

**Skeptical Communities:
The Participatory Dynamics of Political Fandom**

Michelle Stewart, University of Quebec, Canada
Maxime Bérubé, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Canada
Sklaerenn Le Gallo, Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada

Résumé:

Depuis le début de la pandémie de COVID-19, nous avons observé la manière dont les microcélébrités politiques de la sphère informationnelle québécoise font circuler et répondent à la désinformation afin de créer et de maintenir une communauté. Les possibilités offertes par les plateformes encourageant le développement et le maintien de relations multidirectionnelles qui compliquent les modèles unidirectionnels d'influence ou de manipulation. Nous abordons ces processus épistémologiques à travers le prisme de la propagande participative (Wanless & Berk, 2017, 2019) et du fandom politique (Reinhard et al., 2021). En analysant le contenu et des commentaires de vidéos affichées sur YouTube par des influenceurs québécois contre le masque, la vaccination et les mesures sanitaires, nous étudions une construction identitaire en opposition aux sources officielles : les membres de la communauté sont des éveillés (éveillés à la vérité), par opposition aux endormis (ceux qui sont endormis ou manipulés). Grâce à des analyses qualitatives, cette étude met en lumière la manière dont le travail des micro-influenceurs crée des opportunités pour la formation d'une identité communautaire basée sur un affect négatif et une posture épistémologique de scepticisme.

Keywords: Participatory Propaganda; Microcelebrity; Political Fandom; Alternative Influence Networks; Online Communities; Affect and Ideology.

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Introduction

Consider a person who, having read a post containing disinformation amplified by a social bot, arrives at a protest to “Save the Children” from a cabal of pedophilic Democrats (QAnon’s core mythology). That person believes their motivations to be authentic. Participation in this protest then strengthens this person’s commitment to the cause.ⁱ They listen to more live videos, share partisan community information in an attempt to convince others and vote or act . . . in accordance with these felt principles. From whence flows the “influence”? What do we learn if we dismiss this person as a victim of propaganda? Are causes networked or individual? Are the solutions computational or human? Wanless and Berk’s (2017) notion of “participatory propaganda” attempts to address this complex flow of influence in the current media ecosystem. They stress that studies of computational propaganda,ⁱⁱ which focus on automated and machine-learning-enhanced influence campaigns, will only yield part of the picture: “[T]he true effects and magnitude of successful influencing of large audiences in the digital age can only be understood if target audiences are perceived not only as ‘objects’ of influence, but as ‘subjects’ of persuasive communications as well” (Wanless & Berk, 2017: 2).

We pursue these reflections by analyzing how political microcelebrities in the Quebec informational sphere circulate and respond to disinformation. Through the lens of participatory propaganda (Wanless & Berk, 2017, 2019) and political fandom (Reinhard et al., 2021), we address how social media platform affordances encourage the development and maintenance of multi-directional relationships of influence. To add to an understanding of the impact of coordinated campaigns of influence, we set our sights on the murkier side of “participatory propaganda”: participation. In short, how do small communities of usersⁱⁱⁱ engage highly partisan information, including disinformation and metapolitical influence campaigns? Our study addresses this question by examining the ways in which anti-mask themes are appropriated and developed between Quebec-based microcelebrities’ YouTube videos and their comments section.

Participatory Propaganda

Wanless and Berk (2017; 2019) erect a model that accounts for the participatory nature of propaganda. In their formulation,

Participatory propaganda moves beyond a traditional, unidirectional “one-to-many” form of communication, to a “one-to-many-to-many more” form where each “target” of influence (an individual or group which is the object of persuasion) can in theory become the new “originator” (subject) of content production and distribution, spreading persuasive messaging to others in a “snowball” effect. The original propaganda message triggers, reinforces, or exacerbates preexisting sentiments associated with the message in a way that prompts the consumer to actively engage in its propagation through available social networks, both on and off-line.

(Wanless & Berk, 2017: 6)

The notion of participatory propaganda adds to a larger literature that attends to computational propaganda, a range of internet-based disinformation campaigns (Faris et al. 2017; Wooley and

Howard 2017). Central to their account of participation, Wanless and Berk (2017) emphasize that individual users interact with computational propaganda in ways that render such campaigns more potent: “Participatory propaganda offers the ability to truly dominate the information space through volume of messaging, delivered through a mix of real people and automated accounts, effectively making it difficult to discern where fake ends and authenticity begins” (2017: 6). As state actors continue to try to intervene in electoral systems and to influence public opinion, the study of computational propaganda remains important, though outright disinformation campaigns constitute only a piece of the problem. There is now ample evidence that Russia’s Internet Resource Agency attempted to polarize American voters, particularly targeting African-American voters.^{iv}

For these reasons, our research suggests both the urgency and difficulty of assessing more diffuse forms of cultural influence. Individual users continue to be vulnerable to cleverly masked “inauthentic” activity. However, the issue is not a simple one. Wanless and Berk (2017; 2019) are particularly attentive to the role of individual actions in contributing to the propagation and popularity of disinformation. Crucial in their account is the interaction of 1) “inauthentic” activity, 2) platform structures and policies, and 3) user behavior:

“Standard” computational propaganda by algorithm, social bots, intentional manipulation of searchable content and ranking mechanisms.

Platform structures and policies (affordances, platform culture, and community standards).

User behavior – susceptibility to emotional content, informational practices (getting news from closed social circles, search strategies [cf. Tripodi 2018]).

As indicated above, these three network “actors” interact constantly and in complex ways. While Wanless and Berk (2017) update the propaganda model by pointing to user participation, to our taste, they do not emphasize enough how blurry the lines between “inauthentic” and “authentic” online actors have become. Put more directly, where does “influence” begin and political agency end or vice versa? Their definition of participatory propaganda retains a sense of the importance of intent and manipulation. We agree that the intent to manipulate and persuade forms an important piece of these dynamics, but our previous analyses (Stewart et al. 2023) identify equally important, multidirectional interactions between political culture and online culture—culture at once technical and symbolic—including platform affordances and community identity. Thus, our research propaganda puts more emphasis on teasing out the complex dynamics of participation. Further, whereas the intentions of individual actors might elude easy (or convincing) analysis, security experts and white-hat hackers have become increasingly effective at tracing the origins of computational propaganda.

For example, in the lead up to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, a conspiracy theory regarding the existence of “biolabs” circulated online. The theory “that the U.S. was developing and plotting to release a bioweapon or potentially another coronavirus from “biolabs” throughout Ukraine” (Collins & Collier, 2022). The false “biolabs” campaign is a good example of how computational propaganda becomes participatory propaganda, as security analysts were not only able to trace the likely origin of the disinformation, but also to chart its progress across the web, “The post largely sat idle for days....But on Feb. 24, the day Russia

began its invasion, the number of posts about biolabs on English-language far-right websites skyrocketed into the hundreds and only grew in the days after” (Collins & Collier, 2022). Whereas the original intent of the campaign was fairly transparent, the life-cycle of the biolabs disinformation campaign underscores the ways in which an online disinformation campaign was taken up by far-right news outlets (both online and legacy) and was then reframed to fit national narratives (pro-Putin, anti-Biden) and already popular conspiracy theories (regarding biolabs and the coronavirus), as Collins and Collier (2022) document. As such an example indicates, we need research that attends to the origins and circulation of disinformation campaigns, but also a fuller understanding of the cultural dynamics of the “participatory” dimension of participatory propaganda, particularly when that participation emerges from the complex interaction of political culture and popular culture online and in the larger public sphere.

“Participation” traverses multiple cultural and technological spaces that can overlap and conflict—echoing and amplifying some points of view while contradicting others. As Benkler et al.’s (2018) research indicates, users’ informational habits are reinforced and further polarized by a profound disequilibrium within the larger media sphere.^v Certain users-citizens can very “authentically” believe their sources to be reliable and not encounter any information to the contrary.^{vi}

Users still seek different kinds of information from different platforms and mediums—the “hybrid media system” described by Chadwick (2017)—but savvy actors can and do manipulate the flow of information between different parts of the media sphere (Maly, 2020). Likewise, in assessing the “existence of a systematic and coordinated attempt to influence the U.S. voters to support the Trump campaign,” Wanless and Berk (2017) note the importance of a “degree of engagement and inter-connectivity, both inside the network and with supportive media” that contributes to the strength of their model of participatory propaganda (2017: 32). Wanless and Berk (2017) and Maly (2020) stress the workings of strategic influence campaigns and coordinated culture wars, called “metapolitical” by Maly (2020) and influence-peddling by Wanless and Berk (2017).

Political Microcelebrity

There have been relatively few studies of microcelebrity^{vii} as a political form, though the increasing visibility of far-right online activity during the pandemic has begun to add greatly to the literature. Maly’s (2020) excellent scholarship on “metapolitical influencers” outlines the centrality of culture wars for the web stars of the far right. His work lays bare the strategic mobilization of platform affordances by far-right influencers and groups in order to shift the larger cultural dialogue more to the right. Rebecca Lewis’s (2018; 2020; 2021) and Alice Marwick’s (2021) seminal work highlights what they identify as the reactionary form of political microcelebrity.

Profit models, monetization frameworks for microcelebrities, and the affective marketing of the attention economy all bolster reactionary cultural positions even amongst microcelebrities who do not identify as right-wing. Lewis (2018; 2020), Lewis et al. (2021), Marwick (2021), Askanius (2021), and Maly (2020) detail the ways in which platform affordances available to microcelebrities can be marshaled by far-right political actors. Lewis’s work (2018) suggests that

platform cultures built around “credibility,” “relatability,” and “authenticity” encourage informational practices that are reactionary in their cultishness. Influencers signal the authenticity of their brand in opposition to official sources and formats. In the process, they mobilize a range of resistance that flows along a spectrum from suspicion to the outright demonization of legacy media, politicians, experts, academics, and government institutions more generally. Lewis’s thesis is not determinist; rather, she argues, the “political tools and identity markers” of microcelebrity conflate self-promotion with a defensive posture that demands constant rebranding as “anti-mainstream” (Lewis, 2020). In these ways, microcelebrity feeds into populist politics, themselves not necessarily reactionary, but conducive to current far-right strains of populism and, in particular, Trumpism (Lewis, 2020).

In their study of the affective, epistemological, and ideological currents that characterize contemporary populism, Capelos et al. (2021) identify dynamics that resemble those Lewis detected in political microcelebrity:

the distrust and disillusionment expressed towards institutions of democracy, the reluctance or diminished capacity to engage with facts, the increase in the prevalence of anti-immigration, anti-science and anti-elite sentiments, the rise in spiteful and intolerant antagonisms.

(Capelos et al. 2021: 186)

Antagonism, grievance, and resentment feature prominently in both. Lewis et al. (2021) and Marwick (2021) offer case studies that trace the ways in which microcelebrities, and their audiences work together to build narratives, create community identity, frame outsiders, and reinforce ways of knowing the world that resist factual correction. Our prior research (Stewart et al., 2023) suggests that shared affect attracts audiences whom, together, develop interpretive practices which themselves become the basis of community identity. These oppositional practices (antagonistic epistemologies) distinguish themselves in opposition to official government, media, or medical experts.

Multidirectional Influence

We follow these scholars in taking the interaction of microcelebrities, their audiences, political culture, and online forms as a critical focus of study. Indeed, we understand social media to be participating in larger cultural and political shifts, shifts that might be better understood through the lens of cultural hegemony, bids to move the cultural consensus to support more radical politics. The European New Right^{viii} has been direct if not transparent in its appeal to the need for metapolitics – a Gramscian culture war to win hearts and minds, to dominate the cultural narrative (Marcy & D’Erman, 2019).

Far-right influencers make concerted efforts to control the cultural narrative and to help it resonate across media platforms (Golebiewski & boyd, 2019; Donovan & Friedberg, 2019). Illuminating case studies by Maly (2020) and Askanius (2021) detail the tactics of savvy far-right trolls pushing various memes and slogans of the cultural wars to circulate and trend, demonstrating the ways in which these efforts succeed in influencing the news produced by legacy media and consolidating cultural views favorable to far-right politics. These processes

constitute one direction of the informational flow. As Stuart Hall (2018) argued, however, cultural hegemony is won from above and below; the struggle for political power emerges from the confrontation of ideas in continuous, multidirectional tension. And perhaps, spatial metaphors of “above and below” do not capture the complexity and unpredictability of contemporary flows of influence.

Political and cultural leaders can be and sometimes must be swayed by the popular ideas percolating from “below,” from contemporary popular culture (in this case, political influencers or microcelebrities). Moreover, political influencers or microcelebrities are also influenced by their own audiences, further complicating uni- or bi-directional imaginations of influence. In Canada, it remains to be seen how the Conservative Party will respond to populist challenges from the People’s Party and the at once astroturfed (“inauthentic”) and “authentic” protest that was the Truckers’ Convoy.^{ix} We argue that understanding political influence in terms of authenticity and intentionality might identify the most egregious disinformation campaigns but will ultimately fail to capture the multidirectional dynamics of political conversations online.

We would argue that the notion of participatory propaganda helps illuminate an important piece of this puzzle, while the field of Cultural Studies offers approaches to fandom and reception that afford crucial insight into the dynamics of influence and participation. In sum, the notion of political microcelebrity adds to the picture of how participatory propaganda might work, but additional study of political fandom stands to strengthen an understanding of the multidirectionality of the political culture that forms around microcelebrities.

Political Fandom and Affect

Reinhard et al.’s (2021) work on QAnon as a form of political fandom elucidates the subcultural and affective dynamics of political subcultures online, emphasizing the active role of audiences in these processes. In their study of “Fans of Q,” Reinhard et al. (2021) detail how, much like other fans, political fans produce shared meaning and build community via cultural texts (popular and political). In commenting upon, improvising upon and even transforming proprietary content in unexpected ways, fans “own” cultural texts, create individual and group identities around the construction, interpretation, and sharing of characters, stories, symbols. Both the participatory and interpretative nature of these activities work to consolidate community and to demarcate political identities (Reinhard et al. 2021: 7).

The conspiracist subculture of QAnon might represent an extreme form of political fandom, but the interlocking nature of ideology and affect identified by Reinhard et al (2021) describes less extreme communities as well. In a special issue of *Television and Media Studies* on reactionary fandom, Mel Stanfill (2020) examines the intersection of reactionary politics, toxic fandom (Stanfill in Proctor et al., 2018), and the cultivation of community around political figures and ideological campaigns. Indeed, as Proctor and Kies (2018) and Blodgett (2019) suggest, while fan communities have never necessarily been progressive, the emergence of the Alt-right signals the potency of reactionary and toxic fandoms in fueling larger culture wars.^x

The importance of mobilizing affect and ideology in tandem is apparent in the metapolitical campaigns studied by Maly (2020). Such campaigns bring right-wing talking points

into as many mainstream forums as possible, offering potent affective and identity frames for current events, couching far-right views in terms that are more palatable to mainstream readers, echoing contemporary grievance politics, naming antagonists and protagonists, and skirting content moderation policies and community standards. Similarly, Askanius (2021) parses the use of memes and humor for persuasion. These tactics are at once strategic, semiotic, and affective. Coded language helps avoid the prying eyes of outsiders and also cements senses of belonging, as does being “in” on the joke at the expense of opponents.

The strength of this work is that it demonstrates the importance of shared affect and epistemologies in the construction of political fandom. It is the shared focus upon and elaboration of an “object of affection” that furnishes the subject matter and ritual life of the fan culture:

As with popular culture fandoms, understanding the QAnon community as political fandom means focusing on the affection driving their engagement with the objects and each other. What start as diverse beliefs can converge as a communal identity through how they feel about and perceive the world and their role in it.

(Reinhard et al.: 12)

In many online communities, the dominant affect is more constant than the ideological objects around which communities initially formed. To wit, Reinhard et al. (2021) note the capacity of conspiracy theorists (Q fans) to reintegrate plot twists or political developments into the lore of the movement (2021: 12). Communities do form around objects of *fannish* devotion. But they also propose a range of shifting objects that serve to reinforce shared affect. For QAnon, Reinhard et al. identify fear as “the central motive for participation” (2021: 12). Toxic fandom plays upon and produces apocalyptic thinking, as well as a sense of being left behind or betrayed by elites (Reinhard et al.: 13). Fear, anger, sadness (loss of status), grievance, and suspicion of official sources work together in delineating the frontier of in-group and out-group (Al-Rawi, 2021). Together, these affective currents support specific interpretive practices and stoke populist skepticism without necessarily anchoring adherents to a clear political program or easily defined political ideology “Skeptical communities” bond over a sense of active resistance to the “false” or “fake” information flowing from sources deemed illegitimate by the community.

For this reason, attention to the dynamics of political fandom requires an understanding of the networked production of “shared moral communities” (Lewis et al.: 13) that justify and animate political participation online. Seeing participatory propaganda through the lens of political fandom helps explain the dynamics through which objects of “repulsion” (hatred and exclusion) and skepticism encourage participation and consolidate community identity.^{xi} The shared object of affection of classical fandom might be a “point of entry” for participation, but as Reinhard et al (2021) clarify, subcultural identity also takes shapes in contradistinction to outsiders: the more the community can be seen as possessing that “secret, shared knowledge” (Hebdige, 2012), the stronger its sense of community.^{xii}

To return to the discussion at the beginning of the article, this model of political fandom helps illuminate the multidirectional workings of influence in the current political landscape – online and offline. Intentional and malicious actors do succeed in gaining either the unwitting or

conscious participation of average users.^{xiii} Charting the interplay of ideology and affect in political fandom deepens our understanding of this participation. Thus we would stress that political fandom adds a great deal to a participatory propaganda model by examining the ways in which networked political fandoms produce meaning in a broader cultural and political field.^{xiv}

To summarize, rather than see influence in terms of the unidirectional effects of political and cultural strategy or savvy alt-right machinations online, we follow Lewis, Marwick, Reinhard et al. in identifying more multidirectional flows establishing subcultural values and informational practices across media forms. Psychological research has indicated (sub)cultural fluency affects reasoning, allowing some information to feel more “familiar” via the linking of affect to repeated narratives and to collective identity (Oyserman & Dawson, 2021; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Affect, in this constellation of “networked subjectivity” occupies an important place (Boler & Davis, 2018).^{xv}

Boler and Davis (2018) follow Sara Ahmed’s notion of “affective economies” that “illustrate how some affects circulate, and ‘stick’ to some bodies, yet slide off of others (Ahmed, 2004)” (Boler & Davis 2018: 78). Our study points to the production and circulation of shared affective narratives that repetitively pin feelings to bodies, thus cueing community members to the feelings “we” *should* have towards policies and others and demarcating political identities in the process.^{xvi} These processes are dynamic and repetitive. Affect might “stick,” but it is not permanent. Online fan studies attend to the “interface of affect and culture” (Boler & Davis 2018: 80) by addressing the ways in which netizens navigate platform affordances in the production of online communities. Participation in these spaces develops shared narratives that cue feelings towards—and interpretations of—information, events, policies, people across social networks (on and offline). It might be that the centrality of affect in fandom risks veering into “toxic fandom” by virtue of the strength of those bonds formed in participation. This study attends to the production and circulation of affective narratives in the limited “community” spaces that form around microcelebrities.

We strive to develop a method that can attend to the interworking of strategy, structure, and affect—seeing active audiences as both influenced and influencing. Campaigns of manipulation do find their targets. These “targets” are not necessarily dupes, but often the curious or those actively seeking community. The challenge before us to understand networks of multidirectional influence, to rethink influence as a fully social process engaging and conditioning epistemological practices (knowledge seeking) and tying it to identity construction – social and political, ideological and affective.

Methodology

Based on a six-month mixed method observation of Quebec influencers militating against public health measures in response to COVID-19, we note the importance of participatory propaganda and believe that mobilizing studies of political microcelebrity and fandom—with their attention to the centrality of affect and the “active” consumer of information—will contribute greatly to deepening our understanding of dynamics of networked influence.

In the current study, we focus upon the YouTube channel of one of the best-known online influencers in the Quebec-based movement against mask, vaccination, and health measures. Daniel Pilon, whose YouTube channel was previously known more for his videos dealing with tax issues and financial advice for Quebecers, enjoyed a measurable increase in views and followers over the course of the pandemic. Pilon regularly discusses the pandemic from April 2020^{xvii} and, in the months that followed, started producing videos criticizing pandemic measures with clear references to conspiracy theories. Based on the participatory dynamics noted in a previous study (Stewart et al., 2023), we chose Pilon's presence on YouTube to shed light on the multi-directional nature of influence between political microcelebrities and their audiences.

#	Video ID	Title	Upload date	Views	Comments
1	EiBodOrKwv0	Médias : La propagation de la haine	2020-09-01	19288	456
2	UlcxMu0VFAU	Vendredi complotiste	2020-09-05	9168	390
3	Ubup74ju5Z4	Le chemin le plus facile...	2020-09-10	12614	356
4	Z3OgBUWUVDk	Covid au Qc : La Réalité	2020-09-11	9970	284
5	dHa5a3pIzTQ	Un monde faux et fou	2020-09-22	18235	478
6	rN22LC_fXsU	Poursuite pour crime contre l'humanité	2020-10-06	30570	595
7	tPp8DwVq4d4	Un peu plus sur Arruda...	2020-10-13	28053	460
8	KdWp4hHV4CY	Arruda et la ligne	2020-10-15	21368	408
9	H34DiNP_gPg	Qui se ressemble s'assemble ...	2020-10-24	14413	273
10	J_04TYhSS4A	Convoi Montréal Québec	2020-10-24	26279	475
11	G5QKMNGIDiA	Le VACCIN et son contenu + Les vraies stats	2020-10-27	16311	580
12	IjLmPwOJLBY	Test Covid : Le boutte du boutte + l'opposition contrôlée	2020-10-30	17888	472

Table I: Description of the corpus (Sept. 1st, 2020 and Oct. 30th 2020).

In order to do this, we have collected transcripts and comments for the 12 YouTube videos Pilon produced from September 1st, 2020, to October 30th 2020 (see Table I).^{xviii} The period selected corresponds to a change in rhetoric for Pilon, as pandemic health measures became the focal points of his live video presentations. This period also coincides with the Quebec government's enactment of a new system of colors (green, yellow, orange, and red) in order to manage the pandemic health crisis in Quebec. Each color indicates specific health measures accompanied by specific public restrictions once a certain threshold of cases has been reached. This new configuration of rules seemed to encourage Pilon to renew his discourse against public health measures and, ultimately, constituted fertile ground for the participative construction of anti-governmental discourse more generally.

We compare the themes discussed in these comment threads to the themes discussed in the videos themselves. For each video, we conducted qualitative thematic analysis, based on an inductive approach. In order to establish pertinent categories of analysis and to elaborate a model of political fandom and participatory propaganda, we did an exploratory coding of three of Pilon's video transcripts and, separately, coded the comments attached to those videos. We had

different coders attached to each corpus in order to establish the complete range of issues and sentiments emerging between Pilon and his audience. After verifying the consistency and pertinence of codes produced by each coder, we identified six large categories of analysis: sentiment (affect), community reinforcement, rhetorical structure (argumentative styles and tactics), informational practices (sharing of information), mistrust towards institutions, and conspiracy theories (specifically, the mobilization of pre-existing conspiracy theories).

We then proceeded with the coding of the rest of the corpus working from the principle that a successful model for detecting multidirectional influence must identify, shared themes, shared sentiments, shared objects of affection, repulsion, and grievance between the themes discussed by Pilon and the themes of the comment threads as well as conversations emerging between commenters. We looked to identify patterns of informational sharing: what sources are mobilized, which experts are cited most frequently, which are most often excoriated. We analyzed the corpus to determine if it is possible to identify themes, sentiments, interpretative frames, and informational practices taking shape between community members and between celebrities and their followings. Who introduces new information, new language, new memes/hashtags (symbolization), new frames (interpretive / emotional) and how do these circulate and gain traction? Is the influencer influenced? How are the boundaries of identity set and what is the role of sentiment in these processes? How do shared sentiments evolve between influencers and audiences and how do they develop over time?

Results and Analysis

Overall, both the videos and the comments reflect and encourage mistrust in institutions.^{xix} We also note the importance of “sharing information”, a theme which includes the sharing of alternative sources of information, the denunciation of censored stories, as well as the sharing of personal anecdotes and experience. Pilon and many of his viewers also develop an increasing penchant for conspiracy theories, merging QAnon themes, antivax themes, and conspiracy theories about the world government and the World Economic Forum that have a populist, anti-elitist sensibility and are also popular in QAnon circles. We also note that Pilon consistently uses his videos to spread the message regarding protests and to promote the work of other influencers in the Quebec Alternate Information Network (QC-AIN).

While we expected to see a more direct relationship between the themes developed in Pilon’s videos and the kinds of conversations emerging in the comments, we found interesting points of divergence in the sub-codes. Of the three most prevalent themes and informational practices noted above, Pilon seems to focus more on expressing his distrust in institutions than his audience. Commenters spend more time-sharing personal stories and alternate sources of information. Additionally, the commenters mobilize more conspiracy theories than Pilon, whose discourse tends more towards populist themes than his audience’s.

Pilon’s efforts to support this network of alternative information includes his own self-promotion and his reinforcement of the group’s identity in distinction to the “sleeping masses.” Commenters also contribute to a sense of group identity, but more through the mobilization of sentiment. This reinforcement of the group’s identity is therefore combined with the sharing of personal opinions, feelings and feedback from the audience. Such interactive relationships

between microcelebrities and their network of peers contributes to the crystallization of beliefs on both sides of the spectrum. Previous studies have also shown that this kind of exchange between like-minded peers acts as an influential source of reinforcement and amplification of radical belief systems (Bérubé et al, 2019). In the current study, this reinforcement emerges between the comments of the audience as they share and establish connections between various conspiracy theories.

Pilon appears to mobilize a larger palette of sentiments than his commenters. In order of prevalence, he expresses anger and frustration, disapproval, solidarity and victimisation. Whereas his commenters give more approbation, followed by disapproval, solidarity, sadness and fear. On the whole, the mobilization of sentiment--affective argumentation--is more prevalent in the comments. This difference also emerges under the “argument structure” theme. While the themes are fairly diverse for both Pilon and the commenters, one notes a slightly greater emphasis on populist arguments (calling Canadian leaders’ dictators) in Pilon’s videos, while comments descend more readily into insults and sarcasm.

What emerges in the comparison of Pilon’s themes, argumentative style, and sentiments is a microcelebrity working to maintain his own celebrity and to establish the importance of his work in building a movement that sees itself as the resistance (to the dominant narrative, to the health measures, to the government in office. While social media provide the potential for direct communication, Pilon’s gestures towards his audience are more performative than sincere. He devotes some time at the beginning of each video to reading the names of viewers as they log on to his live streams, and he occasionally reads audience mail or news items (almost invariably critical) at the end of a video presentation. However, both of these gestures serve to support his identity, as accessible on the one hand and as embattled on the other. Much like the illusory promise of direct exchange between populist leaders and their audiences, Pilon’s videos do not offer direct interaction or debate. However, he does focus on movement building, mobilizing audiences for various protests, and praising other influencers in the QC-AIC. These moves might be seen as generally supporting his brand -- connecting himself to other microcelebrities that might be of interest to his viewers and performing his identity as accessible, while not directly engaging with his audience.

And although this study does not give any direct evidence of the dynamics “participatory propaganda” at work, it does point to the different uses of the encounter between microcelebrity and audience. While the videos and the comments treat similar themes with similar affects, they mobilize different argument styles and emphasize different themes and feelings towards different ends. The dynamics of political fandom seem to be a better descriptor of how the comments take shape. Commenters’ higher levels of approbation stem from, in fact, approving comments aimed at the microcelebrity. Comments cheer Pilon as their champion and express great affection for him,^{xx} then comments turn more negative, emphasizing disapproval of government and the imposed pandemic health measures and doing so via insults and sarcasm. Pilon, for his part, references his community mostly as a reflection of his own popularity (very often marking new thresholds of followers) and distinction.

With Pilon’s most popular videos, critics do address or mock the fallacious arguments and disinformation frequently proffered by Pilon’s freewheeling performances, but mostly the

comments section is “owned” by his fans, who use the videos to express themselves personally (via anecdotes) and emotionally (insults and sarcasm). Whereas Pilon mobilizes themes of victimisation in self-serving and self-important ways, suggesting that he is a target because he is a maverick truth-teller for the resistance, his commenters use tropes of solidarity and victimisation more existentially. They express solidarity for the group via their shared viewing of Pilon’s videos and express – in strong emotional terms – their status in relation to existential threats: public health and other government officials.

Limits of the Research

In addition to the usual subjective limits of qualitative coding, analysis of microcelebrity perhaps requires a method tailored specifically towards an analysis of body language and other aspects of performative style. Pilon, in particular, does a great number of impressions, staging imagined encounters and dialogues between himself, political leaders, and journalists. These are quite popular with his viewers. Further, while the dynamics of participatory propaganda are not directly in evidence between Pilon’s videos and his commenters, they might be more visible via socio-semantic analyses of platforms that foster more equal exchanges (e.g., Twitter, Reddit).

Conclusion

Nonetheless, the dynamics of political fandom and political microcelebrity do emerge between Pilon and his audience. Our results indicate the “use” of Pilon’s presentation for the production of group solidarity around strong emotional objects. Research on toxic and political fandom points to the ways in which objects of political affection work in tandem with objects of political hatred. But we believe affect explains an important piece of overlapping social and political dynamics. Shared objects of political affect and political repulsion matter as much in the formulation of these communities as the network structures (old and new media) and informational practices that limit the content and form of knowledge and feeling in one community (of political fans) vs. another. As scholar Daniel Kreiss argues (2018), media are “less about ‘information’ than ‘family.’ The metaphor is telling. A family provides a sense of identity, place, and belonging; emotional, social, and cultural support and security; and gives rise to political and social affiliations and beliefs” (2018: 94).

Indeed, despite the fact that there are few direct exchanges of opinion between commenters and between commenters and Pilon, what does seem to circulate is an affirmation of argumentative style, or rather, an epistemological posture (what Marwick & Partin [2022] identify as “populist expertise”^{xxi} in QAnon circles) of skepticism suffused with negative affect, particularly, mocking disdain for those who do not see the “real” truth shared in these counterpublic spaces. Commenters use the space created by each video to reinforce shared objects of skepticism—official sources, mainstream media, government officials. Aside from the approval heaped upon Pilon (self-anointed victim and outlaw), negative sentiment—disapproval, sadness, and fear—serve as the grounds upon which community solidarity is expressed.

Paying attention to the dynamics of political fandom elucidates how commenters build a sense of shared identity upon specific negative sentiments and oppositional informational practices. This interlacing of identity, affect, and ideology points to the difficulty of finding

political solutions that fail to address the relationship *between* community identity and resistance to mainstream sources of expertise. In their study of QAnon, Marwick & Partin (2022) stress “the politically ambivalent nature of participatory culture and argue that baking [QAnon’s interpretative fan practices] casts doubt on critical thinking or media literacy as solutions to ‘post-truth’ dilemmas like hyper-partisan media and disinformation” (2022: 1). Successful approaches must go beyond debunking and beyond ideology in order to address the negative affect and epistemological posture of doubt that reinforces the sense of solidarity elaborated by practices of political fandom.

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About the Authors

Dr. Michelle Stewart is a professor in the Dept. of Social and Public Communication at the University of Quebec, Montreal. With Pam Wilson, she is co-editor of *Global Indigenous Media* (Duke UP, 2008). Her publications have appeared in various film and media journals, including *JumpCut*, *TOPIA*, and *Film Quarterly*. She has been a Fulbright Scholar, Kempner Distinguished Professor at Purchase, a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Marseille (2013-2014), and a Visiting Professor at the University of Montreal (2015-2016). Her work addresses digital heritage and digital cinema, in particular, the ways in which Internet art and culture complicate our expectations and standards for self and cultural representation. She is currently the principal investigator for the cross-national study: “Viral Populism: The Amplification of Right-Wing Extremism Online” (SSHRC/ Canadian Heritage 2021-2024).

Dr. Maxime Bérubé is an assistant professor at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (UQTR) and a UQTR Research Chair in Digital Forensic Science. His research interests focus on digital data identification, processing, and interpretation, mainly regarding issues related to terrorism, extremism, propaganda and national security. In addition to improving our understanding of criminal/delinquent behavior through the study of digital traces, his research aims to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of investigative practices when massive amounts of data are involved, as well as the management of digital data in the context of legal proceedings. Maxime is also a lead member of the Open-Source Analysis, Research and Development Group (GARDES0), and a regular researcher of the International Centre for Comparative Criminology.

Dr. Sklaerenn Le Gallo is a post-doctoral fellow and a lecturer at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Her research interests focus on critical epistemologies in intercultural communication and on how specific political identities are constructed, maintained, and confronted in Quebec’s “conspiverse”. Her focus on far right and populist discourses in France and Quebec sheds light on the complex phenomenon of the normalization and acceptance of discourse that used to be left on the fringe of the public sphere.

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Footnotes:

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- ⁱ Vidino et al.'s (2021) analysis of arrest reports following the January 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol categorized the cases against 257 participants as a mix of individual "inspired believers" (55%), 'organized clusters' (32%) of affinity groups (family, friends, co-workers "inspired to participate in the siege despite lack of membership in a formally organized [extremist] group"), and more organized 'militant networks' (13%)" (p. 18). This breakdown led some researchers to fear that those "inspired" individuals caught up in the fervor of the moment would be radicalized by the experience (Holt, 2022).
- ⁱⁱ Definitions of propaganda and disinformation stress the intentional nature of campaigns to persuade or mislead, especially by governments or for political purposes. Wooley and Howard (2017) in their global survey of computational propaganda define it as "the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks" (p. 3) and "Computational propaganda involves learning from and mimicking real people so as to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of platforms and device networks" (p. 7).
- ⁱⁱⁱ By small communities, we are referring to the standard definition of an influencer with a community of fewer than 100,000 followers. See note vii for more detail.
- ^{iv} <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/12/17/18145075/russia-facebook-twitter-internet-research-agency-race>. It remains difficult to quantify the success of such campaigns. For example, see Bail et al. (2020).
- ^v Wanless and Berk (2017) also identify this disequilibrium: "In short, the conservative-leaning media network is more of an ecosystem that stretches beyond news outlet borders, blending into each other and pages beyond just media and journalists, into communities" (p. 32).
- ^{vi} In a capitalist news market, this selective information diet is understood as a matter of consumer choice and agency. It is worth mentioning the historical and strategic organization of this landscape by powerful actors (Fox news in the U.S. [Peck, 2019], think tanks) and that this imbalance is a pronounced feature of the American media ecosystem. Consumers continue to turn to legacy and 'new' media options to inform themselves.
- ^{vii} We use the terms microcelebrity and micro-influencer interchangeably. Both refer to an online personality that has a small following, generally understood to fall between 10,000 and 100,000 with different theorists placing the bar at different thresholds for different platforms. Most significantly for our study, "microcelebrity" implies that a small community of fans has developed around and is cultivated by the person managing the account (Marwick et boyd, 2011). The self-presentation of the microcelebrity as authentic, relatable and accessible aids in the management of intimacy, interest, and community, which we discuss below.
- ^{viii} As is the case with the American Alt-right.
- ^{ix} 'Astroturfing' means a coordinated and often well-funded campaign made to look like a spontaneous groundswell of action by average citizens. Astroturf is understood to be synthetic, directed from above and inauthentic vs. the authenticity of grassroots activism. Grassroots activism is an expression the sovereignty of the people, whereas astroturfing refers to manipulated faux activism. With social media, the lines becomes blurred, as ordinary people take up causes coordinated by political action committees linked to parties or official government accounts, as in the case of recent disinformation from Russian state media.
- ^x Proctor and Kies (2018) question the eagerness of legacy media in deeming certain fan practices "toxic" and point to incidents in which alt-right tricksters exploited credulous journalists' desire to portray them as such to the wider public. Metaphors of toxicity and contagion do not quite capture the larger hegemonic, counterhegemonic and reactionary interactions that are more significant to the contexts we

are describing. Proctor and Kies (2018) also note the interactions of pop culture, fans and broader culture wars that take shape across a variety of media, old and new: “discourses surrounding ‘toxic’ fans, PC-inflected ‘message’ culture, and the rise of the radical right in online quarters cannot be viewed reductively as comprising distinct publics. Instead, we should understand these phenomena as part of a broader matrix comprised of overlapping discourses, utterances, and ‘counter-publics’ (Fraser, 1990; Butsch, 2008)” (p. 131).

- ^{xi} For the consolidation of strategy within the group, alt-tech platforms like Gab and Telegram shield the initiated from the content moderation policies of more mainstream platforms permitting what Al-Rawi (2021) deems “dark participation” and supporting the development of shared objects of repulsion: “The two main themes that these communities discuss include white race grievances and the othering of minorities by targeting them as the roots of all of the problems in the Western world” (p. 845).
- ^{xii} Askanius’s (2021) work on alt-right and neo-Nazi influencers in Sweden demonstrates the ways in which memes and satire building shared community meaning, at once valorizing insider-knowledge that demarcates in-group from out-group, while also seeking to move the boundary of acceptable public discourse. Hate expressed in memes and jokes allows for just enough ambiguity and plausible denial to allow inside “jokes” to resonate beyond neo-Nazi groups/ripple into mainstream culture.
- ^{xiii} Maly (2020) cites Chadwick to emphasize how campaigns work across media forms: “Within [what Chadwick identifies as a hybrid media] system, different actors—be it politicians, influencers, journalists, activists, or alternative media—try to *‘create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable the agency of others, across and between a range of older and newer media settings.’* (Chadwick 2017: xi)” (p. 3).
- ^{xiv} Such a model resists seeing social media as a cultural force acting in (techno-determinist) isolation by paying attention to how online political fandom supports and operates within a hybrid media environment. Research by Peck (2019), Benkler et al. (2018), and Maly (2020) points to the cultural and political influence of right-wing media outlets, think tanks, political leaders and parties.
- ^{xv} As Boler and Davis (2018) argue, we find that “the stark differentiation of ‘affect’ from ‘emotion’ reifies the rational, autonomous, liberal conception of the subject, and is of limited value for political communications research” (p. 75).
- ^{xvi} Boler and Davis (2018) argue that a number of feminist accounts of emotion rely on similar understandings of affect, at once dynamic, “emotions on the move” and normative linking individuals to communities (81).
- ^{xvii} Our research indicates that Pilon first mentions the pandemic on March 17, 2020 just after the announcement of provincial and federal health measures.
- ^{xviii} Via an automatic script. It should be noted that Pilon streams the same content on both YouTube and Facebook Live.
- ^{xix} Distrust in institutions is the theme that generates both the most likes and the most dislikes, possibly because it is the most frequent.
- ^{xx} And, occasionally, concern, as Pilon highlights (and performs on camera) his excessive consumption of alcohol.
- ^{xxi} QAnon adherents, called “bakers”: “demonstrate populist expertise, the rejection of legacy media accounts of current events in favor of the “alternative facts” constructed through their systematic research program” (Marwick & Partin 2022, p. 1).