***Facts Don’t Care About Your Feelings*? Audience Perception and Engagement with Alternative Political Commentator Ben Shapiro**

# **AUTHORS**

Daniel Jurg (imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium)

Sarah Vis (imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium)

Ike Picone (imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium)

**ABSTRACT**YouTube forms a central hub for alternative political commentators (APCs). Much research on the platform has been directed at the supply of supposed radical political content, yet there is a growing call for more nuance and empirical studies on audience demand and engagement. Addressing this call, we explore how audiences perceive and engage with alternative media figures through a case study of Ben Shapiro, one of the most influential conservative voices on YouTube. Focusing on both participatory perceptions, as well as everyday media engagement, our study triangulates computational analysis of engagement via YouTube comments (N= 711, 909) with in-depth interviews (N=15).

Based on our findings, we suggest audience members perceive and engage with Ben Shapiro in two dominant ways: (1) *an entertainer* who aptly ‘destroys’ opponents in so-called YouTube drama, and (2) as *a news provider* delivering 'facts' without unnecessary emotional bias. We find that audiences oscillate between *casual engagement* with Shapiro the entertainer while adopting a more *structured routine* when consuming content from Shapiro as a news provider. Within an alternative media space that blends jokes, irony, and entertainment with serious news and information, our article shows that audiences create distinct spaces for entertainment and news within their everyday media tactics.

# **Keywords**

Audiences, Alternative Political Commentators, Ben Shapiro, YouTube, Everyday media practices, User tactics

# **INTRODUCTION**

Young adults increasingly get their information from alternative sources on social media platforms. Within this growing alternative media market, YouTube has become an especially popular place for right-wing Alternative Political Commentators (APCs) to engage audiences within an often-transgressive digital counterculture, fighting against mainstream journalists and so-called Social Justice Warriors (SJW) (Finlayson, 2021). For instance, while perhaps a relatively unknown figure to legacy news consumers, APC Ben Shapiro has become one of the most influential online figures providing a conservative perspective on American politics and world events for English-speaking audiences. In a 2017 characterization by *The New York Times*, Shapiro is said to function as “a provocative ‘gladiator,’ [who] battles to win young conservatives” (Tavernise, 2017). An apt description given that Shapiro garnered much of his popularity in what has become known as the ‘Anti-SJW Era’ on YouTube, where debating and antagonizing left-wing and liberal college students, activists, politicians, and legacy journalists in various public arena emerged as an incredibly profitable political media genre.

As former editor-at-large of the right-wing *Breitbart News Network*, and founder of the conservative media company *The Daily Wire*, Shapiro’s success may be attributed to his exemplary ability to refashion journalism and conservative ideology within a youthful and provocative vernacular culture, using memes and other natively digital genres to entertain and inform audiences. For example, in one video Shapiro “[…] Reacts to INSANE Woke TikToks” (Ben Shapiro, 2021), whereas in another he “[…] Answers Viewer Questions About Religion” (Ben Shapiro, 2022). Leveraging the power of various online video platforms to reach and engage audiences, Shapiro boasts a substantial following, with 6.2 million subscribers to his personal YouTube Channel as of writing. Additionally, *The DailyWire+* has garnered 3.2 million subscribers, hosting a roster of affiliated APCs, including Jordan Peterson (7.3M), Brett Cooper (3.3M), Matt Walsh (2.7M), Candace Owens (1.9M), and Michael Owens (1.5M).

Many of the abovementioned figures have been discussed in relation to the so-called ‘alt-right’ and, in turn, have raised concerns around online radicalization, affective polarization, and the dissemination of hate speech (BRON). In a foundational report by Lewis (2018), Shapiro and Peterson were considered as part of a broader Alternative Influence Network, consisting of figures who “adopt the techniques of influencers to build audiences and “sell” them on far-right ideology” (p. 1). However, recently such characterizations have come under criticism. First, as Holt (2019) points out, figures such as Ben Shapiro and Jordan Peterson first operated under what became known as the Intellectual Dark Web (IDW) and are perhaps more aptly classified “as simply alternative media, and not as having anti-system or polarizing characteristics” (p. 65). While Shapiro’s polarizing role can be questioned, Holt (2019) makes a good case that our perceptions of figures like Shapiro should not be fixed in an era where many white supremacists infiltrated YouTube, many of whom have since been deplatformed.

The second central critique is that while much research has emerged around the aesthetic, rhetorical and medium specific strategies of figures like Shapiro, there is a lack of audience research on these APCs. Following predominant approaches examining political engagement on YouTube via recommendation algorithms and fears about the existence of so-called radicalization pipelines or rabbit holes (Yesilada & Lewandowsky, 2022), Munger and Phillips (2020) have raised concerns about what they perceive as a return to outdated strong media effects frameworks reminiscent of the hypodermic needle ‘theory,’ or, as they translate it for a new generation of scholars, the zombie-bite theory/ narrative (p. x). Indeed, as Livingstone (2019) notes, in times of societal unrest, such as the rise of right-wing extremism, radical political filter bubbles and contentious polarization, conceptions about people’s agency and ability to actively engage with, and critically make-sense of, media are often pushed to the background. Building on this line of reasoning, Munger & Phillips (2020) urge scholars to approach the alternative right-wing media with *active audience approaches*.

The ‘active audience’ is a long-held, central, and widely debated notion within audience studies. Its earliest formulations appear in the latter half of the 20th century in theories such as Uses and Gratifications (U&G) (Katz et al., 1973). When Munger & Phillips (2022) argue about the active audience, and studying YouTube from a supply and demand framework, they mainly depart from theories grounded in the U&G assumption that audiences tend to seek out information or media messages that align with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, which is driven by the desire to avoid cognitive dissonance (c.q. Prior, 2007; Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013). While we agree with some of the premises in U&G suggested in Munger & Phillips (2022) *active audience approach*, there are more contemporary and sophisticated ways to understand especially how younger audiences make sense of figures like Ben Shapiro.

In In this article, we aim to understand how audiences perceive and interact with alternative media figures, focusing on Ben Shapiro as a case study. First, we review literature on alternative right-wing media, applying the classic conceptual distinction presented by De Certeau (2011). This framework distinguishes between the ‘strategies’ used by Alternative Political Commentators (APCs) to establish themselves in digital platforms as ‘alternative right-wing media,’ and the ‘tactics’ audiences develop to navigate and subvert these structures for their own meaning-making and benefits. We then outline our research questions, which we address using a mixed-methods research design. This approach combines computational analysis of YouTube comments (N=711,909) with in-depth interviews (N=15) to assess how audiences perceive and engage with Ben Shapiro, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

# **RIGHT-WING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA: APPEALS TO FACTS AND REASON WITHIN THE DIGITAL ATTENTION ECONOMY**

This first section examines the emergence of Alternative Political Commentators like Ben Shapiro within the context of studies on right-wing alternative media. It outlines the strategies employed by such commentators to market their content as 'alternative' in two distinct ways: (1) discursively, by positioning themselves as alternative voices of reason and logic that counteract progressive hysteria, and (2) through the adoption of new media logics designed to engage audiences in a digital space. We argue that the strategies used by these commentators aim to strike a balance between presenting themselves as purveyors of facts and reason and employing more emotionally charged tactics to succeed in the digital attention economy.

## Right-Wing Alternative Media

For decades, alternative media have served as a counterpoint to traditional institutional journalism. This trend spans from the early emergence of Indymedia to the current prevalence of diverse 'influencers' on social media. Thirty years ago, media capital was predominantly rooted in institutional media. However, advancements have significantly lowered barriers to media production. Influencer content now often parallels professional productions in quality, departing markedly from amateur content (Fuchs, 2010). With the rise of digital platforms, non-institutional actors now disseminate information alongside traditional journalism outlets, leading to a competitive dynamic with ‘interloper media’ (Eldridge, 2014). Consequently, established journalism is increasingly sharing its role as a 'knowledge producer' with a growing array of alternative voices, challenging its long-held authoritative status (Carlson, 2017). In today's digital landscape, some media corporations have become so adept at engaging audiences and monetizing this interaction that it raises questions about the appropriateness of still categorizing their position as 'alternative' (Munger & Phillips, 2020).

Historically, research on alternative media has emphasized their role in supporting democratic communication, giving voice to marginalized groups, and fostering dialogues beyond the realms of commercial or state-controlled media (Atton, 2002). From its outset, this field of study has been steeped in a critical tradition. It conceptualizes alternative media as essential in cultivating emancipatory counter-publics (Fraser, 1990), thereby facilitating the emergence of critical thought outside the hegemonic public sphere (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010). Rooted in these critical foundations, some scholars have expressed hesitation in applying the 'alternative media' label to the recent surge of online right-wing ideologies. Instead, these phenomena are more often been examined through more cautionary lenses, including the propagation of fake news (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019), disinformation, and hyper partisanship (Rae, 2021).

However, recent scholarship, exemplified by Holt (2019), advocates for examining the ascent of right-wing alternative media through established conceptual frameworks of alternative media studies. Holt warns against research trends in political engagement on platforms like YouTube, which through the cautionary lenses, such as radicalization, may overly focus on sensationalism and extreme cases. He thereby also suggests a reevaluation of the normative theories that traditionally define alternative media. Holt proposes viewing *alternative media* as entities (whether organizations or personalities) that "represent a proclaimed and/or (self) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream" (Holt, 2019, p. 862). It acknowledges the significance of right-wing media not merely as problematic phenomena to be addressed but as entities that genuinely offer an alternative, both in the eyes of content creators and their audiences. The question then becomes: an alternative to what?

## Online Culture Wars

The rise of right-wing alternative media on YouTube mainly took shape around 2015, in what has been called a period of ‘online culture wars.’ The *online culture wars* refers to a series of conflicts on various message boards and social media platforms from 2014 onwards that signaled vehement opposition towards, and conflict with, a new form of progressive ideology, which was perceived as fundamentally grounded in toxic ‘identity politics’ and ‘political correctness’, cultivating new forms of victimhood threatening freedom of speech and cultivating new forms of victimhood (Nagle, 2017). Through these online culture wars, new media figures and opinion leaders arose on platforms such as YouTube capitalizing on this emerging counterculture (Finlayson, 2022). As Lewis (2018) wrote, “these YouTubers are less defined by any single ideology than they are by a “reactionary” position: a general opposition to feminism, social justice, or left-wing politics” (p. 8).

Research into this reactionary online culture has often relied on a distinction between three types of communities and opinion leaders, as defined within the literature on the so-called online culture wars: (1) Intellectual Dark Web (IDW), (2) Alt-light, and (3) Alt-right (Ribeiro et al., 2019). While these groups are often placed on a trajectory that aims to demonstrate radicalization processes, they feature a wide variety of ideological differences and even rejection of each other’s ideas. The *alt-right* is a term mostly referring to a unique blend of online culture and far-right politics that, while appealing to an online culture steeped in transgression, irony and humor, is still fundamentally concerned with ideological questions around race, antisemitism, and white supremacy (Hawley, 2019). The *alt-light*, on the other hand, is used to denote a group of provocative internet celebrities, like Milo Yiannopoulos, that did not explicitly support far-right politics but made “careers exposing the absurdities of online identity politics and the culture of lightly thrown claims of misogyny, racism, ableism, fatphobia, transphobia […] (Nagle, 2017, p. x).

Ben Shapiro, who has a Jewish background, has been a vocal critic of many far-right voices in the alternative digital milieu. He reacted to the radicalization narrative reported on in traditional journalism and academia as follows:

“[This narrative] suggests that if you watch mainstream conservative content, then inevitably you will be led down this rabbit hole. Now this is absurd and bizarre. There are legitimately hundreds of thousands of people that listen to this show everyday who are not even on the political right. There are hundreds of thousands of people who are on the political right and believe the alt-right is evil, just as I do” (Ambient Worlds, 2019).

Shapiro positioned himself as self-described member of the IDW in a 2018 opinion piece in *The New York Times* that described a collective of intellectual renegades, mostly university professors, who argue that there are fundamental biological differences between men and women, that contemporary progressive ideology forms a threat to free speech, and that the predominant focus within the Left on identity politics is “tearing American society apart” (Weiss & Winter, 2018). Ideologically, Shapiro positions himself as an American conservative who emphasizes traditional values and religion (BRON). While one could make an argument about the radical style used to convey these ideas (which we will touch on in the next section), these ideas are not widely considered ‘radical’ or ‘extreme’ in political theory (Holt, 2019).

## Strategies of Fact and Reason

However, writing on the IDW emphasizes that rather than ideology, the groups’ fundamental aim and appeal has been to bring back reason and logic within political discourse. It is here that they specifically adopt the ‘alternative’ label, namely as opposed to the purported overly focus within mainstream progressive discourse on emotions and feelings. This discursive position is often mobilized against the purported mainstream. As Sun-ha Hong (2020) argued, “the conservative influencer Ben Shapiro’s slogan, “facts don’t care about your feelings”, [serves as] a paean to the mythological figure of emotionlessly objective truth which may then be weaponised against one’s enemies” (p. x). Indeed, as Finlayson (2021) points out, rather than fundamentally new figures, much of the appeal of the IDW is that they “speak from traditional, pre-digital, bases of authority (commercial media and university professorships) […]” (p. x). Figures like Ben Shapiro, Jordan Peterson, Sam Harris, and Bret Weinstein all have an academic background with many of them working as professors in academia. The alternative positioning that figures like Shapiro adopt is within a rising anti-progressive social movement that sees liberals and progressives as losing themselves in identity politics and political correctness that clouds the ability for rational thinking.

Whether one agrees with this position or not, we would argue that this discursive position is underdeveloped within right-wing media discussions that focus on the propagation of fake news, disinformation, and hyper partisanship. Many scholars have suggested that alternative forms of knowledge are being developed as opposed to the rational deliberative system developed in tradition journalism (boyd, 2018). However, figures emerging within the IDW like Shapiro are, at least on a discursive level, presenting themselves as alternative media in opposition to the highly emotive Left, who are precisely no longer concerned with objectivity and facts, and rather with the subjective experience of suppressed minorities.

That being said, the alternative discursive position, is fully mediated by digital platforms and the attention economy, which often require emotive strategies and appeals to generate visibility on platforms such as YouTube. In the next section, we will address how APCs navigate this environment.

## Political Influencer Strategies

The second prominent way of thinking about APCs is that they thrive within an alternative environment, namely social media. As Lewis (2018) has argued, APCs function like *political influencers* as they “adopt the techniques of influencers to build audiences and “sell” them on far-right ideology” (p. 1). Leaving aside the remark on far-right ideology, scholarship on social media has well documented how new opinion leaders become successful online by adapting to specific platform logic, effectively becoming media micro-celebrities (Marwick, 2013, 2015). On platforms like YouTube, it is important to build a community, which is often done by creating an ingroup and an outgroup (Tuters & Burton, 2021). These require on the one hand strategies of engaging with the opposition, as well as defining strategies on how to engage within the community.

On the level of outgroup, an important media strategy for APCs has been what Lewis (2018) described as *strategic controversy*, where an influencers engages in controversial issues and statements to gain attention. For instance, Ben Shapiro gained much mainstream exposure already in 2013 when he sat down with the British journalist Pierce Morgan on the gun control issue. In the interview Shapiro accused accusing him of “standing on the graves of the children of Sandy Hook” (Ambient Worlds, 2013). Such interviews are important strategies for APCs, especially in interviews or debates with legacy journalists as they can demonstrate their ability to engage with the opposition. Again, the goal here is to show once debate acumen, while at the same time provoking the other.

These strategic controversy strategies may lead to what Aberdeen (2019) has termed a *weaponized microcelebrit*y, a status achieved when “identities are attention hacked by various traditional and digital media outlets when their infractions become fair game for public commentary and placeholders for a longtail of social issues, resulting in a cyclic loop between internet celebrity and traditional media where value flows back and forth in cycles” (Aberdeen, 2019, p. 37). In this process APCs subvert the status and authority traditional journalism so that they can position themselves in a more contentious way against the mainstream, while at the same time exploiting the reach of mainstream outlets.

While such antagonistic strategies within the digital attention economy work to get attention and position oneself against the mainstream APCs develop more constructive element to retain audience engagement to move beyond mere conflict. One of the strategies APCs use to appeal to audiences, Lewis’ (2020) argues, is by performing “relatability, authenticity, and accountability” to attract and engage audiences (2020, p. 1). Indeed, as in accounts of more traditional alternative media accounts, APCs draw on arguments of being reliable and accountable only to the audience and not some more nefarious political players. This establishes them as more authentic than their mainstream counterparts.

Another powerful way on YouTube to build rapport with audiences is to adopt specific natively digital genres and trends that appeal to the specific vernacular culture such as debates, vlogging and collaborations. Ben Shapiro, for instance, performs various reaction videos and answers personal question in a variety of segments. In addition, as Lewis (2018) points out in her description of the alternative influence network, audiences engage with other popular media figures in the alternative ecosystem to establish friendships and connections and at the same time connecting their audiences with each other. As social movement literature has pointed out, there is a powerful parasocial component to fight collectively towards a cause, and APCs often form alliances with others that share their grievances (Papacharissi, 2014).

In the end, the strategies of APCs suggest an intriguing mix in the alternative media space between on the one hand positioning themselves in opposition to legacy news and progressives as voices of reason concerned with logic and facts, while, on the other hand, operating very much on the affective level, entertaining audiences by adopting the techniques of influencers that build especially on drama, entertainment, and personal connection. As Papacharisi (2014, p. 117) stresses, on social media platforms, emotion, drama, opinion, and news are blended in a manner that departs from the conventional deliberative logic and aligns with emotion. In the case of Shapiro, the two seem inherently connected. It thus becomes an interesting question how audiences are navigating and making sense of these influencer strategies.

# **AUDIENCE TACTICS: PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND EVERYDAY LIFE**

This second section theorizes audience sense-making practices in relation to Alternative Political Commentators (APCs) grounded in Certeau’s concept of ‘tactics’. As opposed to the calculated actions that institutions and structures of power to organize and control space, people, and events, *tactics* are the often-improvised practices that individuals use to navigate and subvert these structures to create meaning or find benefits for themselves (Certeau, 2011). As Fiske (1989) succinctly captured it, “the art of making do with what the system provides” (p. 21). We first show how digital media platforms have afforded audiences increased engagement via wide range of technological features such as likes, shares, comments to navigate and negotiate the messages of APCs and form various online interpretative communities. Secondly, we align ourselves with scholarship that argues that such digitized practices ‘tactics’ should not obscure the broader media habits in everyday life practices of media users.

## Interpretative Tactics within Digital Participatory Culture

The impact of De Certeau on audience studies is particularly evident in theorizations of engagement in the digital landscape. Jenkins' exploration of fandom and participatory culture is anchored in De Certeau's notion of user tactics, melding it with Stuart Hall's reception studies to illustrate how audiences are not passive consumers but active meaning makers, 'cultural poachers', reappropriating and remixing content to create new narratives, reflecting a form of resistance and creative expression (Jenkins, 1992, 2008). Within studies on YouTube, the participatory element has often directed its attention to the creator economy and how video uploads allowed for creating new forms of resistance (Marwick, 2013). However, recent work, such as that of Picone et al. (2019), have noted that much of the engagement on social media platform does not happen via content creators, but audiences who can engage via small acts such as likes, comments, shares. These features are important as they have a more profound impact on content circulation, albeit in the aggregate form.

YouTube comment sections have increasingly become important spaces where the meaning of YouTube videos is negotiated. While often theorized as a place for toxicity and hate, comment sections have also been argued as feedback mechanisms to build reciprocity with content creators, but also serve as a fundamental mechanism to build an online reputation (Burgess & Green, 2018). Also in the alternative political community, comment sections serve as active spaces, as Tuters and Burton (2021) have argued, audiences “perceive themselves less as observers and more as participants in a conversation in which their voices matter” (p. 759). The visibility of audience engagement acts as an instantaneous feedback loop for content creators, allowing them to quickly gauge what resonates with their audience. This is, of course, not only done by fans of the content but also by anti-fans, or non-fans (Gray, 2003) to counter much of the content that content creators upload. These comment sections can become quite antagonistic spaces where negotiation happens. Comment sections are the space *par excellence* where audiences navigate and subvert the strategies of APCs to create meaning or find benefits for themselves, giving voice to their specific opinions and interpretations.

## Structuring Alternative Political Commentators in everyday life

While social media platforms such as YouTube facilitate the visibility and participation of audience engagement, a more critical line of audience studies research argues that a heavy focus on such digital practices risks theorizing hyper-participants while simultaneously obscuring the sense-making practices of individuals in their everyday life (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Livingstone, 2019; Picone et al., 2019; Unwin, 2017). Besides being able to actively engage in a participatory culture (e.g., by commenting under YouTube videos) media users are just as empowered when it comes to selecting, consuming and sense making activities.

In the 'cacophonic' media environment, where journalistic and alternative sources (Cotter & Thorson, 2022), as well as emotional and factual information (Papacharisi, 2014) merge, media users increasingly employ personal curation tactics to navigate the landscape (De Certeau, 1984; Merten, 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016). The digital attention economy, particularly where political 'attention seekers' like Ben Shapiro thrive, has significantly transformed and enhanced users' ability to make decisive choices (Strömback et al., 2022). In essence, do-it-yourself expertise has become crucial in selecting and curating political opinion pieces and humorous videos for consumption.

On the other hand, sociological scholars emphasize how in a hypermediated world users’ online practices are also structured in offline habits and routines. Therefore, Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue that we cannot analyze media phenomena such as Alternative Political Commentator Ben Shapiro isolated from society as a whole since media are now embedded in people’s everyday lives structuring daily activities. Following Couldry (2012, p.3) ’s phenomenological perspective, we therefore aim to understand the role of Ben Shapiro through audience members’ everyday meaning-making practices.

# **RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

Based on our literature study, we formulate the following three central research questions:

How do audience members **perceive** and **engage** with Ben Shapiro as an Alternative Political Commentator?

* + What are the perceived qualities of Ben Shapiro as an APC?
	+ What roles does Ben Shapiro play in the everyday media practices?

# **METHODOLOGY: REVISITNG GROUNDED THEORY WITH COMPUTATIONAL METHODS**

Scholars studying political engagement on YouTube have highlighted the importance of mixed-methods approaches. For example, Munger and Phillips (2020) have argued that while qualitative researchers have productively theorized and studied the online video platform as an important site of political discourse, they “stopped just short of systematically mapping out trends in the production and consumption of political content on YouTube” (p. 190). This is no surprise given that, as Christin & Lewis (Christin & Lewis, 2021) have argued, “YouTube is a notoriously difficult platform to study: the glut of long-form video content makes it resistant to quantitative analysis, yet its size and scale make it potentially overwhelming for qualitative researchers” (p. 6). As Burgess and Green (2018) point out specifically in relation to YouTube research, scholars must seek to bridge the gap "between large-scale quantitative analysis and the sensitivity of qualitative methods" (19). Engaging with this debate, our study of audience engagement with right-wing political commentators explores a mixed-methods approach that aims to benefit from traditional audience studies’ methodology as well as relatively new computational integration, moving back and forth between a computationally assisted study of YouTube comment sections and in-depth interviews with YouTube users. This research thereby builds on what has been termed ‘computational grounded theory’ (Nelson, 2020) and in particular its revisited form (Carlsen & Ralund, 2022).

Nelson (2020) argues that computational methods present many advantages to theory building, noting that *computational* *grounded theory* “combines expert human knowledge and hermeneutic skills with the processing power and pattern recognition of computers, producing a more methodologically rigorous but interpretive approach to content analysis” (Nelson, 2020, p. 3). She thereby argues for a three-step process that (1) computationally detects patterns in data, (2) hermeneutically refines these patterns, and (3) validates these patterns. Such a method, she argues, produces more rigorous research by also limiting the potential biases of researchers which grounded theory precisely seeks to overcome (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Still, one important caveat to consider is that this approach tends to put forward the first step as computer-driven and hence unbiased pattern detection mechanism. In response to this assumption, Carlsen and Ruland argue for “computationally assisted approaches that puts the researcher in charge of all operations but uses the model’s ability to locate potentially useful patterns and word similarities” (p. 15). In this sense computational tools do not lead the researcher’s interpretation but serves more as an assistant in the broader qualitative researcher’s practice.

 In this research we adopted this revisited computational grounded theory to the case of Ben Shapiro, who serves as an exemplary case of appealing to the countercultural sensibilities on the platform. In the following section we will provide a description of our approach.

## A mixed-methods approach to computational grounded theory

This sections briefly highlights the methodological steps the two authors who were involved in the empirical study took following the data gathering and analyzing process as proposed by Carlsen and Ruland (2022). In the *discovery phase*, one researcher would start quantitatively by delving into Ben Shapiro’s comment sections retrieving comment metadata from YouTube Application Programming Interface (API) and testing various computational techniques popular in Natural Language Processing (NLP), whereas the other researcher would begin qualitatively with recruiting and interviewing youngsters who would watch Ben Shapiro on YouTube. After some preliminary insights, the computational analyses of comments would serve as insights during the interviews, while insights from the interviews guided further exploration of the comments sections.

To create a dataset with comments, we used YouTube Data Tools [(Rieder, 2015)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?0kwvET) to capture content and metadata from the YouTube channel ‘Ben Shapiro’. To make a good selection of videos and comments sections to analyze for markers of status[[1]](#footnote-2), we first captured all videos of the channel on the 12th of August 2022 (N = 3,145). This allowed specific ranking of most-commented videos, which were used as a starting point to become familiar with audience engagement with Shapiro’s video content and what gives him status in the alternative media environment on YouTube. Simultaneously, we conducted in-depth interviews (N=15) with media users (age: 18-33 years old) to gain a more layered and inductive understanding of how the video content of Ben Shapiro is perceived by his audience. We were guided by the questions how audience members perceive Ben Shapiro’s status as an alternative political commentator and what role the YouTube-videos (and comment section) of the Ben Shapiro channel play in users’ everyday media experience and addressed them through the lens of everyday audience tactics. The participants were recruited applying a snowball sampling (amongst BA-students and via social media posts). We conducted the interviews both offline and online, using Microsoft Teams. All the interviews were fully audio-recorded and transcribed. While the participants have different nationalities, all of them were living in Belgium at the moment of the interview. The interview transcripts were coded in MAXQDA.

Next, after we got more familiar with Shapiro’s audience, we exchanged certain initial observations and prominent patterns, which then were translated into further data gathering and analysis. For instance, following some prior interviews, we understood that the consumption of so-called ‘YouTube shorts’, a short form video format like Instagram Reels and TikTok, was very different than longer-form videos and therefore recoded the videos into three temporal video categories and selected the top 10 videos in each category for scraping and analysis. In line with our computational methodology, we uploaded this dataset to 4CAT: Capture and Analysis Toolkit (Peeters & Hagen, 2021) and used an unsupervised machine learning method termed word embeddings to generate similar words (Mikolov et al., 2013) to ‘Ben’, and ‘Shapiro’ that gave an indication of what status Ben Shapiro has according to those audiences active in the comment section (Fig 1.)



*Figure 1: Workflow of second dataset creation on YouTube.*

Extracting similar words to ‘ben’ and ‘shapiro’ resulted in a spreadsheet with 100 terms which we then aimed to interpret both by delving back into the comments and discussing them with audiences. During the interviews, we both asked what the audience thought of Ben Shapiro and how they consumed his content, i.e., the usertactics.

# **UNCOVERING THE DUAL ROLE OF APCs: ENTERTAINMENT AND INFORMATION SEEKING IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

In answering our two-fold research question, ‘how do audience members *perceive*, and *engage* with, Ben Shapiro as an Alternative Political Commentator?’, we first explore the perceived qualities of Shapiro to enrich these perceptions within participants’ everyday media practices. In other words, the findings triangulate the perception of Shapiro as APC through the embeddedness of his content in everyday life, and vice versa. The findings are structured in two sections. The first section discusses ‘characteristics’ and ‘qualities’ ascribed within online participatory culture (YouTube comment section) and by individual audiences (during in-depth interviews).[[2]](#footnote-3) The second section discusses how these characteristics and qualities are embedded within specific roles that audiences ascribe to APCs, namely as ‘news provider’ or as ‘entertainer’. We conclude with a schematization that links the roles of Ben Shapiro to (1) perceptions, (2) motivation, and (3) media use.

## Shapiro’s Perceived Characteristics and Qualities

Our analysis begins with a quantitative overview, mapping terms used in contexts similar to 'ben' and 'shapiro' in participatory audiences’ discussions. Drawing from our dataset, we found that of the three video time categories, the YouTube short format yielded the most insightful revelations about Shapiro's characteristics. In contrast, longer videos tended to facilitate more in-depth, topical discussions that extended beyond Shapiro as an individual. Fig. 1 illustrates the characteristics attributed to Ben Shapiro by participatory audiences in YouTube short videos. It's important to note that Figure 2 represents an interpretive outcome, encapsulating the characteristics of Ben Shapiro as described in these videos.



*Figure 2: Terms often used in similar contexts as ‘ben’ and ‘shapiro’, qualitatively selected by the researchers following a quantitative word similarity analysis.*

Without further audience context, Fig 2. already hints at an alignment between Shapiro’s dual top-down audience engagement strategies as defined by Sun-ha Hong (2020) and Lewis (2018). On the one hand we see discussions around his ability to be ‘articulate’ and ‘smart’ or having a sense of ‘openness’, and ‘confidence’, which align with this self-presentation as a rational objective figure. On the other hand, we see discussions about Shapiro being possibly ‘ignorant’, ‘angry’, ‘aggravating’, or even ‘gaslighting’, possibly in relation to ‘sensationalism’ that align with his influencer strategies.

Rather than further seeking to understand and contextualize these associations as ‘expert’ outsiders, risking a narrow focus on our own interpretive categories or discursive formulations, we triangulated the computational findings with in-depth insights of audience members who engaged with Shapiro daily. Interviews and discussions with audiences of commonly associated characteristics with Shapiro led to a discussion on three main perceived qualities: (1) *articulate voice*, (2) *non-emotional intellectual*, and (3) *wittiness,* and (4) *rude debater*.

### Articulate Voice

In discussing the characteristics extracted from comment sections, primary observations from interviewees converged on terms like ‘rhetoric’ and ‘accurate’ but also ‘articulates’, ‘style, and ‘confidence’. These were collectively perceived as indicative of Shapiro's *articulate voice*. A key aspect frequently mentioned by audiences is Shapiro's rhetorical skillset. Interestingly, it's not so much *what* Shapiro says but *how* he says it that defines his reputation for good rhetoric. This aligns with Sun-ha Hong's (2020) concept of Shapiro's 'voice of reason' strategy as a political commentator. However, rather than strictly operating on a linguistic discursive level, participants placed greater emphasis on Shapiro's vocal delivery rather than his logical reasoning when evaluating his rhetorical abilities. Shapiro’s intonation and speed seem to put more force behind the credibility of his words: “You can say a lot of things about him but yeah, he talks fast, and he knows what he’s talking about” (Interview M.B.). Participants often connect his fast way of talking with his confident attitude.

Remarkably, Shapiro's credibility coming from his articulate voice is perceived as a quality that transcends political alignment. In other words, the significance of his argumentative style outweighs that of political agreement. Despite some participants not fully aligning with Shapiro's ideological viewpoints, they still regard him as articulate and consequently a credible rhetorician. This perspective is exemplified by one of the participants: “I never felt like I totally agree with what this guy’s saying, but I always felt like: ‘ah, this guy definitely won the situation, no matter if he's right or wrong’.” (Interview A.A.). Shapiro’s confident attitude and verbal skills, especially the use of his voice, appear to be more influential in engaging his audience than the substance of his argumentation itself. This emphasis on *style* seems to keep the participants captivated and enthralled by the content.

### Non-Emotional Reasoning

A second important clustering occurs around terms related to Shapiro’s ‘intelligence’ and him being an ‘intellectual’ but also ‘rigor’ and ‘wise’. According to the interviewees, Shapiro's intelligent and wise approach, characterized by ‘rigor’, is closely associated with his *non-emotional reasoning*. Parallel with Ben Shapiro’s popular slogan ‘facts don’t care about our feelings’ (Shapiro, 2019), the participants revealingly equalize Shapiro’s status as excellent reasoner to him being “good in hiding emotions”. Being ‘reasoned’ in their eyes is seen as the opposite of showing emotions and is therefore understood as being ‘non-emotional’. As one participant told us: “I see him as a rational man who can put his emotions aside when he’s debating” (Interview A.M.). The fact that Shapiro refrains from displaying emotions enhances his credibility as an intellectual political commentator. Remarkably, this dynamic also operates the other way around: due to his non-emotional attitude participants tend to have a stronger believe in the facts Shapiro is telling in the videos. For instance, another participant we spoke with even redefines the meaning of ‘emotional intelligence’ in relation to Shapiro’s style: “I think it’s a sort of emotional intelligence, when you can put your feelings aside to purely look at the facts, and to see… what is and what is not” (Interview D.G.).

We also find this sentiment in the comment section. For instance, close-reading some of the comments containing the term ‘emotion’ surfaced the following insightful statement: “I have issues registering information if there is heavy aggression/emotion in the argument (..), but now I can see the other side clearly because of how objective Ben states his side. this is pretty cool. thanks!” This sentiment is quite remarkable for Shapiro operates in a highly contentious and antagonistic space, but still seems to attract audiences that precisely engage with his content for the clear non-emotional way of communicating.

### Wittiness

On another level, audiences revealed that they appreciated Shapiro for his *wittiness*. Here we understood how Shapiro’s articulate voice and fast pace of talking is not only linked to his intellectual credibility, but also underlines his entertaining qualities to audiences. Participants described Shapiro as a “funny guy”. Shapiro's reputation for wit stems from his articulate and rapid speech style, which is often laced with humor: “He is witty, so he is intelligent, he talks fast and answers fast. That’s what I find funny,” as Interviewee M.B. notes. This quote highlights how Shapiro's wittiness is perceived as reinforcing both his intelligence and entertaining qualities. This is also a sentiment that we found in the comment section, and some audience members perceived Shapiro’s witty style as something to emulate and aspire towards: “I wish I could be this quick and witty.” This aligns closely with the work of Finlayson (2021) on how APCs perform a character that audience aspire towards.

### Rude Debater

One final prominent quality that audiences assign to Shapiro clusters around the characteristics ‘sensationalism’, ‘angry’, or ‘rude’. Not only do participants highlight Shapiro’s informative features with his articulate voice, non-emotional attitude, and wittiness, but they also perceive him as a *rude debater*. Despite the name, the perception of ‘rude debater’ is also seen as a quality rather than an insult. Participants interpret his rude debating skills as entertaining and funny and therefore emphasize the importance of debate settings in the videos. Interestingly, Ben Shapiro is mostly seen as funny in relation to others, when he’s, for example, debating “emotional college girls”.

However, interviewees do note a thin line between simultaneously being rude and funny as some participants drop out when Shapiro is perceived as too rude. For instance, this is where A.A. draws the line: “I don’t like it when he actually destroys his opponents…“ (Interview A.A.). The rude debater is a contentious ‘quality’ in that it appears to be one of the most contentious topics in comment sections. Many discussions among participatory audiences evolve around Shapiro as an intellectual who subsequently engages with college students who are not on his level, and thus not seen as an actual challenge. Especially in relation to issues around trans issues, Shapiro attracts many anti-fans, or disappointed fans, that see his insulting style as plain rude and unproductive.

However, while many of our participants appear to agree to a certain extent with this idea that being rude in a debate is not very productive or informative, they do not see that as inherently problematic as they revealed different modes of engagement. In the next section we will show how many of Shapiros’ qualities get their meaning in the everyday media context of individual audiences.

## The Role of an Alternative Political Commentator in an everyday media context: Entertainment vis-á-vis Information

According to the interviews, participants gauge Shapiro’s qualities based on their individual motivation behind the consumption of his videos: they distinguish between *getting informed* and *being entertained*. Within this everyday context, the interviewees assign two dominant roles to Shapiro: as a (A) *news provider* delivering information and ‘facts’ without unnecessary emotional bias and as an (B) *entertainer* who adeptly engages in YouTube drama. It is important to stress that participants do not assign only one role or the other to Ben Shapiro, but they oscillate between *news provider* and *entertainer.* These assigned roles can only be understood by zooming in on participants’ media use.

### Shapiro as News Provider

As one participant, who watches Shapiro on a daily basis, explains: “It’s kind of like.. keeping up with the daily news.” (Interview P.E.). The perceived qualities of Ben Shapiro, such as 'non-emotional reasoning' and 'articulate voice,' reinforce his role as a structured *news provider* in the media consumption habits of the participants. By viewing Shapiro as a news provider, participants tend to adopt a more structured user tactic by routinely consuming Shapiro's YouTube content. Consequently, Shapiro's YouTube channel is regarded as a full alternative news source, playing a significant role in shaping participants' views on societal issues. As Interviewee P.E. describes it, “It’s kind of a recap of the events with a bit of personal opinion interjected.”

***Creating routine in alternative news consumption***

The assigned role of Shapiro as *news provider* goes hand in hand with structurally embedded media use. Consequently, participants pay greater attention to Shapiro’s videos when getting informed: “Itis something you actually want to give attention to, so it's not something you put on in the back. I actually sit there, listen and watch.” (Interview R.N.). While doing so, the participants prefer watching the long-format videos on YouTube using a statical device such as a tablet or computer to literally sit back and watch (or listen) carefully to the content. Some of the interviewees even compare this media habit to listening to a podcast or a radio show: “Actually it's a bit like a radio, you turn it on when you pass time.” (Interview R.N). While assigning the role of a news provider to Shapiro, participants bring more structure to their everyday media habits, occurring across three distinct levels.

Firstly, some of the participants embed Shapiro’s videos into their already existing everyday offline routines. For instance, they consistently watch the videos during repeated daily life (household) activities such as cooking, eating, relaxing before bedtime, or right after waking up. One of the participants refers to these types of moments as ‘me-time’: “It’s really just a moment when I’m by myself” (Interview R.N.). These respondents implement Shapiro’s videos structurally in their everyday habits. This self-developed routine could be compared to the long-established structure of watching regular television news (which is broadcast every evening at the same time and therefore embedded in media users’ daily routine). In this sense, these participants experience Shapiro’s channel as a proper news channel: “I find it is genuinely a pretty concise way of getting kind of the daily news of what is going on, not only in America but kind of in the entire world” (Interview, P.E.).

Secondly, besides self-structuring the videos into everyday habits, some of the participants also find structure in the video upload schedule of the Ben Shapiro channel itself. In that case, its routine nature lies in the agenda-setting of Shapiro’s YouTube channel: “I don’t have a specific time, I just watch it kind of whenever he uploads” (Interview E.A.).

A final tactic by which respondents introduce structure into their media habits is influenced by the 'rhythm' of current political and societal events, such as the American elections or significant shifts in the media industry (e.g., Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter). When such events surface on their social media feeds, some participants instinctively turn to Shapiro's channel for information or opinions. Within this context, several participants report watching Shapiro's videos to interpret 'news' and to acquire a distinct perspective on certain events, diverging from 'mainstream media'.

### Shapiro as Entertainer

On the other hand, when discussing qualities such as ‘witty’ or being a ‘rude debater’, the participants refer to the role Shapiro has in their life as an entertaining figure. Despite the intention of the ‘rude debater’, interviewees assign the role of what can be summarized as an *entertainer* to Ben Shapiro.

***Casual laughter***

Contrasting with the structured engagement of Shapiro as a news provider, participants appear to interact on a more casual level when viewing him as *an entertainer*. As one participant describes, “I'm just watching a cake decorating video, there's a wholesome cat video, and then suddenly it's Ben Shapiro” (Interview R.N.). This entertaining role is associated with amusement, humor, and laughter. Through this casual user tactic, participants consume the video content more randomly, perceiving Shapiro as an amusing yet legitimate 'political comedian'. Their consumption typically involves shorter video formats, such as YouTube shorts or brief debate clips on YouTube. Notably, this content often enters their media habits incidentally during “mindless scrolling” (Interview S.S.), rather than through active selection. Consequently, the content is mostly enjoyed sporadically amidst everyday activities, for instance, while waiting or as “background noise entertaining” (Interview L.C.). The primary aim of this consumption is to laugh and relax. Some participants mention increasingly watching these videos when feeling down or even vulnerable: “I think I watch it when I’m a little vulnerable actually because then I’m just scrolling through my phone” (Interview R.N).

# **DISCUSSION**

To conclude, Table 1 provides a final systemized overview of the two roles discussed in the previous sections. In this section, we seek to contextualize and untangle these two roles in relation to academic discussion.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Levels of Engagement* | *Role of Ben Shapiro* |
|  | **News Provider** | **Entertainer** |
| **Perceived Qualities** | Articulate Voice, Non-emotional Reasoning | Wittiness, Rude Debater |
| **Motivation** | Staying Informed | Being Entertained |
| **User tactic** | Structured Use of You-Tube long videoson computer or tablet | Casual Use of YouTube-shortson Smartphone |

*Table 1: Schematization of the layered engagement with Ben Shapiro*

Our findings suggest caution for scholars who narrowly define supply and demand in political science, drawing heavily on selective exposure theory, imagining audiences as rational agents who selectively consume content aligning with their political preferences (Munger & Phillips, 2020; Prior, 2007; Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013). Our findings of young Shapiro audiences are better situated in literature that emphasizes the affective role of political content and alternative influencers, revealing how audience perceptions of political content reside mostly within the particular *moral character* and *style* of political content (Finlayson, 2022; Maddox & Creech, 2020; Peck, 2023).

Journalism scholars have long noted how emotion is becoming an increasingly important dynamic in the online news environment (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). However, the intriguing part of APCs like Shapiro is that they blend a hyper-focus on facts and reason within this increasingly affective digital environment. Our research shows that audiences indeed appreciate Shapiro’s cultivation of an image as being objective without becoming emotional, which nuances scholarship that seeks to explain alternative media in terms of alternative forms of knowledge that do not align with traditional enlightenment values (boyd, 2018). However, at the same time, a closer critical scrutiny of these perceived qualities does highlight the affective dimension audiences ascribe to supposed objective qualities, such as the tone of Shapiro’s voice. Moreover, certain qualities are not only seen as essential characteristics of good reporting, but also character qualities to emulate as a young individual, which aligns with the role Finlayson (2021) ascribes to APCs as role models.

While this classic, arguably mythological, distinction between affective and rational spaces are increasingly blurred (Papacharisi, 2014), audiences construct these boundaries through everyday media tactics in line with the ascribed role for the APC. As we highlight in the findings, to understand the perceived qualities of figures like Shapiro, means to move beyond merely mapping dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading tactics of audiences, as is done with studies focusing solely on comment sections. For example, Shapiro’s articulate voice and non-emotional reasoning are both qualities that feed his role as *news provider* whereas his wittiness and rude debating attitude in turn influence his role as *entertainer.* These ascribed roles closely align with specific modes of media consumption (De Certeau, 1984; Merten, 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016).

We, moreover, see how participants may oscillate between *structured* consumptionwith Shapiro as a *news provider* while adopting a more *casual* user tactic when consuming Shapiro as an *entertainer*. While literature has long pointed to the increasing ways in which political content increasingly comes in the form of entertainment (Brants & Neijens, 1998), it is important to stress that these two separate user tactics are not related to one participant or the other: both are intertwined within audience members’ media habits. Participants are constantly, rather unconsciously, fluctuating from one user tactic to the other in both long- and short-term waves. Hereby, Ben Shapiro’s role in participants’ media practices simultaneously fluctuates from a *news provider to* an *entertainer*, and vice versa. Moreover, the constant alternation between *structured* and *casual* media consumption keeps the media user captivated by Shapiro’s videos allowing the content to stay embedded in participants’ everyday media habits for rather long periods of time.

# **CONCLUSION**

Our research began with the recognition of a gap in audience research in studies on the rise of Alternative Political Commentators (APCs) and the need for more nuanced active audience approaches. We demonstrated how APCs employ strategies that, on one hand, discursively position them as rational in contrast to a perceived highly emotional, hegemonic, liberal mainstream culture. On the other hand, they engage in affective influencer practices within the digital attention economy. We argued that audiences navigate these spaces through small acts of engagement, such as commenting, and through their everyday media tactics. Our findings suggest that audiences are drawn to Shapiro mainly because they perceive him as a rational, non-emotional, yet witty and rude figure. Crucially, these perceived qualities encompass an affective dimension that extends beyond political opinions to a specific *style*. While observing the blend of affective practices with the performance of rationality, we noted that audiences construct more distinct spaces of engagement in their daily media interactions, assigning Shapiro roles as both an *entertainer* and an *informer*.

Our study contributes to the understanding of Alternative Political Commentators (APCs) by emphasizing the importance of considering participatory and everyday life media tactics in conceptualizing and theorizing audience engagement with APCs. Particularly, it highlights how audience tactics create spaces for negotiating and shaping the meaning of figures like Shapiro, tailored to the uses and gratifications of the audience. While our research aimed to underscore the dual nature of engagement – entertainment and information – we did not fully explore the dynamics of shifting between these modes. This shift is exemplified by one participant's remark: “I’ve definitely come to see him less as the funny guy who talks quick and says ‘Ok, this is epic’ and more as a serious commentator and political analyst” (Interview P.E.). Such 'tipping points' raise questions about when exactly casual consumption of an APC transforms into a structured news consumption habit in one's everyday life. In other words, when does casual laughter with a 'witty' debater evolve into a more politically serious framework for viewing and engaging with the world? We propose that future research should incorporate a temporal element to further explore these shifts between the serious and the humorous and how they intertwine with everyday life practices.

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# **APPENDIX**

**Appendix 1: List of YouTube Videos for Computational Analysis**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Title** | **Date** | **Duration** | **Views** | **Likes** | **Comments** |
| Shapiro Reacts to CONFUSING Pronouns TikTok | 03/10/2021 22:00 | 00:00:56 | 8494164 | 467799 | 35853 |
| Demi Lovato Comes Out As "Non-Binary" | 24/05/2021 21:36 | 00:00:57 | 4789216 | 178223 | 27690 |
| Ben Shapiro on Abortion: Evil Is Still Evil Regardless of Politics | 08/09/2021 20:26 | 00:00:59 | 15362004 | 628150 | 19536 |
| THIS Is Why You Should Never Use TikTok | 18/09/2021 22:00 | 00:00:53 | 8573318 | 368298 | 18944 |
| INSANE Parents Convince Their Boy That’s He’s a Girl | 26/03/2022 20:00 | 00:00:59 | 4582956 | 224502 | 18275 |
| Ben Shapiro Reacts to Flat Earth TikTok | 08/09/2021 22:00 | 00:00:55 | 15899803 | 676803 | 17878 |
| Are Chairs Fatphobic? | 17/10/2021 22:00 | 00:00:55 | 5618953 | 240420 | 17631 |
| TikTok Teacher Reveals Sexuality to Students | 17/10/2021 14:00 | 00:00:56 | 8003282 | 241683 | 15287 |
| Shapiro Reacts to CONFUSING Leftist TikTok | 19/09/2021 22:00 | 00:00:59 | 4967270 | 204627 | 13995 |
| LOL: TikToker Says Trump RUINED the American Flag | 02/10/2021 22:00 | 00:00:33 | 9275721 | 377810 | 13520 |

*Table 1: most commented videos below 00:01:00*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Title** | **Date** | **Duration** | **Views** | **Likes** | **Comments** |
| Neil deGrasse Tyson's Thoughts on Transgenderism | 18/07/2021 18:30 | 0:10:39 | 2806835 | 89257 | 59074 |
| Actress Ellen Page Declares She is a Man Named Elliot | 03/12/2020 1:46 | 0:09:17 | 2912769 | 159734 | 53370 |
| Congresswoman Tries to Call Ben Shapiro Racist...Regrets it Immediately. | 22/03/2020 21:00 | 0:03:10 | 16538049 | 373481 | 38636 |
| Why I'm Leaving California. | 16/09/2020 22:03 | 0:05:34 | 3472030 | 180973 | 32601 |
| U.S. Presidents Tier Ranking! | 24/12/2020 20:28 | 0:17:28 | 3327888 | 127268 | 32211 |
| Transgender Parent Tries To Breastfeed Child in BIZARRE Viral Video | 14/07/2021 1:08 | 0:06:50 | 2363936 | 130659 | 31714 |
| Ben Shapiro Reacts to "WAP" by Cardi B! | 19/08/2020 2:38 | 0:09:00 | 2921097 | 128072 | 30327 |
| LOL: Ben Shapiro Reacts to INSANE Woke TikToks | 17/07/2021 17:00 | 0:13:00 | 3635417 | 199605 | 29739 |
| Ben Shapiro DEBUNKS Viral 'Systemic Racism Explained' Video | 10/06/2020 01:00 | 00:17:50 | 4459535 | 225283 | 27526 |
| Shapiro Reacts To Meghan & Harry's Whine-Fest | 08/03/2021 23:37:37 | 00:14:32 | 2638627 | 103371 | 26647 |

*Table 2: most commented videos between 00:01:00 and 00:20:00*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Title** | **Date** | **Duration** | **Views** | **Likes** | **Comments** |
| Gina Carano | The Ben Shapiro Show Sunday Special Ep. 111 | 21/02/2021 14:00 | 1:05:42 | 3233276 | 204828 | 45305 |
| Ben Shapiro vs. Ana Kasparian FULL DEBATE | 06/10/2021 16:55 | 1:14:10 | 3004561 | 104119 | 31767 |
| The Worst Day In Modern American Political History | Ep. 1168 | 07/01/2021 19:00 | 1:08:24 | 1389542 | 41265 | 24144 |
| Ben Shapiro Q&A: Transgenderism Debate, Kyle Rittenhouse, CRT in Schools | 18/11/2021 20:16 | 0:37:17 | 4375868 | 119926 | 19809 |
| Bill Maher | The Ben Shapiro Show Sunday Special Ep. 124 | 13/03/2022 13:00 | 1:13:00 | 2108465 | 87119 | 17392 |
| Here’s THE TRUTH About the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (A Comprehensive History) | 05/06/2021 21:00 | 0:39:23 | 938291 | 70153 | 14175 |
| So... How F#%&$D Are We? | Ep. 1167 | 06/01/2021 19:00 | 0:52:30 | 1091664 | 28560 | 12087 |
| Prepare For The Left’s Revenge | Ep. 1169 | 08/01/2021 19:00 | 1:01:44 | 850268 | 27090 | 11362 |
| Candace Owens Ends Cardi B, And It’s Hilarious | Ep. 1217 | 17/03/2021 18:00 | 0:44:01 | 1331992 | 57997 | 11002 |
| The Jury Got It Wrong | Ep. 1240 | 21/04/2021 19:00 | 0:47:52 | 574869 | 23834 | 10310 |

*Table 3: most commented videos above 00:20:00*

1. YouTube only allows filtering the videos based on ‘oldest’, ‘newest’, and ‘most watched’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. We methodologically and theoretically differentiate between ‘characteristics’ and ‘qualities’, taking the results of computational content analysis as commonly associated *characteristics* that might be rejected, negotiated, or confirmed as having value, whereas the *qualities* discussed by audiences were seen as having a positive impact on their perception and engagement with Shapiro. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)