which rests on 'character': on the generic characteristics or attributes of a person (the type or category to which they belong or may be made to seem to belong); on what might be thought to make them special or distinct; and on their relationship to the character of audiences and communities in general (such as 'the people'). 'Proof' requires successful performance of a style, a 'character', linking a political analysis with a cultural, moral, category and with which people are invited to identify. Thatcher's enactment of authoritarian conservatism and Blair's exemplification of 'modernised' managerial 'social-ism' (both performed in 'heroic' opposition to their party culture) were presented as solutions to problems of the present which they also characterised and diagnosed (Finlayson, 2012: 9–10). They could thus also be invitations to identify one's place in that present (and in a putative future) and to become a certain kind of political subject: a Thatcher*ite*, a Blair*ite*.

Audio–visual media, then, demand a 'style' of political communication which emphasises individuals' 'personality'. That induces rhetorics centred on ethos and with a populist dimension insofar as the generic character of leaders, the 'social type' they appear to be and which has always been important, becomes *central* to argument, linked with claims about the ethical-moral character of policies and peoples and made a focus of supporters' identification. Moffitt (2016: 76) is therefore right to say that 'many of the attributes of media logic are roughly analogous with (or at least complementary to) the features of populism as a political style'. That is why many contemporary politicians (popular as well as populist) have a background as media owners, journalists or television performers (see Moffitt, 2016: 88–94). However, the television age is over. The pressing question for us now is how digital, participatory and shareable forms of media affect this 'populist' rhetorical style.

Politics and Digital Communication: The Case of YouTube

Participatory and shareable digital media have shattered politicians' monopoly on the lead roles in performances of social and political dramas. Ever more people may audition for and get the part. Social media platforms (such as Twitter, Reddit and Facebook) have fundamentally changed the production and consumption of political communication, giving rise to new genres built out of (and in reaction to) pre-digital forms of communication. The term 'platforms' makes it feel as if they merely host our communicative interactions (Gillespie, 2010) but in reality they are 'actively regulating their users content and

behaviour through increasingly complex sociotechnical mechanisms of control' (Burgess and Green, 2018: 10). Highly structured fields of activity, they are made out of software protocols and codes influenced by the culture and outlook of the designers, the rules and regulations of the platform (shaped by owners' economic and ideational outlook) and the social behaviours enforced by user communities (Gillespie, 2018; Massanari, 2015).

A challenge for media analysts is to understand the iterative interaction of platform designers' designs with users' uses; a challenge for political analysts is to understand how the forms to which this gives rise interact with the fields of politics. Gerbaudo, for instance, helpfully identifies an 'elective affinity' between social media and populism. He shows how the algorithms governing our attention online lead otherwise dispersed individuals to focus on very particular issues while the 'filter effect', in which people see only certain kinds of information, intensifies partisan attachment. Public discourses of social media which represent it as a means for giving voice to those otherwise excluded by 'the mainstream' have connected its use with 'a transgressive and rebellious posture' (Gerbaudo, 2018a: 746; also Nagle, 2017). That is intensified by anonymity and the affective dynamic of computer-screen and keyboard which make it easy to express what might be thought unsayable: early adopters of 'chans' and message boards created a culture which 'fetishized dark humour' and shaped some of the practices associated with 'trolling' including the use of aggressive and insulting language to disrupt or shut down others' arguments. As Philips shows, belief in the virtues of argumentative combat has interacted with the affordances of platforms, turning political discourse into a virtual bloodsport (Phillips, 2015: 340–370). The more a speech act violates norms and provokes a reaction, the more it can be experienced as a heroic instantiation of 'free speech' and self-expression, and considered intrinsically valuable regardless of its content or actual contribution to 'public reason'. The interaction between technological form and user culture has created a particular way of thinking about, and doing, political and public communication.

Another key feature of the medium is important here. Online, the context of expression is always ambiguous. Things which help us decode meaning (a definite social situation, the social location or background of those speaking and, on text-forums, their tone of voice and expression) are missing; fragments of things said are easily extracted, circulated and recontextualised (see also Davis and Jurgenson, 2014). Consequently, disputes about meaning and intention dominate online discourse; arguments centre on peoples' sincerity, prejudicial motivation or hidden interests which are seen as decisive for defining and evaluating the meaning of statements.

Digital media, then, have an 'affinity' with populist forms and styles of ideology and rhetoric. They push argument into centring on claims about one's own or others' personal character or ethos. Words are interpreted via assertions about the social (and moral) category to which the person saying them can be made to belong: a Remainer, a Brexiter, a man, a woman, a Feminist, a journalist, one of 'the people' and one of 'them' – someone 'who would say or think that sort thing'. Emerging into an already mediatised and ethoscentric political culture, digital media make moral character, categorisation and identification even more central to political discourse. This – as we will see – also affects the 'morphology' of ideologies (Freeden, 2012). How that happens varies across platforms which may be primarily textual, aural or visual, with communication happening at different speeds and according to different rules. To develop the discussion further, we therefore focus on just one.

YouTube was launched in June of 2005, acquired by Google in 2006 for US$1.65 billion and in 2007 became the most popular entertainment site in the United States (Burgess

and Green, 2018; Stokel-Walker, 2019). Birthed into a market and a culture characterised by the rapid proliferation of media outlets, in which people had become used to the personalization of media consumption (unbound from the fixed schedules of centralised broadcasters) and the valorization of 'participation', YouTube has been designed to intensify and organise a 'multi-sided market' made up of 'audiences; amateur, pro-amateur, and professional content creators; media partners; advertisers, new intermediaries like the multi-channel networks and third-party developers' (Burgess and Green, 2018: 9). Over the last decade, it has supported content creators to professionalise and scale-up their activity giving rise to new genres of 'social media entertainment' (Cunningham quoted in Burgess and Green, 2018: 11). That includes political genres, the most successful of which (in terms of viewers) are, so far, on the political right (Lewis, 2018; Munger and Phillips, 2019). To understand what is happening here, we need to consider how the platform shapes the production and consumption of content, and how that affects the style, rhetoric and articulation of political ideologies.

YouTube radically extends access to media production and dissemination because it lowers entry barriers. It converts video into the necessary format, managing and hosting its presentation, so that producers need to invest only a small amount in minimal equipment for recording. Because they are one of its products, YouTube formally and informally trains creators in how to make good content as judged by the metric which as a commercial advertising service it naturally promotes: the volume and intensity of views. Creators are subject to what Bogost (2007: 3) calls a 'procedural rhetoric', the persuasive effects of 'processes in general and computational processes in particular'. The code that organises YouTube activity produces and enforces 'rules of behaviour' which give rise to 'content' (Bogost, 2007: 29). YouTube Analytics provides creators with detailed data on the number of viewers, where they are coming from, demographics and watch-time. Combined with direct responses such as likes/dislikes and comments, this enables producers rapidly to adapt their productions, increasing and retaining audiences by giving them what they seem to want. Through the Partner Programme, producers can earn a proportion of advertising revenue, supplementing that income (potentially quite handsomely) through selling merchandise and via allied funding platforms such as Patreon.[1]

On YouTube, there is a feedback loop between producer and consumer much more intense and rapid than with television and radio, similar to the direct relationship of platform orator and audience but without constraints of time or distance, and mediated by the language of the software. Furthermore, the overarching context is commercial rather than artistic, civic or political. What is valuable is not any single video but the channel and the subscribers it attracts and retains. Individuals – to survive in such a market – must brand themselves and their content so as to engender consumer loyalty, a pattern familiar from 'talk radio' and 'shock jocks' who played a significant role in changing the style of political discourse prominent in the United States (Bobbitt, 2010). Within this system, YouTube creators of, for example, make-up tutorials, who started as fans of particular products, have been able to become respected product reviewers and, ultimately, creators of original product lines. Something analogous has occurred on political YouTube: the emergence from political fandom of new kinds of ideological entrepreneur, branded by their political character and able to sell directly to whatever publics they can find, cultivate and retain. Thanks to this system one can be a 'professional' living 'from' politics, as Weber (1994) put it, yet independent of a Party or professional media and so free from the accountability and regulation these entail. Evidence suggests that consumption of political content on YouTube is driven by demand as well

as supply and that it enables otherwise disaggregated political constituencies to take definite shape. White Nationalists, for example, whose political media consumption might otherwise be constrained by ideologies of mass media are, through YouTube, able to 'switch into consuming media more consistent with their ideal points' (Munger and Phillips, 2019: 12). But in making the market for such material available, the platform incentivises its supply and the genres of political expression and communication suited to capturing such lucrative market share. Producers of online political content are accountable only to viewers, subscribers and, ultimately, the incentive structures of the platform.

YouTube's design shapes not only the production of content but also its consumption. Consequently, it engenders new kinds of relationship between individuals and political ideas. Raymond Williams famously characterised the experience of television viewing as one of 'flow'. Where communication had once been discrete – a specific book or pamphlet, a play or a meeting in a particular place and time – television created 'a *sequence* or set of alternative sequences of these and other similar events, which are then available in a single dimension and in a single operation' (Williams, 1973: 87). YouTube, accessed via computer, tablet or smartphone, makes visual images part of a complex flow consciously or unconsciously created by an individual viewer as they click through sites and texts, follow links or view embedded content shared and spread on other platforms. Viewers choose what to search for and watch, freed from the centralising powers characteristic of national broadcast media systems. But they are subject to new kinds of governance. The procedural rhetoric invites and insists on participation; endless adapted recommendations are reiterated by producers' necessary demand that we 'like, comment and subscribe'. Unattended, one video will automatically slip onto the next, the flow determined by the algorithms running the machine, directing, intensifying and focusing viewer choices (Gillespie, 2014). YouTube is a pseudo-individualising medium, offering a simulated experience of autonomy while compelling participation in the form of evaluation: upvoting, downvoting, commenting, subscribing, sharing and so on. Through such means, audience members interact and may form 'community' beyond the confines of the YouTube channel through ancillary forums (such as those on Reddit) where video content can be discussed at inordinate length (see, for example, Ging's (2017) excellent study of Men's Rights forums). YouTube channel producers can participate in these, making the relationship of producer and consumer closer. That further encourages users to support creators through 'donations' which – significantly – feel more like a social relationship than a purely commercial one and may give special rights of access to otherwise unattainable content. Further participation can follow: sharing, promoting or defending a creator; making secondary materials such as compilation videos, extracts or digests of the work of the originator; and creating commentaries, archives and glossaries. Thus political communities form through online engagement but share more in common with commercial fan communities than with civic groups of citizens. They are 'affective communities' of sentiment not interest. YouTube political content positions viewers as 'followers' to be enthused and retained.

These aspects of production and consumption affect the appearance of videos. The visual appearance of political YouTube is often similar to television (and talk radio) dominated by talking-heads in apparently intimate, personal and conversational interaction, directly addressing an imagined audience. As Lewis (2018: 18) notes, the political content of conservative YouTube in particular is 'often highly personal, told through subjective storytelling and affective cues . . . over long periods of time'. This is linked to the

branding of channels, often with the name of the person behind them, and producers develop a consistent character for viewers to identify with. The low-tech 'DIY' aspect of many videos intensifies this personalization. Seemingly 'face-to-face' communication comes from a 'private' space such as a bedroom, living-room or home office. The setting makes the videos seem personal and 'backstage' and 'frontstage' blurring contributes to the performance of authenticity, the sense that what is being said is a direct expression of the one saying it and not subordinated to the demands, codes or rules of any other authority. As Lewis (2018: 18) observes, 'oppositional' identity and claims to marginalisation are foregrounded and there is a premium on displaying 'authenticity through transparency and responsiveness'. Speakers deliver '*ideological testimonials* akin to product testimonials in advertising'; personal and ideological betterment combine and 'influencers display the way they live their politics as an aspirational brand' (Lewis, 2018: 28).

The argument of this section has been that digital communication creates new forums within the public sphere, radically changing who can set up stall there, what they can say, who they say it to, how they say it and why. These 'ideological entrepreneurs' can cater to all kinds of niche political taste at low cost with potentially high rewards if they can cultivate and keep an audience, stimulating enthusiasm and participation. Ethos, already made central to political rhetoric and discourse by television, assumes even greater salience. Audiences are invited to identify with and to become fans of a politics through identifying with the individual who embodies it, for whom it is an attribute, an expression of inner moral character and something to which one may aspire. To see in more detail how this affects ideological form, we now turn to an in-depth case study.

Case Study: Paul Joseph Watson

The UK-based political activist Paul Joseph Watson is an exemplary instance of a new kind of political actor: an ideological entrepreneur earning a living from social media, producing regular, political–ideological commentary for an international following. He has 1.78 million subscribers on YouTube where his videos regularly receive 750,000–1 million views. The most watched has been viewed 12 million times. For context, The Labour Party has 34,000 subscribers; its most watched video has 668,000 views.

Watson's videos present some challenges to political analysis: ranging from 2 to 20 minutes in length, they are combinations of word and image, hard to summarise in text. They are highly contextual interventions into ongoing political events and Internet popular culture. His ideological position is inconsistent and never fully argued; he prioritises sectarian distinction over systematic theorising and is unconstrained by commitment to accuracy. However, he draws on established ideological traditions, cites political thinkers and regularly considers fundamental political concepts such as liberty, individuality, religion, transcendence, civilisation and decadence. His videos are an instance of 'political theory in the wild' (Finlayson, 2012): speech-acts which (re)articulate political concepts for non-specialist audiences, using them to analyse and explain events and phenomena. In the following discussion, I first characterise Watson ideologically and then rhetorically, showing how the style of the latter, adapted to and shaped by the demands of YouTube, affects ideological form.

First, a little background. Born in Sheffield in 1982, in the early 2000s Watson began promoting conspiracy theories on his website Propaganda Matrix: the Oklahoma bombing, 9/11 and London bombings were faked by governments; Princess Diana was murdered. Talent-spotted by the American professional conspiracy theorist Alex Jones,

Watson was hired as a contributing editor of the websites Prison Planet and Infowars (Hines, 2018). He has since become more focused on mainstream political and cultural issues. Watson began uploading to YouTube in 2011; in 2016, videos he made claiming that Hilary Clinton was suffering from a brain disorder went viral (Watson, 2016a); in 2018, he joined UK Independence Party (UKIP; Watson, 2018d); and in 2019 President Trump tweeted support for Watson after the latter was 'banned' from Facebook.

Watson's earliest 'systematic' political statement is his 2003 book *Order Out of Chaos: Elite Sponsored Terrorism and the New World Order*. A typical example of the genre of conspiracy theory in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 moment, it argues that a 'power elite' made up of the usual suspects – the UN, European Union (EU), Bilderberg Group, Trilateral Commission, Rockefellers, Rothschilds – believes it has 'the divine right to commandeer total control of your life' and is secretly behind all major current events. Much of the book is bizarre. For example, citing Hegel, Watson presents 'thesis' and 'antithesis' as names for conflicts staged by the power elite, which resolve into a new stage of their 'agenda': the Nazis and Bolsheviks, for instance, were funded by the elite to fight World War Two. Rulers routinely manufacture enemies to 'hoodwink the real enemy, the people they govern'. As Jodi Dean observes, in conspiracy discourse 'power is staged for itself'. Rather than explain why governments dupe populations, Watson describes in cumulative detail the seeming connections between things, events and people, 'showing' that behind what you, the reader, think is merely disorder their lies a hidden hand.

As Watson's thinking has developed, the simplicities of conspiracy theory have turned into mainstream suspicion and rejection of state power, bringing him into alignment, in the first instance, with Libertarian ideologies. From 2011 to 2016 Infowars articles by Watson were published on the website of the American libertarian activist Lew Rockwell. He has drawn on and encouraged viewers to read books on Libertarianism, such as *Libertarian Anarchy* by the Irish philosopher Gerard Casey (2012), and argued that the state is by its nature a threat to individual freedom (Watson, 2014a).

It is not clear if Watson has read Murray Rothbard, the American Libertarian who inspired Rockwell and Casey. Yet, his influence seems clear. Rothbard advocated a 'Right-Wing Populism' based on antagonism towards

> [P]oliticians and bureaucrats allied with . . . powerful corporate and Old Money financial elites (e.g. the Rockefellers, the Trilateralists and the New Class of technocrats and intellectuals, including Ivy League academics and media elites, who constitute the opinion-moulding class in society) (Rothbard, 1992).

In Watson's videos, the 'power elite' is identified as that 'new class'. In common with other online activists (Conservative, Libertarian, and Alt-Right), he articulates hostility to that class using a number of specific names. The first of these is 'Cultural Marxist', a concept linked to a pre-digital conspiracy theory and used to invoke an idea of politicised intellectuals, 'tenured radicals' in Kimball's phrase, who are said to exploit race and gender politics to further their own authoritarian 'agenda' (Jamin, 2014; Manavis, 2019; Richardson, 2015). The second name is a product of Internet and gaming subculture. 'Social Justice Warrior' (SJW) is a pejorative for an advocate (likely a young woman) of 'identity politics' (see Massanari and Chess, 2018; Nagle, 2017). The term came to prominence as part of largely online disputes about video games journalism (Phelan, 2019: 4–10). That makes it sound very marginal but its prominence and centrality within online political discourse cannot be underestimated. At its core is a mocking rejection of the very

idea of 'social justice', of equality as a legitimate political goal, which has its roots in Hayekian critiques of the welfare state (Phelan, 2019). A third, instructive if less prominent term, is non-player characters (NPCs). In video games, NPCs are programmed to react in set ways to players' behaviour, reciting a set script. As a political metaphor, it suggests that 'SJWs' lack autonomy; incapable of free thought, they are puppeted by an ideological script written by others.

In his videos, Watson rarely directly advocates any positive political system. His focus is relentless critiques of 'SJWs', Cultural Marxists, Government, Bureaucracy, Feminism, Islam, Multiculturalism and Liberalism in which these names (and the alleged connections between them) function as explanations. Islam, he argues, is inherently violent and hostile to the West but actively supported by the 'regressive left' because both 'share the same goal: the complete destruction of Western civilization' (Watson, 2016c, 2017d); contemporary Feminism is a creation of corporate interests and Cultural Marxists (Watson, 2014b), part of an irrational 'anti-science, social justice agenda, to force contrived equality . . . at the expense of empirical reality' (Watson, 2017f). Government bureaucracy is 'poisoned by political correctness' a tool to force conformity and suppress resistance, and the United Kingdom 'an authoritarian state in which freedom of speech and freedom of assembly don't actually exist anymore' (Watson, 2018b). Through such claims, Watson becomes aligned, in a second instance, with classical Conservative arguments about the threat to liberty and order posed by ideologies which resist traditional and natural hierarchies and divisions. The unnatural presence of such ideologies is explained by reference to destructive, outside forces and the irrationalism of adherents – the 'NPCs' incapable of recognising, or frightened by, the true autonomy of an individual who understands and is brave in the face of natural order and its limits. Libertarian individualism remains important however. Rothbard argued that humans are unique in being driven only by free will, undetermined by biology, psychology, history or society: 'ideas, freely adopted, determine social institutions, and not vice versa' (Rothbard, 1960: 5). Watson seems to share this view insofar as he promotes a conception of the ideal and authentic individual as one wholly self-directed and self-created, free from the influence of societal convention. He even criticises the concept of romantic love as possessive, 'egotistical and greedy', claiming that it 'detracts from the only true source of sustained happiness: creativity and self-mastery' (Watson, 2018a).

Watson also engages extensively in conservative *kulturkritik*: a thoroughgoing rejection of the culture of liberal modernity as decadent, stupefying and narcissistic. The 'next great battle' for freedom and 'true individuality', he says, will be a culture war. His early conspiracy-theory videos linked popstars to devil worship and this has become criticism of 'vulgar, vapid, self-absorbed, hedonistic' popular culture, a 'rancid assault on the senses' which Watson (2017g) blames on 'post-modernist, moral relativist, critical-theory-espousing cultural Marxist nihilists'. He also dislikes modern architecture, citing Roger Scruton approvingly and arguing that modernist architects were 'the social justice warriors of their time' (Watson, 2017h). Modern Art is another regular target – the preserve of 'pretentious twats' trying to appear sophisticated, and symptomatic of 'aesthetic relativism'. SJWs and Cultural Marxists have taken control (Watson, 2016b) and politically 'abused' art in the effort 'to advance and ingrain far-left narratives' (Watson, 2017b, 2017i). For Watson (2015b, 2017a), 'Conservatism is the new counter-culture'. He sells T-Shirts bearing that slogan. SJWs are fake, he and his followers are the authentic punks and teenage rebels of today (Watson, 2017c). In the modern art gallery, as we wonder why 'nothing resonates', Watson says, 'don't be alarmed, because they're only pretending to

understand. They're faking it to look trendy. You're the only honest person in the build-ing'. Ultimately, Watson predicts the collapse of a consumerist society which cannot give life meaning and in which 'insatiable greed for sensual stimulation outweighs the urge for any kind of private or social responsibility'. Immigration is identified as a symptom of this decline because, he thinks, it will undermine the culture just as the Mayans were wiped out by the Spanish. 'For all its barbarity', he remarks, 'at least Islam provides its adherents with some sense of meaning' (Watson, 2019c).

Watson's political theory is, then, a rough blend of Conservatism and Libertarianism. It is similar to (and probably directly influenced by) North American Paleoconservatism. An ideological tributary which has fed into the wider online 'alt-right' (Drolet and Williams, 2020; Hawley, 2017: 9–33; Nagle, 2017: 54–67). Paleoconservatism blends traditionalism with neoliberal critiques of state overreach and inefficiency (e.g. Gottfried, 1999) organising itself around what Laclau would call an 'antagonism' to a 'new class' of left-wing academics and journalists considered coterminous with Liberalism as such. Like Paleoconservatives, Watson expresses a conservative concern with the problem of change, linking a critical explanation of its origins (its imposition by ideologically driven left-wingers literally in league with foreigners) with a liberal belief in freedom from both the state and from what Mill called social tyranny, but which for Watson consists of the social mores and cultural rules of politically correct Liberalism. At the core of this ideo-logical assemblage is an essentially inegalitarian 'aristocratic', crudely Nietzschean, indi-vidualism for which the core contemporary political problem is that freedom has been granted to those incapable of exercising it and who are now in thrall to evil forces on the left. The latter, believing that they can overturn nature, are a threat to the noble few able to bear the burdens of true liberty. This position makes for such a thoroughgoing reaction-ary politics, so determinedly counterrevolutionary, its critique of the present so intense, that it becomes revolutionary, neither defending nor protecting culture but aiming to bring the whole decadent edifice down (see also Robin, 2018). It is a politics of 'liberation', of 'us', the true and authentic ones, from 'them', the anti-natural liberal new class and their herd-like, 'NPC', followers.

Importantly, then, Watson's (not unfamiliar blend) of Conservatism and Libertarianism is expressed in a Populist style of the sort identified by Moffitt and Tormey: an authentic, moral and rational 'people' is contrasted with 'them', the wicked Cultural Marxists, fake SJWs and stupid NPC foot-soldiers. He demonstrates 'bad manners', calling Liberalism a 'mental disorder' (Watson, 2015a) and its adherents 'libtards' (online slang combining the words liberal and retard) while all Feminists are 'fat and ugly' (Watson, 2015c). And he certainly makes invocations of crisis and breakdown: our culture, liberty and way of life are besieged; civilisation itself is under threat.

That populist style is part of a distinct rhetoric. Central to it is the trope of *paradiastole*; the re-description and renaming of things so that they move from one moral-evaluative category to the opposite (see Skinner, 1997, 1999, 2002). Watson redefines what Liberals or Socialists consider virtues as not merely naïve and mistaken beliefs but as selfish and acquisitive tactics – 'virtue-signalling'. Advocates of equality, such as Feminists, are rede-scribed as hierarchical, wanting to dominate men; the allegation of racism is itself called racist. The focus of Watson's argument is not on showing some positions to be in error but on revealing that they are not as they appear. This is different from the argument that poli-cies intended to promote equality, say, will have the unintended opposite outcome or hin-der individual freedom – the tropes of 'perversity' and 'jeopardy' which Hirschmann (1991) identified as characteristic of reactionary rhetoric. The proposition is that Liberals

and Socialists are masquerading, hiding their true (illiberal, anti-social, inegalitarian and intolerant) nature. He wants to prove a lack not of intellectual soundness but of authentic moral character. Consequently, the argumentation never moves closer to its subject, into the particularity and complexity of concepts or policy proposals; it moves upwards and away, towards generalities and fundamental oppositions, showing things to be examples of something bigger, explaining and understanding issues and phenomena by giving them a name which places them in a larger category of immoral things of which they are simultaneously an instance and an inductive proof.

Naming through re-description is, then, a central element of Watson's rhetorical style and of the form and content of his political thinking. This is also instantiated in the structure of his video essays. These almost always take a specific incident, issue or phenomenon (often one being reported on in mainstream media) and show it to be a synecdoche for a general crisis. Recent examples are women having children later (Watson, 2020), criticism of the movie *Joker* (Watson, 2019f), the popularity of superhero movies (Watson, 2019d) and the 'cancelling' of JK Rowling (Watson, 2019a). Each instance is the conclusion of a logic which Watson traces back to its (thereby demonstrated) premise: the corruption of Liberalism. Visual imagery is important here. Watsons's films are highly intertextual, with many rapid cuts between him talking and images which work as citations of authority (such as a documentary featuring Roger Scruton), evidential reference (stills of newspapers and websites – including Watson's own – presented as proof for empirical claims) and humorous, mocking counterpoints. These images also name enemies. For example, short clips of women activists appearing aggressive or emotional (with no context provided) are inserted as comic breaks and empirical proof of what 'they' are really like; videos on migration cut to unidentified (non-white) people in an unidentified location appearing riotous, visual 'proof' of the chaos that immigration is said to create. Often Watson does not comment directly on these images: his words form one part of a truncated, rhetorical syllogism, the visual images another. For example, as Watson says the 'enemies are at the gates', a picture of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez comes on the screen. 'Socialist vulture demagogues are busy licking their lips', he continues (Watson, 2019c). Viewers are positioned to draw their 'own' conclusion, to complete the thought, give the Democrat politician her 'true' name and put her in the category to which she belongs.

At the core of all this is a rhetoric of secrets. The visual, structural and verbal rhetoric of Watson's videos is oriented at showing what's 'really' going on, hidden behind otherwise seemingly random phenomena. He reveals what 'they' don't want you to know, what the media will not tell you and others do not realise but which is here presented before your eyes in living colour, given its proper name and assigned to the correct category. That is why a large number of the videos are titled 'The Truth About . . .' (e.g. Brexit, Yellow Vest Protests, Modern Advertising, Apu and the Simpsons, Migrants, The Border, Comedy, Oprah, Jerusalem, Kavanaugh, Incels, Shithole Countries and so on). Many others are titled 'What they are not telling you about . . .' The 'secret', as Black writes, is a rhetorical commonplace with 'uncommon powers of implication and entailment'. It promotes revelation 'in the belief that such exposure will work to the detriment of whatever is revealed – that the secret, which is simultaneously concealed because it is evil and evil because it is concealed, will shrivel in the luminosity of revelation' (Black, 1988: 134, 136). Subjects of such a rhetoric must persevere to make evil visible, to see the truth for themselves and name it for others.

Here is where ethos – which, as we saw, has become central to contemporary political rhetoric – comes into its own in Watson's rhetoric, in a way which exceeds Conservatism

or Libertarianism and gives his populism a distinct 'style' and ideological flavour. His performance of a character, able to speak the truth, to reveal and so fight off the evil, is the fixing point of his (sometimes disparate) political claims and the focus of the identification he invites. Where some political YouTubers confine themselves to giving a voice-over, the central image in Watson's videos is himself: well-groomed, dressed informally but in a suit, a younger man, usually standing, looking slightly down at us, his face and body active, expressive and directly, confidently, addressing us (perhaps, with our headphones on, alone with him on our screen talking in our heads). Behind him, often, is a world map, connoting news programmes or a military adviser. His enunciation is sharp, direct, aggressive but controlled, sarcastic and cutting, invoking the codes of formal broadcasting while ostentatiously breaking them with asides. His appearance and manner evoke a style familiar from talk radio, the to-camera editorialising of liberal and conservative cable news, and the kind of satire pioneered by Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*. Indeed, argumentative weight often falls on exaggerated quizzical looks to camera and reading out statements in a mocking voice.

Ethos and authority are established through this bearing and delivery with no hint of equivocation or hesitation. Watson is not cowed by the world which he stands in front of. He knows what he is talking about and is 'knowing', revealing the world in strident, directly addressed injunctions: a hard-headed, 'rational', 'evidence-based' and 'brave' perceiver of truth. His virulent rejections and mockery of so-called 'woke' culture position him as unconstrained, a plain speaking truth-teller. Obvious edits to cover for verbal slips, typical of YouTube, add to the performance of authenticity. While the crudity of the mainstream culture (which is also censorious) is an index of its inauthenticity, Watson's performance of crudity is staged as bold polemic. The epithets and mockery he directs at feminists, anti-racists and liberals are heroic demonstrations of his power of naming which is also a power of truth-telling.

Significantly, none of this builds to a plan for collective action. Watson advocates support for some specific political causes (such as Brexit) but does not generally promote any particular kind of political action or seek to recruit to a political party. The actions he urges are individual and his ultimate promise is of personal salvation not political liberation. In his 2003 book, Watson's revelation of the elite's hidden-hand came with an injunction to readers to work on themselves, resist brainwashing, learn to see 'the agenda' and help others 'realise they are under attack'. A precondition for success was the ability to shield oneself from the stupefaction and hedonism of contemporary culture. 'The battle begins at home', Watson wrote, against feelings of depression or worthlessness: 'if your state of melancholy cannot be explained by any single event, it is likely the result of countless years of this matrix false-reality pounding on your soul'. The promise was that if you 'grab life by the scruff of the neck and reject all the outside emotional manipulation' you'd feel freer, happier and more significant.

The same themes appear in Watson's YouTube videos (through which, incidentally, he promotes the sale of nutritional supplements). In a striking video from New Year's Day in 2016 Watson, expressing disgust at 'human vermin' drinking to excess, 'lost souls' confined to 'an existence as insignificant and unfulfilling as farmyard pigs', urged followers to hear their 'voice of conscience', the 'true human spirit' which demands 'meaning' from 'principles and striving towards something authentic' (Watson, 2016d). In other videos, he urges followers to reduce their use of social media (Watson, 2018c), refrain from pornography and masturbation (Watson, 2019b) and develop the 'strength of mind' and character to resist a culture said to 'fetishize' depression (bizarrely, because of the malign influence of Foucault; Watson, 2017e).

Watson's performance of ethos is of a person – specifically a man – who has acquired such strength, manifested not only through his blunt, 'transgressive' language but also through his voice and bearing on the screen. The simulated intimacy of the camera close-up, consumed by individuals in their private space, makes him the focus of identification with the political ideas and ideology, more so than any appeal to abstract, general or shared interests. That performance of a way of being in and orienting oneself to the world forms part of a promise that you too can attain such confidence and certainty. He gives his ideal audience member (clearly imagined as male) an explanation for suffering and an enemy to focus on: the 'entire economic system and culture is now set up to be so hostile' to working-class White men that it is inducing their suicide and preventing discussion of it (Watson, 2019e). If you feel bad, guilty or weak, it is because the enemy wants you to; your inability to appreciate or share in the values or culture around you is good because it is their values and their culture. In understanding that it is all fake you have taken the first step on the road to becoming a self-directed individual. By participating in digital culture – becoming a fan and liking, commenting, subscribing and donating, by being rude to the feminists, liberals and anti-racists – you are liberating yourself, speaking the truth and being a hero. The secret of Paul Joseph Watson, then, is that his hostility to Liberalism is linked with advocacy of a typical form of (neo)Liberal self-governance: followers are enjoined not to change social/economic structures but to develop the resilience to survive, overcoming their feelings and becoming individuals fit to compete with and win out against 'them'. He urges a work on the self that Foucauldians call 'autonomisation and responsibilisation' (Rose, 1999).

The argument of this section has been that the 'political theory' of Paul Joseph Watson is at one level a familiar blend of Conservatism and Libertarianism, antagonistic to the Liberal 'new class'. This provides an explanation for events, feelings and experiences making them all instances of a cultural assault 'they' wage against 'us'. But it is articulated in a distinct populist style adapted to the medium of YouTube. Central to it is the trope of the secret and a performance of ethos which invites viewers to learn how to recognise and name things while developing practices of self-care and resilience.

Discussion

Paul Joseph Watson is an example of a new kind of ideological entrepreneur able to flourish apart from a political party or regulated journalistic outlet, earning a living directly from the promotion of a political world-view. His YouTube videos are a novel combination of 'social media entertainment', political theory and ideological rhetoric: a form of inegalitarian Conservative Libertarianism and a radical reactionary attack on liberal politics and culture, the articulation of which accords with the structural form of populism identified by Laclau, the Manichean and moralised content specified by Mudde and the populist style observed by Moffit and Tormey. However, strikingly, this style is part of a rhetorical appeal to individuals rather than to 'a people', giving them not a programme for a political movement but for personal therapy. Watson's performance of ethos embodies an 'ideological testimonial', promising empowerment thorough the revelation of what is 'really' happening, giving things their 'true' name, assigning them to the proper moral category and negating their power so that we are free to work on and heal ourselves.

This rhetoric is characteristic of the medium through which it is articulated. YouTube requires content providers to develop a brand and to cultivate a very specific relationship

with audiences. It invites individual identification of viewers with content providers in an ongoing, remunerative relationship, intensifying a mediatised celebrity logic formed before the Internet. YouTubers of all kinds perform a 'stylised individuality' around which there form affective 'fan' communities. Apparent in make-up artists, entertainment reviewers and pranksters, this is also central to political YouTube where producers appear as special individuals with whom we may develop a personal relationship, and who can reveal to us information, skills and a truth which will aid us in our quest for self-improvement. Watson's version of this is indicative of what Jodi Dean has called a 'political-medialogical setting' characterised by 'dissensus, incredulity, and competing conceptions of reality' (Dean, 2009: 147). The liberal–democratic commonplace that information and publicity empowers and enables publics is amplified in a particular way by commercial technoculture for which more information is always the answer to any question (Dean, 2001: 624) giving rise to 'searching, suspicious subjects ever clicking for more information, ever drawn to uncover the secret and find out for themselves' (Dean, 2001: 625). What we learn from analysing Watson, then, is how this may take specific political–ideological forms in a populist style expressed by political actors who claim authority as interpreters of texts and events able to show what they 'really' mean and what is 'really' going on. In this sense, and in Weberian language, the rhetorically cultivated authority of a YouTuber such as Watson derives not from a formal structure (rational-legal or traditional) but from his personality and presentation as a self-creating individual who rejects established forms of authority (political, journalistic, scientific and so on). His is a charismatic authority reliant on continued trust in the revelations presented and which, as Weber put it, promise to 'effect a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm'.[2] That reorientation comes not from the acceptance of a truth tested in the light of public reason but from the revelation of falsehood, recognised by individuals for whom it is a route to self-knowledge.

Conclusion

Understanding the ways in which the Internet is changing our politics certainly requires investigation of its effects on news, campaigning and political organisation. It also requires qualitative investigation of how, as a means of communication, it reshapes and reconstitutes the forms taken by political–rhetorical discourse and how that in turn reorganises political ideologies and the relationships of adherents to them. Platforms for new kinds of political participant previously unable to reach large audiences expand the range of publicly effective political ideologies bringing what were extremes into the mainstream. But in changing how these are communicated, the platforms also reorganise the content and style of political ideas, how they appeal to potential followers and how the latter identify with them. Such changes have not emerged out of nowhere and while constituted by the technology are not determined by it. The Internet intensifies a focus on individualised political personality, already characteristic of mediatised political culture (perhaps of culture in general) in which rhetorical justification rests on the performance of a social type, an ethos, and claims about self. The present article has investigated one example of this from one online platform. There are many more platforms and many other ideological entrepreneurs populating this new territory. It awaits and demands further exploration and mapping.

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Notes

1. There is also evidence of direct funding of political channels by, for example, the Koch brothers (Lewis, 2018: 18).
2. In this context, it is interesting to note that Weber observed that when it comes to money, 'those to whom the charisma is addressed provide honorific gifts, donations, or other voluntary contributions' often in return for special access to the leader; this is exactly what one obtains from a Patreon subscription: membership of an insider community, behind the scenes access and the right to 'Ask Me Anything'.

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