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Prageru as a parasite public.

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PRAGERU AS A PARASITE PUBLIC

By

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B.A., Concordia University Irvine, 2019
M.A. University of Louisville, 2021

A Thesis

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A Thesis Approved On

April 26, 2021

By the following Thesis Committee

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Mrs. Windi Corso-Gonzales

And

Mr. Anthony Gonzales

who have given me invaluable educational opportunities.

Also,

To Feras Morad

May you rest in peace

Without your encouragement I would have never been here

ABSTRACT

PRAGERU AS A PARASITE PUBLIC

Ryan A. Corso-Gonzales

April 27, 2021

This thesis examines the media corporation PragerU as a parasite public, using the framework provided by Larson and McHendry (2019). Parasitic publics are "reactionary discursive spaces formed residual and institutionalized affectively through the invention, circulation and uptake of demagogic rhetorics" (Larson & McHendry, 2019, p. 517). The purpose of this thesis is to identify and analyze the argumentative tactics used by PragerU in the public sphere. I argue that PragerU utilizes its extensive network to resist counterpublicity and influence the dominant public sphere. This thesis demonstrates the ways in which this PragerU utilizes its unique position in the public sphere to open new discursive areas and inject their political ideologies that drive hardline partisanship. The main tactic that this thesis focuses on is the use of the demagogic strategy of victimhood to persuade its viewers into believing its messages. Through victimization PragerU operates in a parasitic fashion to influence the dominate public sphere and resist counter publics. The arguments that PragerU deploys do not follow traditional structures for argumentation, but instead rely on affective appeals to persuade and influence its audience.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Polarized Politics

The state of contemporary politics in the United States of America has seen a

momentous shift towards Neoliberalism since the 1970s (Harvey, 2005). The Reagan era

began this significant uprooting of the political landscape in the United States, which not

only occurred within the political sphere but amongst the everyday American as well.

The modern arena of politics no longer values traditional tropes of civility and

compromise but instead values individualism and market strategies (Brown, 2015). As a

result, politics is now one of hardline partisanship and resentment towards the other, with

affective polarization increasing worsening over the past 60 years (Drutman, 2020). This

severe level of polarization is being recognized as a phenomenon known as negative

partisanship (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Negative partisanship is defined as a likely

hood to vote for a party, not on the basis that you like them, but instead because you are

repulsed by the other major party. (Ladd, 2017). As Emory Professor Alan Abramowitz

states "Conservatives and liberals don't just disagree — they actually like to hate each

other. And it's getting uglier" (Stelter, 2020, para 2). Research out of the University of

Maryland and Louisiana State University supports this claim, by identifying that negative

partisanship in the United States has reached unprecedented heights. Stating that the

current levels of extreme partisan animosity are a prelude to the collapse of democracy

(Kalmoe & Mason, 2019). There is a plethora of factors that could be identified as the cause of this hatred. One possible source of this polarization that has been identified is the increased access to the internet (Boxwell, et all, 2017). More specifically, the blame has been pointed to the rise of social media platforms as an attributer to this political divide (De-Wit, et al, 2019). Social-media giants, such as Facebook and Twitter, algorithms have transformed these social websites into political echo chambers filled with content the only reinforces one's preconceptions (Mims, 2020). In addition, research out of Northwestern University highlights the prevalence of confirmation bias on social media. Their findings suggest that exposer to viewpoints different than their own only leads to users digging in their heels further. Rather than swaying them to the other side the reader only reinforces their viewpoint (Abrams, 2020). In virtual spaces, Americans are sharing news and videos that represent their hardline political ideology. Many organizations have flourished in these times of negative partisanship by fueling the flames with unique rhetorical tactics. One such political apparatus is PragerU.

ArgUment

The purpose of this thesis is to identify and analyze the argumentative tactics used by PragerU in the public sphere. I will demonstrate how this site utilizes its unique position in the public sphere to open new discursive areas and inject their political ideologies that drive hardline partisanship. Using Kyle Larson and Guy McHendry's (2019) work as a foundational framework I will argue that PragerU should be identified as parasitic public. Parasitic publics are "reactionary discursive spaces formed residual and institutionalized affectively through the invention, circulation, and uptake of demagogic rhetorics" (Larson & McHendry, 2019, p. 517). By positioning PragerU as a

parasitic public, I can analyze how it works to uphold the dominant public sphere. PragerU's foundational roots exist in opposition to the other making it reactionary in nature, as Larson and McHendry (2019) suggest, is an essential characteristic of parasitic publics. The organization works, for the most part, to disseminate oppositional messages which seek to resist counter public perspectives. Counter-publics are discursive arenas for members of subordinated social groups, where they collectively invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate narratives that represent their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1999). This resistance is notably the focal point for the circulation of PragerU's videos, which are directly oppositional to counter-publics.

This thesis will argue that PragerU strategically engages in parasitic strategies to open discursive spaces allowing it to move, replace, and enlarge the center's assemblage of dominant publics. The specific parasitic strategy of this analysis will focus on how PragerU appropriates the strategies of contemporary counter-publics to affectively persuade its audience. Therefore, the objective of this thesis is to identify the PragerU as an example of a parasite public and analyze the rhetorical strategies it uses to influence the public sphere. I argue that PragerU relies on its vast network to create discursive spaces and gain legitimacy within the public sphere, through victimized rhetoric. Through victimization, PragerU operates in a parasitic fashion to influence the dominant public sphere and resist counter-publics. The arguments that PragerU deploys do not follow traditional structures for argumentation, but instead, rely on affective appeals to persuade and influence its audience. All in all, PragerU's efforts work to not only delegitimize and oppose counterpublics, but also seeks to employ methods that work to exclude discourse in the public sphere. This is significant because as Larson and

McHendry state these publics attempt to "move closer to, replace, and/or enlarge the center's assemblage of dominant publics" which strengthens its own circulatory, material power (Larson & McHendry, 2019, pg. 519). Which highlights the affects capabilities that parasite publics have on the public sphere.

My argument is that PragerU is a parasite public that appropriates the argumentative styles, techniques, and strategies of progressive movements, such as counter-publics. To set up this argument this introductory chapter will first introduce you to the rhetorical artifact that is PragerU. Then highlight the effects and reach that PragerU has on the public sphere and counter publics. Next, examine PragerU as a network and understand the ways in which it operates as such. Afterward I'll establish the understanding of how PragerU legitimizes its strategies in social discourse parasitically by coopting a university ethos. Before spotlighting how PragerU is problematic for both argumentation and public sphere scholars. Then conclude with a preview of the rest of the chapters in this thesis.

PragerWho?

Prager University, or PragerU for short, was established in 2009 and is a non-profit media company that was founded by Dennis Prager. Prager is an affluent seventy-one-year-old Jewish American, who attended Columbia University's School of International Affairs and received an honorary Doctor of Law from Pepperdine University. He is most famously known as a nationally syndicated conservative radio talk show host heard on 150 stations across the country. Dennis Prager is also a best-selling author that was appointed by President Ronald Reagan to the U.S. Delegation to the Vienna Review Conference on the Helsinki Accords, and by President George W. Bush

to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council. Utilizing his wealth and his well-establish reputation, in conservative circles, Prager decided to establish Prager University. Prager believed that modern "universities have all but shut down, not to mention demonized, non-left ideas" so he wanted to do something to combat that exclusion (Oppenhiemer, 2018, para 4). Dennis Prager set out to make his own 'University' to engage in an epistemic war with the leftist institutions that he despised.

PragerU stands for Prager University, a name that originated from the initial suggestion that sparked the idea for the website. Dennis Prager wanted to open his own physical University in 2008. However, one of Prager's employees, Estrin, was highly skeptical of the idea, perceiving it as 'too daunting' so they decided that rather than try to build a building, they could instead create a virtual 'university' (Oppenheimer, 2018). The operation was officially launched in 2011 and was a tax-exempt nonprofit that would showcase weekly 'educational' videos, mostly filmed at PragerU's Los Angeles-area studio. This media company however does not offer any official certifications or diplomas and is not considered an accredited academic institution. Yet PragerU still seeks to maintain the title of University allowing the original idea of creating a university to live on. Dennis Prager might not have manifested a physical university but that has not stopped him from trying to achieve a website as close to a University, as legally possible.

The about us section on the PragerU website proclaims that "Prager University is the world's only conservative nonprofit that is focused on changing minds through the creative use of digital media. Taking full advantage of today's technology and social media, we educate millions of Americans and young people about the values that make America great" (Prageru.com). This statement is representative of what the PragerU

ideology is and its overall goal. Since its conception, PragerU has sought to become a dominant tool that spreads conservative viewpoints online. The websites stated mission is to promote "the Judeo-Christian values on which America is founded: free speech, free enterprise, a moral foreign policy, and the rational case for God's existence," and counter what it sees as "the Leftist indoctrination imposed by schools and universities" (Prageru.com). This YouTube channel has evolved into a massive network of shows and organizations with a multi-million-dollar budget that is funded largely by millionaires and billionaires, with a goal of promoting American Exceptionalism (Bowles, 2020 & Kotch, 2019). Thanks to its funding and connections PragerU has been extremely successful, which highlights the significance of analyzing it as a rhetorical artifact.

The Prager Effect

PragerU website prides itself on its reach for they claim to have "changed millions of lives" through their videos. With over a thousand videos on YouTube, and an additional 100 on its website, PragerU averages four million views a day, one billion views each year, nine million social media followers, and ten thousand student ambassadors. These factors show that PragerU's videos are succeeding in achieving in reaching a large group of people, and thus disseminating their message. The PragerU website claims that content has garnered over 4 billion lifetime views, a number that is seen constantly increasing at the bottom of every single page on their website. PragerU's YouTube channel has over 2.78 Million Subscribers and over 1,197 videos. PragerU's most popular video "Do you understand the electoral college?" has over 66 million views. Many of their other popular videos have 10-20 million views on average. The

level of dissemination that PragerU videos have achieved is only half the issue, for videos potentially have persuasive capabilities on those who watch them.

The increase in reach of PragerU, on and offline, has drawn much attention to the force and potential of the discursive arena's it is creating. As mentioned above, its videos have reached millions of individuals and have been viewed over four billion times. PragerU was also ranked as one of the most effective free-market think tanks measured by its social media impact, leading in seven out of the eight measured points (Chafuen, 2020). PragerU led in followers and reach across every social media platform, demonstrating the size that this oppositional powerhouse has managed to achieve. *Vanity Fair* even argued that PragerU's method of packaging right-wing concepts into short, animated videos has been one of the most effective conversion tools to create young conservatives (Nguyen, 2018). So not only is PragerU's reach vaster than any other political network online but it has been identified as an effective rhetorical strategy for influencing a wide variety of individuals. So much so that President Donald Trump, in an event acknowledging online conservative activists, recognized Mr. Prager and the success that PragerU is having more success in rallying young people to Trump's side than many campaign committees aligned with the president (Halper, 2019). This influence signifies the noticeable capabilities that this media outlet has on disseminating messages to the public.

PragerU also focuses on expanding its ever-growing network through the use of 'political celebrities' who make appearances in their videos. These 'celebrities' have already well-established audiences, which allows social media and algorithms to expand its discursive arena (Bernstein, 2018). In a 2018 report from the Data & Society Research

Institute, Sociologist Francesca Tripodi described the effect of PragerU's videos as an opportunity to dabble in content that that heavily influenced by the alt-right, yet it comes across as mainstream. Tripodi also wrote that PragerU relies on "search engine optimization and suggested content to elevate their messaging," (p. 47) and that PragerU's content "allows for those who identify as mainline conservatives to gain easy access to white supremacist logic" (p. 36). Those expanding, indirectly, its audiences reach to further conservative ideologies outside their own, that further push listeners in their direction. Tripodi demonstrates that PragerU relies on a network of connections, highly dependent on algorithmic connections on social media to connect its users between Fox News, PragerU, and alt-right YouTube personalities (Tripodi, 2018). In addition, according to PragerU's own surveys 70% of their viewers said that their opinions have been changed on at least one issue from watching their videos. Henry Williams cautions that we should take these results with "a grain of salt," but noted, "I don't think that it is unreasonable to say that a percentage — perhaps not as high as 70%, but maybe between 10% and 60% of people who watched a video of theirs — some portion of those people's minds have been changed" (Rozsa, 2020, para 3). As one can see, there is a lot being said about PragerU, from its reach, its powerful network, capabilities, and its affects.

The sheer size and reach that PragerU has online, visible through the multitude of platforms and spaces it penetrates. This highlights the significance of the affective messages that PragerU is using in its website, due to the success it has in persuading people. PragerU has created a diverse network which it can deploy discursive tactics to a multitude of platforms and regions that contribute to its global influence. This shows that PragerU has transcended simply being media production and has become a network of

argument assemblages and material resources designed to disseminate broadly

conservative argument. In the analysis section, we will identify the ways that

dissemination relies on PragerU's status as a parasitic public. For now, we will first

complete our understanding of this artifact by identifying the various aspects of the

extensive network that is PragerU.

PragerU Network

PragerU should be viewed as more than just a media company but instead as a

network with connections to all regions of the right-wing political sphere on and offline.

In order to have a clear picture of this artifact for analysis, it is essential to identify a

complete understanding of this network. A network is understood by the relationships

that contextualize the particular engagement between people or things (Asen, 2015).

PragerU fits within this understanding for its connections can be understood as an

expansive network that serves to benefit PragerU in many ways. The extensions of

PragerU are seen in different regions such as funding, organizations, individual

spotlighting, virtual spheres, and physical manifestations. The network PragerU has

established is not only is it essential to the size and reach that it has achieved, but it also

spotlights how actors within the PragerU network play a major role in the arguments it

deploys. All of PragerU's network have a interlinked connections to conservative

political ideologies, specifically tied to the Republican party. Therefore, we will look at

the different connections and influences that shape PragerU to achieve a comprehensive

understanding of this artifact.

The PragerU website claims that it relies on donations from everyday individuals,

implying that it is highly dependent on small contributions from its average viewer. This

perception positions it as an entity that is relatable to its viewer as well as dependent on them. It also builds on the idea it is a University, for any who benefits from their knowledge is expected to contribute financially. This has led to PragerU acquiring around 130,000 online donors, which accounts for roughly 40% of its budget (Halper, 2019). The company's annual budget however has reached about $6 million which is all donated, according to the CEO of PragerU, Marissa Streit (Halper, 2019). Contrary to what is implied on the website, the group has historically relied mainly on big-dollar conservative donors to supply that amount (Bridge Initiative Team, 2020). Several top donors include Dan and Farris Wilks, the Koch political network, Lee Roy Mitchell, Sheldon Adelson, Michael Leven, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. Prager University's large revenue stream has more than tripled in the aftermath of Trump's election as president, increasing from $5.42 million in 2016 to $18.6 million in 2018 (Wiener, 2020). Most of that money is consistently spent on Facebook advertising. PragerU spends more than major political campaigns and national advocacy groups and ranks among the 10 biggest political spenders on the platform (Halper, 2019). Indeed, its 2018 tax filing shows that the group spent $1.2 million on Facebook, and another $612,000 on Google (Wiener, 2020). Such spending is the main reason the website has been able to grow so rapidly and reach so many people (Goforth, 2019). This spending highlights how PragerU has been able to disseminate its videos so effectively.

In addition, PragerU mobilizes its spending to open discursive areas that allow for it to further engage in parasitic strategies and practices. The company works to expands the reach of its ideas into discursive spaces through two distinct modes, physically and virtually. First is how PragerU operates in physical spaces by establishing itself directly

onto college campuses. This allows them to "open discursive spaces" in areas where they claim to be excluded from via student-led efforts. With the use of ambassador programs, clubs, and guest speakers on college campuses they formulate physical manifestations of their viewpoints. PragerU promotes clubs and ambassador programs on college campuses with over 6,500 student promoters, which it calls the Prager Force. These efforts continually work to reinforce many of the rhetorical narratives and strategies that are seen in PragerU's videos by providing additional platforms to spread its reach. These students host on-campus meetings and gather at least once a year for conventions. The goal is to allow students to further network and spread the ideals of PragerU across their college and high school campuses. Many of these students are even signed by PragerU executives to host made-for-the-internet shows to fuel 2020 content, including a book club and a show geared to Hispanics called Americanos. As Prager would put it this club combats the indoctrination of the left directly at the source: college campus' (Bowles, 2020). Physical manifestations such as the Prager Force and other conservative clubs on campus aid PragerU's efforts to legitimize itself drive its rhetorical strategies even further. All of which occurs under the guise that PragerU is not allowed to be in educational spaces in the first place. Positioning PragerU's physical discursive spaces as rebellious and heroic in the eyes of the average conservative. These practices highlight the ways in which PragerU mobilizes people in the real world via outreach methods to influence and affect them.

The second mode of opening discursive areas for parasitic strategies occurs through virtual spaces, which is the primary focus of this thesis. Here PragerU deploys and hosts, a wide of variety shows, guest stars, and personalities that strategically connect

PragerU to its audience online. In doing to PragerU positions itself in relation to other public spheres for conservatism and the far right. By utilizing individuals from all arenas of conservatism, on and offline, social media algorithms connect its viewers to PragerU and further down the rabbit hole of conservative ideology. PragerU mass disseminates affective conservative messages, through the use of short five-minute videos on various political, economic, and philosophical topics. The idea behind these short five-minute videos is that they provide you the same amount of education as an entire semester-long college course (Bowles, 2020). Once again, PragerU seeks to equate its identity directly to that of the University. Yet the University lacks the knowledge production capabilities that PragerU can provide. Most of PragerU's videos are hosted on YouTube. However, some have violated YouTube's policies for being 'inappropriate' leading to them being moved to PragerU's official website. The release of these videos is specifically timed and targeted to match mainstream news to increase their reach (Rozsa, 2020). The messages portrayed in these videos are mainly reactionary as they tend to exist in direct opposition to the ideals of "the left." According to Henry Williams, co-founder of The Gravel Institute, the videos are also "deeply baked into the kind of crypto-libertarian ideology," which is "very influential. I think that they're almost populist in a way" (Rozsa, 2020, para. 7). This is important to recognize for it shapes the ways PragerU's messages persuade people by connecting to their personal grievances.

PragerU also capitalizes on using the ethos of the notable conservative figureheads that are included in their videos. This adds a unique aspect to PragerU's network for the large number of personalities that the company brings in as guest speakers expand its online presence. PragerU showcases over 130 distinct personalities,

many of which are famous or popular in virtual spaces. The PragerU website list of presenters includes people like Ben Shapiro, Mike Rowe, Steven Crowder, Candice Owens, and Tucker Carlson. The use of these personalities from all different aspects of conservatism plays a huge role in PragerU's marketing tactics. Due to the interconnections between the personalities and PragerU social media algorithms, tie them together, increasing visibility for both parties (Tripodi, 2018). Anyone who has ever been featured in a PragerU video is connected to this vast network, where not only are they able to acquire more viewership but pipelined into the network that provides funding as well (Tripodi, 2018). The practice of having educational videos with prominent figureheads who deliver simple affective messages of conservative points and/or claims as highly palatable information to be easily consumed and spread. This practice helps creates the discursive arenas for PragerU to thrive and inject their discursive parasitic strategies into different contemporary discourses.

To summarize PragerU's network highlights its expansive reach both in the physical world and in virtual spaces. PragerU's funders are key actors in developing the overall messages found in PragerU's videos for they provide PragerU with the ability to produce and disseminate its videos. Funders in turn benefit from a "quid pro quo" in that their political ideologies get represented to millions of people globally, and algorithms drive viewers back to their website. PragerU network of connections often overlaps and exchanges with other companies creating an extensive web from which PragerU can expand upon, increasing said funneling effect for its viewers. PragerU strategically deploys resources it acquires to disseminate its positions in both physical and virtual spaces. This examination provides merely a glimpse of the expansive network that

PragerU has created. Providing an essential comprehension of the interconnections of the company, to better understand the sheer size of this artifact. With this understanding we can move forward to examine the problematic aspects PragerU presents for public sphere scholars.

ProblematicU

The reason why PragerU is the topic of focus for this thesis is largely due to its unprecedented success in changing influencing people online. These videos are now even being shown in college classrooms for their persuasive value (WTOL, 2020). This exemplifies how effective PragerU is in inserting itself into discursive spaces. Videos, by PragerU, continually make sweeping claims with little evidence and few warrants, are dominating virtual spaces. Despite strenuous relationship to traditional understandings of argumentation and structure they have been proven to not only be persuasive but push individuals further down a pipeline about right-wing media (Rosza, 2020; Tripodi, 2018). Therefore, the problematic nature that requires further analysis is how the affective parasitic strategics that PragerU engages in are achieving such a significant level of reach and influence. Particularly, the use of such affective strategies to reconceptualize its viewer understandings of power, which we will later identify as victimization. These tactics highlighting the need for a network analysis of the arguments being made by PragerU, in order to understand how it influences the public sphere and counter-publics.

Additionally, there are several potentially problematic aspects to the way that PragerU operates. The first is its mass dissemination of messages towards the foundational ideas upon which prominent counter-publics are formulated upon. The strength of its support and network allows it to mass-produce new discursive spaces and

rhetorical strategies at a far greater rate and level than any counter-public it opposes. This occurrence suggests the possibility of a much larger disadvantage to accessing power structures between parasitic and counter-publics. Spotlighting potentially a larger imbalance of symbolic and material sources between parasitic publics and counter publics. Such imbalance can be demonstrated by comparing the success of PragerU to the success of other progressive movements seeking to achieve counter publicity. This stresses a need for scholars to reconceptualize the ways we understand resistance to counter-public movements from the dominant public.

Additionally, PragerU continually promotes the narrative that its views are in fact the ones that are oppressed and the minority. PragerU claims that all areas of society have a high liberal bias that works to exclude them and its viewers. In doing so, PragerU defines its own conditions of oppression, this rhetorically cooptation positions PragerU existence as equivalent to the model of counterpublics. This affective strategy is used to persuade its viewers to reject and resist counterpublics narratives. The self-conceived exclusion from prominent channels of political discourse and lack of political power employs its own "counter" status. In doing so, its audience perceives PragerU, and its network, as a unique critical opposition that fosters a "new" discursive arena for individuals, like themselves, to "invent" and circulate discourse with liberatory abilities equal to that of counterpublics. This guise of counter-publicity poses a unique threat to communication scholars, in which one is forced to evaluate whether the conditions for the creation of counterpublics hold validity to the ways in which we understand constructions of power (Larson & McHendry, 2019). This understanding of how PragerU is

problematic can allow us to move forward with a formal establishment of the argumentation of this thesis.

PreviewU

The main questions driving this thesis are as follows: "How can we understand what PragerU is within the knowledge of the public sphere?" and "What strategies does PragerU employ, and how do those strategies foreclose/empower particular modes of argument?" To answer these questions the remainder of this thesis will study PragerU as a parasitic argumentative actor. I will show how PragerU adopts a unique strategy of victimization for gaining legitimacy in the public sphere as a viable argumentative actor. Additionally, how those strategies are used to protect what can be seen as the dominant public sphere and deteriorate counter-public resistance.

The analysis section will detail the specific ways this rhetorical strategy is used to legitimize itself. To accomplish this task, we need to first understand how PragerU legitimizes itself parasitically by copying the ethos of a University. Then conduct an analysis of two politically relevant spheres that of gender and race discourse. These two arenas highlight the way PragerU consistently engages in parasitic argumentative practice of victimization to influence its audience. This strategy focuses on appropriating the affective relationship with oppression, found in counterpublics, to circulate the strategies of victimization to an audience that exists in power.

The following chapter will outline a theoretical framework for my analysis. I will provide a literature review of all relevant public sphere scholars from Habermas to Larson & McHendry to show readers how scholarship has adapted to the changing nature of publics, counter-publics, and currently, neoliberalism. I will make the theoretical

argument that parasitic publics is a unique adaptation of what Asen has called the "networked public sphere," and that PragerU is exemplary of this possibility. Chapter three will guide readers through my analytical argumentative approach. I will provide information on what it means to do a networked argument analysis and why it is important. Additionally, I will also delimit my research by discussing exactly what artifacts, or texts, I will analyze, specifically in my thesis. Chapter four is where I will conduct my analysis. In this chapter, I will establish how PragerU coopts the ethos of a university to legitimize itself into different discursive spaces. Then analyze two argumentative issues that Prager U injects itself in using the parasitic strategy of victimization: race and gender. The analysis of these issues from the perspective of PragerU as a parasitic actor that uses victimhood as a strategy to exploit the public to which it gains access too.

Chapter five discusses the implications of these findings by talking about the future of PragerU, parasitic publics, democratic deliberation, and the public sphere. Is it possible PragerU is a legitimate argumentative actor in the public sphere? How does an understanding of parasitic publics alter the possibilities of how publics and counter could or should function. How does this affect actual universities, their ethos, epistemics, and the dissemination of information? Does victimization play a bigger role in parasitic public theory then previously established? Or is it that we are possibly dealing with the failure of dialectics itself. Followed by a conclusion of my research that includes reviewing all of my chapters and paving the way for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Public Sphere

This chapter will provide a comprehensive review of all the relevant literature for

this thesis. The foundation framework for this thesis revolves around an understanding of

how parasite publics exist in relationship to public sphere theory. This chapter is an

inquiry into the theoretical framework of Larson and McHendry's work on parasite

public. A review of the proceeding public sphere scholarship will help uncover how

PragerU can best be understood in relation to this established literature. This chapter will

move through the foundational philosophical framework that laid the roots for

understanding the public sphere by engaging the work of John Dewey. Then I discuss

Habermas' work which conceptualized the public sphere as "society engaged in critical

public debate" and establishing it as "a realm of our social life in which something

approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 1986, p. 52). Next, I engage with

the multitude of reconfigurations to public sphere theory that is compiled in the work of

Asen and Brouwers. These essential expansions include the conceptualizations of

counterpublics, the neoliberalization of the public sphere, and the addition of parasite

publics. I will break down public sphere theory as a point of reference and traverses the

multitude of changes and additions that have occurred leading to contemporary

understandings which allow for an understanding of Larson and McHendry's work.

The goal of this chapter is to lay down an understanding from which I can build the

argument that PragerU can be understood as an example of a parasitic public.

John Dewey

The notion of the public has operated in many fields with a plethora of

definitions. John Dewey's 1927 work *The Public and Its Problems* provides a

philosophical framework and outline of 'The Public.' Dewey understood 'The Public' as

an ephemeral phenomenon built through collective perceptions (Dewey, 1927).

Essentially, the public is a conglomeration of opinions of a group of people that has a

relation to each other. Publics exist not as a stable entity tied to a geographical location

but instead are in the aggregated physical bodies of the person. In this way, the public can

be perceived as a collection of shared meanings or agreed-upon messages. According to

Dewey, 'The Public' came into being as members of a political community perceived

their affected status by the indirect consequences of human actions. Dewey emphasizes

that it is the perceptions of the unpredictable consequences from actions that are the

source of the public (Dewey, 1927). In addition, Dewey's work expressed concerns for a

public that faced increasing social complexities that in which threaten the collective

perception and practical judgment of a functioning public of citizens. Dewey

conceptualizations of the public provide a philosophical paradigm for understanding how

collective thought can be understood. He also began identifying the conditions of

community action, identified challenges facing the public, and highlighted possibilities of

multiple publics (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). Establishing a baseline understanding of the

public for us to engage with the proceeding scholarship.

Jürgen Habermas

A foundational understanding of the public sphere cannot proceed without engaging the work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas, a member of the Frankfurt School, wrote *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* where he explicated the historical and critical concept of the 'Public Sphere.' Which he identified as the emergence of a realm, within civil society, where citizens came together as private persons to form a public. Habermas' stressed that the notion of the *public* is as to the notion of the *common* (Habermas, 1989). Habermas' understood that society, via publics, work to legitimize themselves. He explains that "social systems can maintain themselves vis-a-vis outer nature through instrumental actions (according to technical rules), and vis-a-vis inner nature through communicative actions (according to valid norms), because at the socio-cultural stage of development animal behavior is reorganized under imperatives of validity claims" (Habermas, 1975, p. 10). These self-regulating social systems explain how publics maintain themselves.

To Habermas, the ideal public sphere was predicated on critical discourse and presupposed rational debate in public places and spaces. A public therefore should be engaged in deliberative discourse about the activities of the state. Habermas recognized that this process was historically sustained through pamphlets and coffee houses. In addition, Habermas, began to structure the public sphere in an attempt to identify important attributes within public sphere theory. These characteristics of the public sphere include access being guaranteed to all citizens; citizens debate openly; citizens debate matters of general interest; and formulation of public opinion (Habermas, 1989). To summarize the public sphere can be understood as the social sites or arenas where

meanings is articulated, distributed, and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted by, and in this process, 'the public' (Haberman, 1989). These social systems, i.e., publics, linguistically create the objectivity of knowledge and legitimacy of valid norms, which paved the way to understand publics and public spheres. Public discussion within these systems can result in the formulation of political action as Slavko Splical (2008) points out that the public sphere fosters "a critical impulse against injustice, based on the secrecy of state actions and as an enlightening momentum, substantiating the 'region of human liberty', making private citizens equal in the public use of reason" (p. 22). This understanding lays a foundational entry point to further engagement with contemporary public sphere theory.

Habermas recognized that the public sphere ultimately fostered a political consciousness that led to the development of the bourgeois political subject (Habermas, 1989). This public sphere signified an open forum in which citizens were implicit in the practice of the bourgeois and explicit in their justification of the public sphere. Habermas explains the bourgeois public sphere is "regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor" (Habermas, 1989, p. 27). Habermas' later work identifies unique actors that influence the modern political public sphere, that being professionals in the media system and politicians. In addition, he identifies five different actors who transmit and influence information and who receive it. This includes lobbyists, experts, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and advocates for interest groups (Habermas, 2006). Habermas argues that the modern public sphere requires "specific means for transmitting information and

influencing those who receive it" (Habermas, 2006, p. 136). Habermas emphasizes the importance of media and its effects on the public sphere by illustrating that forms of media play a role in establishing and maintaining opinions the in public sphere through dissemination. When Habermas' work reached America, it led to an uptake in public sphere scholarship (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). Habermas' work provided an ideological basis for the bourgeois public sphere which led to understandable critiques in Habermas' position, based on his limited scope. Moving forward I will identify the different extrapolations of the public sphere that led to the reconceptualization of its contemporary understanding.

Reconfigurations of Public Sphere Theory

Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer's introduction to *Counterpublics and the State* identified three major reconfigurations needed for the advancement of the public sphere. This book lays out a comprehensive framework for understanding what can best be described as contemporary Public Sphere Theory. The reconfigurations to the public sphere are summarized from a wide range of scholars who engage with public sphere theory. The advancements made by the authors collected here combine to make a suitable framework for understanding how parasite publics fit within contemporary knowledge. The three major reconfigurations that Brouwer and Asen recognize consist of the reconsideration of the separation of the public sphere and the state, the multiplicity of the public, and the loosening of boundaries and appreciate the permeability of borders.

The first key move in public sphere theory is the reconsideration of the separation of public and state. While Habermas's original theory was strictly separatists', regarding his understanding of the public sphere and the state, calls have come to reevaluate this

relationship. Micheal Schudson's response to Habermas argues that the state should in fact be seen as a part of the public sphere (Schudson, 1992). Asen and Brouwer (2001) claim that the separation of the public and state is "inadequate for understanding contemporary political arrangements, that have blurred the lines separating civil society and the state" (p. 15). Additionally, the separatist view would discount the capacity of an activist state to intervene in society. The public seeks to engage and move the state in various directions based on public deliberation. With this understanding of how the state figures into the public sphere we can move into the next reconfiguration.

The second expansion to public sphere theory followed the work of Nancy Fraser and Rita Felski. Their inquiry concerned alternative arenas to the dominant public sphere led to the understanding of a multiplicity of publics. Established a framework for understanding the public as existing in multiple spheres as they choose. Fraser brought challenges to Habermas' definition of "common concern" noting that there was not a naturally given a-prior boundary of concern, as she points out shifts in concern over domestic violence. Perhaps more importantly, Fraser argued that the bourgeois public sphere was in fact a space exclusive to men and specifically discriminated against women, and other historically marginalized groups. She identified that Habermas' understanding of this public sphere was exclusion, implying that other spheres exist outside of it. She saw that the bourgeois public sphere as an "arena, the training ground and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men who were coming to see themselves as a "universal class" and preparing to assert their fitness to govern" (Fraser, 1992, p. 60). In this way, Fraser recognized that the bourgeois public sphere is hegemonic and brackets off inequalities.

In Fraser's historical reevaluation of the bourgeois public sphere, she argues that political power shifted from a repressive mode of domination to one that is hegemonic. Where the public sphere did not shift towards inclusivity but instead was a rule by the power of the majority (Fraser, 1992). The existence of an "in" group and an "out" group of the bourgeois public sphere set the foundations for counter publics theory, which Fraser called "Subaltern counter-publics" that should be seen as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1999, p. 67). Thus, public spheres have been deemed as tactical areas that are essential to establishing identity, experience, perspective, positionality, engagement, and intersections. This energizes and expands public discourse into the sometimes-difficult process of living together (Asen, 2018).

Counter-publics are a significantly influential aspect to understanding multiplicity for it recognizes the existence of public spheres outside the dominate sphere. This reconceptualization understands that counterpublics are formulated from a self-consciousness of identities forged by specific conditions, such as that of discrimination, oppression, and cultural dislocation (Felski, 1989). Academic efforts supporting this have determined that marginalized individuals use counter-publics (Jackson & Foucault, Welles, 2016; Sowards & Renegar, 2006), compared to the public sphere of the economic elites (Fraser, 2013). The concept of a counter-public opened scholarship to recognize critical opposition that seeks to disrupt the homogenization and universalizing process promoted by a dominant sphere to create uncritical consumerism (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). This is what scholars refer to when referring to the promise of critical publicity, or

counterpublicity, which would be the end goal of a counter-public (Fraser, 2013). Therefore, the understanding of multiplicity of public spheres presents them as locations that allow for dialogues that project a multi-faceted negotiation of power (Pezzullo, 2003). Another major aspect noticed from the multiplicity of publics and counter publics is the concept of "oscillation". Explicated by Jane Manbridge (1996), oscillation is the ability for counter-publics to move across varying arenas.

The final reconfiguration of public sphere theory is the loosening of boundaries. Which implies one should view public spheres as permeable. This piggybacks off the idea of oscillation, for individuals would have the ability to freely move between arenas. Seyla Benhabib's understanding recognizes that struggles exist across boundaries and at multiple sites at once. Benhabib states that "all struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously been considered 'private', non-public and non-political" (Benhabib, 1992, p. 100). Stressing the need to reevaluate the way we recognize the borders of public spheres. Jean Cohen (1996) supports this by recommending scholars pay closer attention to valuable sites of study regarding the struggles of/over demarcation. While Asen and Brouwer (2001) recommend the loosening of boundaries they still believe that the distinctions of publics hold important qualities for scholarship. Boundaries play a role in identifying different spheres where argumentation takes place. Understanding how boundaries function within contemporary public sphere scholarship provides a needed mobility for individuals through different spheres.

The reconfigurations of public sphere theory that have led a contemporary understanding are essential to examining the possible relations between various publics.

Habermas's original account, was in large part, scrutinized for "perpetuating its own exclusions by failing to explore the contemporaneous functioning of alternative modes of the public sphere" (Asen and Brouwer, 2001, p. 6). Scholars have since worked to identify the bourgeois public sphere as one that was "dominant" or "official" public sphere by spotlighting that its exclusionary nature and efforts to homogenize distinctions of opinion. This homogenization can be seen as a "common value" or "public good", that inevitably blocks the potential for certain topics of deliberation to enter the public sphere. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993) reflections of the bourgeois public sphere determined that capitalists participated in this public sphere to bolster their hegemonic socioeconomic position through the invocation of a public good that only furthered their own individual interest. Capitalists, for instance, have enacted a dominant knowledge or a specialized knowledge that seeks to exploit this sphere (Negt & Kluge, 1993). Habermas ultimately conceded to his many critics, admitting that his public sphere was based on "fictitious identities" and presupposed that social and economic conditions presented "everyone" with an equal opportunity to engage. Habermas eventually recognized that bourgeois ideology warranted the exclusion of those who were disadvantaged within society. Due to their lack of education and autonomy, they were not seen as capable of making the "best" decisions to advance society (Habermas, 1992). Habermas went on to note that the public sphere was simultaneously restricted, with the emergence of mass media, and the influence of money and politics, it became infiltrated by power. Signifying the influence, that money and politics have on altering the public sphere. As well as conceding to the reconfigurations that are promoted in contemporary scholarship.

Networked Public Spheres

The next logical expansion from the reconfigurations of the public sphere is the idea of networked public spheres for its roots lies in the concept of multiplicity. The multiplicity of publics signals direct and indirect, as well as a near and distant relationship with other publics. This implies that dialogue between publics is not equal but instead is best represented by a multi-faceted negotiation of power (Pezzullo, 2003). Rhetorical scholars in the field, like Gerard Hauser explains that the contemporary public sphere can be understood as a web of discursive arenas, that is spread across society (Hauser, 1999). The analogy to a web expresses the interconnectivity of public spheres, the attributes of which are representative of networks. Seyla Benhabib expands on this stating that public discourse includes participants situated across various networks. The engagement with unique interlocuters builds something beyond their specific interactions. Public conversation is therefore a result of the interlocking net of a multitude of connections, associations, networks, and organizations that contribute to this dialogue (Benhabib, 1996). As Asen and Brouwer (2010) explain the networked aspect of the public sphere allows individuals to transcend various publics. This conceptualization has become so widely accepted within the field, that even Jurgen Habermas reconceptualized his unitary model and developed a model of the public sphere as a "network" (Habermas, 1992). Ultimately, the recognition of the multiplicity of public spheres has led to the understanding of potential interconnections that exist between them, which is can be understood as the networked public sphere. On top of that, it has led to other research that suggests that the public screen is used for dissemination, images, publicity, and

distractions (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002). Scholars argue the public screen additionally

accounts for technological and cultural changes.

Neoliberalism and the Public Sphere

Many contemporary public sphere theorists recognize that "neoliberalism requires

deliberative engagement with the tensions of an embodied, habitual mode of neoliberal

communication (Asen, 2018; Chaput, 2010). Asen (2018) for instance calls upon critical,

rhetorical, and communication scholars to observe neoliberalism as both an intellectual

orientation and a practical project that seeks to challenge public sphere scholarship.

Asen's call is joined by others who argue neoliberalism requires public sphere scholars to

have deliberative engagement with tensions with an embodied, habitual mode of

neoliberal communication (Chaput,2010). Before continuing with a literature review of

how neoliberalism is infecting the public sphere theory, I will provide a brief review of

neoliberalism for context.

Due to the complex nature of neoliberalism, this review on the subject should

supply palpable access to some essential information. In doing so, we can move forward

to understand how scholars are beginning to recognize the effects of neoliberalism on the

public sphere. *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, compiled contributions from over 50

leading authors on the subject, in order to establish a base level of reference to

neoliberalism. The handbook broadly defines neoliberalism as "the extension of

competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society"

that "attempts to instill a series of values and social practices in subjects" (Springer, et al,

2016, p. 2). As David Harvey (2007) pinpoints in *The Brief History of Neoliberalism*

there is a distinct motive for this extension of economic markets as the model for human

relationships, which is to "re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (p. 19). Ultimately, one can best understand the concept of neoliberalism as a prioritization of the maximum accumulation of individual wealth for only the economic elites, at any cost. Neoliberalism relies on the structural transformation of institutions and the dissemination of neoliberal rationality into all domains and activities (Brown, 2015). This is what Harvey clarifies as the process of creative destruction called 'Neoliberalization'. This process entailed the reconfiguration of "not only prior institutional frameworks and powers but also of divisions of labour, social relations, welfare, provisions technological mixes, ways of life and thought productive activities, attachments to land and habits of the heart" to suit its goal (Harvey, 2007, p. 3). This process is one that seeps into all aspects of society.

Neoliberalism is a class-based ideological project. This can be understood through a Foucauldian perspective, as a form of governmentality, that seeks to neoliberalize the public, by challenging the social and public thought (Foucault, 2008). Neoliberalism seeks to reconfigure the basic assumptions of the subject to prioritize individual freedoms and the market (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism, therefore, can alter discourse and reshape societal norms to influence others. As a result, it compels individuals to believe the neoliberal utopian ideal as rational and intrinsic to humanity. The neoliberal market value rationale is promoted as a framework for societal understanding. This use of neoliberalism has proliferated radical individualism as "gospel", inscribing both greed and indifference, encourages massive disparities in wealth, health, nutrition, education, housing, and debt (Giroux, 2014). Neoliberalism acts as a class-based ideological project that functions as a hegemonic mode of discourse. This discourse "has pervasive effects

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on the ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (Harvey, 2007, p. 3). With this understanding of neoliberalism, we can return to the discussion of public sphere theory and grapple with how neoliberalism is playing a role in that field.

Asen's concern is that neoliberalism has the potential to threaten critical publicity by undermining multiple modes of publicity. This is done through a neoliberal publicity, which is predicated on the assumption that the market treats all actors equally. This market-based publicity makes inequality invisible by presupposing equality onto all actors (Asen, 2015). There are three unique challenges that neoliberalism presents to the theory are subjectivity, public engagement, and agency/structure. First, is the "homogentisic" effect of neoliberalism, which functions similarly to the bourgeois subject, where individuals are positioned as market actors guided by competition. With a uniform motivation and goal which seeks to discount the productive power of diversity and difference in the public sphere. The effects on subjectivity from neoliberalism, are noticed in the scholarship of public sphere (Asen, 2015). The prioritization of individualism fosters in and out groups of independents and dependents into public opinion that blusters neoliberal policy frameworks (Gent, 2017). Regarding subjectivity, Michel Foucault stated, in his lectures referring to neoliberalism that "Citizens ceased to be subjected to the social but instead are commodified as economic subject incentivized by money" (Foucault, 1978). As Asen points out, Neoliberalism has the capability to alter discourse and reshape societal norms to be suitable subjects for the neoliberal state. The rationale of the market is therefore promoted as a framework to subjugate the individual beyond economics and into one's societal understanding of the self. The prioritization of

individualism fosters in and out groups of independents and dependents into public opinion that blusters neoliberal ideologies (Gent, 2017). The neoliberalization of the public sphere echoes the same exclusionary tactics that Fraser observed in the bourgeois public sphere.

The second challenge identified by Asen is public engagement. This is an essential aspect of the public sphere, for it facilitates the rate at which people are willing to interact with one another. However, Neoliberal models establish self-interest as a universal human value or motivation which severely limits the public's view, knowledge, and experiences (Pennington, 2014). As mentioned above in the uses of neoliberalism, there is a large focus on the independent and therefore self-interest becomes the priority of the public. Neoliberal models of the public also are deeply rooted in reorienting agency and structures. This is uniquely connected to the creative destruction mentioned by Harvey (2005) as it is now being shown to infect or co-opt critiques involving feminism (Fraser, 2013) and race (Jones & Mukherjee, 2010; Enck-Wanzer, 2011). Asen highlights how public engagement is at risk due to the way neoliberalism is affecting society at large.

Lastly, neoliberal models of the public also are reorienting agency. This is uniquely connected to the creative destruction mentioned by Harvey (2005) as it is now being shown to infect or co-opt critiques involving feminism (Fraser, 2013) and race (Jones & Mukherjee, 2010; Enck-Wanzer, 2011). Neoliberal subjects are advancing narratives within those movements that undermining the structures necessary for their achievements and even cause them to implode. The public sphere is now being recognized as not only a strategic place for resistance but for neoliberalism as well. These

challenges present a unique battlefield for scholars to approach and understand

neoliberalism as a communication theory. Asen's work also begins to critique the

neoliberal public as well as begins the discussion of identifying prospects for resistance

through coordinated action of networked publics. Asen combined others, provide an

ample framework for this thesis to expand off and further explore the notions of the

public sphere.

  Money as understood by Ronald Greene (2007) can be seen as a rhetorical device

in the modern area contributing to this neoliberalization. Greene's essay *Rhetorical*

Capital: Communicative Labor, Money/Speech, and Neo-Liberal Governance suggest

that we should look at the ways "capitalism incorporates rhetorical communication into

its regime of accumulation and its mode of regulation" (Greene, 2007, p. 328). Greene

argues that money is often used as a unique rhetorical strategy in contemporary politics.

According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, political discourse is directly financed by large

corporations that foster the norms and conventions through commercialized outlets which

drive other kinds of public discourse out of circulation (Campbell, 2004). Greene then

lays out several concepts for pursuing such a materialist approach within the rhetoric of

political economy. In pointing out that in the United States free speech protections are

provided to the money that finances the political process Greene proposes this new

critical approach to hermeneutics.

  To Greene, Money/Speech refers to "the overdetermined articulation of money

and advocacy that can appear in different rhetorical forms: political advertisements,

oratory, lawn signs, lobbying" (Greene, 2009, p. 329). This concept was solidified when

the United States Supreme Court fused money and speech together under the norm of free

speech. Greene positioning Money/Speech as a form of political rhetoric to the financial process. Noting that Money/Speech appears in different rhetorical forms and it works institutionally to embed and socially regularize behavior (Greene, 2009). Greene's reading of the rhetorical dimension of money provides a means for conceptualizing how affluent people can shape and alter the public sphere through financial avenues. Money can be seen as the means by which communication can occur, for advertisement, messaging and forms of dissemination all have a financial cost to them. Contemporary modes of communicating on a mass scale require the expenditure of money. This allows those who are funding different rhetorical efforts to have sway or influence on the messages portrayed. In other words, Money/Speech takes the citizen-rhetorician out of the public sphere and into an apparatus of advocacy. This conceptualizes political rhetoric as "the terrain of capitalist production and reproduction to the terrain of finance capital" (Greene, 2009, p. 329). Money is thus political rhetoric. Those who fund and support institutions utilize those apparatuses to speak.

Parasitic Publics

The contemporary public sphere as observed by Lauren Berlant (2011) is susceptible to affective strategies. Berlant identifies that the public sphere is intimate in nature and that the central structuring factor is developed through affect. This is because as Sara Ahmed points out "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects but are produced as effects of circulation" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 8). Which implies that it is not just the collective thoughts that mold the public sphere, it's also individuals' feelings and emotions. According to Ahmed, "affective circulation structures and animates social formations" making it important to recognize "emotions not as psychological

dispositions, but as investments in social norms" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 4 & 56). The public

sphere is therefore created by history, power, and social, material, and economic

structures. When the societal norms begin to erode and/or experience strong counter

discursive challenges, the publics benefitting from said hegemonic discourses refocus

that resistance as a process of their demise (Larson & McHendry, 2019). Illustrating how

discursive strategies work to center that affective demise of hegemonic publics,

positioning them as victims, as a main motivator to influence public spheres. These such

strategies work with and feed off a power structures, in a way that can best be understood

as parasitic. Therefore, it is important to understand publics as containing complex

assemblages of discourses, processes, and relationships. This understanding recognizes

the ways in which relations of power and symbolic and material resources influence

production, circulation, and reception of discourse in the public sphere" (Asen, 2015, p.

265). This understanding of how publics operate leads us to the main literature base of

this thesis: parasite publics.

In 2019 Kyle Larson and Guy McHendry Jr proposed the unique concept of

"Parasite Publics" to add theoretical clarity to the scholarship on counter publics (Asen,

2001, 2017; Fraser; 1990; Squires, 2002). Referencing Nowacek (2011), they

acknowledge that Counterpublic scholarship "offers a valuable and necessary attention to

alternative publics advancing social justice and opening discursive space, offering a

"constellation of associated social relations, goals identities, ways of knowing (and

feeling), and even knowledge domains" (Nowacek, 2011 p. 19). However, they also

recognize that there is a lack of attention to alternative publics, such as white nationalist

publics, that lend theoretical ambiguity and inconsistency to the designation

"counterpublic" (Larson & McHendry, 2019). Under the previous framework for counter publics, they highlight that both black feminist publics and white nationalist publics could be identified under the conceptualization of a counterpublic. It is because of this Larson and McHendry's essay spotlights that there was an insufficient recognition of power, privilege, and oppression within the conceptual framework of counter publics, and a need to understand what they identified as parasite publics.

Larson and McHendry's essay begins with an identification of several discursive spaces online opened by a white nationalist group known as Swarmfront. Swarmfront engages in massive coordinated rhetorical attacks on digital forms and comment sections of trending topics seeking to inject their oppressive ideas into the public sphere. Larson and McHendry recognized the need to argue for a unique public that could best represent the phenomenon that they were observing regarding Swarmfront. The conclusion of this revelation was to argue for the establishment of a parasite public, which is a public that holds a privileged symbiotic relationship with dominant power structures, while not necessarily being central enough to be a "dominant public" (Larson & McHendry, 2019). The goal of a parasite public is to "move closer to, replace, and /or enlarge the center's assemblage of dominate publics (or "hosts" of the power structure)" (Larson & McHendry, 2019, p. 519). A parasite public, as its name implies, attempts to articulate with and feed off a power structure's oppressive norms to limit the spaces in which other publics can engage and increase its own access and material power. The authors argue that this addition of parasite publics into counterpublic scholarship helps to better account for power, privilege, and oppression in the public sphere and is a necessary addition to scholarship on publics and counterpublics (Larson & McHendry, 2019). A parasite public

properly defined as a "reactionary discursive space formed residual and institutionalized affectively through the invention, circulation, and uptake of demagogic rhetorics" (Larson & McHendry, 2019, p. 531). One can further understand the behavior of a parasite publics by recognizing how they feed off the oppressive conditions in the public sphere. By engaging with dominant discourses, parasite publics work to exploit the dominant publics' force and protect dominant publics against all other counter-discursive challenges (Larson & McHendry, 2019). Parasitic publics work by means of affective demagogic strategies to manipulate public spheres and protect hegemonic structures.

The hegemonic structures that the artifact of our analysis seeks to maintain are foundational to the construction of the United States. The US conception expands from its settler-colonial foundation to contemporary forms of racism, see via mass incarceration (Larson & McHendry, 2019). The United States is a white ethnocentric, upheld through hegemonic structures of whiteness and the patriarchy. Sara Ahmed describes whiteness as a phenomenology, or experience, rather than an ontology and defines it as "an ongoing and un-finished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 149). Baldwin and Peck (2017) for instance argue whiteness is a networked force that constructed the national identity of the United States. Recognizing the ways hegemonic structures have historically, and continually, exert dominance via a white radical frame is essential for this critical analysis. Following Asen (2009), this allows critics to "account for the ways in which relations of power and symbolic and material resources influence production, circulation, and reception of discourse in the public sphere" (p. 265). The affective contours of whiteness are essential to the racial formation of parasitic publics. This

extends into the ways whiteness constructs masculinity which additionally promotes notions of the patriarchy.

Demagoguery

Demagogic rhetoric is a primary tool for parasite publics to uphold these hegemonic structures. Patricia Roberts-Miller calls for a renewed focus on demagoguery. Demagoguery is defined as "polarizing propaganda that motivates members of an in-group to hate and scapegoat some outgroup(s), largely by promising certainty, stability, and… an 'escape from freedom' (Roberts-Miller, 2005, p. 462). From this perspective, freedom is best understood from a political theory perspective which describes being responsible for a choice one makes, whether right or wrong. Roberts-Millers refocuses scholarship on to how demagogic audiences understand their relationship to the uncertainty of politics as a threat to their personhood. In this way, demagogic audiences are invested solely in the conversation of their personhood. That investment manifests as a separation from others and risk aversion from engagement with differentiating perspectives. Demagogic patterns position their audience as separate from other political life and work to reconfigure judgment as threats to personal well-being (Roberts-Millers, 2005).

Paul Elliot Johnson articulates specific characteristics about demagoguery in his article *The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump's Demagoguery* (2017). He states that scholars should "define demagoguery in connection with the concepts of risk and personhood". In this way "demagogues not only engage in agitational speech but also figure their audiences' identity as antecedent to- and therefore shielded from- the undecidable vulnerability of democratic life" (Johnson, 2017, p. 230). This allows

demagogues to hinder democracy by maintaining the focus of their subjects on the "felt precarity of their existence" (Johnson, 2017, p. 230). Butler (2004) defines precarity by the ways in which "the subject interprets these addresses as threats to an imagined autonomous self" (p. 130). Johnson expands on Robert-Millers understanding of demagoguery as a shared pattern of reasoning that figures audiences as risk-adverse subjects. Demagoguery works by concerting their shared vulnerability within public life into a feeling of precarity (Johnson, 2017). In other words, demagogic rhetoric works to establish an identity of victimhood at the expense of those have more objective claims to that mantle (Johnson, 2017).

Understanding that demagoguery is based on the production of risk-adverse subjects allows one to engage in scholarship that is positioned "against violence" (Johnson, 2017). Johnson clarifies that the violence of exclusion occurs in a multitude of forms, such as discursive, institutional, physical, or even all three (Johnson, 2017). This understanding of demagoguery enables a recognition of how existing political democracy is built on violence rather than reason (Vivian, 2013). To Johnson, the role of the rhetorical scholar is to "name, identify, and mark rhetorical forms that conceal and enable repetitive exclusions" (2017, p. 230). This thesis partakes in this role, by identifying the demagogic strategies of PragerU as such a rhetorical strategy. The main demagogic strategy this thesis will focus on how PragerU uses victimhood to affectively persuade its audience.

Victimization

One of the main strategies of demagogic language is to invoke the feelings of victimhood to its audience (Johnson, 2017), which is why Larson and McHendry (2019)

identify victimization as a key component of parasitic publics. StormFront for instance

presents its "identity as marginalized in contemporary power structures" (Larson &

McHendry, 2019, p. 527). In other words, StormFront has been establishing a narrative

that seeks to rewrite history by demarcating their subjects as the victim that is threatened

by the unjust government (Ahmed, 2015; Larson & McHendry, 2019). In this way,

parasitic publics feed off of "affective structures to limit others' discursive space and

build their own power" (Larson & McHendry, 2019, g 534). In this regard, these parasitic

publics are founded in an epistemology of ignorance in that are unable to recognize their

privileged position within and instead configure themselves as victims (Daniels, 2009).

Larson and McHendry highlight that parasitic tactics may operate using the affective

rhetorical device of victimhood the same way Swarmfront used white genocide rhetoric.

The strategy of victimhood warrants further research for its prevalence within parasitic

publics.

Demagoguery weaponizes feelings of unfamiliarity and doubts to often propagate

hierarchical notions such as patriarchy and whiteness. The discursive tactics of white

masculinity seek to position itself marginally in order for its audience to justify their

denial of power systems (Johnson, 2017). Claire Sisco King notes that "a key strategy

through which hegemonic systems persist is positing the abject body as a trope for

understanding the life of hegemonic ideological formations" (King, 2005, p. 366). Julia

Kristeva identifies the abject as that which ''disrupts identity, system, order. What does

not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite"

(Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). The abject body adopts "interspace" which allows the body to

become everything and nothing at the same time. The abject is a "dangerous" strategy

that must be denied at all costs because it is an attempt to reproduce its cultural privilege while remaining invisible (King, 2005). This strategy actively seeks to position the body both in and out of power structures simultaneously. This strategy entails what Lucaites and McDaniel call a ''carnival undoing'' in which hegemonic formations "actively produce their own conditions of impossibility or rupture" (Lucaites & McDaniel, 2004, p. 21). This carnival motion offers a theoretical framework for understanding how hegemonic formations, produce moments of reversal and fissure. The abject formation of white masculinity has internal fissures, contradictions, and impossibilities that allow it to accommodate a multitude of incarnations of what it can be, and is needed at the time (King, 2005). The abject ideological formation is one that imagines and performs itself as limitless, variable, adaptive. The abject prevails not by banishing the Other, but by sacrificing its own fictions in order to absorb, assimilate, and make room for Otherness. Dominant groups simultaneously discredit the suffering of the marginalized while elevating themselves via the strategy of coopting victimage. As a rhetorical strategy, the positioning of victimhood has a plethora of benefits for hegemonic publics. It seeks to shield those from claims of skepticism, compel others to act, and ultimately disrupt or re-entrench problematic structures (Coker, 2018). The use of victimization as a parasitic strategy is the primary focus of analysis in this thesis.

Conclusion

Larson and McHendry's article suggests that parasite publics are significant enough to warrant further research on the subject to better enhance scholars' understandings of contemporary public spheres. Just as Swarmfront was identified as an ideal subject to explore the case for parasite publics, for it continually attempts to shape

dominate discourse and public consciousness by inserting white nationalist rhetoric. This thesis will seek to explore that PragerU is just as ideal of a candidate as Swarmfront as an example of a parasite public, for it too has a symbiotic relationship with dominant power structures and continually seeks to influence public opinion and discourse around a wide variety of mainstream and trending topics. Using Larson and McHendry's essay on parasite publics as a framework I will identify and analyze PragerU as a parasite public.

This chapter has sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of public sphere scholarship to better understand how PragerU can be viewed as a parasite public. From Dewey who provided a structural understanding of the public. To Habermas's original work identifying the bourgeois public sphere. Moving on to the contemporary views, established via the reconfigurations of the public sphere posed by Asen and Brouwer. To a further in depth look at the neoliberalization of the public sphere and landing on parasite publics. This literature review should provide ample information to not only understand what the dominant public sphere is, but also how parasite publics feed off it to attack counter publics. PragerU has been able to successfully convince individuals of the political positions it promotes using parasitic strategies. The goal of this thesis is to study the strategies of this parasitic actor and identify the ways it works parasitically in the analysis section. To do so, this thesis will move into chapter three, where I will outline the methodology of the analysis section.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Now that we have reviewed the proper literature relevant to the topic regarding networks, the public sphere, counter publics, neoliberalism, and parasite publics this thesis will move onto the methodology section. In this chapter, I outline the specific methodology that will be engaged within chapter four, the analysis of the thesis. The intention is to give readers an overview of how the following chapter will proceed. Additionally, this chapter will serve as an explanation for why the thesis will make the methodological decisions that it does in the following chapter. First, I discuss the use of a network argumentative analysis as the method and determine how I delimit my artifact. Then I break down my approach to analyzing the PragerU network. I then identify how to understand that PragerU exists as a parasite public. Next, I outline how I will analyze PragerU's cooptation of the university ethos before analyzing PragerU's parasitic strategies in both gender and race conversations.

My analysis will engage in the method of a network argumentative analysis. This argument analysis will focus on the way PragerU, as a parasite public, discursively deploys rhetorical strategies to affectively persuade its audience. A network argument analysis considers PragerU as more than just a corporation; it allows us to analyze it as a network of actors unifying a singular message. My analysis tracks PragerU's argumentative network and analyzes its arguments in the context of race and gender. Below I walk readers through my methodological process by detailing first what a networked argument analysis is, how I delimited my text, and how I read the styles and strategies of Prager U.

Networked argument analysis

Networks enable the transmission and circulation of arguments faster than ever before. Networks also expand audiences beyond local levels to national and global levels. PragerU is a premier example of a networked argumentative agent that plays a pivotal role in public argument production. I analyze how PragerU's arguments work to persuade its audiences outside of traditional argumentative understandings. Network argument analysis is a helpful tool to understand how arguments function in what can be understood as a 'post-truth' society, which describes the "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Neville-Shepard, 2019, p. 175). A network argument analysis analyzes the different rhetorical strategies that are found at different sights of the network. Allowing for an analysis of the different connections within that network, to see how it all influences itself. In this instance, I will analyze the different rhetorical strategies that PragerU uses in its different videos. This analysis is unique from a traditional argument analysis for it looks at the way rhetoric is deployed in a manner that understands outside forces, such as power and affect. Network argument analysis has been used in a wide variety of scholarly work. Network argument analysis has been used to explore the state of arguments in the post-fact era (Klumpp, 2019; Cloud, 2019; Greene, 2019). Other instances of network analysis have been used to analyze the public rhetoric of social movements and activist spaces (Brooks, 2019; Nolan, 2019; Morooka, 2019). Network argument analysis has also been a tool to understanding argumentation networks in regard to authority and control (McHendry & Paliewicz, 2019; Hamilton, 2019). This is done by analyzing the fascist rhetorical elements of those in power and identifying the

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affect of that rhetoric. Network argument has also been used to understand argument circulation in online networks (Goodnight, 2019; Kelly, 2019; McAlister, 2019). A network argument analysis is an ample methodology to grapple with a network like PragerU and understand how its discursive strategies work. I use argument network analysis to understand the PragerU network and analyze its discursive strategies. Below I identify how I managed to delimit my artifact.

Delimiting the Artifacts

PragerU has thousands of videos on YouTube, and on their website, that cover a wide variety of different topics. A complete analysis of all the videos that PragerU has would be an impossible feat to achieve for a master's thesis, or maybe even a Ph.D. dissertation. Having recognized the sheer size of this network and platform I had to make the choice to strategically delimit my artifacts. This decision was made with the intention of still providing an analysis that could prove my argument regarding a specific discursive strategy in two discursive areas. I recognize that PragerU utilizes a multitude of other affective strategies, which should be looked at further in future research. However, again due to the nature of this thesis and limitation of time I choose to focus on victimhood. There are several different factors in delimiting my artifact to the videos that I choose. First, I narrowed my areas of discourse down to two politically relevant sections. These areas of discourse, gender, and race, both have identity-based understanding of power and hierarchies. These topics are therefore ripe with clear examples of how PragerU coopt oppressed identities. I delimited my texts down to three videos each realm of discourse. My decision to choose the videos of analysis came through identifying different ways that PragerU approaches the topics areas. PragerU

uses different entry points into the discussion on gender and races, however, the strategy of victimization is continually employed despite the point of entry. The videos I have chosen for my thesis should highlight these different approaches to engage in the identified topic areas.

Now that we have a clearer idea of how I have selected artifacts, it is also important to observe my approach for studying the PragerU network. I analyze two particular aspects of the argumentative network. First, I provide an in-depth look at all the actors who are providing funds for PragerU. A key portion of this is to not only identify these actors but also to highlight what political affiliations and ideologies these individuals hold. This is why a significant portion of my analysis includes making connections that these actors have, and whom they are affiliated with, within the political sphere. By identifying what other organizations they have created or funded, I isolate connections and draw additional patterns from those actors back to the larger PragerU network. This should provide a more comprehensive look into the internal and external network that PragerU has established. Included in this will also be a look at the different virtual and physical spaces that PragerU has established and is linked to, in order to complete the picture of the PragerU network. Last, I will provide a more in-depth visualization of the PragerU network to give a better glance at how this network has managed to interlock itself throughout various aspects of the conservative, dominant public sphere.

PragerU-as-Parasitic

My analysis also involves studying how PragerU establishes itself as a parasite public. As I have identified in the introduction as well as the literature review, parasite

publics are unique forms of publics that feed off and propagate the dominant public sphere. On top of that, they also seek to directly resist the strategies and efforts of counter-publics. My analysis thus studies the different traits that Larson and McHendry have identified as unique to parasite publics then draws clear links to PragerU as an example of that. Establishing PragerU as a parasite public provides a clear theoretical framework for my analysis within counter-public theory. This portion is key in being able to further the argument that these parasite publics have unique rhetorical strategies that will become the bulk of the analysis. The reason I specifically choose to view PragerU as a parasite public is because I too recognized the lack of discussion within counter-public theory that could clarify how different movements sought to progress social justice and others sought to oppose that progress. As Larson and McHendry (2019) put it there was a need to understand "power, privilege, and oppression in the public sphere" that would help distinguish different forms of publics (p. 519). Parasite publics provide an ample framework in which I could view PragerU as a driving force in the public sphere that actively attempts to resist many of the counter publics that I recognized.

University Ethos

My analysis also involves the study of PragerU's University ethos. As I have mentioned PragerU postures this façade of a University to gain legitimacy and influence over its viewers. This University ethos plays a major role in persuading viewers and opening discursive spaces by establishing a sense of legitimacy to its arguments (Tuchman, 2009). The reason why this is a focal point for analysis is that it is the starting point for the development of PragerU. Dennis Prager sought to make an actual university to counter what he saw as a leftist takeover of academia. While he ultimately settled for a

virtual option the essence of the university is something the site constantly attempts to provide and maintain. By deconstructing what the university ethos is one can then see the affects that it provides for the organization. Additionally, the analysis section can spotlight all the different ways that PragerU attempts to paint this mask it wears to convince its audience that it is worthy of this ethos. Knowing the benefits of the university ethos this thesis can better move forward to directly engage with the different rhetorical strategies the PragerU deploys in their videos. I will also analyze the PragerU video, "What are your kids learning in schools" which illustrates how PragerU affectively influences its audience and positions itself as an essential for schools and universities.

PragerU's Rhetorical Strategies

The bulk of my analysis studies PragerU's rhetorical argumentative strategies within different areas of public discourse. There are two major areas for my analysis that will be looked at when it comes to dissecting their rhetorical strategies. The reason why these areas of politics were chosen was for they each consist of spaces in which counter publics are resisting the public sphere. In addition, each region should exemplify the affective rhetorical strategies that PragerU mobilizes through demagoguery. While such rhetorical strategies exist in the different discursive spaces these specific areas clearly highlight victimhood. The goal of this analysis is to show the dominant rhetorical strategy used by PragerU as examples of how it operates as a parasite public and influences the public sphere. PragerU has thousands of videos and they cover a wide variety of different topic areas, but these two areas of gender and race were specifically chosen for several reasons enumerated below.

Analyzing strategies focuses on the specific tactics that the organization is using in a certain space. A strategy is an intention or deliberative action, and through analyzing strategies I can identify the specific intentions and goals or the organization. Strategies can be recognized for they are highly thought out and intentionally used therefore they are repetitive in nature. Rhetorical strategies will be common tactics for the organization. In this thesis, the videos I isolated are only a couple of examples of the rhetorical strategy of victimhood that PragerU uses. This strategy is far more frequently used than just in the several examples analyzed in this thesis.

First, both strategies have an ongoing significance and relevance in contemporary public discourse. This provides a clear case as to why they should be evaluated for the dialogue around these arenas is unresolved. PragerU seeks to constantly inject its ideologies into the hot spots of political discourse. On top of that, both discursive issues have a plethora of different videos to pull from, which provides ample resources and artifacts to examine. This will also allow for the recognition of distinct patterns and similar discursive efforts between videos. With a larger pool of videos to pull from in each region, the analysis should be able to achieve an understanding of the overall strategy in each realm. Last, there are active counterpublics that can be identified within each rhetorical issue, which works to prove how PragerU's oppositional position seeks to contradict that of the counter-public ideology. An essential characteristic of parasite publics as noted by Larson and McHendry.

Argumentative Issues

The analytical approach to the following two political issues that will be to cover the analysis sections will proceed in a very similar manner. First, I will introduce the

reader to the discourse that is occurring in the specific area of analysis. Each portion will

proceed with regards to the overall rhetorical strategy of victimhood. With that strategy in

mind, the analysis will continue by looking for the multitude of ways that PragerU

utilizes strategies of victimhood. The identification process will consider a wide variety

of variables that are present within the videos that help convey and deploy that strategy.

The most obvious variable is that of the specific arguments or claims that are being made

in the video. This is a major component to the analysis for not only is the argument, or

claim, essential but as is the structure in which it is deployed in the video. The structure

including the qualifiers and supporting material supplied, or lack of which all are

identifiable variables that need to be considered when analyzing the video. Connected to

that is the source material for the warrants of each claim or absence of source material

which ties into the very structure of the argument. This more "traditional" approach to

looking at the claims being made in the videos provides a more constructive

understanding of how the rhetorical strategies work. For instance, if there is lacking

structure or inadequate source material, it would in many ways imply that PragerU relies

far heavier on its ethos and or pathos, than logos when it comes to its persuasive methods.

Furthering the argument of how essential the university ethos is to PragerU, as well as

supporting Larson and McHendry's position that parasite publics rely heavily on

affective argument, pathos.

Another example that will be considered in the analysis is the individual who is

presenting the information in the video. PragerU is highly strategic about which

individual they bring in to make which argument on its website. Using individuals as

spokespersons, or tokens is an essential part of my analysis. Each individual brings in

different characters and unique sets of rhetorical strategies. Other rhetorical aspects that will also be considered beyond what is being said and who is saying it such as the nonverbal aspects of how things are being said in the video. Its widely known that the different modes of deployment from a nonverbal perspective shape and alter the message. Unique methods of encoding messages are an essential part of understanding the true intention of the rhetorical strategy being used. Not only that, but it can also be a key factor in discovering specific dog whistles or other dogmatic forms of rhetoric in their videos. Finally, the last dimension that should be considered in the analysis section of this thesis is the background and infographics that are strategically utilized in each PragerU video. These infographics provide a layer of reinforcement to what is being said by the individual presenting in each video. Just as important is the message to PragerU, the way the message is provided, and its supporting images clearly shape what is understood by the audience. This networked strategy can also provide insights into some of the more subtle points being made in regard to what is really meant to be said in each video. All of these unique dimensions of parasitic argumentation need to be analyzed in each video that is reviewed. It is a combination of all these rhetorical strategies that PragerU intends on injecting into the public sphere.

My analysis takes up two specific argumentative issues. The first realm of analysis that this thesis will investigate is the realm of gender discourse. Understandings of genders are evolving at a rapid pace, and resistance to societal norms is sparking on multiple fronts. Whether it be resistance to patriarchal constructs or changes in gender PragerU has a multitude of videos on the subject that respond to the progressive dialogues. I approach PragerU's arguments about gender from a parasitic perspective that

shows how its argumentative networks undermine feminist counter-publics through cooptation of victimhood. I will identify the ways that PragerU positions itself in opposition to feminist movements. PragerU's reactionary responses to counter-public narratives solidified my decision to analyze this form of dissemination. I include an analysis of the discursive tactics PragerU utilizes to delegitimizes feminist counterpublicity through positioning the abject male body as the victim. Additionally, I identify the ways PragerU seeks to defend and re-establish the normative conceptualizations of masculinity.

There are 54 videos on gender (keyword: gender) on the PragerU website. My analysis will identify these different rhetorical approaches in the following three videos on gender by PragerU; "Who Needs Feminism", "Make Men Masculine Again", and "War on Boys". All these videos show how PragerU enters the discussion on gender politics in a different manner. The first is a reactionary response to modern feminism movements. The second is an attend to rearticulate the concept of masculinity. While the video "War on Boys" seeks to redefine common understandings of oppression in gendered-based discourse. Each unique approach by PragerU should allow for a better understanding of how parasite publics use this specific strategy of victimization. The affective strategies that PragerU uses have caused the public sphere to widely reject the changes occurring in gender discourse and norms.

The second area of discourse for this analysis is race relations. Race relations in the past few years have been one of the most prevalent areas of public discourse. This also is one area in which PragerU explicitly engages directly against counter publics such as the Black Lives Matter movement. This made the decision to analyze this region very

easy, for the functions and attributes of a parasite public are most visible here. PragerU's strategies within this issue depend heavily on appropriating the affective relationship with oppression, found in counterpublics, to circulate the strategies of victimization. This is a major aspect that parasite publics can thrive upon to galvanize and control populations. The investigation of appropriation will allow us to better understand how parasite publics operate and engage others. It also acts as a primary tool to maintain the dominant public by flipping the narrative on which public is under assault. The analysis here will seek to spotlight not only the strategies of appropriation but the value of doing so as well. There are many ploys of whiteness found in the videos PragerU has created on this topic area, that this analysis will seek to identify. Another component to the strategy PragerU uses is that of tokenization that will need to be recognized. When searching "race" on the PragerU website search bar one is met with 99 different videos on the subject.

The analysis of this section will occur through an analysis of the following four videos: "What is Social Justice", "What is intersectionality", "Playing the Black Card", "Calling Good People Racist Isn't New". The first video was chosen for its explicit questioning of social justice movements in general. The second poses the question of whether or not intersectionality is good or bad in order to engage in race discussions. The third is a direct attack on black individuals calling out the racism they experience. While the last demonstrates how PragerU makes whites victims when racism is discussed. All four videos highlight a different way PragerU injects itself into race discourse through different modes. The analysis of PragerU's dialogues in race will be achieved by understanding all these factors through a deconstruction of these videos on and regarding Black Lives Matter, race, and race relations.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the specific methodology of a networked argument analysis that will be used in the following chapter. This chapter highlighted the different sections that will be further analyzed in chapter four. The following chapter begins with a more in-depth analysis of the PragerU network from its funding to operations. The second section will identify the ways in which PragerU exists as a parasite public. This analysis will clarify the links from Larson and McHendry's work to PragerU. The result should provide a clear case for why PragerU is an example of a parasite public within the public sphere. The third section is a continuation of the analysis of PragerU's university ethos. This section will evaluate what a university ethos is as well as how it functions to benefit PragerU. This will be determined to be an essential part of how PragerU posits itself as a parasite public and we will explore the many ways that PragerU seeks to establish and maintain this university ethos. The fourth section will be the bulk of the analysis, for it will explore two contemporary arenas of politics and explore the rhetorical strategies that PragerU engages in to achieve its parasitic goals. Those two arenas being gender and race relations which are all essential topic areas with plenty of current discourse within the public sphere. Now that we have outlined the methodologies that we will use in the analysis section, we can now move on to the said chapter.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

Understanding the PragerU Network

This chapter will begin with an examination of the PragerU network. Using the

concept of Money/Speech as a reference, I recognize that there is rhetorical significance

in understanding who is directly funding and supporting PragerU. The major funders and

supporters of PragerU are significant for they provide ample resources that work to

strengthen the messages of PragerU. They also provide a line of connections to other

conservative groups and organizations, which PragerU pulls from in its videos. The

network PragerU has established for itself provides a cushion of support and utility for

PragerU that allows for the promotion of their political messages. PragerU's donors

contribute significant funds to the organization and provide unique connections to other

aspects of conservative spaces. By following the money, this analysis will provide a

glimpse of what the PragerU network looks like to the best of my ability. The

individuals/organizations who provide the most direct financial influence on the

organization are; the Wilks Brothers, the Koch political network, Lee Roy Mitchell,

Sheldon Adelson, Michael Leven, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley foundation

Much of the money that helped establish PragerU came from the Wilks Brothers.

Dan and Farris Wilks have donated millions of dollars to PragerU over the years. Their

financial support has even bought them some time on PragerU's board according to IRS

filings. The Wilks brothers are notorious for providing financial support to others who share their beliefs (Avery, 2020). The Wilk brothers are widely known as GOP Megadonors, for they have donated millions to GOP Super PACS (Kotch, 2018). They pour so much money into conservative causes and politicians that they're often referred to as "the sugar daddies for the far-right" and the "kingmakers" of Texas politics (Montgomery, 2014 & Bova, 2018). These two billionaire brothers use their fortune to continually invest in that market of oil and natural gas. Pro-oil and natural gas messages are frequent in PragerU's videos such as "Why you should love Fossil Fuel". (Hampton, 2020). The laundry list of conservative organizations which they donate includes the following: the American Majority, which trains and supports Tea Party activist networks; The Heritage Foundation, a behemoth right-wing think tank that promotes Religious Right social conservatism and Tea Party anti-government ideology; The State Policy Network which comprises mini- right-wing "think tanks" at the state level that work closely with ALEC and right-wing lawmakers; and The Franklin Center, which is closely allied to the American Legislative Exchange Council and other right-wing groups that produce and support ideological advocacy (Montgomery, 2014). Additionally, Wilks brothers own the conservative news source *The Daily Wire*, run by right-wing media star Ben Shapiro. This connection is ever clear for Shapiro has made a multitude of appearances in PragerU videos. The Wilks brother promote Western ideologies and attack counter publicity narratives such as intersectionality.

These brothers have donated a large amount of their money to many religious organizations as well. They founded 'The Thirteen Foundation' and 'The Heavenly Father's Foundation'. These foundations are major funders to religious right organizations

and to right-wing political outlets that seek to spread their religious beliefs further. Through these charitable foundations, the Wilks brothers have bolstered up right-wing policies and media as well as their religious beliefs. Such religious messages are commonly found in PragerU videos, for example, episode 82 of Fireside Chat "The Bible will save America." These brothers have donated to a wide variety of Religious Right groups in the country. A few of the recipients of the Wilks brothers' donations to religious right organizations are the following. The Liberty Counsel, which promotes extreme anti-gay rhetoric, and support laws criminalizing homosexuality. The Family Research Council designated an anti-gay hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Focus on the Family, one of the largest religious right groups in the country, whose leadership called gay rights movement "one of the great threats to our religious liberty." As well as Wallbuilders which promotes the historical revisionism of "historian" David Barton, who claims a "Christian Nation" history and that the Bible opposes the minimum wage, progressive taxation, capital gains taxes, the estate tax, and unions and collective bargaining (Montgomery, 2014). Other donations focus largely on supporting organizations that are in favor of banning abortions and gay marriage (Goforth, 2019). However, their efforts to spread their religious beliefs do not stop with their donations to religious foundations. The Wilk's run a church called the Assembly of Yahweh extremely conservative Messianic Israelite church (& Goforth, 2020). The church promotes extremely conservative ideals, many of which are enforced in the service, such as the fact that women are not allowed to speak during services, and a strict traditionalist dress code. Reuters reports that Farris has preached on homosexuality, comparing it to bestiality, pedophilia, and incest stating that "It's a predatorial lifestyle in that they need

your children, and straight people having kids, to fulfill their sexual habits". He also reportedly declared climate change the will of God (Conlin, 2015). All these sizable donations from the Wilks brothers should provide a glimpse of their ability to infuse funds, and therefore their ideologies, into all aspects of right-wing organizations.

The second major financial supporter of PragerU is the Koch Political Network run by Charles Koch. Charles and his now-deceased brother David expanded the Koch business empire that has funded the Koch Political Network. The two brothers are libertarians and have invested a vast amount of money into politics, most of which however has been undisclosed. The Koch Political Network provides these funds and is famous, or infamous, for its secret funding and fiercely negative advertising. While their funding is not exactly a secret, they frequently use Dark Money avenues to wield outsize influence on American politics. Over the last 12 years, the Koch Political Network has donated to hundreds of political candidates the recorded amount adding up to 13,409,644 dollars. 92% or 12,368,044 went to Republicans while just over a million has gone to Democrats (Open Secrets, 2020). The Koch Political Network is believed to play a major role in PragerU tripling its revenue in the past three years (Wiener, 2020).

Additionally, there is a network of think tanks across the country that are pushing the agenda of right-wing groups with funding from Koch brothers-affiliated organizations. This network of right-wing action groups and think tanks a short list of them includes State Policy Network, ALEC, Americans for Prosperity Foundation, FreedomWorks, Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, the Cato Institute, The Heritage Foundation, Citizens for a Sound Economy, George Mason's Mercatus Center, Institute for Humane Studies, Bill of Rights Institute, Institute for Justice Reason

Foundation, Federalist Society, American Enterprise Institute & Brookings Joint Center

for Regulatory Studies, Foundation for Research on Economics & the Environment,

Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (Kopan, 2013 & Carrk, 2011). These are

just a few of the vast think tanks and organizations that the Koch Brothers have supported

over the years. These think tanks are frequent and common sources for the information

that is portrayed in PragerU videos. The Koch Brothers' funding ties to PragerU are just

as influential as the tied to this vast think tank network that supplies information and

support for any narrative PragerU wants. It is not to be understated how significant the

Koch brother's role has been in reshaping American politics. The Koch network

drastically increases the size of PragerU's political network while providing the source

material for many of the videos.

Another supporter of PragerU from Texas is Lee Roy Mitchell, his wealth is

around a quarter-billion dollars. He is the founder of Cinemark, generally stays out of the

limelight. However, Mitchell has given a significant amount of money to support

PragerU. According to the *Los Angeles Times* Mitchell gave PragerU $800,000 in 2018,

and it has been reported that he donated the same amount in 2017 as well (Halper, 2019;

Goforth, 2019). Most notably however has been his support and donations to Roy

Moore's senate campaign. This was in 2017 when he pulled out a gun while on the

campaign trail. Moore had already previously faced allegations that he preyed on young

teens when he was a thirty-something prosecutor in 1980s Alabama. According to Open

Secrets, Mitchell and his wife were Moore's fifth-largest contributors, which might give

some light to why Prager has even given praise for Roy Moore on his podcast. Mitch has

a long history of supporting hard-core conservatives beyond Roy Moore, contributing

over one million dollars to the campaigns of Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Rick Perry,

Donald Trump, and other Republicans and aligned causes. Other major donations that

Mitchell has been recognized for are the six-hundred thousand dollars he gave to Turning

Point USA in 2017. As reported by *Newsweek* the donations and causes supported by Lee

Roy Mitchell all match up, precisely with the sort of politicians and causes that PragerU

supports and often praises (Goodkind, 2017). Many of the messages in PragerU's videos

represent the ideologies that directly support the rights of gun owners and continually

promote the method of self-defense with a gun as viable.

The next mega-donor to PragerU is the 24th richest person in the world according

to Forbes. Eighty-six-year-old, Sheldon Adelson has built his $35 billion fortune through

his dealings in the casino industry. According to Business Insider, Sheldon Adelson is a

huge Trump supporter and has given more than $25 million to Trump (Warren, 2020)

Thus solidifying him as one of the president's biggest donors and earning him the

moniker, "Trump's patron-in-chief". Adelson is said to have wielded incredible influence

over Trump's decisions to pull out of the Iran nuclear dear, cut funds for Palestinian

refugees, and move the U.S. embassy in Israel. Craig Holman of the watchdog group

Public Citizen told ProPublica in 2018 that he would put Adelson at the very top of the

list of both access and influence in the Trump administration (Elliot, 2018). Using his

wealth to sway Trump is not all Adelson has been able to, accomplish for he has

contributed to the GOP across the nation and the same can be said about PragerU.

Adelson created Maccabee Task Force is one of the organization's biggest donors,

according to the Los Angeles Times (Halper, 2019). A task force that is very pro Jew and

Israel, so much so that it has been criticized for being Zionist and anti-Palestinian. It is

important to note that Adelson's has nine videos on the PragerU website, most of which are about Israel. It is believed that Adelson's funding and support played a major role in turning Prager himself, who was once a never-Trumper, into a Trump supporter himself (Goforth, 2019). The significant amount of money that Adelson has donated to PragerU most likely highlights the affect he has on the company. Many of PragerU videos over recent years have shown increased support for Trump and his Presidency, and this is believed to be a result of Adelson's influence.

Next, there is 81-year-old Michael Leven who is on PragerU's advisory board. Leven amassed his comparatively small $11 million fortune working directly for Adelson. Both Leven and Adelson are almost identical in politics. Like Adelson, when it comes to politics, particularly regarding Israel and economics, Leven is firmly on the right. He has spoken favorably of Trump's tariffs and Brexit while taking some hardline stance in columns he wrote on Muslims and Mexicans. These stances are often seen represented in videos on PragerU, for he is commonly featured in several of the shows. Both PragerU and Leven have been criticized for being Islamophobic, however, they proclaim that Islamophobia does not exist. Through his foundation, Leven has donated 100,000 dollars to PragerU in both 2017 and 2018. Additionally, Leven has donated roughly 150,000 dollars to Turning Point USA and he currently sits on the advisory council (Goforth,2019). In 2010, Leven and his wife launched the Michael and Andrea Leven Family Foundation, which focuses on three funding areas: Free Enterprise, Jewish Continuity, and Oil Independence. Many of the ideologies of Leven are prevalent in PragerU videos, such as "the dangers of radical Islam" and "Is Islam a religion of peace".

The last set of donors to analyze is the second-largest donor for PragerU, the conservative Bradley family of Wisconsin. Their well-funded charity organization the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, has donated over $700,000 to PragerU from 2013 to 2017 (Kotch, 2019). The Bradley Foundation mission statement is that it "pursues a mission to restore, strengthen, and protect the principles and institutions of American exceptionalism," according to its website, focusing on limited government, federalism, free markets, private enterprise, "civil society" institutions, and education. These ideologies are frequently represented in PragerU videos which seek to promote such American exceptionalism. Videos like "Why America must lead", and "Why America's military must be strong" are prime examples of the ideologies that the Bradley Foundation seeks to promote.

The Bradley's are prolific Republican donors and donate to a wide variety of organizations and think tanks that support those beliefs. The size and funding levels are just as high if not higher than the Koch brothers. Due to the extensive reach of the foundation, this analysis will identify only a few topic areas and then point out several organizations within each. First, the Bradley Foundation has funded the following republican think tanks and state-based action; Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), American Majority, State Policy Network (SPN), Badger Institute, and the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions. They have provided funding towards workplace freedom efforts, which seek to dismantle union by donating to Americans for Fair Treatment, Freedom Foundation, and the Lincoln Network, Inc. As well as donating to the following climate change denial organizations; Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, and the

American Legislative Exchange Council. Lastly, they have provided grants for many

right-wing groups most notably; David Horowtiz Freedom Center an organization that

the Southern Poverty Law Center labeled as an anti-Muslim hate group, Thomas

Jefferson Institute for Public Policy which focuses on off-shore gas and oil exploration

and development, Americans for Prosperity (AFP) the political advocacy arm funded by

the Koch brothers, and the Daily Caller News Foundation a right-wing conservative news

site founded by Fox News host Tucker Carlson (Corey, 2019). In addition, the Bradley

Foundation donates to anti-LGBTQ groups such as the Family Research Council (Kotch,

2019). The Bradley foundation has gone largely under the radar, compared to the Koch

brothers, however, their financial influence and the network it establishes is just as big, if

not bigger. Their connections contribute to the vast network that PragerU relies on to

establish and promote its videos. For instance, many of these organizations are frequently

referenced, and Tucker Carlson even has his own video on PragerU called "Illegal

Immigration; It's about power.

Visualizing the PragerU Network

Throughout all of videos the views of PragerU's funders are recognizable. While

there is a significant number of funders for PragerU that go undisclosed. This breakdown

of the recognizable and disclosed funders provides an inside look at who is influencing

PragerU's messages through money. Additionally, how the ties of PragerU's funders

work to increase the size of PragerU's network. The many organizations identified to

have connections to PragerU, through funding or other means, can be found as sources or

hosts in their videos. This entire network is connected through financial means and this

identification provides a glimpse of exactly how well connected and privileged PragerU

exists as. I created the following diagram below is a brief illustration of the PragerU

network. This diagram was constructed on photoshop and serves only as a visual

representation of the above research. There is no specific methodology for its

construction, it merely illustrates identifiable connections between individuals and

organizations through funds. This image seeks to highlight the size of PragerU network

and its expansive reach both in the physical world and in virtual spaces. There is a far

greater number of interconnections between funders, videos, and organizations than I

could represent in the image below. However, it at the very least is informative as a tool

to understand the number of connections that those funding PragerU has to other

organizations within the conservative realm.

As a guide to the image, I will briefly explain how to understand the image below.

The bottom portion of the map shows PragerU's biggest funders, they are key actors in

developing the overall messages found in PragerU's videos. The black lines between

circles merely indicate lines of funding that occur. Such funding provides PragerU with

the ability to produce its videos in the first place, the quid pro quo here is that their

political ideologies get represented to millions of people globally. The funders of

PragerU are key actors for the media platform and its network connections often overlap

and exchange with other companies that are also funded by these actors. The overlapping

of connections is something that I would not be able to demonstrate in a two-dimensional

image. I would love to further explore and map the network of PragerU with the proper

tools to create a three-dimension image. This image illustrates the extensive web from

which PragerU can expand upon as well as create a funneling effect for its viewers. The

top portion shows some of the virtual connections and well as the physical

implementations that PragerU deploys to strategically use the resources it acquires to disseminate its positions. In some ways, this is a very loose visual representation of PragerU's influence outlined in chapter one, which was supported by the research of Tripodi in 2018.

Figure 1

Cartography of the PragerU Network
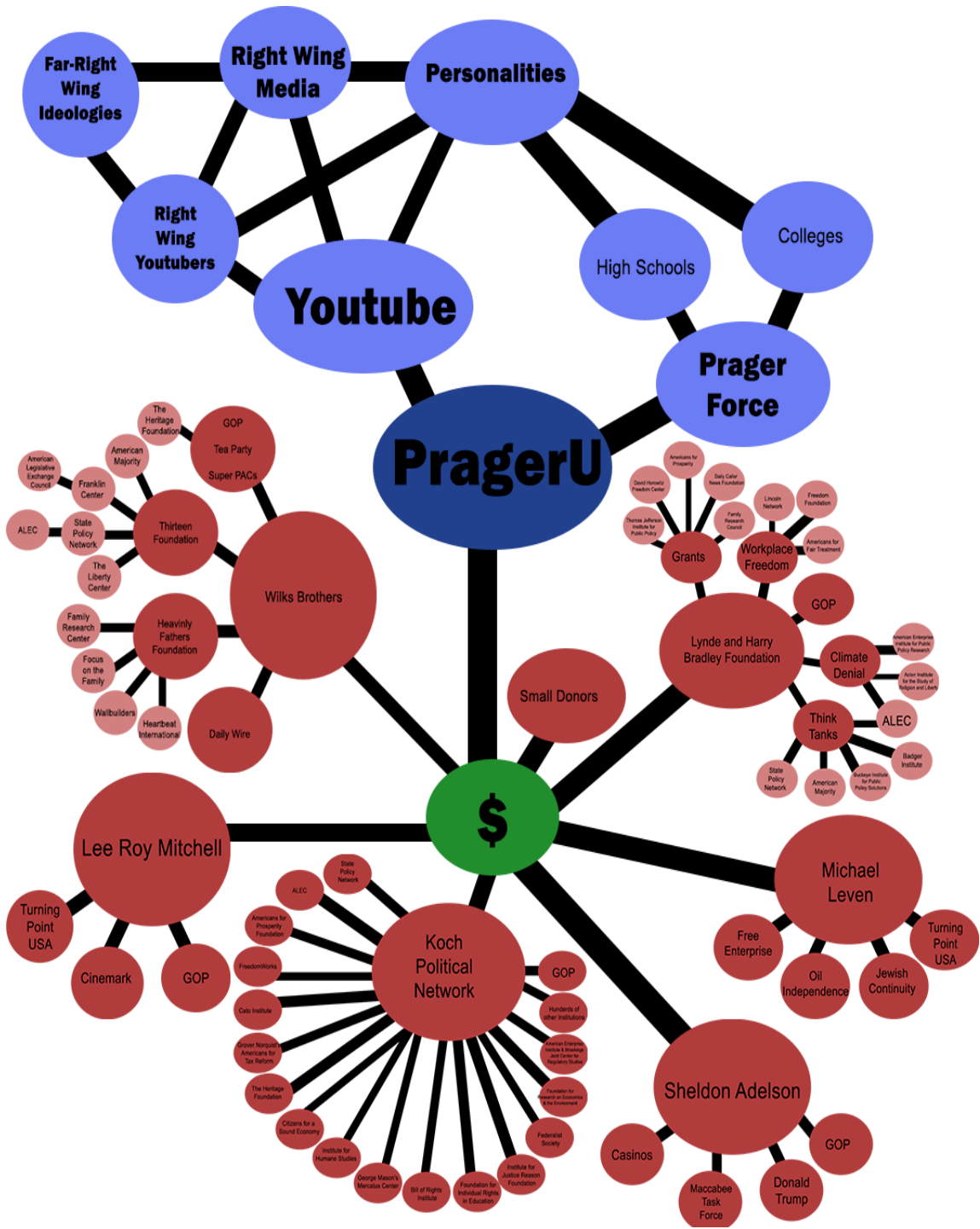
This image should illustrate just how expansive the PragerU network is. Those who fund PragerU have connections to thousands of conservative organizations, which PragerU relies on to create its messages. PragerU has proven itself as an oppositional force with its sheer reach, powered by its extensive funding and network relations. In its thousands of videos, available online, this network has taken opposition, but not limited, to the following: immigrants, Muslims, abortions, gun laws, racism, climate change, animal rights, sexism, religion, and recently Black Lives Matter. (Kotch, 2019; Stempel, 2020; Oppenheimer, 2018; Lopez, 2020). The expansive network that PragerU has is an essential element to better understand the main focus of this analysis, understanding PragerU as a parasite public, that works via demagogic strategies to influence its audience.

Parasite Public

PragerU is a parasite public because it meets the expectations and fits within the theoretical framework that is provided for us by Larson and McHendry. Parasite publics are fundamentally reactionary spaces, PragerU is a primary example of that for it was created on the basis of responding to the left. PragerU justifies its existence in relation to the left, via a victimization narrative rooted in the ideology that conservatives are excluded from universities and society at large.

Consider the video "About PragerU", which is where PragerU establishes the idea that media is everywhere and throughout one's entire life they are only exposed to one viewpoint, the left. PragerU positions itself as a key change that will "reclaim the future for our values" by providing its viewers with the best minds. This video shows how distinctly reactionary PragerU is, as clearly identifies how it needs to exist as a way to

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resist the left. This reactionary nature towards universities is best seen in the video "What are your kids learning in school?", where PragerU claims that colleges, and schools, have become leftist indoctrination centers. This 'problem' according to PragerU is a radical change and it has been going on for decades. Radical change is shown as an evil shadow monster on-screen that kills an innocent person and looms over college campuses. According to PragerU, this evil plot has become so invasive that it is now infecting schools from elementary to high school as well.

The rhetorical message PragerU is establishing is that leftist ideas are evil and that all schools are trying to force them onto your innocent children. The host knows this because, well she's seen it with her own eyes as a mother of two children. PragerU posits that schools are now teaching kids' ideas that are so radical that they are completely devoid of education that we should all be alarmed. The examples of these radical ideas include the idea that America is racist, and that white Americans today bear responsibility for all historical racism. Other radical ideas include equity, diversity, and inclusion, or what PragerU calls critical race theory. Having established that schools are evil leftist indoctrination centers, PragerU presents itself as the solution. In this way, PragerU's existence is inherently reactionary for it is a direct response to the progressive changes that are occurring at universities.

The reactionary nature of PragerU sets the strategies that it uses to safeguard the assemblage of dominant publics against all other counter-discursive challenges such as counter-publics. PragerU engages in a multitude of strategies that position itself against not only the left but other counter-public spaces such as social justice. As a parasite public, PragerU's main strategy is to undermine and attack efforts to change the

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hegemonic norms of the dominant sphere. This is tied directly to maintaining the influence of its network and funders. To do so PragerU galvanizes massive support from its vast network of wealth to posture its ideologies. This network provides PragerU with a unique parasitic relationship to dominant publics' which allows it to exploit its centripetal force, the way that Larson and McHendry suggest. This capability should be recognized as a privileged symbiotic relationship with dominant power structures, a trait unique to parasitic publics—a characteristic not found in alternative publics such as counterpublics, virtual publics, or networked publics. PragerU also works to continually position itself as outside the dominant public, rather than within or central to it. This positioning happens in two ways, first through the cooptation of the university ethos, and secondarily through victimization. In doing both of these actions PragerU works to enlarge the center's assemblage of dominant publics, akin to the actions of parasite publics described by Larson and McHendry (2019, p. 519). In establishing argumentative legitimacy PragerU relies on the ethos of a university to argue with authority and engage in the same demagogic rhetoric, prescribed to parasite publics, that intends to limit discursive spaces for others and strengthen its own circulation and material power in return. By identifying PragerU as a parasitic public we can analyze the ways it affectively manipulates its audience.

University Ethos

PragerU seeks to legitimize itself by garnering the ethos of a university. It is important to note that PragerU is, in fact, not a university even though it operates under the guise of being a university. This façade of being a university is a major component in establishing authority and significance in the public sphere. Many of those who venture

to the official website might not even notice that small, most likely legally obligated, mention that this is not a university. PragerU's entire aesthetic focuses on establishing the image of a virtual University. Beyond that, the rhetorical strategies that the corporation engages in seek to constantly appropriate the very ethos of a modern university. The university ethos is one of a sacred space of learning, a secular temple where knowledge and truth to be achieved (Tuchman, 2009). This is the very ethos that PragerU attempts to coopt through a wide variety of strategies.

PragerU seeks to constantly remind its audience in its videos just how valuable the education its videos provide. One of the PragerU early slogans was 'Give us five minutes, and we'll give you a semester" (Bowles, 2020, para 21). In this way, PragerU even positions the knowledge you'll receive from a single video as just as valuable as an entire semester in college. Each video on the website comes with its very own study guides sheet for the viewer to fill out as they follow along. A study guide is a tool used for students to study for tests, therefore it is directly related to the classroom. Study guides exist for the purpose of learning and the implementation of these for each video implies that what is being shown is worthy of being tested. This strategy specifically works to imply the value of the education in the video is equivalent to that of the university. In addition to the study guides, PragerU's videos themselves are strategically designed to maintain a simplistic and professional look to them that resembles lecture PowerPoints. Allowing them to posture their videos as something more educational, rather than opinion based. For instance, the use of flow charts and graphs are frequent in PragerU videos, however, there is often no reference to where therefrom, or even labels to identify what they measure (examples below). These visuals are only added for the

sake of symbolically nodding to an abstract resemblance of truth, that would often be actually found in actual research or educational presentations. Another mode that PragerU works to establish a university ethos is through its online shop. PragerU sells clothing that resembles that of common university apparel. An essential feature for every university is the school clothes, which helps students show their school spirit.

Figure 2 & Figure 3

Examples of the symbolic images used to propagate the University Ethos.
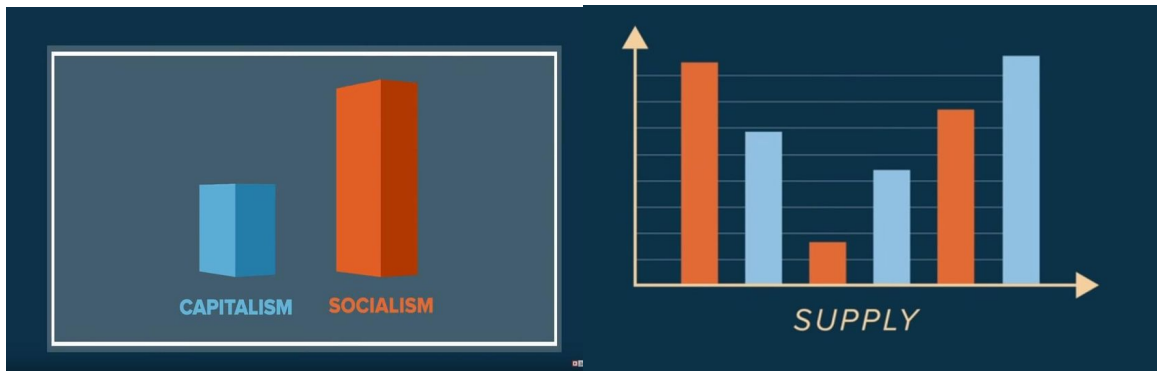
PragerU's utilizes a university ethos to appeal to authority and legitimacy within the public sphere. This ethos allows PragerU to covertly employ narratives of the dominant structure and circumvent the need for evidence or warrants. For PragerU has positioned itself as the only 'true' university that exists outside of the evil radical agenda of the left. This façade of being a virtual university relies on the premise that universities are places of knowledge and truth, which grants PragerU the notion of expertise and truth regarding the topics it discusses. PragerU's sources section are also provided for every one of their videos. Many of the sources for the videos come directly from within the PragerU network. However, the sources section is heavily riddled with opinion pieces, that are often directly written by the "celebrity speaker" brought in for the video. The

university ethos that PragerU has established even allows them to reframe social relations to recategorize individual's relationship to oppression. The university ethos allows PragerU to determine what is or isn't 'truth', which allows them to redefine who the "real victims" are in society. This is backed by the idea that Universities, like PragerU, are institutions that work to identify oppression and suffering and work to relieve those instances of violence. The university ethos is essential to the identity PragerU has online, as more universities turn to virtual spaces, its ethos is only further legitimized. The ethos of the university is an aesthetic that PragerU continually attempts to coopt, for it allows it to justify its positions and ideologies affectively. There is no need for facts or sources when you have a strong enough ethos as a University does.

Networked Argument in Context: Gender and Race

PragerU is quick to rush to the defense of dominant publics, specifically in the instances where counter-discourses seek to challenge societal norms. There are many strategies parasitic publics employ to resist the narratives of counter-publics. They work to affectively persuade their audience and undermine counter-public efforts in a multitude of fashions. I argue that PragerU depends heavily on a parasitic strategy that coopts the affective relationship with oppression, found in counterpublics, to circulate the strategies of victimization. As Larson and McHendry (2019) point out, parasite publics seek to "appropriate the rhetoric of civil rights and social justice for oppressive means and ends (p. 521). The foundational parasitic ideology of PragerU is rooted in this victimhood, that being that conservatives are excluded from Universities and society at large. This analysis section will look at the ways in which PragerU uses demagogic rhetoric of

victimhood to affectively persuade its audience in two areas of contemporary discourse: gender and race.

Gender Based Discourse

In the past 50 years, there has been an increase in counter-discourses that are challenging patriarchal norms within society (Gilliard, 2020). Feminist protests are occurring all around the globe even in unlikely places such as Saudi Arabia. These mobilization efforts have begun to gain major traction and have led to an increased recognition of the large-scale discrimination against women (Chu, 2020). The male dominated hierarchy is beginning to be challenged on many fronts, as researcher Laurel Weldon (2020) claims "Feminist movements not only contribute to closing the gap for gender inequality… it has reduced child marriage, changed attitudes towards women in politics and violence against women, expanded numbers of women in elected office, and a strengthening of democracy more broadly" para 3). As counter discourses increase, society is beginning to recognize the concept of the patriarchy and identify how it has historically privileged men (Burnaby, 2020, para 3). This recognition results in men being held accountable for actions at greater rates and increased liberation and acceptance of women. However, it's clear that there is resistance occurring to feminist movements is also on the rise (Lewis, 2019). One of those sources of anti-feminism that is gaining traction is PragerU.

PragerU has continually injected itself into this modern controversy regarding women's rights and gender-based liberation. The reactionary nature of PragerU has it rushing to the defense of men and boys in order to maintain the dominant sphere. These parasitic discourses focus on reframing men as the real victims and positioning women as

the threat to society at large. They do this by identifying specific instances in which men are struggling then extrapolate and blow those issues out of proportion. Additionally, they seek to undermine the oppression faced by the other, women, in the instance of gender-based discourse. This repositioning of hierarchies allows PragerU's to resist modern feminist discourses, reaffirm static gender constructions, and undermine understandings of the patriarchy. Below I consider the following videos: "Who Needs Feminism?", "Make Men Masculine Again", and "War on Boys".

Who Needs Feminism?

The video titled "Who needs Feminism", provides a clear example of PragerU's parasitic assault on the counter discourse around feminism. The video starts with the host proudly announcing that he is "an anti-feminist." This proclamation of PragerU's opposition to the social movement makes it clear from jump street that this space is discursive and reactionary. His proud declaration implies to the listener that he must have good reason to be against it and helps pull the audience in. This posturing also implies that once the listener learns what the host knows, they too will stand proudly against feminism. The host for instance states that "Feminism is a mean-spirited, small-minded and oppressive philosophy that can poison relations between the sexes—relations which, for most of us, provide some of life's deepest pleasures and consolations" (Klavan, 2018). This is a clear anti-feminist message for the audience.

There are several attacks launched towards feminism in this opening statement of the video, which provide a multitude of reasons for the audience to want to resist feminism at face value. First, feminism is framed as mean-spirited, connecting it to aggression and bad intentions. The choice to call it mean-spirited signals its essence is

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cruel and harmful. PragerU is working to undermine the ideology that feminism seeks to do good and establish equality, by proclaiming that it is the exact opposite. Next, the host asserts that the philosophy itself is oppressive and poisons relationships between sexes. This assertion strategically works to flip the script on understandings of patriarchy, which thrives on the oppression of women. Instead, the host asserts that it is in fact feminism that seeks to oppress people and seeks to harm the relationships of people, rather than combat said oppression. This contention also not so subtly reinforces binaries of sexuality and gender, which are patriarchically regarded as essential to maintain for they provide life's "deepest pleasures" (Klavan, 2018). This opening statement encompasses multiple elements that flip the script on how society, that exists under patriarchal norms, is actually good. Patriarchy is therefore something that does not need to be resisted for it is essential to human nature. This understanding of feminism, as radical and angry, leads the audience to believe that it is an unjustified movement that selfishly seeks change that will take away from other's pleasures. Those who lose out on pleasures are the traditional American individuals watching these videos. In this way, the host is initiating the victimhood narrative right from the start. The viewer is the one facing a loss, of pleasure, and therefore the one who is a victim in danger. This narrative is directly oppositional to the narratives advanced by counter discourses of feminism.

The video continues to resist feminist narratives by pinning it as something mean and untrustworthy. Using affective and dogmatic rhetoric to position feminism as a villain. This villain persona is supplemented by the graphics used in the video, which impose comic book imagery to establish this subconscious link. Comic book imagery helps the audience draw the conclusion that a fight is happening between them and the

feminist. The stereotypical comic book "pow" is instead replaced with "lie" as if the audience is being hit by the attacks of feminism. These images identify an exchange of blows, implying that feminism is attacking with lies. The intention is to draw from the comic play to impose great significance to feminism as something evil, and relentlessly assaulting the viewer.

This comic book aesthetic is important because it implies that feminism is either not real or it should not be taken seriously. Ultimately PragerU positions men at odds with feminism who is on an unjustified assault against the norms of society. This placement seeks to lead the male viewers to be on the side of the host, as he is antifeminism, and clearly, feminism is bad. The host, the audience being the protagonist of this virtual comic book adventure, who need to defend against this aggressive force with justified violence. Strategic word choices are employed such as "bully" and "lie" position feminism as an evil and harmful antagonist. PragerU even ties in rhetorical devices such as "power, talents, and force" to build upon this comic book imagery. The comic book style rhetoric imposes a larger connection to good and evil. Feminism here is "shoving lies down our throats" something that is forceful and unwanted. An action that a villain would take, and it is that lie that makes "both men and women less happy and less free" (Klavan, 2018). PragerU utilizes this creative imagery to invent the idea that feminism is evil, so evil that its goal is to not only make you less happy but also less free. Freedom, being one of the main pillars of neoliberalism, and "America" that PragerU seeks to defend.

Figure 4 & Figure 5

Images used in "Who Needs Feminism" to illustrate a comic book style

Throughout the comic book imagery and rhetorical choices of this video, the goal

becomes clear: it is not men who are oppressing women, but the other way around. This

parasitic discourse seeks to reposition men as the victim who are merely living natural

lives. As the host states "Feminism denigrates masculinity in men by relentlessly calling

us 'toxic' for our flaws rather than appreciating our natural qualities" (Klavan, 2018). In

the world that the host describes, men are relentlessly under attack just for existing. Who

face the assault of being called toxic, while they are just trying their best to be men.

Feminism, like any evil villain, is causing "damage it does to our lives", that seeks to

suppress men out of revenge. PragerU even fits feminism into the villain trope of being

unjust, claiming that feminism actually "developed the historical mythology that men

have oppressed women" (Klavan, 2018). This appropriative strategy undermines the

entire narrative, by denying the existence of the material conditions that all counter

discourses are predicated on. This assertion is a sweeping attack at counterpublics and

propagates the narratives of the dominant sphere as one that was always fair and just.

Beyond that, PragerU also asserts that the ideal beliefs that feminism claims to be about

are actually its founding principles. The video in short co-opts the message that "women have the same human rights as men" by claiming that it is actually the founding philosophy of "classical liberalism". PragerU constantly refers to classical liberalism as the founding ideology for all its political beliefs. The hosts proclaim it holds the idea that "we are all equally endowed by God with the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (Klavan, 2018), which cements PragerU's argument of victimhood through an appeal to religion.

To the viewer, feminism is to be seen as an attack not only on men but on the traditional values and understanding of sex and gender founded in society. To back this claim, he refers to a dogmatic truth, pointing to the natural aspects of men and women within the bible. Referencing the ideal conceptualizations of a specific man and a specific woman found in the bible. This demagogic imposes truths of the role of man and the role of women, that can and should not be contested. It propagates the dogmatic truths of religion to resist cultural and societal changes that counterpublics seek to achieve. The biblical references of the video continue the narrative that men are heroes and women's attempt to tailor their roles as unnatural. A "good" woman stays in the house and embraces motherhood by catering to the family. While a man uses his superior strength to protect the women, as someone who is chivalrous. The affirmation of what is and isn't acceptable for men and women is a truth imposed by the bible, and this is a prominent theme in the next PragerU video as well.

To summarize, the video "Who Needs Feminism?" shows how PragerU establishes an affective argument of victimhood by positioning men as the victims of feminism. PragerU coopts the oppressive relationship and imposes it onto traditional

Americans and men. This video uses specific rhetoric and images to establish the idea that feminism is unjustified, incorrect, and harmful to its viewer. The viewer, who is to be understood as someone just trying to do their best is demonized by the villain of feminism. Feminism in this video is a comic book villain, who seeks to wrongly harm everyone who gets in its way. This discursive strategy works by playing off the notions of right and wrong by redefining what feminism is and does. This strategy is unique for it spotlights feminism and demonizes it to undermine the movement. It also positions it against traditional Americans, and even religion, two vastly popular ideas in the dominant sphere. This reconfiguration of feminism is done to make sure the audience understands that feminism is a flawed ideology that seeks to harm them, the real victim.

"Make Men Masculine Again"

PragerU's video called "make men masculine again" seeks to resist counter publics discourse regarding toxic masculinity. The overarching strategy here is to victimize masculinity and therefore imply that men and boys are the actual victims when it comes to addressing toxic masculinity in society. The video points out there are many traits such as "aggression, violence, ambition unchecked by conscience" that are associated with toxic masculinity (Stuckey, 2018). However, the host uses "air quotes" when saying toxic masculinity, seeking to undervalue its meaning or status. She then sarcastically implies that the solution is obvious, "make men less masculine." The words masculine appears with pink and yellow flowers behind it and a magical sound effect. Suggesting that the intention is to turn men feminine, rather than resolve toxicity. Once again implying that feminist movements are lying about their intentions and goals. PragerU poses that society's current approach to resolving toxic masculinity is not to

address the toxic aspects, but instead to attack all masculinity. Identifying men as the object under assault in the war on toxic masculinity. They state that the solution, being promoted by counter discourse, is to "make men less masculine, make men more like women" (Stuckey, 2018). Therefore, these attempts to adjust masculinity do not actually want to resolve toxicity but instead, they seek "to feminize young men in the hopes of achieving some utopian notion of equality and peace" (Stuckey, 2018). A notion that they state is not only wrong but also dangerous to men. PragerU has created a clear understanding that men are under attack and facing real danger, as a result of the left trying to resolve toxic masculinity.

Figure 6

Image used in "Make Men Masculine Again" to show how feminine men are becoming.
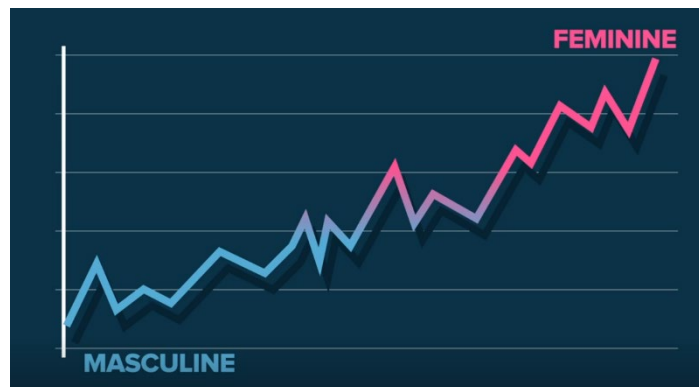
This parasitic strategy works in several ways by rearticulating men as victims in the discourse that seeks to address toxic masculinity. Under the lens PragerU creates, men are merely prey to be feminized by people who are attempting to achieve an impossible (utopian) goal. PragerU is playing off the idea that men will be attacked, for these bad actors seek to feminize them, thus stealing their identity. Femineity in this instance is an evil force that is incompatible with the male identity. In fact, femineity is harmful and dangerous for men, which would destroy their identity or worse turn them evil. PragerU is pandering to its viewers conceptualization of masculinity, which they

know is often an essential aspect to its male viewers conceptualization of themselves. According to PragerU the danger to making men more feminine is that it will lead to more toxic masculinity. This message seeks to undermine feminist strategies that promote the idea that men should embrace femineity more as a way to reduce toxic masculinity. PragerU claims that increasing femininity in men doesn't work because "bad men don't become good when they stop being men- they become good when they stop being bad" (Stuckey, 2018). This assertion functions by conflating toxic masculinity with masculinity and asserting that aggression, violence, and unbridled ambition are intrinsic to being a man. PragerU states that these traits cannot be eliminated from the male psyche, instead only harnessed. Here PragerU has managed to reconceptualize toxicity as inherent to men, and something that therefore cannot be removed. If this attribute is an essential part of being a man, then trying to remove it, as feminist wish, is a direct assault on the male being. Instead, PragerU asserts the need for toxic masculinity to be harnessed for they allow for men to accomplish great feats, such as, defeating tyranny, building economies, and heroism. The problem in PragerU's understanding isn't that men are too masculine, but instead that they aren't masculine enough. Promoting the idea that man should fully embrace masculinity, and if anything becomes more masculine than they already are.

Figure 7

Image in "Make Men Masculine Again" shows harm of men becoming feminine.
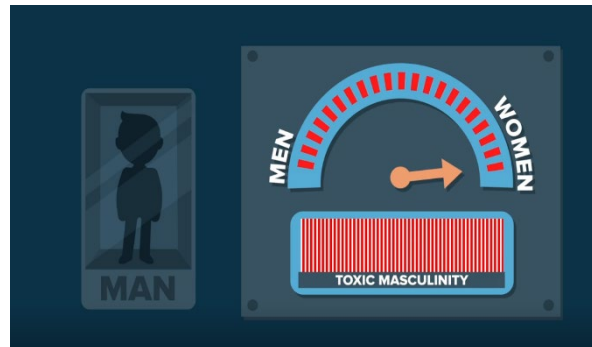
Having positioned the man as the victim and undermined the counter discourse narrative of toxic masculinity, PragerU then promotes its constructions of an ideal male identity. The masculine man opens doors for women, which reaffirms chivalry that hints at the traditional notions of family and gender constructions. He also works very long hours to feed his family, tying back the male identity to his work, in a neoliberal fashion. One that seeks to normalize the under value of work, where long working hours are normalized just to feed one's family. He also is willing to die for his country, positioning the man as masculine as long as they sacrifice themselves for the imperialism of the United States. Thus, positioning masculinity in such a fashion, that reinforces specific notions of value to men watching this video. The average PragerU viewer conceptualizes their 'manhood' in relation to their labor, not their inherent value. The standard for what it means to be a man is to go off and die for one's country or work themselves to death. These harmful conceptualizations of the masculine identity promote the dominant public sphere, by reaffirming the male body as a tool for the bourgeois. The made body is abject in the way it's determined, hardworking, and willing to sacrifice itself. Yet, it's also in danger by the potential of crying or not being strong. This body is only masculine when

its purpose and identity is tied to maintaining the traditional norms of the dominant sphere.

PragerU defends the dominant publics norms regarding the male identity, for masculine men are "leaders, warriors, and heroes". While men who do not embrace masculinity are cowards that leave destruction and despair in their wake. Implying that any man who allies themselves with movements challenging toxic masculinity are less masculine. These men flee responsibilities, such as that of being a father, and children without fathers grow up to have major issues. In this manner, PragerU ties masculinity as not only an essential aspect to society but as key to being a good father. If a man wishes to be respected as a good person, or father, then he should embrace masculinity and by all means, resist femininity. From there PragerU returns to repositioning the man and boy as the victims in the conflict regarding toxic masculinity. PragerU establishes several more assaults against feminist logic. Saying that they are losing access to games and competition, which therefore attacks innate qualities that allow them to be strong and responsible. Men become victims in this way, who will lose access to games and competitions for they will no longer be strong if they express femineity. PragerU then utilizes this position to assert that men have innate attributes tied directly to being a man. This statement allows PragerU to undermine the theory of social construction. Which is the driving force to contemporary understandings of gender. Lastly, images of people rioting against boys are displayed to emphasize the social uprising that is occurring against boys. Implying that society at large despises men and is actively working against them.

Figure 8 & Figure 9

Images in "Make Men Masculine Again" shows how boys are being attacked in society.

PragerU uses the discursive strategy of victimhood to position men as in danger. Men face losing everything about themselves when evil feminist seeks to resist toxic masculinity. PragerU seeks to undermine efforts to allow men to embrace femineity by stating that it will turn them into horrible people. They reconfigure efforts to resist toxic masculinity as efforts to attack the very essence of men. Men are therefore the victim when people try to address this problem, for the way they address the problem is based off lies and bad solutions. Additionally, they reaffirm the notions of masculinity that are essential to maintain the dominant public. The following video expands heavily on this war on boys briefly mentioned in this video.

"War on Boys"

The PragerU video "War on Boys" proclaims that "being a normal boy is a serious liability in today's classroom" (Sommers, 2014). This video begins by immediately establishing the victim narrative to men and boys. PragerU is implying that men and boys are the ones facing the biggest threat growing up, not women. The host states that previous behaviors that were once just boyish by nature, such as being disorganized and restless are now entirely unacceptable within the classroom. Positioning

grade school classrooms as a significant obstacle to young boys, instead of a place for learning. The classroom in this instance is another organization that is intentionally seeking to prevent boys from succeeding. All because they refuse to allow "boys be boys" and are purposefully built to not be boy-friendly. Implying that boys are institutionally being oppressed by school systems. This victimization of the young boy allows PragerU to claim that it's the rejection of "harmless and minor" behaviors, naturally found in boys, as the sole reason for long-term damaging effects on boys. PragerU only identifies small and insignificant attitudes that younger boys demonstrate as the only problems that boys create. This strategic positioning allows for PragerU to extrapolate on the idea that boys are completely innocent and are unfairly being assaulted by the education system. In this video, the blame is shifted off the young boys, or parents, and directly onto the schools who, for some reason, hate boys. Boys are once again positioned as the innocent victim who's helpless to the assault of the school that hates them.

PragerU refers to psychologist Michael Thompson who states that "Girl's behavior is the gold standard in schools. Boys are treated like defective girls" (Sommers, 2014). The rhetorical framing of boys as defective girls is that of that abject body. It posits young boys not only as a danger to schools but as victims of a school system that no longer accepts them. This discursive tactic of calling them defective girls, implies that they are not only girls now, but significantly worse than girls. The notion of "being a girl" here, once again harps on the idea that the left, or feminists, are seeking to eliminate men for their 'evil cause'. Boys cease to exist in the school system for they can only fail, therefore they must become girls to succeed. These "defective girls" are falling behind

academically, as a direct result of this "unwelcoming" and harsh environment for boys in grade school. The strategy PragerU is deploying is to identify the idea that young boys are being institutionally discriminated against by school, just because they are boys. Directly, coopting the relationship with oppression that feminists have long identified as unique to the female body historically in the school system. PragerU states that compared with girls, boys earn lower grades, win fewer honors they are far less likely to go to college. Using this "data", PragerU can make the claim that the institution is clearly oppressing them. This claim is supported by an infographic with no metrics for evaluating or understanding that data shown.

Figure 10

Image from "War on Boys" shows how boys are falling behind in school.
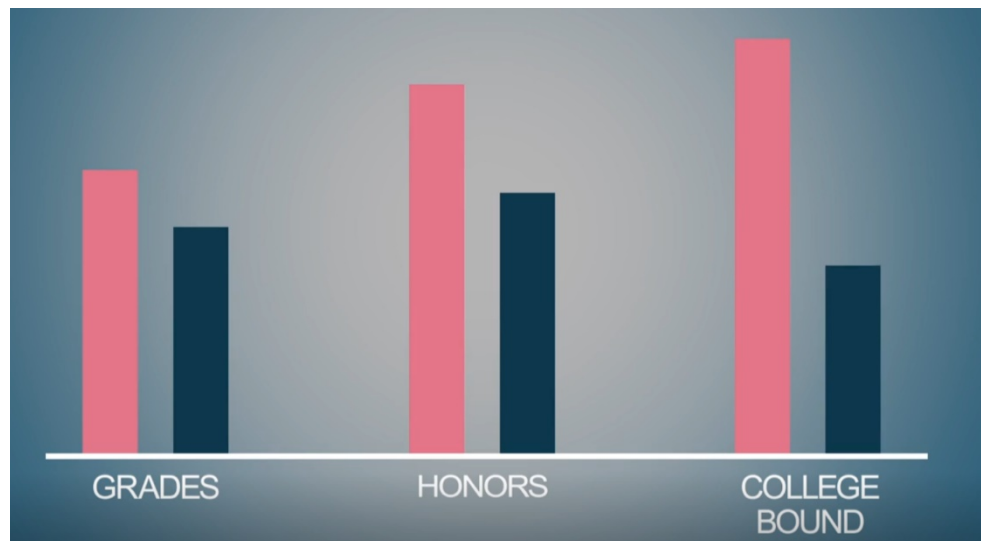
The entire video focuses solely on how "normal boys" are under attack by a system that is out to get them. PragerU establishes the victimhood of the young boy, as not even being that of a girl, but even worse as a defective girl. This attempt to invert hierarchical standings positions the young boy as far inferior to the young girl. The logical conclusion PragerU wants you to draw is that if this is true at a young age, then it

must be true for all ages. Hence why they point to the failures of boys as they start to get older. PragerU is actually prying off the patriarchal positioning of a girl, one that is weak, when establishing the boy as a defective girl. This is a direct assault on the male identity within a patriarchal society. For every adolescent boy fears the day they are called girly at school or maybe he throws like a girl. In this instance though, not only are you a girl, implying you are weak and inferior, but you are even worse than a girl, for you are defective. These unspoken narratives are an essential aspect to the affective argument this parasite public seeks to use to persuade its audience.

Using this victimhood position, PragerU leverages assaults on the institutions that they claim are determined to prevent boys from succeeding. PragerU even goes as far as implying that society will fail if this trend of discrimination continues. PragerU drives this victimized narrative by describing how "typical" boy imagination of "violence, action, and adventure" is frowned upon in the school system. The host describes a time where a California third grader drew a painting of several people being murdered and the teacher merely expressed concern to his parents. This instance is shown as a moment of normal boyhood being rejected from schools, for violence is inherent to a young boy's imagination. This victimhood framing is leveraged to reverse the "boy-averse" trends, such as feeling centered, and competition free education. Positing the need for competition as an essential aspect to the classroom. Competition being a founding principle of neoliberalism, needs to be maintained in the dominant public. Feeling centered learning, positioned as opposite of action and adventure, as if they are mutually exclusive. They portray feeling-based education as incomprehensible and uninteresting to young boys.

Overall, in gender-based discourse the affective strategy of victimhood seeks to coopt the relationship with oppression felt by women and impose that on men. This strategy works two-fold; it delegitimizes the feminist narrative and refocuses struggles to maintaining the dominant norms in society. The videos found on the PragerU website continually position feminism as an evil entity that is predicated on lies and only seeks to harm men. This attempt to redefine feminism erases its efforts to achieve equality and turns it into a hegemonic actor. PragerU turns men and boys into the abject body, to position it as simultaneously strong, but also endanger. Men are hardworking heroes and warriors; however, they face unbearable threats in society that they can't overcome without help. The male body isn't masculine enough and constantly under attack by forces that seek to eliminate it. Men and boys to PragerU are merely tools that need to be told what they are, and whom they need to fear, aka feminism. This is problematic for PragerU reties masculinity, without limits, to the identity of the man which only solidifies the harms that are occurring in the status quo to women. PragerU erases the struggles and oppression of women then co-opts that narrative by applying it to those who cause, or maintain, that oppression in the first place. With the analysis of gender discourse complete, I will now move on and analyze PragerU's discourse in race-based issues.

Race-Based Discourse

This chapter will now analyze the next aspect of identity politics that PragerU seeks to influence through the strategy of victimage. Movements for social justice for black people saw a significant uptake in 2020. The Black Lives Matters movement of 2020 is sought to be the largest political movement in US history (Buchanan, 2020). Following the death of George Floyd, protests erupted even to a global scale with the

common goal of highlighting the mistreatment of black people. The movement was focused on raising awareness of the equalities that black people face in society, especially when it comes to police brutality (Westerman; et al, 2020; Ore, 2019). The rise of BLM illustrates a major counter discourse shift that has been occurring in the status quo.

PragerU is constantly engaging in discourse regarding race and civil rights movements, more specifically the social injustice faced by black people in America. PragerU's videos seek to affectively persuade its audience that they are the real victim, instead of black Americans. As noted by the Southern Poverty Law Center, many of PragerU's videos serve as racist dog-whistles for the far right, identifying the following videos as examples; Playing the Black Card," hosted by Owens, Are the Police Racist," hosted by Heather Mac Donald; "Blacks in Power Don't Empower Blacks," hosted by Jason Riley; "Are Some Cultures Better than Others" and "Is Fascism Right or Left," both hosted by Dinesh D'Souza (Kelley, 2018). PragerU's website has over 60 videos listed when one searches for the word "black". There are many strategies and tactics used by PragerU but most focus on undermining the struggles of black people in America, and presuppose whites as the real victims of society.

<p align="center">*"What is Social Justice?"*</p>

The next video for analysis on the issue of race relations is titled "What is Social Justice?". This video features host Jonah Goldberg, who is recognized as being a part of the American Enterprise Institute and national review, both part of PragerU's network. The video calls into question what exactly social justice is by attempting to redefine the term and erase race from the discussion of social justice. Jonah starts the video by providing the audience with a simple question to perhaps ask at their next dinner party.

He says that the viewer should ask their liberal friends to define social justice. As he

states, everyone on the political left talks incessantly about social justice, then they

should be able to provide a good definition. He claims though, if you ask ten liberals to

define it, that you would surely get ten different answers. Stating that the reason for this

is because "social justice means anything that its champions want it to mean" Goldberg,

2014). Jonah answers the question of this definition by cherry picks a mission statement

by the AFL-CIO, a government organization, that focuses on economic justice as well as

social justice. However, this mission statement never actually defines what social justice

is, despite this being the question the host is seeking an answer too. This effort by

PragerU works to begin taking questions of racial, or even gender, inequality out of the

discussion of social justice in this video. The host is setting up a move to define an

essential aspect out of the equation, i.e., race, by simplifying the discussion to an

economic matter alone. In doing so, PragerU renders the social aspect of social justice

invisible. Social justice, by PragerU's standards, becomes simply an economic question.

Social justice under this definition is not concerned with discrimination, hate crimes,

violence, or any form of oppression that is not solely economic. Oppression around race,

and gender, are rendered unintelligible to the audience. In this way, PragerU has inserted

itself into discourse regarding race, by eliminating race definitionally from the term

social justice.

Figure 11

Image from "What is Social Justice?" shows liberals defining the term differently.

The host summarizes the official mission statement from the AFL-CIO, which he claims would apply to thousands of other organizations, to be "social justice equals a "good thing" no one needs to argue for, and no one dare be against" (Goldberg, 2014). There are several important aspects about the way Jonah verbally and nonverbally delivers this summarization, which is supplemented by the images on screen. The first is the nonverbal presentation of the words "good things" within quotation marks. The quotations here imply that the good things that social justice seeks to achieve is not inherently good. They are undermining the efforts and goals of social justice initiatives through this nonverbal strategy. A layer of subjectivity is created through the use of these quotation marks that separates the audience from those seeking social justice. This separation is continued through the emphasis on "argue" and "NO one DARE be against". The purpose of this rhetorical positioning is to resonate with the listener preconceived biases that social justice exists as an unjustified moral position. Upon positioning the listener's as separate from the social justice they begin to undermine it to relieve any tension that they should feel obligated to support. Goldberg is establishing the conflict between the viewer and the concept of social justice. He implies that social

justice is self-justifying, however the premise in which its based off is false and therefore the audience should reject it.

Figure 12

Image from "What is Social Justice?" redefines social justice.
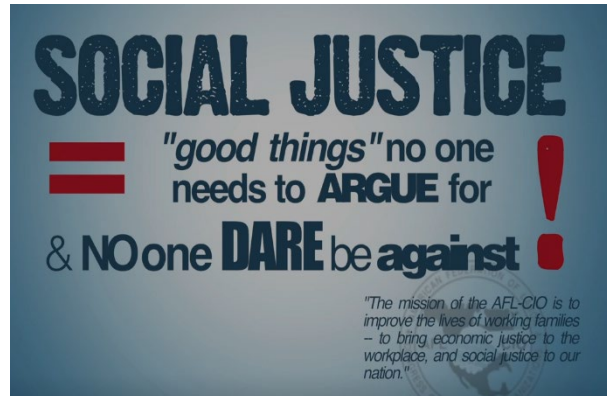
Goldberg returns to positioning social justice to be merely an economic question by pointing to a quotation from an economist, Friedrick Hayek. Hayek wants people to be ashamed forever employing the term social justice. Goldberg states that this is because he saw beyond the façade of the term social justice. To Hayek, this term is one merely of political opportunism and intellectual laziness that truly seeks to "sacrifice freedom in order to redistribute income" (Goldberg, 2014). This quotation has major discursive significance for it seeks to redefine the goals of social justice to be nothing more than an attack on freedoms and theft. Freedom, as understood in a neoliberal word seeks to be a freedom *from* not a freedom *to*. This freedom from having to help others is directly under attack in the instance defined by the host in this video. For the audience, they now see social justice as a threat to their freedom and an attempt to steal their hard-earned income. The focus on stealing income ties into the axiological constructions of the neoliberal subject who values their own income over others suffering. Using this strategy, PragerU positions this as a direct assault on the core neoliberal values of their subjects. PragerU

reconceptualization of what social justice means positions it as not an attempt to achieve equality but an attempt to steal equality from the viewer. The viewer quickly recognizes that they are the ones with something to lose if social justice prevails, making them the victim of such movement.

Goldberg pushes this narrative of danger and fear by stirring up red scare fears of large government, aka communism. He claims that social justice is an attempt to give the government ever-increasing power in which it can do 'good things' with. This message is strategically used to trigger the core of conservative ideology that focuses on maintaining a small government. A simplistic message rooted in red scare propaganda. The "good things" that the government should do with power is simply, "whatever the champions of social justice decide this week" (Goldberg, 2014). PragerU uses the phrase "this week" to imply that social justice champions don't actually know what they want. Their week-by-week approach makes them reactionary and irrational, and therefore not fit to make decisions, with the viewer's money that is. One thing is for sure though, social justice will seek to redistribute wealth, for it's in the 'doctrine of social justice'. This doctrine is provided by the UN which claims social justice is defined by 'strong and coherent redistributive policies conceived and implemented by public agencies" (Goldberg, 2014). Here Goldberg solidifies the erasure of race from social justice initiatives and definitionally limits social justice to only economic redistribution. By eliminating issues such as race from the conversation of social justice, Goldberg has erased the conceptual hierarchies inherent to the discussion. This is not all, for Goldberg states that "it gets worse" implying economic redistribution is uniquely bad for the average viewer.

Goldberg continues by proclaiming that the UN report states that anyone who believes that truth and justice exist as concepts separate from the 'agenda' defined by the left is an enemy of social justice. To PragerU, social justice is a term that the left alone can define. The left of course weaponizes this term to best fit their agenda at the time. All for the purpose to steal your money. In this way, if you want to keep your money, a fairly common belief, you will be determined to be a horrible person. The video suggests the viewer identify with the need to keep their hard-earned money and resist anyone who wants to take it. In this way, they are victims for the left's agenda seeks to take their money, and if they refuse, they are deemed as bad. Goldberg says that "compassion, or social justice, is when the government takes your money and gives it to someone else, while greed is when you want to keep it" (Goldberg, 2014). The viewer is helpless to the attacks of social justice in the way PragerU has set this scene. 'You' have no choice but to give someone else your money, or your greedy. This narrative makes the viewer the clear victim who's helpless but to give their money away by force. The overall message of this video is that the left uses the term 'social justice' to impose their will onto other people and take their money. The audience is therefore suitable to any attack from the left if they merely invoke the term social justice. The left can use this term to coerce anyone to do whatever they want. The viewer is a victim of an irrational left and faces the threat of a large government in the world of social justice.

PragerU injects itself in a very unique manner into race-centered discourse in the video "What is social justice". PragerU strategically redefines social justice to something that focuses solely on economic redistribution. To the viewer, that means social justice is an effort to steal their wealth, making them the victims of government coercion. This

video engages in race discussions by eliminating it from the conversation about social justice. This strategic effort prevents hierarchical discussions from influencing anyone and puts everyone on an even playing field. The erasure of racial discrimination in the dialogue regarding social justice allows for PragerU to easily position the viewer as the victim in regard to efforts to achieve social justice. When social justice isn't about ending racism or sexism but instead about stealing the viewer's money, it becomes very simple to allow the viewer to conceptualize themselves as the ones at risk. The erasure of oppression faced by social justice advocates is a unique strategy that easily allows this parasitic public to reestablish hierarchical understandings. Victimhood is achieved through ignorance in the instance where one can simply deny the counter-public efforts to combat racism.

<p style="text-align:center">*"What is intersectionality?"*</p>

Another popular video on PragerU regarding the subject of identity politics is "What is Intersectionality" which aired in June of 2018. The host is the popular conservative figurehead Ben Shapiro, whose rise to fame revolves around the aesthetic of being a master debater. This came out around the time where many universities and companies revamped efforts to be more inclusive. The topic of diversity and intersectionality are major pushing points for counter discourses that seeks to increase access for minorities into different spheres. Shapiro starts the video by setting the scene for the viewer. This being that the viewer probably believes that they are unique with different thoughts and experiences than anyone else. However, Shapiro immediately claims that modern leftist orthodox seeks to deny the lived experiences of the viewer. From the start of the video, Shapiro has spoken to the viewer and made them feel

welcome and unique only to make the claim that there is a group of people that seeks to erase that uniqueness. His rhetorical efforts sought to make the viewer feel reasonably good about themselves, then profile an enemy that is unjustly attacking them. This is another instance where PragerU turns the counter-public efforts to decrease racism in the public sphere as an assault on the white identity. In under fifteen seconds, the audience is told clearly that they are under attack, and they now can also identify who is attacking them.

Figure 13

Image from "What is intersectionality?" illustrates white men as victim.

Shapiro reinterprets intersectionality, not as a lived experience but instead as a hierarchy, a chart that justifies opinions solely based on identity. PragerU uses a graphic portraying a Muslim women next to an average white man. This contrast is specifically important for the audience for it draws on the audience's internal biases. The Muslim women in a hijab represents oppression from a conservative Western perspective. PragerU is playing off the idea that its viewers see hijabs as merely a symbolic representation of the women's placement in Muslim society. Knowing this, they create an image that its viewers will see as oppressed and then play their viewers as even more oppressed than the Muslim women. The bar next to this woman is full, meaning her

opinions matter far more than the average white man. Her image is also significantly

bigger than the image of the man. These strategic efforts seek to reinforce the idea that

the white man is lesser to the Muslim women in the eyes of leftism. An argument that is

strengthened by the internal biases of the viewer juxtaposed to the oppressed Muslim

women. It's important to note that PragerU never specifically states that its viewer is the

victim, they only imply and continually reinforce that idea.

Figure 14 & Figure 15

Images from "What is intersectionality?" portray the straight white male as excluded.
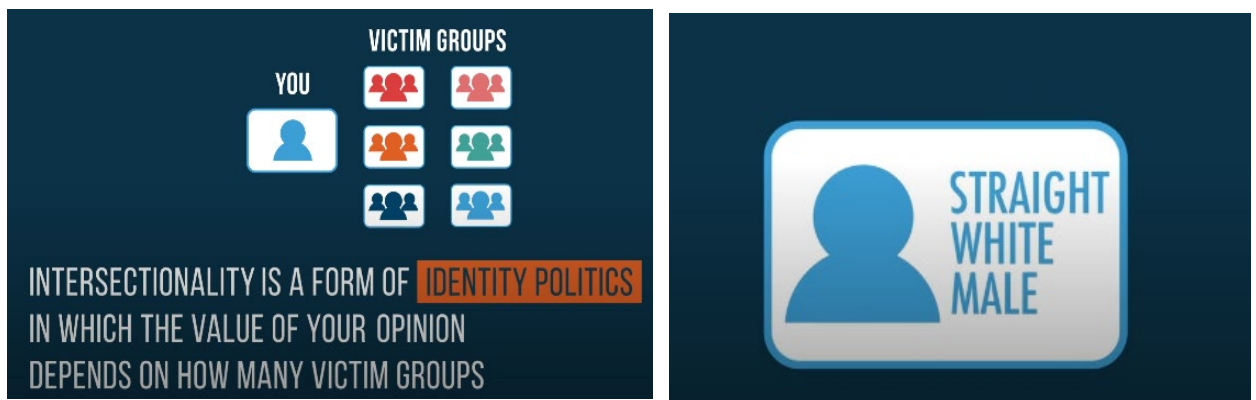
The idea of the victim, in the videos of PragerU, is something that is self-imposed

and only used to gain power over others. This is clearly shown by the way Ben Shapiro

describes what intersectionality is. The video defines intersectionality as "a form of

identity politics in which the value of your opinion depends on how many victims'

groups you belong too" (Shapiro, 2018). This once again illustrates a definitional

approach to victimhood that seeks to redefine counter-public terms to undermine and

attack them. PragerU redefines intersectionality to make is a question of how to value

one's opinions, according to leftist ideology. In addition, intersectionality is specifically

based solely on the self-identification as a victim is a tactic of the left, to gain power and

reject the real victims of society, the conservative right. PragerU positions "you", i.e., the

viewer, as outside of those victim groups that benefit from intersectionality. The "you" is identified as being at the bottom of the totem pole of intersectionality, and the words "you" transform into "straight white male". The rhetorical significance of this redefinition is that it allows PragerU to recategorize oppressive relationships. Intersectionality ceases to be a tool to understand how diverse experience oppression, and instead becomes a tool of power to oppress the viewer. PragerU is revealing to the viewer that they are the real victim of a world the prioritizes "victim groups". PragerU positions intersectionality as an effort to exclude the cis white male is and ignore all the struggles that they face while making them the enemy. The understandings of how hierarchies function in left-wing ideology is created to exclude the white male. This is all done to reframe the counter discourse strategies which seek to increase equality as a direct assault on the white body. The white body is declared as the victim through this redefining of what intersectionality means. Additionally, this strategy is a defense of the dominant sphere, by undermining the basis of intersectionality. PragerU galvanizes the support of its viewers against this 'movement' by refocuses the discussion away from issues of race and positing them as the abject body. Victimizing the viewer, aka the conservative white male, as a result of this new horrible leftist ideology that wants to attack them.

PragerU takes strategic efforts to increase the perceived victimization of the viewer, by positioning them in isolation compared to the rest of society. Ben Shapiro claims that the ideology of intersectionality works to create alliances between victim groups. According to Shapiro, intersectionality works by focusing on the intersections of identity thus creating an "us vs them" paradigm. The sole purpose of creating such a paradigm is to fight their oppressor. That oppressor being the "dreaded straight white

men." From an intersectional perspective, the only thing that matters is *victim solidarity*. He uses this identification to continually undermine the concept, by stating it is illogical as a core foundation. He claims, "this is why we see lesbians for Palestine, despite the fact that Islam is horrible to gay people". These rhetorical efforts assault the concept of intersectionality to defend the dominant ideologies of whiteness and the patriarchy.

Shapiro uses another tactic to attack intersectionality by attacking Kimberle Crenshaw, the professor who coined the term. He takes a quotation from her that states the intention of intersectionality from her perspective was "*my* to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what *I* thought they should highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced". Shapiro strategically inflects "my" and "I" in her quotation to imply that the creation was something selfish, instead of progressive. He continues this attempt to distant Crenshaw from counter discourses by claiming that her ideologies are actually ivory tower. Crenshaw relationship to academia means that she is too distant from the average American for her opinions to be valid.

Figure 16 & Figure 17

Images from "What is intersectionality" attempt to undermine Kimberle Crenshaw.
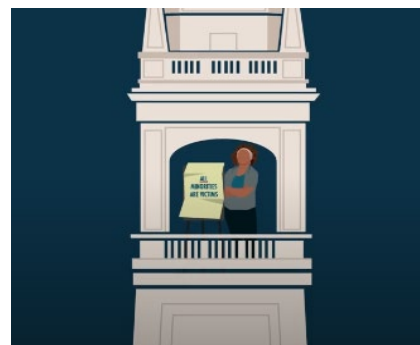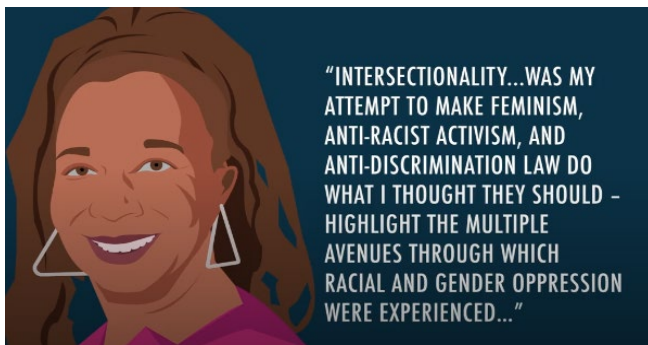
This strategy sets up the point that intersectionality is flawed for it deprives individuals, mainly white individuals, from their experiences and actions. Intersectionality is the embodiment of identity politics for it only looks to judge people based on their identity. The conclusion that Ben Shapiro proposes when speaking to the viewer is that "you and I" have unique experiences that count for nothing, while our racial and sexual identity count for everything. This idea, according to Ben Shapiro, by no means could produce a free and equal America. Once again shifting intersectionality as an attack, this time however as not only an attack on the viewer but also as an attack on the founding ideologies of America. PragerU strategically positions the idea at the core of intersectionality is the idea that "America is a terrible place. Thus, the overall rhetorical strategy of this video is to establish the victimage of the cis white male in identity politics. In addition, they seek to defend the dominant sphere by redefining intersectionality as something that is in direct assault to the cis white male, and America, to help establish the narrative of victimhood. The video to works to prove that a selfish ideology, intersectionality, operates solely to harm the host and the viewer that is watching.

Figure 18

Image illustrates PragerU's depiction of left activists.

In the PragerU video "What is intersectionality" the parasitic public seeks to inject itself into race discourse by redefining another term essential to counter public narratives. PragerU deploys a discursive strategy that identifies intersectionality not as a movement to increase awareness and equality, but instead as a movement to attack the white cis male. By positioning the white male as excluded from intersectional discourse PragerU is able to identify and legitimize a sense of oppression for its viewers. This affective strategy focuses on a single instance in which the white voice is lessened and exploits that narrative to illustrate a large-scale assault towards the viewer. This type of victimage is frequently seen in PragerU's efforts to engage in discourse regarding race, for it works to undermine the relevance of racial oppression of minorities through redefining terms. Similarly, to how PragerU erased race from discourse regarding social justice, here they erase the oppression of minorities from the discussion of intersectionality. This refocusing of the issue back to the body is an essential tool used to persuade the abject body that they should first consider the harms to themselves this movement might cause. PragerU wants the audience to leave with the knowledge that the cis white male, is unjustifiably being attacked by all minority groups who are rallying up against them, even though they have done nothing wrong. This demagogic strategy works to create fear in the viewer that they are worthless and in danger in the face of intersectionality.

"Playing the Black Card"

The video called "Playing the Black Card" features host Candice Owens, who makes the argument that Black people play the black card as the sole means to achieve massive success in the United States. Throughout the video, it is implied that playing the

black card means calling out racism. In this way, this phrase becomes a replacement for any instance in which a minority points out or identifies racism in society. The tactic here for PragerU is if they can demonize 'playing the black card' they can demonize any effort to raise awareness about racism. PragerU makes the strategic choice to use Candice Owens in many of their videos on race. PragerU uses her as the token black conservative, who can make statements about and against black people without being called racist. The fact that Owens herself is black allows PragerU to deploy strategic arguments into racial discourse through direct interaction, rather than redefining terms as seen above. Throughout the video, Owens relies on personal anecdotal evidence to prove that the black card is only something that is abused and should not be used. Owens is mobilizing her identity as a black women against the lived experiences of other black people. The idea here is that if Owens can succeed without the 'black card' then all other black people should be able to as well. This is the same rhetoric of tokenism identified by Dana Cloud when analyzing Oprah Winfrey's rags-to-riches biography (1996). The significance of tokenism is it allows one narrative to imply accessibility to black individuals in society, while denying the structural economic and political barriers for black people in society (Cloud, 1996). This strategy is seen throughout the entire video, Owens continually makes a wide variety of claims attacking blackness, undermining experiences of oppression, and delegitimizing black culture. These rhetorical tactics seek to shield the dominant public from the counter publicity efforts that seek to promote equality for black individuals in the status quo.

The underlying message that Owens wants the listener to infer is that being black is actually a benefit, or advantage because one simply being able to play the black card.

PragerU is attempting to reject the narratives of counter-publics who promote an understanding that society is uniquely racist. According to Owen's "the black card" is a tool that will allow you to weaponize an entire history of oppression, even if you have never been oppressed (Owens, 2018). In this way, even if there is some racism, the power of the black card overwhelms it. This rhetorically seeks to separate black people from their recent history of oppression. Thus, implying that just because a person was never an actual slave, that they were therefore never oppressed. This seeks to undermine the counter publicity effort promoting the understanding that black people still face many forms of systematic oppression on a large scale institutionally and individually and suffer from its historical effects (Alexander, 2010). Owen's efforts here seek to erase the experience and long-term effects caused by slavery, by implying that you must have been a slave to have ever felt oppression.

Owens lists off a wide variety of hypothetical achievements or crimes that one can commit and get away with, all just by being black. Simply by 'flashing' the black card any black person can make white people cowards. Once again, Owens repositioning whites as those to be afraid when it comes to identity politics. This rhetorical strategy seeks to construct efforts of identifying racism as a power play instead of legitimate resistance. The video continues by stating when one plays the black card one can win awards and make millions while "claiming that the people that got you there somehow hate you" (Owens, 2018). The rhetorical significance of that sentence is that the achievements of the black people she is referring to is not their own. Instead, black success is the byproduct of others, the viewers, who were directly responsible for their success, but still disposable. Cadence Owens positions the black card as something that

lets black people defy all odds, destroy corporations under the guise of social justice, and torch their own neighborhoods without consequences.

Owens states that people who play the black card, not only were poorly raised but also in using it they destroy their family's entire history. The black card, therefore, undermines all the hard work that the black family has done for it is an easy route to success, a form of cheating. The video relies on recirculating a series of conservative tropes such as black-on-black violence, and the missing black father. Owens strategically positions the black card as a way for black people to refuse responsibility for their actions. This is merely a tool to take advantage of the system and abuse privileges that white people cannot. PragerU illustrates this as an example of how white people are not able to compete or succeed, for they do not have access to the same tools as black people. Owens utilizes her own personal narrative to continue undermining the struggles of black people. In the rest of the video Owens declares that she does not want the imaginary black card, and she rejects the idea of it. This tactic relies heavily on tokenizing her experience, for if Owens believes the black cards are inherently bad, then the white viewer too can feel legitimized to express that same belief. The strategic reason for this is to position black victimhood as invalid, and something that should not be used. This is juxtaposed with white victimhood which is deemed legitimate according to PragerU. White victimhood in this instance arises from the lack of access to the powerful tool that is the black card. The message is that this tool is inherently unfair and creates inequality if not everyone has access to it. The audience therefore should reject the idea of the black card in all instances, e.g., any time someone calls out instances of racism.

Figure 19 & Figure 20

Images demonstrate the "dangers" of the black card from "Playing the Black Card".

This timing of this message works to directly assault on the core narrative of

BLM, that black people are struggling to achieve in society due to socio and economic

oppression. The images on screen portray black people as angry and show them as

violent or attacking corporations. This violence is shown when black people call out

racism or seek to achieve diversity. PragerU also depicts images of entire cities on fire,

for this is the violence black people are allowed to inflict on societies thanks to the black

card. These images seek to invoke implicit biases, or subconscious racism often found in

conservative tropes. Where the black body is violent, or thugs, that care not about their

communities. The host here is seeking to convince the audience that the struggles black

people claim to experience do not actually exist, for they can play the "black card" to get

away with anything. In establishing this idea, the subconscious message she hints at is the

way in which playing the 'black card' works. The idea behind this is to call or imply that

the other people are racist. This flips the script on whom the actual victim is in the mind

of the viewer, for being called racist is an attack on the identity of the average white

viewer. Owens positions the black body as one that is abusing the power of the "black

card" in order to unjustly achieve success or avoid punishment by calling others racist.

Therefore, the real victim of this situation is the white individual who points out the

crime or the undeserving success, i.e., the viewer. This trope is continually perpetuated

throughout PragerU's videos on race, most noticeably in the following artifact, "Calling Good People Racist".

Within the video "Playing the Black Card" PragerU weaponizes Candice Owens' identity to undermine counter-public discourse surrounding race. Using her personal experiences Owens's experiences are tokenized as a method of rejecting anyone who 'plays the black card'. To the viewer, this becomes a rhetorical replacement for anyone who calls out or identifies racism. This parasitic strategy seeks to eliminate the discussion of racism from the public sphere. In turn, the video identifies that the real victim is the white individual who doesn't have access to such a powerful tool. The ability to claim racism is a rhetorical tool so powerful that white people should fear it, showing the demagogic nature of this strategy at play. This strategy works to affectively persuade the viewer that those who want to address racism only do so in order to get an advantage over them. Therefore, the black card is illegitimate and used selfishly, as a way of silencing those who experience racism.

<p align="center">"Calling Good People Racist"</p>

PragerU's video "Calling Good People Racist" starts by positioning Ty Cobb as one of the greatest baseball players ever, he was the first-ever superstar, the first hall of Famer, and has the highest batting average. Charles Leershen is the host for this PragerU video and the other a bibliography about Ty Cobb. He states that Ty Cobb is often referred to as "the worst racist and the dirtiest player ever to take the field". Stories about how Ty Cobb would pistol wipe black men in the street, or how he once stabbed a black waiter for acting uppity are apparently common references. The host asks, "How could a man born in Georgia in 1886 not be a racist" then answers this question by explaining

that the Cobb family has a long history of abolitionism (Leerhsen, 2017). Additionally, he

states that in his research he found that none of these stories about being a dirty player or

racist were actually true. Instead, Ty Cobb's legacy was tarnished by a bad faith

journalist named Al Stump. Al supposedly made up these stories about Cobb, for some

reason. The scandal was too good for Al Stump to turn down, and it managed to stick.

Whether or not Ty Cobb was actually racist is not the matter of analysis here though.

Instead as the video concludes, we get a glimpse of the real message that PragerU is

trying to get across. This being that good people are too often falsely called racists and

their lives, and legacy, are ruined because of it.

Figure 21

Images from "Calling Good People Racist" used to illustrate dangers of journalism.

Charles Leershen draws several conclusions after telling the story of how Ty

Cobb was falsely listed as a racist. These conclusions give insight to what PragerU wants

the viewer to deduct from watching this video. First is that it is far too "easy to believe

lies, especially successful ones" (Leerhsen, 2017). This point has unique significance to

the time that this video was released, airing in April 2017, shortly after Donald Trump

was sworn in as President. The video wants its readers to come to the conclusion that

successful people like Ty Cobb, or Donald Trump, are assaulted with lies about their

character. This strategy relies on a strawman fallacy that implies that if an innocent person, like Ty Cobb, can have their reputation tarnish then so can 'you' the viewer. In fact, many of PragerU's tactics can be understood as fallacies, however, they work differently for they have no interest in persuading someone "logically" but rather emotionally. Additionally, the message seeks for the viewer to make the logical conclusion that such attacks should not be believed. Those who are label racists are often innocent because those who label them racist are actually ill-intended. This discursive strategy seeks to invert the blame from those who may have done something racist, to those who are calling others racist. The message PragerU is creating positions the person who is called a racist as the victim in this narrative. The white masculine male, like Ty Cobb or Donald Trump, are often good people who are faced with false attacks by those who seek only to attack then, not resolve racism. In this instance, PragerU has demonized those who call out people for being racist and placed the average good guy as a victim to meritless attacks.

This rhetorical strategy seeks to defend the dominant public, i.e., Trump, from the onslaught of allegations he faces in regard to identity politics. The countless allegations about Trump being sexist are racist are lies in the same way Ty Cobb's allegations were. The subconscious comparison that the video wants you to draw is that these two celebrities are merely both victims of evil journalists. In addition, this positions the good white person as a victim again within the realm of identity politics, for if one of the best baseball players in history can be labeled as a racist, then surely anyone can. This is another example of how PragerU works to silence anyone who works to resist racism in the public sphere by demonizing their tactics. Calling someone racist is illegitimate at

face value and is a tool for people with bad intentions to attack innocent people. This message seeks to resonate with the viewer and allow them to reject calls of racism as unjust attacks on innocent people. Therefore, this strategy works to operate by closing off discursive avenues of counter-publics that attempt to resist racism by identifying it within the public sphere.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has conducted a network argument analysis in a multitude of parts. First, through an identification of the funders who support PragerU and help establish its network. Then by determining how PragerU can be understood as a parasite public through the framework provided by Larson and McHendry. This was followed by an analysis of how PragerU seeks to coopt the ethos of a university and how that benefits it. Then moving into the bulk of the analysis that looked at the specific parasitic strategies PragerU utilizes against counter publicity. The main demagogic strategy identified was through establishing the viewer as a victim in both gender and race discourse. Victimhood is achieved by coopting the relationship with oppression from minorities to those in power. This affective strategy of victimage is achieved in a variety of ways throughout PragerU's videos. We highlight how PragerU extrapolates small instances of exclusion as indicative of large-scale oppression. How PragerU redefines terms that work to achieve equality as threats to its viewers. How it erases and eliminates counter-public narratives that seek to confront actual forms of oppression, in order to reapply that same oppression to its viewers. As well as how PragerU tokenizes its hosts to undermine counter public narratives of oppression as a means of reapplying it to its viewers. All of these rhetorical strategies work parasitically to allow PragerU to attack

counter publics and maintain the dominant public sphere. Moving forward the next

chapter will explore the implications of this analysis and draw conclusions from this

thesis.

CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Review

Now that I have concluded the analysis, I will briefly review the previous chapters

before drawing implications and concluding. In chapter one, I introduced you to the

problem of negative partisanship in contemporary politics. The problem has changed

political alignment from individuals supporting a particular candidate to resisting the

oppositional candidate (Ladd, 2017). People no longer just disagree, instead, they hate

each other, and this problem is only getting worse (Stelter, 2020). Extreme partisanship is

increasing so much that it has led some to believe will lead to the collapse of democracy

(Kalmoe & Mason, 2019). The purpose of chapter one was to introduce one possible

factor that I believe is contributing to this level of negative partisanship. Introducing my

argument, I isolated the online media corporation, PragerU, as a significant source of

influence in contemporary politics. The argument of my thesis has been that PragerU, and

its network, is a parasitic public that appropriates the argumentative styles, techniques,

and strategies of progressive movements, such as counter-publics through the use of

victimhood.

Upon introducing the argument of my thesis, I proceeded by further exploring the

rhetorical artifact. The intention was to identify out what PragerU is, who founded it, and

why it was established. This information is essential to understanding the purpose and

intentions of PragerU's attempts to disseminate messages through videos online.

PragerU's massive online following and ability to reach millions of people with each

video stress the importance of analyzing this artifact (Nguyen, 2018). Additionally, I

highlighted the capabilities that PragerU has in influencing individuals in the public

sphere. The influence PragerU has on the opinions of its viewers was shown, as well as

the susceptibility for them to move further down the far-right rabbit hole online (Tripodi,

2018). The purpose of this section was to highlight the significance of this artifact in

order to justify my analysis. moving forward I briefly discussed PragerU as a network by

spotlighting its connections and operations both in the virtual and physical world. This

established the understanding that PragerU's funders are key actors in developing the

overall messages found in PragerU's videos. Additionally, identified the different ways

PragerU operates in specific discursive spaces. Chapter one then concluded by

identifying the problematic nature of PragerU as a part of the public sphere.

In chapter two, provided a comprehensive literature review of the public sphere

and by tracing how it has been understood since its conception. This literature review

began with an introduction of the public by John Dewey. Dewey understood the public as

a phenomenon that occurred from a conglomeration of opinions of a group of people that

has relation to each other (Dewey, 1927). From Dewey's understanding of the public, the

literature review moved to the work of Jürgen Habermas, who explicated the concept of

the public sphere. To Habermas, the public sphere as a realm, within civil society, where

citizens came together as private persons to form a public (Habermas, 1989). Habermas

recognized that the public sphere allowed for the further development of political

consciousness in society. From Habermas the literature review turned to *Counterpublics*

and the State by Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer. This book works as a compilation of important scholarship regarding the public sphere (Fraser, 1992; Felski, 1989; Benhabib, 1992, Cohen, 1996). There are three major contributions suggest by Asen and Brouwer that further our understanding of the public sphere. Such advancements include the recognition that the public and the state aren't inherently separate, that there is a multiplicity of publics, and that the boundaries between publics are permeable (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). The multiplicity of the public sphere helps further the understanding of a networked web of publics with a series of interconnections (Benhabib, 1996). Such reconfigurations of the state are essential to understanding the contemporary perspectives on the public sphere.

The literature review continues by developing an understanding of neoliberalism, in order to proceed with Asen's later work on neoliberalism and the public sphere. Neoliberalism is a class-based ideology that seeks to extend the notion of "competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society" that "attempts to instill a series of values and social practices in subjects" (Springer, et al, 2016, p. 2). Asen's latter work is concerned with the potential threat that neoliberalism is to critical publicity for it seeks to undermine multiple modes of publicity. An understanding of neoliberalism ties the literature review into the work of Ronald Greene who explicates the concept of Money/Speech. Greene's theory provides an essential understanding of how money can be viewed as a rhetorical mode of influence. This provides the foundations for identifying the connection of the PragerU network to its messages and ideology. From here the literature begins its discussion of parasitic publics by identifying how the public sphere is susceptible to affective messages and hierarchies (Berlant, 2011;

Ahmed, 2015). The hierarchical nature of the public sphere provides a paradigm in which one can understand parasitic publics (Larson & McHendry, 2019). A parasite public is a "reactionary discursive space formed residual and institutionalized affectively through the invention, circulation, and uptake of demagogic rhetorics" (p. 531). These publics work to uphold and maintain the hierarchical norms established by the dominant sphere. Larson and McKendry's theory provides an ample framework to understand how PragerU fits within the public sphere. Furthermore, it highlights demagogic strategies for parasitic publics to use in the analysis section.

The purpose of the literature review was to provide a proper foundation of how to understand the public sphere, and more importantly how PragerU fits within it. Chapter three contributed to the thesis by identifying the methodology of a network argument analysis. A network argument analysis identifies a particular network then looks at the rhetorical arguments of that particular artifact. This approach understands how arguments operate to persuade people outside traditional argumentative norms by identifying the affective approaches and implied meaning behind messages. Chapter three identified the reasons for delimiting the expansive artifact that is PragerU. This chapter concluded by outlining the analysis chapter the proceeded it.

The analysis chapter was the bulk of my thesis and contained several important aspects. First, I understood PragerU within the parameters of a parasite public provided by Larson and McHendry (2019). The next section of the chapter identified the major financial contributors to PragerU and highlighted the connections they create to other areas of conservatism. The analysis of the PragerU network concluded with a cartography of the entire network that was identifiable. Chapter four continued by understanding how

PragerU coopts the ethos of a University. Utilizing this ethos, I highlight how it manages

to legitimize itself within the public sphere. The last section of the analysis chapter

focused on the parasitic strategy of victimhood. PragerU seeks to posit its viewers as the

victims of change that is led by counter-narratives. There are two specific discursive

issues that were analyzed in this thesis to demonstrate this strategy, gender, and race

discourse. Chapter four looked at several PragerU videos on each issue and identified

how the media company worked to defend and expand the dominant sphere with the use

of demagogic rhetoric. In conclusion, the analysis chapter highlights how PragerU has

managed to persuade its audience that they are the victims of counter publicity. These

strategies use fear and threats to scare their audience into resisting counter-publics, in

turn creating new defenders of the dominant sphere. This chapter has shown that PragerU

is operating as a parasitic public and by using its network its demagogic strategies are

able to be more affective in influencing its audience.

Implications

The previous chapter containing the analysis of this thesis highlighted a multitude

of important findings. On one hand, this analysis identified the size and depth of the

PragerU network. This network is essential to understanding how PragerU works and fits

within the public sphere. From there, the analysis section sought to understand the

PragerU network as a parasite public. Further analyzing the unique positioning of parasite

publics in the public sphere and how it uses demagogic strategies. The analysis continues

by identifying the different discursive strategies of demagoguery that PragerU utilizes to

persuade its audience. Specifically focusing on the affective strategy of victimization this

thesis analyzed the PragerU's methods of establishing itself and its viewers as the abject

body. With the analysis completed, this chapter will discuss the potential implications that can be suggested for future scholars and researchers. Then finish this thesis by drawing conclusions from the overall project.

Having completed our literature review, method, and analysis we can properly return to the questions from chapter one. We can now answer the question, "how can we understand what PragerU is within the knowledge of the public sphere?" This thesis established the understanding that PragerU exists as a vast network. This network was identified to have a massive number of connections to conservative spaces. These connections have a significant influence over the ideologies and messages shown in PragerU videos. Large affluent organizations and people can position themselves, and/or their beliefs, outside the dominant public through the usage of PragerU. Additionally, PragerU benefits from existing as a network with these loose connections allowing it to operate parasitically. I suggest that further work should be done to analyze the collective rhetoric of this network. PragerU has shown that a network with such an extensive collective power is able to reach millions of people throughout different spheres. Such collective rhetoric, especially at the size of PragerU, should continue to be examined by scholars due to its proven success and reach. The ability for affluent individuals to come together under any guise and disseminate messages on a mass scale should be further looked at by communication scholars. This phenomenon that has been identified in this thesis is unique but most likely not the last of its kind. While no other political corporation, that is not an official news media, has yet to achieve the feats and success of PragerU, this does not mean it will not be achieved later. In my opinion, scholars should work to identify and understand large networks of arguments similar to PragerU. Further

research and help provide an in-depth look at the ways such a network establishes such a dominant influence over others. Additionally, the collective strength of this network potential brings new understandings to money/speech outside of inherently political and state spheres. PragerU's network drives its ideologies into all avenues of discussion, and with it the opinions of its funders. Such networks have been shown to have massive impacts on public spheres and it could be compounding. Further analysis of this type will be essential for understanding a world of increasing networks caused by the rise in technology. This may need to occur by expanding on preexisting theories regarding networked public sphere or even public screen theory.

Expanding off the understanding of PragerU as a network, this thesis sought to create a cartography of the network. I suggest that visualizing networks have the potential to increase our conceptualizations and understandings of them. My attempt to understand the PragerU network through visualizations is merely a glimpse of the vast PragerU network. I would recommend that such efforts should be significantly expanded on. My thesis level work did not have the proper tools to gather a comprehensive understanding or effectively visualize such a network. I am not sure of the exact intricacies of the data collection process needed to create a more comprehensive view of the PragerU network, for much of the funding is not disclosed. However, I would love one day to get the opportunity to further this analysis if provided with the proper tools. Identifying the connections that PragerU has can illustrate influences and potentially significant factors that contribute to their videos. The visualization of this network would allow individuals to have a better understanding of how PragerU exists and operates. The ability to see the interconnections between different portions of its network could allow for a better

understanding of what those specific areas focus on or are concerned with. Additionally, one could recognize and determine familiar strategies within PragerU's network. In the instance that one part of the network has certain rhetorical success in certain discourse, it could be assumed that the rest of the network would swiftly implement and adapt that successful strategy in another connection.

Mapping the lines of this network could allow for one to trace the movements of rhetorical strategies between network points. Such a tool could help others trace and follow connections between points from one company to another and analyze their influences on each other. Additionally, researchers could study the changes that occur to new points when they become a part of, or enter, the PragerU network. These changes could also highlight new strategies or overall guidelines and approaches to the network. On a personal level, a map of the network could simply allow for minor micro-political actions, such as boycotting to be more effective. If someone wishes to remove themselves from part of the PragerU network, a visualization could allow them to extend such micro-political action to the entire network. This is just a few examples of how mapping the overall network could be an effective visualization of how PragerU functions. The potential implications of mapping the PragerU network is why I thought it was significant enough to include the even such a simplistic map into the analysis of the thesis. While it is not extensive or completely illustrative of all PragerU's connections, it does provide a decent glimpse of the network. This preview may provide the groundwork for future studies of my, or others, to further this analysis and complete the picture. In this way, the cartography of PragerU's network is a puzzle, while all the pieces may or may not be visible at this time. This puzzle could someday be completed and there is plenty of

potential benefits that could arise from it. The potential for mapping such a network

could provide a plethora of additional benefits that I would be interested in exploring in

further research.

The set of inquiries that arise from this thesis come via way of expanding off

Larson and McHendry's work on parasite publics. The understanding that the PragerU

network itself exists as a parasite public raises many questions. As a parasitic public we

can understand the unique position of PragerU, but what does this mean of studies

regarding parasite publics? As a parasite public PragerU simultaneously is and is not the

dominant public which is a key aspect of its parasitic nature. PragerU is unique from

StormFront, the foundational artifact identified by Larson and McHendry, for it is a

larger media corporation. PragerU demonstrates a much larger influence on the public

sphere and has a much closer tie to the dominant public than StormFront, it still fits

within the framework of a parasite public. This implies that further research should look

to analyze other larger organizations as institutions of parasitic publics. In addition,

PragerU's network funds and influences PragerU's videos while existing simultaneously

existing as not being a part of the website. Many portions of the PragerU network have

direct connections to the dominant public via highly affluent and political entities. Yet,

PragerU exists as a separate organization that merely promotes similar beliefs to the

dominant sphere. This creates a symbiotic relationship that PragerU and its network of

dominant organizations both benefit from. The positioning as a parasite public allows

PragerU recontextualize and disguise the messages of rich affluent elites in a manner that

is palpable to under privileged poor white voters. It's likely that these voters never look

past the entity of PragerU and examine the network that influences it, due to the affective

nature of PragerU. Viewers aren't interested in verifying information, for it speaks to their preconceived beliefs. Even if they did, PragerU continually draws the lines of an in-group that manages to include only rich and poor white voters. This highlights the importance of the network PragerU has created is illustrated by how it is positioned parasitically. As a parasite, it benefits from the dominant sphere, yet is able to claim its existence as separate from. The implications we can gather from this thesis is that more organizations, beyond fringe projects like StormFront, can be understood as an instance of a parasite public.

This symbiotic relationship that parasite public's have with the dominant public sphere is an important aspect for further research. There is a significant number of benefits that both parasite and the dominant public get from this type of relationship. The obvious, as mentioned above, is that a parasitic public can use its relationships to achieve massive funding and support for its efforts to maintain the dominant sphere and protect against counter discourse. This is uniquely different from StormFront who works on a smaller level with only connections to the dominant sphere's hegemonic norms. PragerU as an organization can be covertly supported through direct funding efforts from large members who play a significant role within the dominant sphere. In addition to that, dominant spheres can utilize parasite public's to "test the waters" of public discourse in order to further their own agenda. As noted by Larson and McHendry the parasite public StormFront, a white supremacist group, often utilizes this symbiotic relationship to push its ethnographic narratives. StormFront prays on an audience that exists comfortably within the dominant sphere. Their discursive strategies seek to improve and expand that sphere in often radical ways. The dominant sphere is comfortable with these parasitic

public's existing, despite these radical ideologies, for its recognizably beneficial to it. White nationalism isn't inherently radical to a nation founded on and upheld by white supremacy. However, most of the dominant sphere's whiteness exists in a more covert state. StormFront allows for a more overt approach to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in publics. The positioning of the parasite public allows it to benefit from yet remain disposable to the dominant sphere. Clearly, PragerU's connections to the dominant sphere are much more obvious and larger, it still positions itself outside the dominant sphere. This ties into its main strategy of victimhood, which allows it to influence its audience directly.

There are also implications regarding the neoliberalization of the public sphere that should be considered. PragerU, as a parasite public often works to influence neoliberal values in its audience as well. This is seen several times in the analysis section, where PragerU claims that being a man is determined by their work ethic and their willingness to fight for their country. It seems that parasitic publics in this way operate similarly to how dominant sphere works to neoliberalize its subjects. This stresses the connections between Larson and McHendry (2019) and Asen (2018), for parasitic publics could be seen as the mode in which neoliberalism is influencing the public sphere. Even with PragerU alone, there is plenty of rhetorical evidence of how they promote a neoliberal agenda in their videos. I suggest further analysis should look directly at how parasitic public, like PragerU or StormFront, have worked to further neoliberalize the public sphere. The messages of PragerU are riddled with a focus on individualism, the self, and the market which highlights the potential for it to be a directly neoliberal parasitic sphere. The implications that should be looked at here is the role of

neoliberalism in parasitic publics. Neoliberalism has established itself as the dominant ideology in the United States, if parasitic publics are working to expand the dominant sphere then they are working to expand neoliberalism. This suggests deep connections exist between neoliberalism and parasitic publics that should be further investigated. If neoliberal nature is found to be inherent in parasitic publics, it could help researchers better understand the methods and goals of parasitic publics.

As I mentioned in the methodology section, PragerU ultimately utilizes a wide variety of rhetorical strategies. PragerU and its network deploy a wide variety of strategies that I believe should be further analyzed by rhetorical scholars. Due to the limitations of this thesis my efforts were narrowed down to the discursive demagoguery of victimhood. As identified victimization plays an important role in affective persuading its viewers. However, I recognize that victimhood is not the sole strategy responsible for all of PragerU's success in influencing its audience. Future research on PragerU, as a parasite public or not, should look to expand off this thesis, and therefore does not need to be delimited only to the discursive strategies that were identified here. I invite future efforts and examinations into the topic of this thesis, for there is much more to be analyzed in regard to this network. I encourage others to pick up this artifact and engage it from their own unique perspectives. There are even other parasitic strategies and forces at work here that should be further analyzed. Further research into these and other aspects regarding PragerU strategies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how PragerU has managed to be so successful in influencing the public sphere. Beyond that, PragerU's attempts to open discourse spaces in physical areas would be another area of analysis that could be explored. Ultimately, PragerU as an artifact is ripe for future

rhetorical research and has a wide range of discursive strategies that this thesis wasn't able to include in its analysis.

Further research on parasitic public's would also be valuable for counter publics. There are many implications to understanding parasite publics as a unique portion of the public sphere. Before Larson and McHendry's work, it was difficult to differentiate between efforts that worked against or for hegemonic norms. This is due to the fact that public sphere theory had not stabilized a direct relational understanding of power specific to the efforts of publicity. It was previously understood that the dominant sphere was the only retaliating force to counter publicity. However, Larson and McHendry's work identifying parasite publics provides an understanding of how publicity efforts are positioned to power structures. This thesis has worked to expand upon the understandings of parasite publics by Larson and McHendry. I have identified PragerU, the media corporation, as a parasite public that fits within the framework provided about these unique public spheres. Seemingly answering the question can a large corporation, and its network, be considered as a parasite public. This approach was essential in demarcating key differences between unique spheres working to alter the dominant public sphere. Parasite public theory provided an essential understanding of the role that power and privilege play in public spheres. Larson and McHendry provide a key framework to differentiate between those who seek to maintain and expand the dominant public sphere and those who seek to progress it through counter discourse. The ability to delineate between these two types of spheres is essential to a proper understanding of the public sphere. With this understanding counter-publics can shift their focus from solely on influencing the dominant sphere.

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The recognition of parasite publics has a plethora of benefits for counter publics. First, counter-publics can identify outside publics that work to resist and undermine counterpublicity. Which could allow for an immediate response or retaliation to such resistance to counter publics. This knowledge of parasite publics existence has the potential to increase the efforts of counter discourse. For example, organizations such as Black Lives Matter could implement direct responses to PragerU videos that seek to undermine their counter-public narratives. Additionally, counter publics can have a better understanding of what exactly they are up against, as well as who they are up against. It is one thing to rally for a cause, it is another to be able to pinpoint an enemy. In the instance counter-publics can identify individuals or organizations resisting their counter publicity they can galvanize support against those groups. The knowledge counter publics acquire from understanding parasite publics can put them in a position to resist their discursive strategies more efficiently. Counter-publics can implement their own rhetorical efforts as a direct response to or including rebuttals parasitic arguments that have not been a focus of theirs. The benefits of counter public's understanding opposition forces, such as PragerU, could likely be improved rhetorical strategies to achieve counterpublicity. Hence why future research on parasitic publics is integral for public sphere scholars.

The next set of implications focuses on the demagogic strategies that PragerU uses to affectively persuade its audience. Through analysis of parasitic practices, researchers can work to identify the ways parasite publics affectively persuade individuals. This identification is a key observation for contemporary scholarship of networks and public spheres in a post-truth era. As society moves farther away from

traditional argumentative practices scholars should seek to identify and trace these changes. Such affective strategies have the potential to deteriorate democratic norms and can lead to even more harmful societies, such as fascism. Scholars should be willing to identify such strategies and engage with them to further our understandings. PragerU is almost mainstream, but it is not the only example of a parasite public that should be analyzed. Some parasite public's, such as StormFront, work in much more fringe spheres. The more parasitic public's we can recognize, normalized or fringe, the better understanding of their approaches and strategies researchers will have. Such an understanding could lead to more productive modes of resistance in order to reclaim democratic avenues. Parasitic publics are an important extension to public sphere research for all these implications and more to be discovered.

The next inquiry of implications is concerned with how PragerU attempts to establish the façade of the university ethos. PragerU continually attempts to establish the idea that it is equivalent to, if not better than, a university education. As demonstrated in the analysis the corporation goes to great lengths to disguise itself as a university. One implication that is worth suggesting from this thesis is the significance such a guise plays for parasite publics (Tuchman, 2009). These publics seem to benefit from disguising themselves as an official institution in order to gain legitimacy and maintain their discursive spaces. The façade of being an educational institutional allows PragerU to not long legitimize its arguments, but also justify its existence. Such a façade did not exist for the parasite public StormFront, which positioned itself simply as a web forum community. The lack of a legitimizing mask for StormFront allowed it to be quickly identified for what it is, a far-right neo-Nazi community. The argument should be

explored that parasite publics are better off disguising themselves within the public sphere. Additionally, actual universities should seek to be wary of these affective messages persuading students. These arguments delegitimize the university ethos in the long run for they don't hold up to traditional forms of scrutiny. The implications of this suggest that it is in the University's best interest to resist the parasitic efforts of organizations like PragerU. With the success of PragerU and its ability to resist opposition from other spaces the possibility that such a façade could be essential in maintaining a successful parasitic public.

PragerU's façade is unique for it's a directly reactionary creation to the perceived exclusion of conservative voices on college campuses. Many organizations root their goal and mission statements to turning college students into conservatives, yet none go as far as PragerU and pretend to be one. PragerU's puts on a mask of an educational institution in order to gain legitimacy within the public sphere. One implication that we can draw from this is the potential for other parasitic publics to operate by coopting the ethos of other institutions. PragerU has had significant success in persuading people in the public sphere by using this guise so it's likely that other parasite publics will seek to co-opt other ethos of value. By representing itself as something it is not, parasite publics can fool their audiences into being persuaded by their strategies. Rhetorical scholars should seek to look for other parasitic publics that are benefiting from this parasitic guise. Other parasite publics may position themselves as different organizations or institutions in order to garner the ethos and essence of that system. Scholars should look for publics that flirt with different identities to gain specific benefits that are fostered in that identity. A potential example may involve parasite publics disguising themselves as social justice

organizations, think tanks, clubs or even advocacy groups. There is plenty of potential for parasite publics to coopt ethos' outside the university, and the masks these publics wear should be explored when identifying and analyzing parasite publics.

The main implications of this thesis regard the discursive strategies that PragerU uses to create a sense of victimhood for itself and its viewers. This affective strategy is observable throughout a multitude of discursive spaces in political discourse. The main strategy of PragerU that I focused on is its efforts to recategorize the terms of oppression. PragerU engages in coopting the affective experience of oppression and imposing that narrative onto its viewers. This strategy is highly effective in centralizing issues, that often do not regard its main viewer, around its viewer. I propose that victimization plays an essential role for parasitic publics. This discursive strategy is essential to the development of parasitic publics audiences as loyal to the dominant sphere. All the victimization tactics that PragerU implements position changes to the dominant sphere as direct assaults to its audience. This parasitic strategy works for it connects the viewer intrinsically to the dominant sphere. By connecting the audience with the dominant public PragerU is developing a wave of support for that sphere.

Victimization is such an essential strategy for PragerU because it employs any change of societal norms as direct attacks on the viewer. PragerU can affectively convince its audience that they are facing threats and dangers in all areas of contemporary politics. This strategy seeks to exploit the fear and poor material conditions of its viewers. Then refocus those fears onto counter publics who are attempting to relive their own conditions of oppression. For these reasons, I think victimization is not just merely a tool for parasitic publics but an essential affective strategy of demagoguery. Parasite publics

need to use victimhood in order to persuade its members of its legitimacy. In addition to that, the audience perceives a need for the parasitic public to defend them from these constant threats they identify. In the instance of PragerU, it is needed for it 'arms' its viewers with knowledge essential to help them defend themselves. Other parasite publics like StormFront are needed to its members to help build defenses against the rise of other ethnic groups. Therefore, victimization not only works by coopting oppression and undermining counter-publics, but it also legitimizes the existence of the parasite public.

In regard to victimization, one thing that stood out throughout the analysis is how often establishing the viewer as a victim occurred after attacking counterpublicity. This potentially highlights an expansion of the work of Johnson (2017). For PragerU to establish its viewers as the victim in the specific instances of the video, it often needed to undermine progressive viewpoints of hierarchies. The destabilizing of meaning or delegitimization of counter-public narratives was an essential strategy that PragerU used prior to positioning its viewers as the victim. This suggests that victimization benefits from, or adds to, efforts of attacking counterpublicity. The delegitimization of the current narrative allowed for PragerU to insert itself into the topic and more effectively flip the script on who's being oppressed in that particular instance. This understanding can allow scholars to have a better grasp on how the combination of these strategies work and increase their effectiveness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has established an understanding of how PragerU exists and operates within the public sphere. I provided an extensive literature review on public sphere theory that traced its changes through Habermas to Asen. The literature review

provided a comprehensive understanding of not only how public sphere theory has evolved but an explanation of network publics, and the neoliberalization of the public sphere. This development highlights how the public sphere has become susceptible to affective strategies. Throughout the thesis, we used the work of Larson and McHendry as a framework to identified PragerU as a parasitic public. The parasitic nature of PragerU allows it to utilize a unique position in the public sphere to open new discursive areas to affectively push conservative ideologies that uphold the dominant sphere. The main strategy that we focused on was the demagogic tactic of victimization. PragerU deploys the discursive strategy of victimhood to persuade its audience that they are the real victims struggling in the public sphere. This tactic functions by coopting oppression and redefining it onto its viewers.

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My goal is to teach communication studies at the collegiate level. I want to establish myself at an institution that upholds the beliefs and objectives of empowering students with diverse backgrounds. I aspire to develop students into successful and confident speakers with the courage to face any situation that could arise. Additionally, I wish to devote myself to a forensics program that seeks to achieve national success, as well as long term benefits for its students. I hope to find a home at a University where I can establish or build upon a legacy of academic and competitive success. My objective is to find a long-term position that supports me as a professor, as well a forensics coach.

EXPERIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE, Louisville, KY

Graduate Teaching Assistant | Aug 2019 - Present

- As a graduate teaching assistant, I work directly with my assigned professors at the University of Louisville. My responsibilities include assisting these professors with grading, research, teaching and a multitude of other requests. Additionally, my responsibilities increased my second year into my program to include teaching communication 111 "Introduction to Public Speaking" at the University. This entails developing my own syllabus along the guidelines of the University. Working to uphold the Universities mission statement and expectations of academic excellence. I am responsible for teaching a highly diverse group of students the intricacies of public speaking to help them in their life.

QD LEARNING (NON-PROFIT), Irvine, CA

Forensics Coach | Aug 2016 - Aug 2019

- As a Forensics Coach at QD learning I was tasked with teaching speech and debate to a wide range of students from pre-school to high school. This job included teaching a variety of different events from both the speech and debate aspects of forensics. I was responsible for preparing my own lectures, learning plans and guidelines for competitive excellence. I participated in helping run tournaments, recruitment, and retainment for the program.

EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

Louisville, KY

Communication, Argumentation/Rhetoric Candidate (Expected graduation May 2021)

- **GPA:** 4.0
- **Relevant Coursework:** Communication Pedagogy, Advanced Argumentation, Communication Theories
- **Awards & Honors:** Dean's List, Athletics Red and Black Scholar, Co-authored paper accepted by NCA and published by JCR.
- **Extracurricular Activities:** Graduate Teaching Assistant Academy, Louisville Athletics Digital Internship, Graduate Student Council, Collegiate Cheerleader

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY IRVINE

Irvine, CA

Communication Major, Business Minor (May 2019)

- **GPA:** 3.3
- **Relevant Coursework:** Advanced Public Speaking, Persuasion,
- **Awards & Honors:** National Parliamentary Debate Association 2019 6th Place, Honor issuer National Parliamentary Tournament of Excellence 2019 4th Place
- **Extracurricular Activities:** Forensics Competitor- Captain, Collegiate Cheerleader- Captain, Student Journalist, Student Senate

ADDITIONAL SKILLS

- Public Speaking
- Social Media Management
- Recruitment Efficiency
- Organization/Planning