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Creating Discursive Spaces to Promote Productive Discourse and Dissuading Sectarianism in Online Political Enclaves on TikTok

Kenneth Root

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Creating Discursive Spaces to Promote Productive Discourse and Dissuading
Sectarianism in Online Political Enclaves on TikTok

by

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ABSTRACT

Over the last ten years social media has emerged as a major space for political discussion and the dissemination of information. On open platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, algorithms personalize each user's experience and tailor the posts they see to their specific interests and tastes. What this eventually leads to are echo chambers or discursive enclaves centered around anything from history to mental illness to extreme political ideologies. Within these enclaves, users almost exclusively see and interact with content that aligns with their group's interest, and in the case of political enclaves this can and does lead to further radicalization and a distancing from productive discourse. While productive discourse is difficult in these situations, it is not impossible. In the following thesis, I demonstrate my attempt to take an active role in examining these unique discursive spaces that are forming to develop a method for both observing and circulating constructive content within such a space. In particular, I will be detailing my experience participating and circulating content within a leftist political enclave that has formed on TikTok, a video sharing platform similar to Twitter but instead of brief text-based posts, users share and interact with brief, 1–3-minute video clips. In order to perform this task, I created my own TikTok account geared towards sharing clips from scholarly lectures given by influential leftist scholars. Lengthy and complex lectures were broken down by individual argument and circulated online within the existing leftist community on TikTok. The overarching goal of the project was to create a space within an already existing online community where productive content can be shared and

productive conversations can be had. The thesis begins as a semi-autoethnographic account of the development of the digital media experiment in order to demonstrate how the methods of such a project developed through my personal experience on social media. Following the introduction is a description of the theory that guides the background of the project and finally I conclude with the results of the project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
List of Figures	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Literature Review	6
1.1 Discursive Enclaves	6
1.2 Political Literacy and Rhetorical Circulation	12
1.3 Publics, Counterpublics, and the Ethos of Rhetoric	16
Chapter 2: Methods.....	19
Chapter 3: Results and Discussion.....	31
3.1 Category 1: Shared Topics with Shared Perspectives	31
3.2 Category 2: Shared Topics with Differing Perspectives	33
3.3 Category 3: Topics Unique to Each Speaker.....	35
3.4 Analysis of Comments Under the Merged Account	39
3.5 Analysis of Survey Results.....	50
Conclusion	58
References.....	60

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Examples of offensive content and comments found on leftist TikTok.....	9
Figure 1.2 Examples of attempts to provide productive content on TikTok	12
Figure 2.1 Side-by-side comparison of the design of the posts on the YellowParenti account (left) and YoungChomsky account (right)	20
Figure 2.2 Example of posts from different speakers on the account.....	28
Figure 2.3 Screenshot of the post used to send out audience survey	29
Figure 3.1 Comparison of the performance of Parenti and Chomsky’s videos by total views, likes, and comments	32
Figure 3.2 Comparison of the performance of Parenti and Chomsky’s videos by total views, likes, and comments. Chomsky’s videos by total views, likes, and comments	34
Figure 3.3 Comparison of the performance of Parenti and Chomsky’s videos by total views, likes, and comments	37
Figure 3.4 Snapshot of the progress of the YellowParenti account (left) and YoungChomsky account (right) after 28 days	38
Figure 3.5 Example of argument between two users under one of the account’s most popular videos	41
Figure 3.6 Example of TikTok’s “reply with video,” with the comment on the left and the resulting video on the right.....	43

Figure 3.7 Sample of the types of comments under Chomsky’s video denigrating socialism in the USSR	44
Figure 3.8 A sample of the comments under Chomsky’s anti-USSR video.	46
Figure 3.9 Interaction between two users regarding Chomsky’s video on the USSR.....	47
Figure 3.10 Discussion thread under Angela Davis Glass Ceiling Feminism video	49
Figure 3.11 Sample of results from question four	53
Figure 3.12 Survey results regarding users’ perception of arguments in the comment section.....	55
Figure 3.13 Sample of answers given to question eight	56

INTRODUCTION

The internet has undergone dramatic changes from the free, open, and democratizing platform it was initially thought to be. Two major shifts have dramatically changed the way we experience the internet over the last twenty to thirty years. Namely, the personalization of each user's experience on the web and the dominance of template-based design over traditional homepage authoring, each being major characteristics of what is being called "Web 2.0." In the early days of the internet, almost everything was uniform. Two users searching "climate change" on Google would yield the same results regardless of who the user was, which is no longer the case. On Google as well as other platforms, what you see is no longer universal, it is specifically tailored to your search histories, online activity, location, and personal preferences. What this has led to is what Eli Pariser calls "filter bubbles," his description of what personalization algorithms produce. Namely, "a unique universe of information for each of us . . . which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information" (17). This effect is particularly pronounced on social media sites, where, in addition to personalization, we can directly see the popularity of template-based design. When the internet was first being developed, users both designed and coded their own homepages. As noted by Kristin Arola, however, "web users who want an online presence do not need to code a web site or even use a WYSIWYG program; instead, the 'web as platform' allows them to post a profile to MySpace or Facebook" and are then free to share content with their "friends" in the case of Facebook, or potentially, the entire platform in the case of sites

like Twitter or TikTok (6). Template-based platforms have allowed more people to more easily create content to share with the wider public online. If you want to get any sort of message out to an audience online, the primary way of doing so today is through social media.

On social media sites especially, the personalization of users' feeds has led to the development of distinct echo chambers or discursive enclaves. Especially pervasive are enclaves that revolve around political ideologies. When users engage with predominantly political content, eventually they will only be served that type of content on their social media feeds. This phenomenon can be seen clearly on a site like Twitter where there is a very distinct "sect" of Twitter that is simply referred to as leftist Twitter. From my own experience, and from speaking to others who participate in far-left spaces online, users typically begin by searching out leftist content and are initially social democrat/democratic socialist style content, such as content related to popular figures like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Occasio Cortez. After a few weeks the algorithm will curate content tailored to this view until it takes up a large portion of this user's feed, placing them into an algorithmically curated echo chamber or enclave. This enclave, however, will inevitably intersect at points with a multitude of other enclaves on the app and in many cases, this leads users towards more extreme content. A user may start out seeing largely democratic socialist content and, in a few weeks, find themselves seeing content from users with hammer and sickle emojis in their usernames or profile pictures of Stalin and Mao. These extremist leftist spaces that develop online are what I am most interested in studying in this thesis, and in particular, whether or not it is possible to circulate and promote productive discourse within them.

Within these enclaves, however, are stark divisions between members. Among the broad far-left social media spheres there are essentially two main strains of ideology, leftists who describe themselves as libertarian socialists/Anarchists and those who sympathize more with the Marxist-Leninist vein of socialism. While this is a divide that has existed among socialist for over a century now, they are forming distinct enclaves on social media both as a broad far-left online enclave and more niche enclaves that cater to their preferred branch of socialism. As a participant in these enclaves on Twitter, I noticed this trend more and more and became increasingly discontented with this type of discourse. Then as I was scrolling through my Twitter feed one day, I saw a screen recording of a TikTok video that consisted of a clip from Michael Parenti's 1986 lecture in which he passionately decries capitalist imperialism and declares that "the third world is not poor" and that "the capitalist European and North American powers have carved and taken" billions of dollars in natural resources and cheap labor from these countries (Parenti 1986). This led me to find and watch his full lecture on YouTube, after which I was struck both by the persuasiveness of the talk and by the fact that here was an hour and a half lecture given by an academic, praising communism, while not doing outright apology for authoritarian regimes or playing into any sort of leftist in-fighting.

After watching this speech, I thought that the online leftist enclaves would benefit from watching it as well, the only problem is that an hour and a half long lecture does not easily translate to social media. In order to address this, I created my own TikTok account dedicated to sharing clips of the speech until essentially it would be uploaded in bite sized clips in its entirety in order to be circulated among online leftist enclaves, and ideally beyond. After posting only a few clips from the speech, the account gained a

decent amount of attention for a brand-new account, receiving a few thousand views and several hundred likes per video within days of making the account. From here, I decided to set up a digital media experiment focused on studying far-left social media enclaves. Due to the rather extreme subject matter of the clips from Parenti, it was clear that I was going to have a very niche type of audience that favored a Marxist-Leninist style of socialism as opposed to a more libertarian one. In order to be able to study both sects of the online left, I created a second account dedicated to sharing clips of speeches from Noam Chomsky titled “YoungChomsky,” since Chomsky falls on the more libertarian socialist end of the Marxist spectrum. I worked to post clips of the two speakers both agreeing and disagreeing on issues from separate accounts that would generate different, but likely overlapping, audiences.

The project developed into two distinct phases, the first focused simply on which account generated more interactions and was more successful in terms of likes, views, and comments. Once this phase was completed, and it was clear the YellowParenti account had garnered far more attention, I merged the accounts and posted clips from a multitude of speakers such as Angela Davis, Kwame Ture, Arundhati Roy, Edward Said, and others in addition to Michael Parenti and Noam Chomsky in order to have a broad range of opinions and perspectives on a single already popular account. This way I could expand the discursive enclave my account circulated content within as well as expose the original followers of the account to a wider range of perspectives.

While this project developed slowly and largely spontaneously over the course of a year and a half, it was informed throughout with the goal of circulating potentially productive content in an already existing rhetorical online space. During this project I

acted both as participant and observer in order to get an authentic look at what the experience of dwelling in these spaces consisted of. Finally, I sent out a survey to my followers whom I also followed back, known as your “friends” on TikTok, in order to see more directly what their perception of the account was and how it compared to other accounts that they followed.

While most leftist TikTok accounts are centered around content creators giving their opinions on various topics or explaining Marxist concepts, very few are based entirely on sharing clips from leftist scholars. What the account I created will provide is examples of established leftist scholars, who subscribe to a range of leftist ideologies, giving their analyses of capitalism and American imperialism. This way they will be more likely to seek out written works by these speakers and be exposed to a more rigorous leftist analysis than what can typically be provided on social media platforms. Since discursive enclaves form on social media sites and provide “an initial place of bonding, acceptance, and intimacy and a place for establishing discursive conventions,” it is important that the conversations being had do not revolve around harmful topics. Members of this particular type of leftist enclave can either establish discursive conventions centered around apologia for dictators like Stalin and foster sectarianism as described above or can be established around useful critiques of American capitalism and imperialism (Pavia 91). The main purpose of this study therefore is to not only observe the discourse that occurs in these types of online discursive enclaves but to provide content that attempts to steer conversations away from harmful rhetoric and towards productive conversations.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 DISCURSIVE ENCLAVES

The formation of echo chambers on social media platforms is an increasingly worrying trend. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are open on the surface in that every user can potentially see every other user's posts (unless the user has their account set to "private"), unlike on Facebook where you must mutually agree to be friends in order to see each other's content. However, even on "open" platforms what you see and interact with is strictly determined by the types of posts you interact with. Even if you follow both liberal and conservative accounts, the algorithm will eventually determine which you enjoy seeing more and feed more of that type of content to you. In fact, "the basic code at the heart of the new Internet is pretty simple. The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like—the actual things you've done, or the things people like you like—and tries to extrapolate" (Pariser 17). This leads to what Pariser calls filter bubbles, or for the purposes of this paper, discursive enclaves, within which users are served content that conforms to their already held biases and ideological leanings. Increasingly, users are quite literally living in completely different realities online and the more time we as a society spend online, the worse these divisions become. The algorithms running these platforms are constantly gaining information about each user, thus allowing them to better tailor your experience to your personal tastes.

One particularly potent example of algorithms creating discursive communities online is those that are centered around political ideologies on social media platforms. Much attention has already been given to the growth and development of far-right echo chambers on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The research regarding the effects of these platform's algorithms on polarization, however, are often contradictory "with some finding evidence of radicalization and others finding the opposite" (Hosseini et al., 1). Systemic evidence and tools for tracking the development of echo chambers online has been proven difficult to obtain, despite many efforts in recent years to investigate everything from the emotions behind the formations of echo chambers to their effects on elections to attempts to determine if the algorithms themselves are in fact responsible (Del Vicario et al. 2016; Grover et al., 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2020). What is lacking in the research, however, is a review of the possibility for productive and critical discourse to circulate in these spaces. At this point in time, we can begin to think of social media as a type of public sphere and because of this, in addition to echo chambers, counter-publics are also able to form.

Within these enclaves, critical discourse that moves beyond shared biases between other members is rather difficult, not to mention communication between enclave participants and the more general social media user base. What typically happens is that "enclaved online groups not only remain steadfast in their initial views but actually become more extreme in them" (Pavia 89). Furthermore, this coincides with a drop in trust in traditional media and the internet has played a major role in this:

While we still don't have conclusive proof, it appears that this, too, is an effect of the internet. When you're getting news from one source, the source doesn't draw

your attention much to its own errors and omissions. Corrections, after all, are buried in tiny type on an inside page. But as masses of news readers went online and began to hear from multiple sources, the differences in coverage were drawn out and amplified. (Pariser 64)

The same phenomenon has also begun to affect all types of information as people are exposed to alternate views on history, culture, and political ideologies. In his book *Republic 2.0*, Cass Sunstein discusses the effects that polarized online groups have on our public discourse and the extent to which it fosters extremism and even terrorism in many cases. According to Sunstein, looking at extreme cases of online polarization, “[reveals] something about the potential consequences of a *fragmented speech market*. In a system with robust [non-fragmented] public forums and general-interest intermediaries, self-insulation is more difficult, and people will frequently come across views and materials that they would not have chosen in advance,” therefore as our speech market becomes increasingly fragmented, self-insulation becomes more common (48, emphasis my own). Here Sunstein makes an incredibly important point, namely that discourse online is providing opportunities for discourse communities to become more and more insulated whether intentionally by creating gatekept forums or even unintentionally through algorithmic curation by social media platforms. He goes on to argue that “place-based communities may be supplanted by interest-based communities,” something that has undoubtedly begun to occur on social media sites (48).

From my own observations and personal participation in these spaces over the last year, much of the discourse in far-left online spaces can very easily devolve into uncritically defending past and current socialist countries and their leaders, which can

and does include leaders like Stalin, Mao, and even Kim Jong Un. In addition to what some have called genocide denial, discourse among the online left often lacks any real substance. Participants in these spaces have become so removed from the tangible realities of our political arena that debates center around topics like whether or not the Holodomor famine was intentional or natural, rather than any discussion of actual class issues in modern western capitalist society. Discourse has a tendency to devolve into these unnecessary arguments both with people inside and outside the enclave that range anywhere from memes to borderline genocide denial. In Figure 1.1 I provide a few examples of some of the more extreme types of posts and comments that can be seen within the online left community.



Figure 1.1. Examples of offensive content and comments found on leftist TikTok

Despite the tendency for these enclaves to devolve into ideological polarization, it is certainly possible to have critical political discourse. In her 2020 article, Catherine

Pavia studied an online forum specifically designated for Mormon Women called the “My Online Friends” or MOF forum. She found that members of this online religious enclave were able to engage in productive political discussion surrounding the 2008 presidential election. She observed that when the members of the enclave practiced intimate literacy or “or writing that emphasizes emotional connections and reciprocity” they were able to speak more comfortably and engage in critical discussion (89). She goes on further to argue that enclaves can in fact be beneficial, and in some cases necessary. That they offer a “place of initial bonding, acceptance, and intimacy and a place for establishing discursive conventions” and “can be crucial starting places for a rhetor to test positions and to listen to others’ perspectives” (91). She uses this example of an enclaved discourse community to illustrate “that members of enclaves can be ‘actively engaged in evolving opinions that influence how our cultural, social, and political wheels turn,’” in order to “expand Hauser’s conceptualization beyond the vernacular to include the intimate and the enclaved” (90). When users interact with people who share similar values and perspectives, they are more likely to voice their opinions openly. In this way, enclaves can “be important places for identity work” since “openness to different perspectives is more likely to occur in safe spaces rather than contested ones” (91, 92).

Though the enclave that Pavia observed for her study was a closed online forum, it still shares many similarities with the political enclaves I am interested in here. In fact, enclaves on sites like Twitter or TikTok have the potential for even more productive discourse due to their being enclaved both voluntarily and algorithmically since content is heavily suggested to users based on their activity. On TikTok especially, users certainly

do like and follow creators in order to see more of their content, but you do not necessarily have to follow creators at all in order to see their content on your feed regularly. TikTok can gather enough information simply from watch time on videos to determine what types of videos will keep a specific user on the site longer. Because of this, posts from creators who exist within an enclave can and do wind up on the feeds of users who are not part of their target audience. Whether this be simply because a user responds well to “political” content in general or if they have spent a large amount of time watching content on a specific topic. This allows for the intersection of multiple discourse communities and allows for members to occasionally interact with people who do in fact fundamentally disagree with them, as well as allowing for the enclave to be spontaneously broadened or narrowed.

In addition to extreme and unproductive content among the online left, there is also an effort to promote productive and educational discourse. Many creators on TikTok take their task of education very seriously and work to explain complex concepts and even respond to users with their own interpretation of theoretical works. They go beyond simply telling people to “read theory” and attempt to cite specific passages in their videos as seen below in Figure 1.2.

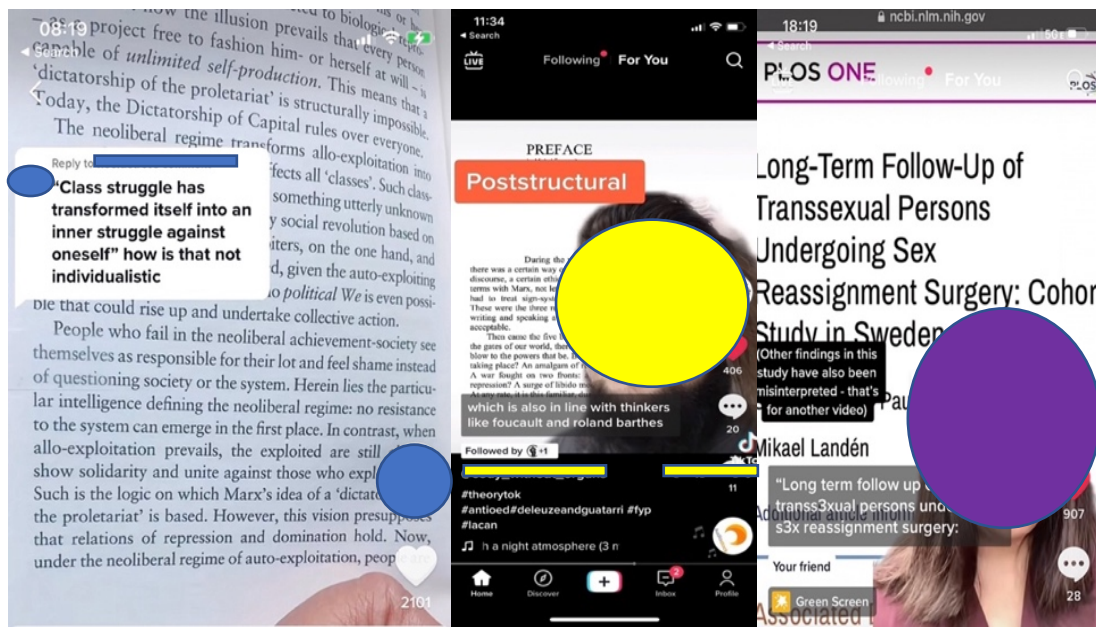


Figure 1.2. Examples of attempts to provide productive content on TikTok

1.2 POLITICAL LITERACY AND RHETORICAL CIRCULATION

In response to the rise of far-right populism in the U.S., there has begun to develop a very real far-left populist backlash both on and offline. As has happened in the past during the counterculture movement in the 1960s, Millennials and Gen Z have become disillusioned with capitalism and are rediscovering Marxism (Solis 2020). One of the problems, however, is a lack of political literacy, leading to very little actual critical discourse. What I mean by “political literacy” in this context is the ability to apply a Marxist analysis to past and current social issues without simply defending countries that claim to be socialist, something I have noticed personally as well as something many online leftist creators spend a lot of time and energy fighting back against. This has manifested in a rising phenomenon of largely online socialists who are referred to as “tankies” both by themselves and by the internet political community at large, defined by Urban Dictionary as:

A hardline Stalinist. A tankie is a member of a communist group or a “fellow traveler” (sympathizer) who believes fully in the political system of the Soviet Union and defends/defended the actions of the Soviet Union and other accredited states (China, Serbia, etc.) to the hilt, even in cases where other communists criticize their policies or actions. (Urban Dictionary)

The term was originally used to describe the socialists who defended the USSR’s invasion of Hungary in 1956 in which tanks were deployed to quell protestors. The term has come to be used to describe people who defend the authoritarian nature of past and current communist states. This extremist turn is what this project was intended to work against, to show how to apply a Marxist framework to US politics as well as providing my audience with speakers who themselves have their own written works on such topics. This way they can do further reading on their own or watch the full lectures that the clips come from. This way they can see that you can use Marxism as a tool to analyze society without falling into the trap of defending the authoritarianism and repression that is found in countries like the USSR, China, or Cuba.

Bemoaning the lack of critical cultural analysis in first year composition courses, Donald Lazere (2015, 2020) calls for the reintroduction of cultural studies approaches to rhetoric and composition studies. He argues that this lack of critical pedagogy has added to the rise of authoritarianism, far-right populism, and the breakdown of our political landscape. Specifically, he proposes pedagogy that “[instructs] students in critical analysis of the rhetoric of partisan politics, propaganda, and public debates on issues” (4). While this is absolutely the direction we should be going towards in the classroom, it is also a sentiment we should extend to online spaces as well. Especially considering a third

of Twitter users are under 18 and 41% of TikTok users are between the ages of 16 and 28 (Chen 2020, Mohsin 2020). Social media is serving as grounds for the political education of a very significant portion of Millennials and Gen Z, and we should therefore look very seriously at promoting political literacy on these platforms, especially in the political discursive enclaves that form on them. This means promoting content that directs users to outside sources and scholarly works.

An important aspect of this project is paying attention to the specific audiences that will come in contact with the material being distributed. This will require taking into account the users in these spaces as well as the actual interfaces being engaged with and the algorithm that drives them. In “Writing for Algorithmic Audiences,” John Gallagher discusses the role that algorithms play as an audience. He argues that since the algorithm is what is initially processing a digital text and recommending it to other users, online writers must be aware of and write for the algorithm as well as the people they are intending to reach. Particularly important here is Gallagher’s description of algorithms as participatory audiences that yield predictable results through a set of procedures. Since “algorithms [reorient] feedback from participatory audiences into results,” we must keep this in mind and use it to our advantage (30). He then gives a general formula for how Facebook’s EdgeRank algorithm curates user’s timelines. The formula is given as: $\sum u_e w_e d_e$; where u_e represents user affinity (liking, commenting, watching, and sharing), w_e represents the weight of the content (different types of content, such as photos vs. text, are weighted differently), and d_e represents time decay (new content is weighted higher than older content). While he is concerned with Facebook’s algorithm, for the purposes of this project the principles are similar. Any social media platform’s algorithm will need

to be taken into account when using said platform, and though TikTok does not release much information about how their algorithm works, some people have made reasonable inferences into what the TikTok algorithm privileges when pushes content out to users. Jessica Worb (2022) lays out a general guideline for what TikTok privileges in their algorithm. First, the number of likes, comments, shares, completions, and rewatches are privileged first and foremost. Then videos are grouped based on subject matter, something TikTok is quite good at, and pushed out to users who have shown interest in that subject in the past. These are perhaps the two most important ways that the TikTok algorithm categorizes and pushes content out to users, followed then by the location of the poster and any hashtags present in the video description.

Circulation of ideological events in online spaces is another important aspect of this project. In order to understand how images circulate and change meaning overtime online, Laurie Gries developed a method she calls “iconographic tracking,” in order to:

- (a) draw attention to rhetoric’s dynamic movement and fluidity; (b) reconfigure theories of rhetoric and publics to account for discourse’s dynamic, distributed, and emergent aspects; (c) rethink composing strategies for writing in a digital age; and (d) revamp pedagogy to account for writing’s full production cycle. (333)

In her 2013 study, Gries did a comprehensive analysis of how Shepard Fairey’s “Obama Hope” image circulated and changed meaning over time and the ways in which it affects our political landscape. Building off of Byron Hawk’s work on the circulation of music (2011), Gries tracks the circulation of images as events. And since, “an event is never something that can be fully captured in our analyses and interpretations, an event is a process of inexplicable becoming,” the circulation of images must be thought of as events

(Gries 334). While this approach was used by Gries to study how images circulate, this same method can be used to look at how videos can circulate and spread online. TikTok videos, political ones in particular, are brief rhetorical events that circulate widely and rapidly within discursive enclaves.

As a follow up to her 2013 study, Gries along with Phil Bratta performed another iconographic study on how the Obama Hope image style had been taken up by Trump supporters leading up to the 2016 election. They found that “digital doxicons (doxa laden digital pictures) [were] designed and produced to recirculate and amplify white supremacist fantasies tied to the nation-state” (418). In effect, the Obama Hope image style had been repurposed to circulate “doxicons” that were tied to messages of white supremacy. What is most relevant for my project, however, is Gries’ concept of “doxicons.” Essentially, the aim of my thesis is to do the exact opposite of circulating doxicons, to circulate videos that encourage the audience to question their biases or expand their knowledge. To circulate “epistemicons” rather than doxicons, which can be described as events that promote the seeking of further information or that are informed by some type of scholarly research and framework. In many ways they still can be ideological in nature but direct people to do further research or allow them to formulate arguments of their own.

1.3 PUBLICS, COUNTERPUBLICS, AND THE ETHOS OF RHETORIC

Since the rhetorical spaces being observed for this project are both enclaved and open, they can be considered a type of public. Gerard Hauser defines a public sphere as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgement about them”

(*Vernacular Voices* 61). Furthermore, publics are discourse based and have critical norms that are derived from discursive practices (61). This perfectly describes the types of spaces that form online around political ideologies and hints at the fact that discursive practices are what help to form them. When a public is too contained, however, they become more and more enclaved, and this results in members being “unable to effect change. Eventually they either buy a point of view that strips them of their autonomy or they become insulated from and insensitive to the perspectives of others whose cooperation is essential for resolving problems” (78). This is a crucial component of this project, namely, to attempt to prevent a specific online public from becoming *too* enclaved and promote the formation of a counterpublic rather than an isolated enclave. Counterpublics, as defined by Nancy Fraser, share many similarities with publics but crucially, they have a dual nature where “on the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics” (Fraser 15). Counterpublics are essentially spaces for developing rhetorical practices that can be used to challenge prevailing discourses in the larger public sphere. They are temporarily enclaved communities that have the intention of influencing outside public debate.

In addition to these online spaces having characteristics of publics, counterpublics, and enclaves, they also create their own type of ethos. Here we must use an older and less used definition of ethos which is given by Michael Hyde in relation to rhetoric as a more “‘primordial’ meaning of the term, [from which] one can understand the phrase ‘the *ethos* of rhetoric’ to refer to the way that discourse is used to transform space and time into ‘dwelling places’ where people can deliberate about and ‘know

together” (Hyde xiii). This is an apt description of what I am trying to achieve by making this TikTok account. The creation of a “dwelling place” where people can discuss far left politics from an informed perspective and do so in relation to US history and politics.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Over the course of roughly a year, the project has gone through two distinct phases. Initially, two accounts were created in order to observe the differences in their reception. One account was dedicated to sharing clips from lectures by Michael Parenti and the other to clips of Noam Chomsky. The goal here was to create two separate spaces with different emphases. The Parenti account was aimed at garnering a more extreme Marxist-Leninist inclined audience while the Chomsky account was designed to attract a more libertarian socialist audience. This allowed for the creation of two separate insular enclaves in which I would post clips that played into the biases of each group, clips where the two groups ostensibly agreed, and clips that went against the prevailing attitudes each audience. On both accounts, the style of the posts was kept very simple. The only thing each post consisted of was the desired clip from whichever speech and a one to two-line caption above and below the video. I kept the font and color of the text consistent across all the videos on each account, with the YellowParenti account using yellow text and the YoungChomsky account using red text, shown below in Figure 2.1.

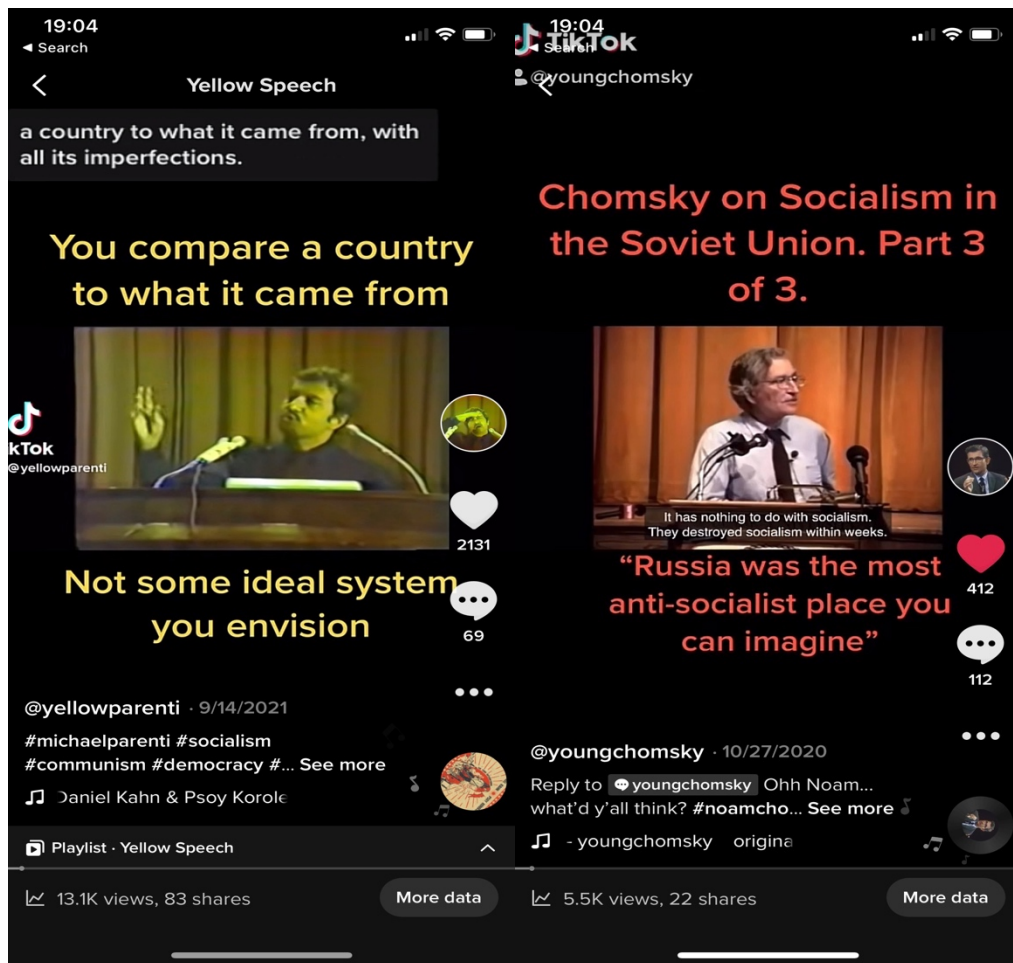


Figure 2.1. Side-by-side comparison of the design of the posts on the YellowParenti account (left) and YoungChomsky account (right).

Each of these two speakers differ from one another in two very important respects. First, their speaking styles are stark opposites with Parenti delivering far more impassioned and emotional speeches while Chomsky speaks in his characteristically matter of fact, academic style. More importantly, however, are their differences in ideology and the subjects they speak about. Many of the topics they cover certainly overlap and they agree on most issues regarding capitalism, the history of western imperialism, and their opposition to wars perpetuated by the US state. Where they diverge is in the way that they each treat existing or past socialist countries like the USSR. Chomsky unequivocally denounces the Soviet Union, for example, as an

irredeemable authoritarian monstrosity. Even going as far as to say that the fall of the Soviet Union was in fact a gain for socialism rather than a setback. Parenti, on the other hand, does not shy away from making positive statements about the USSR and other communist countries. This, along with his style of speaking, is what draws a more extreme crowd. While he does not support the authoritarian tendencies within these countries or defend leaders like Stalin, he does put those actions and leaders into context.

On the account dedicated to Michael Parenti, there were two videos in particular that were posted to play into the views of the more Marxist-Leninist aligned audience. The first from his 1986 “yellow” tinted speech at Colorado University (pictured above in Figure 3), where he states:

You compare a country to what it came from, with all its imperfections. And those who demand instant perfection, the day after the revolution they get up and say “Are there civil liberties for the fascists? Are they going to be allowed to have their newspapers and their radio programs? Are they going to be able to keep all their farms? The passion that some of our liberals feel, the passion and concern they feel for the fascists, the civil rights and civil liberties, of those fascists, who were dumping and destroying and murdering people before. Now the revolution’s gotta be perfect it’s gotta be flawless. Well, that isn’t my criteria. My criteria is what happens to those people who couldn’t read? What happens to those babies that couldn’t eat, that died of hunger? And there, that’s why I support revolution. The revolution that feeds the children gets my support. Not blindly, not unqualified. (Parenti 1986)

The main argument here is that liberals, and often anarchists/libertarian socialists in this context, hold revolutionary countries to unrealistic standards. The clip supports the talking points that are often used by Marxist-Leninists that the majority of countries that had socialist revolutions were far better off after their revolutions despite their shortcomings and human rights abuses.

In addition to this clip, is a clip taken from a speech Parenti gave shortly after the dissolution of the USSR titled “Reflections on the Overthrow of Communism,” in which he states:

Communism transformed desperately poor countries into societies in which everyone had adequate food, shelter, medical care, and education. And some of us who come from poor families and carry around the hidden injuries of class are very impressed, are very very impressed by these achievements and are not willing to dismiss them as ‘economistic.’ To say that socialism doesn’t work is to overlook the fact that it did work, and it worked for hundreds of millions of people. ‘But what about the democratic rights that they lost?’ We hear US leaders talking about restoring democracy to the communist countries, but these countries, with the exception of Czechoslovakia, were not democracies before communism. . . . So, what exactly, what democracy are we talking about restoring? The socialist countries did not take away any rights that didn’t exist there in the first place. (Parenti)

Clearly here the idea again here is that regardless of the abuses of any of these countries, it is not accurate to simply say that socialism failed and that in many respects it was a

success. Something that is oft pointed to by Marxist-Leninists, which is the type of leftist enclave that the YellowParenti account was meant to create.

Once these were taken up and circulated around leftist TikTok, each doing quite well, I began to post find clips where Parenti criticizes the systems that existed specifically in the USSR and China. Below is an amalgam of two posts that encompass this sentiment, all coming from the same speech given after the fall of the USSR;

Now all of this is not to deny that communist countries suffered internal deficiencies and contradictions that were real factors in their own demise. All of them were burdened with a managerial and economic system that tended to stagnate. . . . The Soviets for instance produced many of the world's best scientists . . . but very little of their theoretical works materialized in actual production during the scientific and technological revolution of the 70s and 80s. I mean their industrial base was roughly the same one that Stalin had built. . . . The market reforms in China have brought a return of child labor . . . in China labor is being imprisoned and in China capital has been unleashed in its rawest and most vicious free market way. (Parenti)

The intention with clips such as these is to provide some push back to what communist states both did and are doing from someone like Parenti who is adamantly in favor of communism in order to provide a sense of critical discourse within the enclave.

With respect to the Noam Chomsky account there was one clip in particular that was intended to appeal to a libertarian socialist audience and to attack the stance held by the Marxist-Leninist crowd. It comes from a speech given at Clark University in 1994 and is in response to a question asked by an audience member about the fall of the USSR:

I mean they were the initial modern totalitarians. It has nothing to do with socialism they destroyed socialism within weeks. By 1918 it was finished, and they knew, like it's not a secret. I mean Lenin as soon as he sort of got grips of things, he moved to what he called state capitalism. It had nothing to do with socialism I mean socialism is . . . what it always meant at the core was that producers take control of production. Well, there was more socialism in Germany in Western Europe than the Soviet Union. Russia was about the most anti-socialist place you could imagine since 1918. (Chomsky 1994)

This clip aptly sums up Chomsky's view on the USSR and it is one that many within the libertarian socialist movement share. That the USSR was anything but socialist and that defending it in any way tarnishes what socialists should in theory stand for. The intention of this clip was to both shore up and expand the libertarian socialist audience and to isolate the Marxist-Leninist audience. However, in addition to this clip I picked another from Chomsky's appearance on Firing Line with William F. Buckley in 1969 to share, in which he states:

You see it's very important to recognize, if you want to understand what communism means in Southeast Asia, to realize that along with many authoritarian and repressive practices, which I certainly don't condone, there is on the side a great deal of democratization there's been a liberation of energies and involvement- (Chomsky 1969)

Here he is interrupted by William Buckley who claims that "The great paradigm of Red China in which the AFL-CIO itself concedes to something in the neighborhood of 20 million victims" (Buckley 1969). To which Chomsky responds,

Oh, come on. . . . No one has claimed a million people killed through Chinese communist purges. Absolutely no one. No one serious at least. . . . But you see, I think you're missing the point and I think it's an important point. See I think in looking at China one has to recognize a great deal of oppressive practice and a great deal of authoritarianism. And one also has to recognize a great deal of spontaneous democratic structure of a sort which never existed in Asia before and if you want to know the truth to some extent doesn't even exist in our society.

(Chomsky 1969)

Here Chomsky almost seems to echo what Michael Parenti says when talking about the USSR. Namely, that despite their flaws communism in China has brought about a massive change for the better in their society. This type of video was intended to temper the attacks towards socialist countries that many online know Chomsky for. In a sense, it is meant to widen the bounds of the libertarian socialist enclave that the account was meant to attract.

Posting these types of clips quickly garnered a decent following on both accounts and within roughly a week they each had several hundred followers. In order to sustain and grow these followings several strategies were taken. First, I found leftist creators on TikTok with sizeable followings and went through and followed as many of their followers as TikTok would allow since inevitably some percentage will instinctively follow back. Then I made sure to respond in some capacity to every comment under the videos in order to increase interactions and make the audience feel they were being heard. In addition to this, I made sure I followed every user who liked or interacted with the account, gaining many "friends" or users that you follow and that also follow you back,

which is something most creators do very little of, particularly larger creator accounts. This way the accounts both felt more personal, and I would see their comments on other posts first. I also made a conscious effort to interact with posts of other leftist accounts in order to integrate myself into the community as much as possible. When signed in to either account, the approach I took was simply one of defending what was being said by each speaker in the video. Under the YoungChomsky account I responded to comments about the USSR as faithfully to Chomsky's view as possible and under the YellowParenti account I did the same with respect to Parenti's views. I did as much as possible to keep my own personal opinions out of my interactions.

In order to be able to make a consistent comparison between the two accounts after each had gained a significant following, I selected a few specific videos from each account and put them in three categories, those that were on the same topic and Parenti and Chomsky were in agreement, those that are on the same topic but they disagree, and then topics that were unique to each of them. Shared topics with shared perspectives make up Category 1, which covers the U.S.'s relationship to Mussolini and Hitler's fascist regimes up until and even after WWII. Category 2 consisted of their reflections on the overthrow of Communism in the USSR. Then Category 3 was made up of two videos from each of them, for Chomsky this includes category 3.1- human nature in his debate with Foucault and 3.2- direct discussion about the anti-democratic founding and structure of the U.S. For Parenti I chose, 3.1- Specific examples of successes of socialist countries and 3.2- A direct and passionate condemnation of the United States' private healthcare system.

After roughly a month of posting several times a week on each account, admittedly posting more on the Parenti account due to his speeches being inherently easier share clips of due to his quicker and more direct style of speaking that more easily fits within the one-minute time limit TikTok had at the time, it was clear that the YellowParenti account was surpassing the YoungChomsky account in terms of total followers and overall likes, comments, and interactions. While the Chomsky account had a few videos that did well and received a few thousand views it was consistently getting under a hundred views per post, while it was rare that a video shared on the Parenti account received under a few thousand views. After this was evident, I took a TikTok poll, asking if I should merge the accounts and overwhelming my audience voted in favor of merging them. So, I began sharing clips from Chomsky as well as Angela Davis, Kwame Ture, Edward Said, and Arundhati Roy on the YellowParenti account. This allowed for a diverse range of perspectives as well as topics since someone like Edward Said can more credibly discuss issues like Palestine and while Angela Davis and Kwame Ture could speak more directly towards African American issues from a leftist lens and someone like Arundhati Roy could speak on issues effecting India as well as speak on US imperialism from a perspective of someone from an imperialized country. This served as an attempt to both share a wider perspective with my existing audience, but also to expand the enclaved audience that I had cultivated. These clips were kept simple as well and each speaker was given a specific color for the text captions in their videos to give them some sort of consistency and to distinguish them from the other videos. Figure 2.2 below is an example of posts from the other speakers on the merged account.

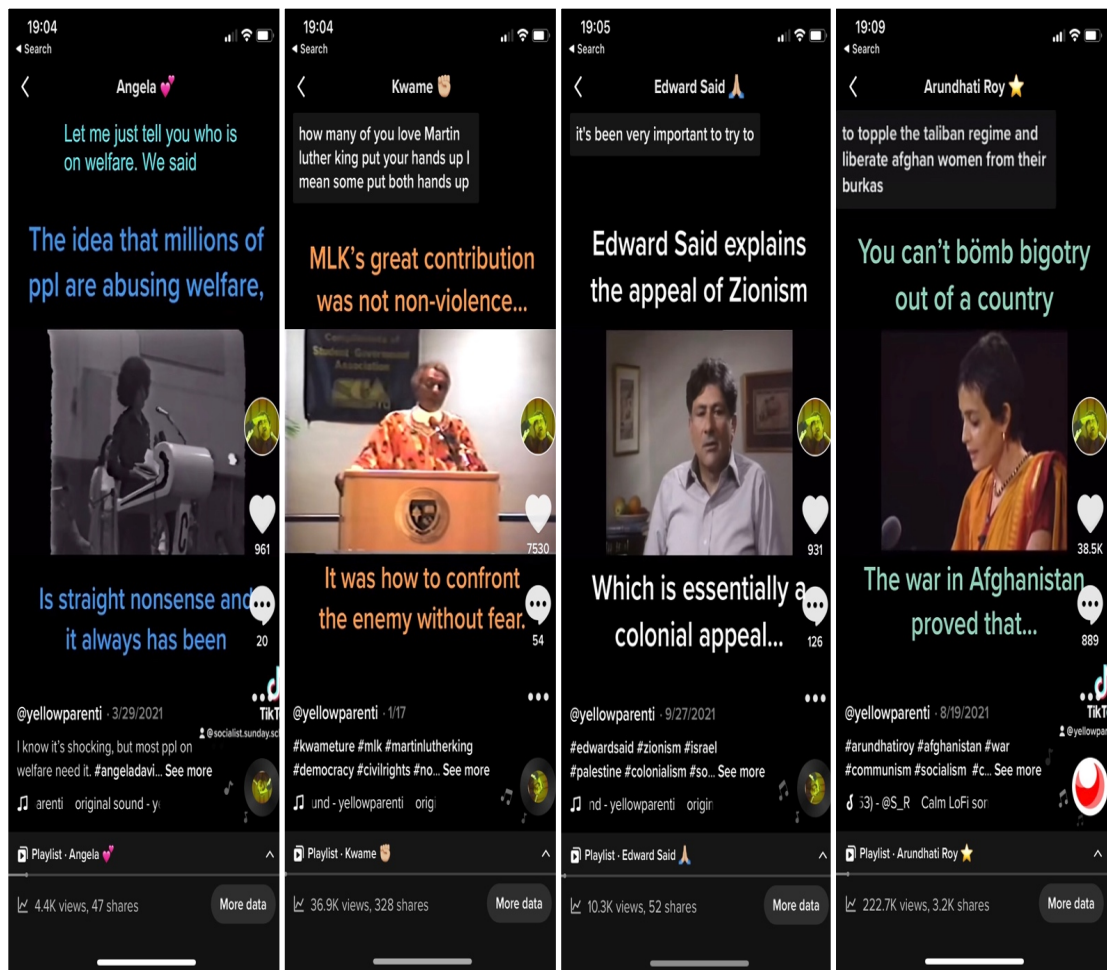


Figure 2.2. Example of posts from different speakers on the account

The most crucial part of creating content to circulate within these online spaces is the process of distilling down lengthy lectures into short easily digestible clips. Essentially, I would watch each speaker's entire lecture on any given topic and decide from there which of their arguments were most persuasive and had the most potential for circulation online. TikTok is an especially apt medium for doing this as the entire platform is based on sharing video clips. It is essentially a video version of Twitter and because of this it lends itself to a wider variety of communication, especially since it now allows for sharing up to three-minute videos, TikTok allows for more content to be shared than what can be shared in a single Tweet. In addition to this, other users can react

to the videos and “stitch” videos where a user can share a video on their own account and add their own reactions to it. Either simply agreeing to it or using it to bolster some argument they themselves are making.

The Results and Discussion section will begin with the results obtained from comparing the YellowParenti and YoungChomsky accounts followed by an analysis of the most successful video posted on the merged account, as well as a direct look at how a critical video of the USSR did on the merged account, and finally looking at a video from Angela Davis on the topic of feminism since this was not a topic that I was easily able to cover before adding her to the account. Concluding the Results and Discussion section is an overview of a poll sent out to my audience specifically. To do this I made a Google form with ten questions regarding their perception of the YellowParenti account specifically and leftist TikTok more broadly. To send out the poll I made a still picture post with a message asking my followers to complete a brief survey and providing them with the link in the comments section shown below in Figure 2.3.

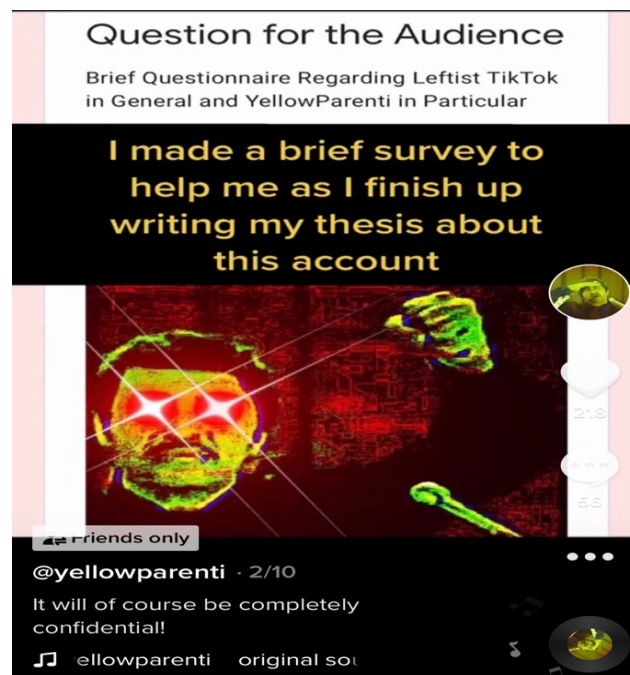


Figure 2.3. Screenshot of the post used to send out audience survey.

They were informed that the results would be used for the writing of this thesis and many of them were already aware through interactions with me in the comments that the account was initially made for academic purposes. The post with the poll information was set to “friends only” meaning that only followers of the account who the account also followed back were able to see it. It should be noted that this sample is therefore biased in the sense that it mostly was seen by users who had followed the account from the beginning since that is when I was following large amounts of people back. Once the account began to get around 10k followers it was no longer necessary to mass follow accounts since followers came more naturally. Therefore, most of the “friends” of the account are early followers and likely the more active segment of those followers since posts set to “friends only” are less likely to appear on your feed than regular posts.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I will begin by showing how I conducted the comparison of the two accounts in the initial phase of the project and present the results of this phase, then I will go into a discussion of the second phase after the account was merged and diversified, and finally the results of the survey.

3.1 CATEGORY 1: SHARED TOPICS WITH SHARED PERSPECTIVES

The most successful video for Chomsky in this category was one where he points out that “scientists weren’t the only ones we let in from Nazi Germany” (1994). Explaining that the U.S. government brought in counter-insurgency specialists from the “Wehrmacht and the SS who were engaged in anti-Partisan activity” to help design the COINTELPRO program (1994). This video is an example of a view that would span the audiences of each account, something that both major sects of the online left would certainly agree with. There were few comments under this video, which consisted simply of statements of incredulity and then requests for a Part 2 to be made. Due to the time limit of TikTok videos this was a fairly common request on both accounts. Often there’s no alternative to cutting them off in the middle of a sentence, but it is an encouraging sign to get these requests. It means both that people are engaged and raises the possibility that they will seek out and watch the full videos themselves, or perhaps even read their written works that the talk is based off of. The Parenti video chosen for this category is

one in which he talks about how friendly the U.S. media was to Hitler and Mussolini throughout the 1930s and even into 1940s. He reminds us that they regarded Mussolini as a “fascist who was a solid patriot . . . who would get rid of the forces of disorder and anarchy and roll back the red menace” and “Hitler [was] a man who had ideas and was really not as mean as he sounded, and that his anti-Semitism was mostly for display” (1988). This video also garnered little discussion in the comments. There was just a handful of comments agreeing and then one asking why we entered WWII if it wasn’t necessarily to combat fascism. This was actually answered by another user who pointed out that it was largely because Nazi Germany broke several treaties by invading various countries.

Here, as expected due to the Parenti account simply having more engagement, the video from Parenti did far better in both total likes, views, and comments. Though they did have similar likes to views ratios, Chomsky’s video being slightly higher at 0.19 to Parenti’s at 0.14.

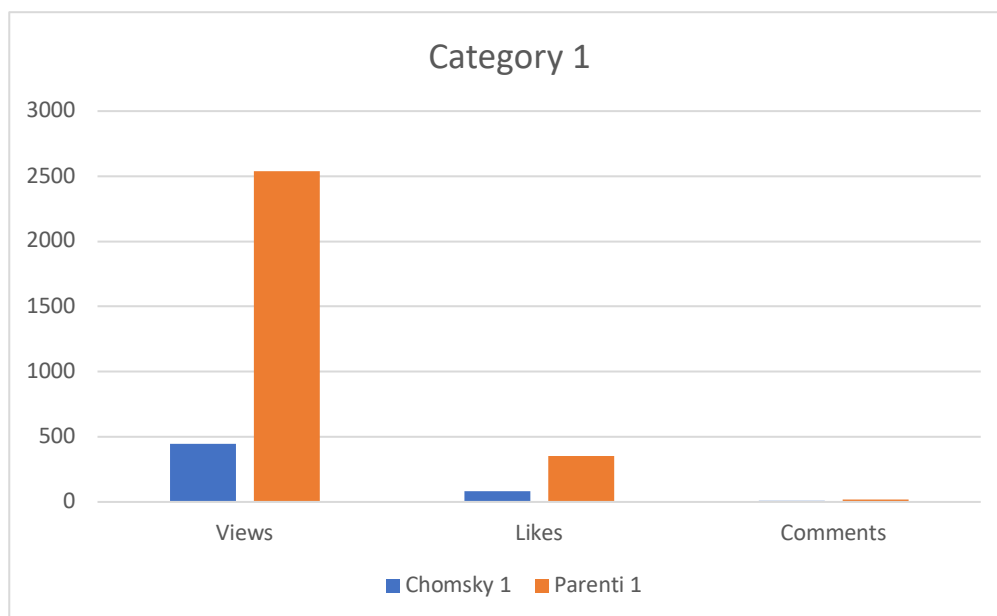


Figure 3.1. Comparison of the performance of Parenti and Chomsky’s videos by total views, likes, and comments.

3.2 CATEGORY 2: SHARED TOPICS WITH DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES

In discussing the fall of the Soviet Union, Chomsky's opinion differs sharply from Parenti's. He argues that it wasn't a blow to Socialism at all, that the USSR "had nothing to do with Socialism. They destroyed Socialism within weeks, by 1918 it was finished . . . Russia was about the most anti-socialist place you could imagine" (1994). Going even further to state that "if it is a blow to socialism then it's also a blow to democracy since they called themselves a democracy" and that it was in fact a gain for the socialist cause (1994). His argument hinges on the assertion that if we define socialism as working people taking control of production, then there was more socialism in Western Europe than in Russia. This video definitely created a lot of discussion in the comments, much of which were disagreements and attacks towards Chomsky, indicating that the video did not just go out to followers of the account but to the wider leftist enclave as well. There were 132 comments ranging from adamant disagreement to boisterous approval. Several of the comment threads were actually quite nuanced discussions of the history of the Soviet Union, largely between leftists determined both by their usernames and profile pictures, which among leftist accounts typically have some sort of socialist imagery or slogans. Many called Chomsky's assertions an oversimplification of history and that his definition of socialism here is too idealistic. Then there were a few arguments with conservatives about socialism in general, which unsurprisingly were not particularly fruitful but did indicate that the video did well enough to make it onto the feeds of users that were not leftists at all.

For Parenti the video from his speech on the fall of the Soviet Union is the one cited earlier in the methodology where he says that "To say that socialism doesn't work is

to overlook the fact that it did work, and it worked for hundreds of millions of people” and then claims that the socialist countries didn’t take away any rights that didn’t exist in the now former Soviet States in the first place (Parenti). He gives this statement very passionately, even banging on the desk as he emphasizes that it “DID WORK.” The comments under this video were largely supportive and from followers of the account, with one commentor tagging someone they knew who disagreed with the video and then engaging in a twenty-five-comment debate about whether or not communism “works” or not. It did not appear to gain much traction from leftists who disagreed with this sentiment or from non-leftists, meaning it largely circulated within the audience of the YellowParenti account.

The results of this category were interesting since it is the only category where a Chomsky video received more views than one of Parenti’s videos, but while it received more overall views, it did receive less likes. Meaning that more people watched the video in order to argue with it in the comments. An indication that the views were in large part made up of users who disagreed with Chomsky on this point. The like to view ratio on the Chomsky video was 0.07 while the ratio for Parenti’s video was 0.15.

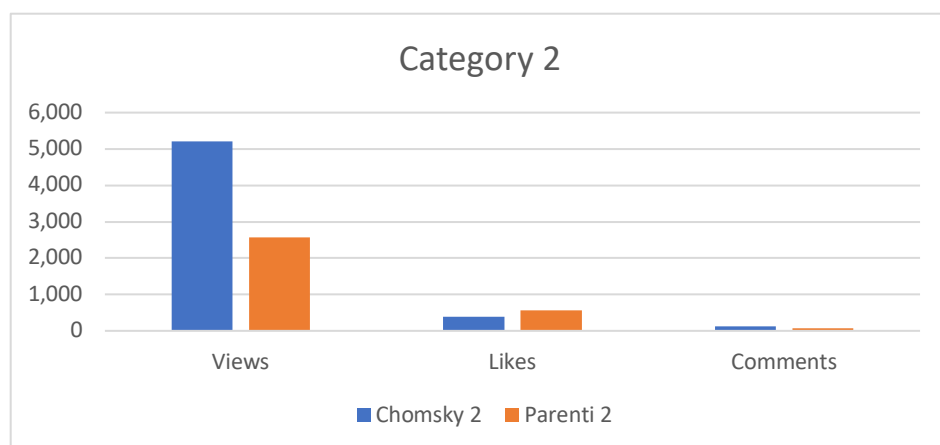


Figure 3.2. Comparison of the performance of Parenti and Chomsky’s videos by total views, likes, and comments. Chomsky’s videos by total views, likes, and comments.

3.3 CATEGORY 3: TOPICS UNIQUE TO EACH SPEAKER

The videos selected for Chomsky were from his debate with Foucault and unfortunately were by far the worst performing. The most successful one was a video in which Foucault pushes back against Chomsky's assertion that the "system of constraints that make a science possible can be found within the mind or human nature" and instead argues that these constraints can be "found outside the human mind, in social structures" (1971). Chomsky responds, arguing that the need for creative work is fundamental to human nature and that a "decent society should maximize the possibilities for this fundamental characteristic to be realized" without the arbitrary limiting effects of coercive institutions (1971). His point being that the state limits creativity and intellectual activity rather than furthering it. This video, like all the ones from the Foucault debate, gained very little attention at all and only a handful of comments, with no real discussion aside from a few interested users asking for the link to the full video.

The next video in this category is one in which he talks about the federalist papers. He argues that they were essentially propaganda to convince people to accept the new constitution since the general population at the time didn't like what was going on. He says that instead of the federalist papers we should look at the transcripts from the Constitutional Convention. During the convention it is clear, Chomsky argues, that while the founders did want to make a more "democratic society [they believed that a] democratic society has a serious flaw, the people can participate" (1997). He says that they were concerned that if "they let the people actually vote [one of the first things] they would vote for would be agrarian reform," to redistribute land and put limits on private property (1997). Something the founders would not tolerate. Again, this video had little

discussion in the comments aside from a request for the link to the full video and several positive comments.

For Parenti, the two videos I singled out for this section did the best of any of the videos by far. In fact, each of them received more likes individually than the entire Chomsky account received across all videos. The first is a video in which he gives an account from a Cuban farmer who says that “before the Revolution we never saw a doctor . . . now we have this clinic up here with a full-time doctor . . . and today in Cuba when you become a doctor you have to spend two years in the country. That’s your dedication to the people” (1986). Essentially here he is pointing out some of the improvements made for rural folk and again says that that is why he supports revolution. The next video is a scathing and impassioned attack on the U.S. private healthcare system. Saying that “The first examination you get when you go into an emergency clinic is the examination of your wallet . . . It was better in Cuba where I didn’t pay a penny . . . In a poor country I got good medical care, in a rich country I’m treated like a beggar and a . . . and a pariah” (1988). Each of these videos dwarfed the performance of any of the other posts on either account, and even rivaled the views and likes of the top videos (over the last month) from other leftist accounts I looked at who had tens of thousands of followers while at the time the YellowParenti account had just under ten thousand.

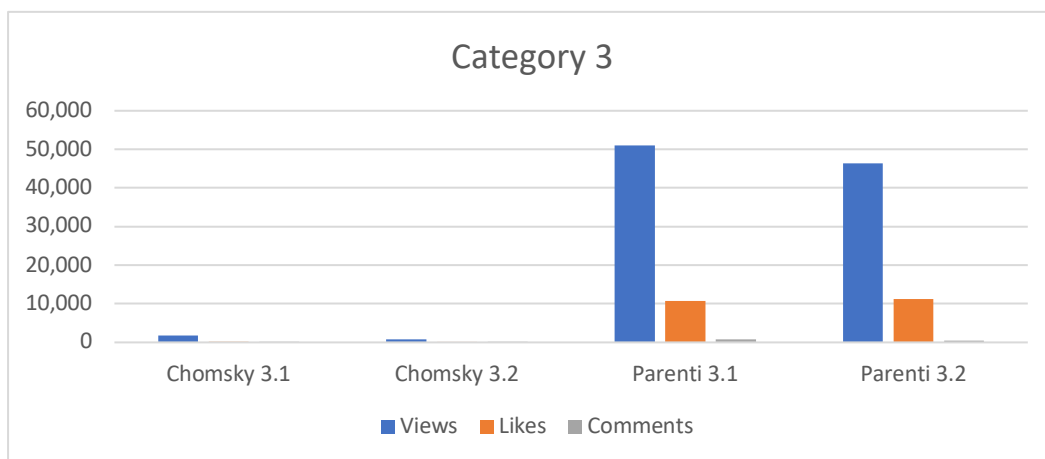


Figure 3.3. Comparison of the performance of Parenti and Chomsky’s videos by total views, likes, and comments.

In each case besides category 2, Parenti outperformed Chomsky in terms of total views, while outperforming Chomsky in every category in terms of total likes. Much of this is not surprising due to their contrasting styles and the nature of social media that favors more impassioned or inflammatory content. Despite Parenti appealing to more ideologically extreme users, however, the comments were by far more productive and varied in opinion than on Chomsky’s videos. Users with beliefs ranging from far-left to far-right took to the comments in droves, the more controversial the video the better. Rather than only being seen and interacted with by those who hold similar beliefs, as one may assume, the videos were picked up and shown to people of all ideological persuasions simply due to how popular they became. Much of this is simply because the more interactions a video gets the more people the algorithm will show it to.

Despite the Parenti account performing better, for most of this first phase they had quite similar numbers of followers, with Parenti only being ahead by about 1,500 followers

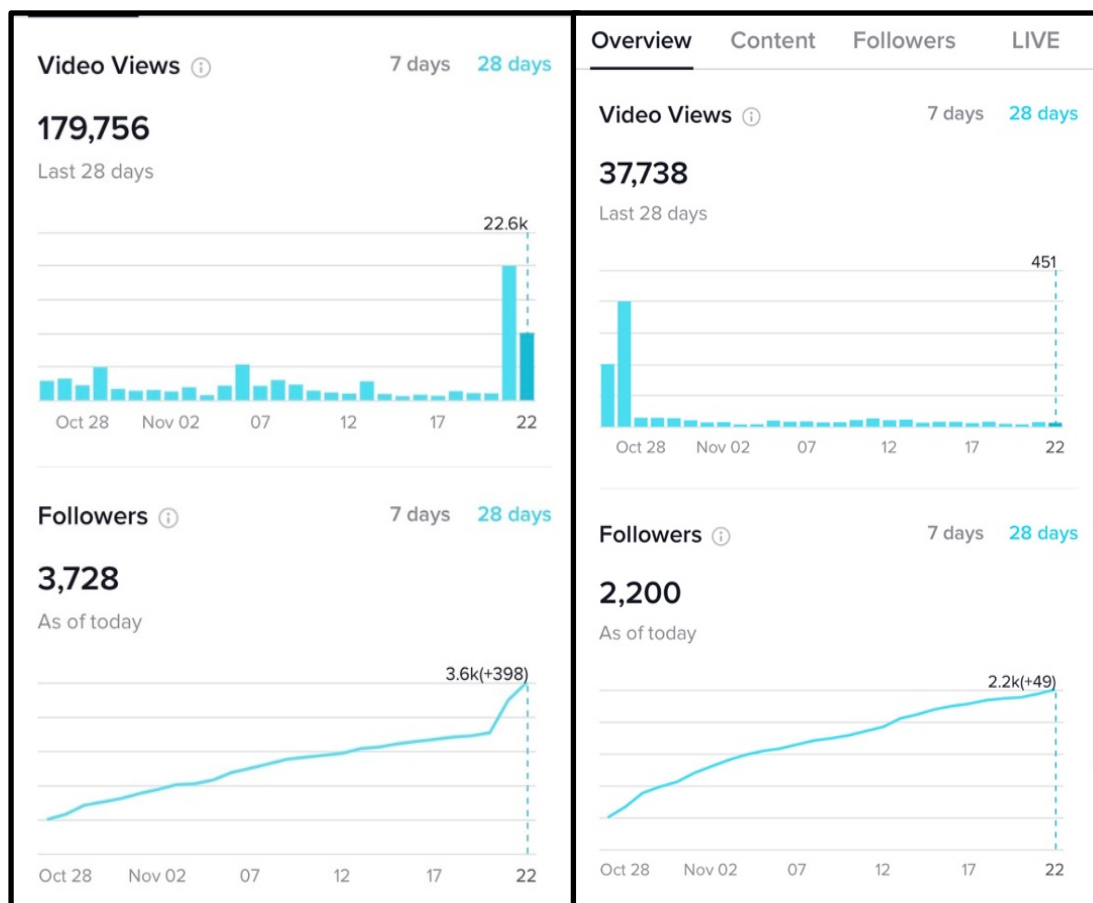


Figure 3.4. Snapshot of the progress of the YellowParenti account (left) and YoungChomsky account (right) after 28 days

They did, however, differ rather greatly in their total number of views. This was, however, partially due to the fact that at this point there were about 75 Parenti videos posted, and 57 Chomsky videos posted. This discrepancy in number of videos was due in part to my own bias in posting as well as the fact that Parenti has a much direct and fast-paced manner of speaking. Making it far easier to find clips to post that fit in the one-minute TikTok limit. During this first stage of the project TikTok only allowed for 60 second clips to be posted (it would later be increased to up to three minutes but during this phase that feature was not available). Another reason for this was simply that the Parenti consistently performed better, again biasing my posting habits. This is also

indicative of how social media functions in general. The more attention a certain type of content gets the more the creator is inclined to post similar content.

3.4 ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS ON THE MERGED ACCOUNT

For the results of the second phase of the project I chose three separate videos to analyze how well they did in terms of purely total views and likes and to examine the comments under each. First, I chose the overall most successful video in terms of views and likes, that the merged account has posted, then a video of Noam Chomsky discussing his views on socialism in the USSR to look at how this video did on the merged account, and a clip of Angela Davis talking about “glass ceiling feminism” to represent a topic that could more readily be talked about on the account with a more diverse set of speakers. These videos were chosen for three separate reasons; to demonstrate the potential reach of the account, to observe how my followers reacted to a video that goes against the mainstream ideology of leftist TikTok, and then a video that covers a tangentially related concept to see how the account can intersect into other discourse communities.

The most successful video that has been posted on the account is from the 1986 speech given by Michael Parenti at the University of Colorado. Posted on June 28th, 2021, the video has received 641.5k views, 71.2k likes, and 2,219 comments. Something I believe is important to note is the likes to views ratio, which on this video was roughly 11%, fairly typical of most of the videos posted on the YellowParenti account both before and after the merging of the account. The message of the post is simple but delivered in a very profound and passionate way. In it, Parenti states:

The third world is not poor. You don't go to *poor* countries to make money. There are very few *poor* countries in this world. Most countries are RICH. The

Philippines are rich, Mexico is rich, Chile is rich. Only the *people* are poor. But there's billions to be made there to be carved out and to be taken. There's been billions for four hundred years. The capitalist European and North American powers have carved out and taken the timber, the flax, the hemp, the coco, the rum, the tin, the copper, the iron, the rubber, the bauxite, the slaves, and the cheap labor. They have taken out of these countries. These countries are not underdeveloped, they're over-exploited. (Parenti 1986, emphasis my own)

What this clip shows most profoundly is the effectiveness of simplicity and a passionate delivery. The overall message of this clip is something that many leftists already certainly know (that the third world was forcibly underdeveloped by imperialism) but when delivered with passion and intense emotion it resonates even more. Furthermore, since it garnered so many views it inevitably circulated outside of the leftist community and was even shared by comedian D. L. Hughley and actor Channing Tatum on Instagram. While each of them simply shared a link to the clip without any commentary, it is still indicative of the reach of TikTok clips, particularly since they circulated outside of the app itself and onto another platform.

The vast majority of the comments under the video were emphatically agreeing with the video but there were several common points that were brought up in opposition to it. Under a few of the dissenting comments were long drawn-out debates between commentors. One going on for nearly 350 comments. Despite the multitude of dissenting comments, there were really only two main dissenting points being brought up in the comments. The first being that the “real” reason that “third world” countries are poor is because of corruption and simply poor management of resources on their part. While

corruption certainly is a real issue, it is still part of a long colonial history as many of those corrupt governments were supported by western capitalist countries. Both sides of this argument occurred in many places in the comments both from followers of the account and those that do not. Below in Figure 4.5 is a snapshot of what turned out to be a sixty-five-comment long argument between two users.



Figure 3.5. Example of argument between two users under one of the account's most popular videos

While none of the commentors in the screenshot above were following the account, they did stay on the video for a very long time and have a very drawn-out discussion. I only included the beginning and end of the conversation, however, since it was over sixty total comments, but it does go to show the type of discussions that are had when a dissenting comment is provided. While user in green in Figure 9 may not have been following my account, they were following a significant number of other far-left creators. So, we can infer that they revolve around leftist TikTok in some capacity. The user above in yellow had their profile on private so their following list is not available to the public, but from the way they were engaging under this video it's safe to assume they do not typically consume leftist content on TikTok, and if they do it is in opposition to it. This perhaps could be categorized as an intersection between the counterpublic of the leftist discursive enclave and the wider public on TikTok. Since this video received over 640k views, it was seen by a much wider audience than the majority of the videos posted to the account. From the beginning of their argument, it was clear that the interaction was not going to be a productive one. They lacked any semblance of intimate literacy, "or writing that emphasizes emotional connections and reciprocity, [which can provide] a base upon which disagreements could be voiced and differences could be heard" (Pavia 90). This is a point heavily emphasized by Pavia as she argues in her study that this is the basis upon which users in her study could have open disagreements with productive outcomes. Since the women in her study shared a religious background, they were able to engage respectfully despite their disagreements. This allowed for, in the case of her study, interactions to begin confrontationally but still be resolved. In the case of the commentors in Figure 10, they have no shared basis with which to form any type of bond. The

interaction begins with sarcasm and each not seeming to take the other that seriously, and unsurprisingly, it culminated in name calling and neither walking away with a better understanding of the other's perspective. When users within the enclave interact with each other, it is typically in a respectful manner, which is seen more on videos that mostly circulate with my followers or the wider ostensibly leftist community.

Another common dissenting view had more to do with communism in general, with several users commenting something to the effect of “communism could not work because humans are by nature selfish and greedy.” This provided an opportunity to utilize TikTok's “reply with video” (pictured below in Figure 3.6) feature to reply to this comment with another Parenti clip where he states that indeed human nature is horrible and awful but that is “all the more reason that we need strong political organization and a liberating ideology to keep power out of the hands the avaricious [capitalists],” turning this very common talking point on its head.

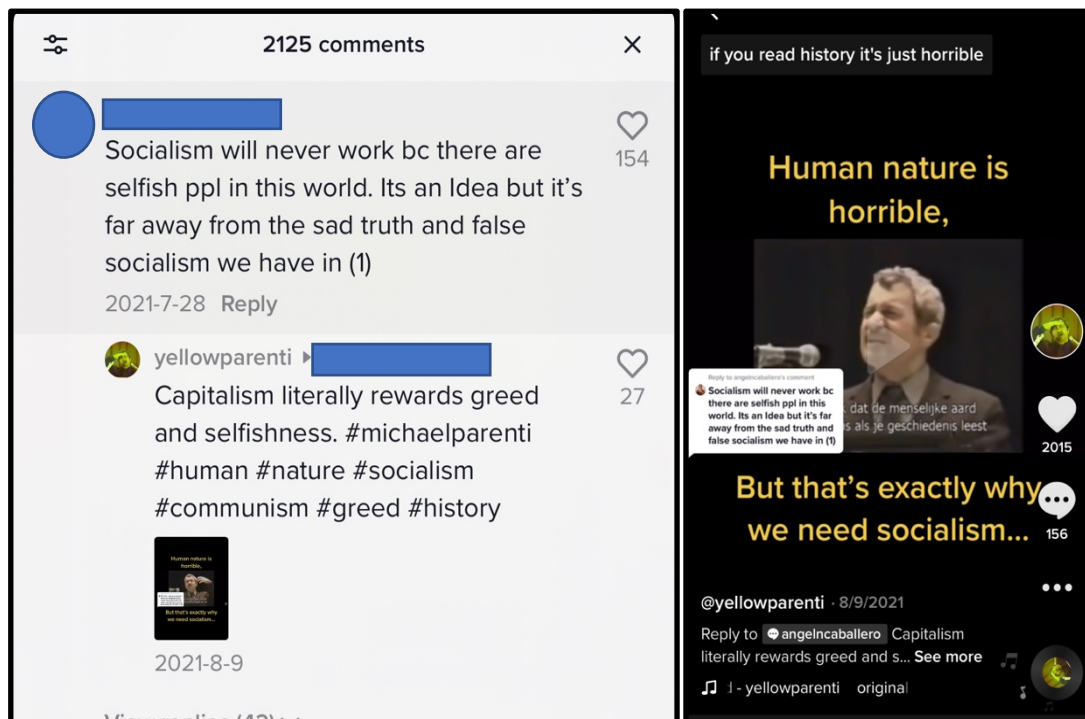


Figure 3.6. Example of TikTok's “reply with video,” with the comment on the left and the resulting video on the right.

The discussions under this video were also interesting, particularly since despite receiving 13.8k views and 2,015 likes, the majority of the commentators, who were largely followers and “friends” of the account, disagreed with the views being expressed in the video. In several places people commented to state that human nature is not inherently evil but rather our circumstances determine our nature.



Figure 3.7. Sample of the types of comments under Chomsky’s video denigrating socialism in the USSR

The comments here conform much more to Pavia’s description of intimate literacy. This video was largely only interacted with by followers of the account and the tone of the comments are far more respectful and make an attempt to engage in real discussion. Comments like “I disagree because” are met with “I agree with you” or “exactly,” reassuring them off the bat that they are listening to them and then going on to explain a

bit more why. The comments in general are lengthier and have more substance as well. They express their disagreement and a substantive explanation for it. All of the commentators pictured above in Figure 3.7 were followers of the account and demonstrate an example of inter-enclaved discourse.

The next video I intend to examine is a clip from Noam Chomsky and is an example of a post that is meant to challenge the dominant views of my audience. The clip is from a lecture at Clark University given in 1994 and is a general overview of his position on socialism as it existed in the USSR:

But when I was ten years old, I already knew well enough that Lenin and Trotsky had destroyed quickly, you know within months, every socialist element in the pre-Bolshevik period. And had done it for quite principled reasons . . . partly they were orthodox Marxists, and it was against the iron laws of history . . . so they were running a holding act until the real revolution occurred in Germany. And partly because they were just brutal authoritarians. As far as the end of Soviet tyranny is concerned, that's a gain for socialism just like the fall of Hitler was a gain for socialism. It eliminates a barrier to it. (Chomsky 1994)

He then goes even further to state that there was nothing remotely resembling socialism in the Soviet Union and even that “there was more socialism in Western Europe than there was in Russia” (Chomsky). The video was posted on November 10th, 2021, and received 38.8k views, 2,937 likes, and 416 comments. The likes to comment ratio here is also quite important as it was only at around 7.5%, well below the average of 10-20%, meaning that many users were simply watching the video to argue in the comments rather than agreeing with what was being said. The vast majority of the comments under the

video were negative and were either attacking Chomsky personally, calling him a liberal, a CIA operative, and simply attacking his intelligence. Below is an example of some of the comments, both in agreement and disagreement, as well as a brief discussion between commenters that ended up with a comment thread of over fifty comments.



Figure 3.8. A sample of the comments under Chomsky's anti-USSR video.

All of the commenters above in Figure 3.8 who disagreed with Chomsky here were following the account, while those agreeing with him did not, but still followed many far-left TikTok accounts, showing the intersection between the enclave generated by my account and the broader leftist enclave. The post did not see many conservatives commenting on the video, suggesting that while it was circulated outside of my following it was still mostly shown within the leftist community on TikTok. Most typical were comments simply attacking Chomsky and giving very little explanation or elaboration. There was however a brief interaction under a comment, from a follower of the account, calling Chomsky “paid opposition” (a very common attack of Chomsky), which did seem productive and as engaging in intimate literacy.



Figure 3.9. Interaction between two users regarding Chomsky’s video on the USSR

In Figure 3.9 above the user in red, also a follower of the account, replied to the comment asking what their issue with what Chomsky actually *said* was. It was said in a very genuine way but was not responded to by the initial commenter] but by another follower of the account giving an accurate account on why many socialists disagree with Chomsky's view. Namely, that the fall of an even allegedly socialist state was not a gain for socialism and that in the years since the fall of the USSR socialism has not taken noticeable hold in any other countries. This shows that it is possible for two users within the enclave who have a fundamental disagreement to come to possibly understand each other's side better.

The video from Angela Davis I chose to highlight is from a speech given in Catalonia Spain in 2017 titled "Revolution Today." In the clip she discusses what she calls "glass ceiling feminism," represented by Hillary Clinton and states:

Glass ceiling feminism is represented, . . . it's grounded from the very outset in hierarchies. I mean how else does that metaphor work? Those who are already high enough to reach the ceiling are probably white, and then if they are not white, they are already affluent because they are at the top. All they have to do is just push through the ceiling. And as long as I have identified as a feminist, it has been clear to me that any feminism that privileges those who already have privilege is bound to be irrelevant to poor women, working class women, women of color, trans women, and trans women of color. (Davis 2017)

The video, posted on March 24th, 2021, received a total of 27.2k views, 8,602 likes, and 110 comments. The comments under the video were nearly all in agreement with her and praised the video highly. The only dissenting comment came from a user that was

respectfully disagreeing, stating initially that “Isn’t working your way up to make actual real-life changes, like the best method of fighting for those people’s interests? She is giving a speech herself; we wouldn’t have heard her message if she didn’t become influential first.” This sparked a nineteen-comment thread between them and another user discussing the difference between being influential and wanting to make systemic change versus wanting to keep the structures you benefitted from in place. Below are screenshots from this conversation in Figure 3.10, which shows a good example of respectful dialogue between two users. The initial commenter shown below in blue is not a follower of the account, while the user in yellow is a follower.



Figure 3.10. Discussion thread under Angela Davis Glass Ceiling Feminism video.

This conversation is another example of inter-enclaved discourse, since the user shown in yellow above is a follow of the account and the original commenter shown in blue is not but still follows many leftist TikTok accounts. This discussion again shows signs of intimate literacy being used with each user faithfully responding to what the other is saying and taking them seriously. They also each begin several replies with affirmations, telling in other they are in agreement on certain points, and in the end come to what seems like a consensus. Similarly, to the previous examples, productive discussion can and does occur when both users come to the conversation respectfully and with the intention of learning. The original commenter's disagreement with Davis in the video was clearly in good faith. They led with a question and not any sort of inflammatory sort of statements and explained their position well. Thus, allowing another commenter to essentially elaborate on Davis' point, pointing out that Davis was referring to figures who climb the ladders of the current systemic and don't make much effort to change those systems. They each agreed at the end that while influential people such as Angela Davis did in fact have to earn some sort of fame and widespread recognition before being taken seriously, as the original commenter pointed out, we should be supporting more "normal people" from the ground up and supporting the people's actual interests, which is precisely what Davis would want listeners to take away from a clip such as this.

3.5 ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS

Finally, to conclude my results for this project, I took a poll of my audience in order to get a better sense of their perception of the account in general and leftist TikTok more broadly. The questions are given below:

1. Are you at least 18 years old?

- a. Yes
 - b. No
2. What gender do you identify as?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-Binary
 - d. Other:
 3. Do you consider leftist TikTok to be its own contained community and do you consider yourself part of this community?
 4. Has any discourse on leftist TikTok in particular influenced your actions or thinking?
 5. How does the content and style of the “YellowParenti” account differ from the majority of leftist content?
 6. Are there any specific videos you can recall from the “YellowParenti” account that have influenced your thinking or actions?
 7. Would you say that arguments in the comments on TikTok are typically productive? Have you ever had a productive argument in the comments?
 8. Compared to other leftist creator accounts, or other TikTok accounts in general, would you say that the “YellowParenti” account is more, less, or equally informative or “productive”?
 9. How would you define “productive” content on a site like TikTok or social media more broadly?
 10. This project is about observing and spreading productive content on leftist TikTok. Are there any observations or insights on this topic you’d like to share?

Only responses from users that affirmed they were over 18 were recorded, all others were removed from the results of the survey. Aside from the initial two questions, all of the questions were given an open-ended response format to give participants as much freedom in their response as possible. The post advertising the poll received 1,330 views, 213 likes, and 56 comments, which itself is a testament to the small portion of my audience that even saw the post about the poll. At this point the account has over 60k

followers, so a typical video that is not set to “friends only” will receive roughly 10k views on the low end, so about 10% of my typical audience saw the poll but these are likely the most active followers of the account. In total the poll received 73 responses with 84.9% being over 18 and 15.1% being under 18. The gender distribution was 58.9% male, 15.1% female, 21.9% non-binary, and 4.2% responding “other.”

The first question I want to look at is the third question regarding whether or not they consider leftist TikTok to be its own community and whether or not they considered themselves part of that community. Of the respondents to the survey, 38 both agreed that it is a distinct community and considered themselves part of it, 7 saw it as its own community but did not consider themselves part of it, and 4 did not see it as being its own community. These results show that the majority of the participants did see themselves as participating in an at least somewhat closed community. One respondent, who noted that “Leftist tiktok is a community, but it also has lots of hyper specialised sub-communities inside it, like Marxist tiktok, which are more contained and vocal than leftist tiktok as a whole. I don’t know if I’m part of the community, because I watch content made by it, but don’t make content myself,” brings up two very important points. Namely, that within leftist TikTok there are other subcategories and enclaves such as the Tankie/Marxist-Leninist style accounts versus more anarchist style accounts as noted previously. But they also draw a distinction between users who simply watch or participate with content on leftist TikTok and actual creators. To which I would argue it is certainly a combination of both content creators and consumers. The users who are consuming and participating in leftist TikTok circles are contributing to the community as a whole and can and do drive the discourse on the app to some degree.

The next set of questions I want to examine more closely are the fourth question and sixth question, which focus on how leftist TikTok and the YellowParenti account had influenced their thinking outside of TikTok. The fourth question simply asks whether any specific discourse on leftist TikTok had affected their thinking in any way. Essentially, was it having a noticeable effect on their worldview. The vast majority, 38 of the respondents, responded yes in some form, though many could not give a specific example, and only 13 responded with a no in some form. Many of the responses suggested that leftist TikTok did in fact lead them to outside sources and reading materials and in general reaffirmed and deepened their already held beliefs. Figure 3.11 shows a brief representation of the responses.

Book recommendations have made me look into theory more and all the speeches from past leftists are very inspiring	It's definitely expanded my knowledge of leftist thought + philosophy
It's definitely advanced my theory and given more material for research.	It's made me more left-wing
it has helped reaffirm my beliefs	absolutely I learn a lot from people here and get great resources
yes, tiktok is a surprisingly good platform regards to creating discourse and presenting it	Yes, expanded my perceptions of reality from various different POV
Not any in particular but tiktok definitely helped become a leftist	No
	Yes, definitely influenced me to go further left
Yes. I used to be a libertarian.	Yes, it constantly informs my ideology and deepens my understanding of history and politics

Figure 3.11. Sample of results from question four.

In general, users responded that the biggest effect leftist TikTok had on them offline was looking more into leftist political theory, citing book recommendation style videos, which are quite common, and they responded that their time on leftist TikTok largely reaffirmed their beliefs and/or pushed them farther left. With one user claiming that they did actually change their views from identifying as a libertarian to (assumingly) a socialist or leftist of some sort. The sixth question in the survey asked whether any specific video from the YellowParenti account had influenced their views or actions. To this roughly 43 responded yes in some form, whether giving a specific example or not, and 11 responded no. Most of those who responded yes either cited the quote that the “Third world is not poor it is over-exploited” (Parenti 1986), or broadly referred to the clips where he talks about the improvements Cuba had made under socialism, however, no respondent cited any of his videos or arguments defending socialism in the USSR. Suggesting that this more extreme line of argument is not central to their thinking. These two questions together highly suggest that the audience is not simply passively consuming content on leftist TikTok but that it is indeed affecting their worldviews in some fashion.

The next question I want to turn my attention to is question seven on the survey, which focused on their perception of the productiveness of arguments they see in comment sections. With regards to whether or not they believe productive arguments occur in the comments sections, they responded overwhelmingly negatively with 35 responding no and 12 responding with some form of either yes or yes but only rarely. Some examples are shown below in Figure 3.12.

LMAO NO	It's hard to say with so many trolls. I haven't take part in comment arguments.
I've never personally had a productive argument, and I've never seen a productive argument in the comments yet, because people mostly just throw inflammatory statements at each other and antagonise each other rather than try to understand each other	No I have not
Very rarely. It has happened.	Typically no, but occasionally there's a few people who genuinely want a conversation
Although they can probably be a bit productive they tend to be very convoluted and difficult to follow and honestly I've never had a productive tik tok argument it just ends up being shouting information at each other online	No and No
	Yes, if you try hard and keep calm yourself, but then again not all of the time.
Absolutely the fuck not lmao. Having like a 60 character limit and comments being posted out of order makes any serious conversation impossible, but doesn't mean I don't still get sucked into that shit on occasion. Usually I just do it so I can present easily look-up-able pieces of information that the broader audience might not otherwise have been exposed to and then I dip.	

Figure 3.12. Survey results regarding users' perception of arguments in the comment section

While the majority of the participants seemed very strongly to believe that comment sections in general were not sites for productive discussion, the few who believed they were echoed many of Pavia's points about intimate literacy, stating that "occasionally there's a few people who genuinely want to have a discussion" or that it's possible "if you try hard and keep calm yourself." Essentially, while it is rare, discussions in comment sections can and are productive when users practice some form of intimate literacy and are coming from a place genuineness, and many users intuitively understand this.

The last question I'd like to single out is the eighth question regarding their perception of the YellowParenti account in comparison with other leftist accounts. In response to this question, which asked specifically if they saw the account as more or less productive/informative than other leftist content, 50 responded that the YellowParenti was more informative/productive than most leftist content on TikTok and 9 responded

that it was equally informative/productive. Below in Figure 3.13 is a general representation of the answers that were given.

More because it makes a less accessible media format (video lecture) more accessible	Informative about specific facets of left politics
Definitely more informative than any other account even though it doesn't really touch on modern day issues but there's plenty of other leftist creators for that	It is informative because it takes bit sized pieces of information from the Parenti lecture and makes it digestible for the passive users of TikTok.
Definitely more, but the format of Tiktok isn't super conducive to this style of content. It also isn't super stimulating, because it's literally like lecture videos and speeches, and they're often fairly blurry and pretty much work the same way from video to video, so watching a ton in a row is exhausting compared to the infinite scroll of 15 second long fast songs and bright colors.	i would say more because they're usually more concise thought out ideas from people who dedicated their entire careers to it
	More
	Definitely more productive. Gen Z needs to hear from parenti, kwame, etc.

Figure 3.13. Sample of answers given to question eight.

There are two important conclusions that I draw from the responses to this question specifically. First, that the account, according to my audience at least, is equally or more productive/informative than the average content that users on leftist TikTok are consuming. Even speakers like Noam Chomsky, who is unpopular with my audience, is taken seriously because of his status as high performing academic. Since all the speakers that I share have some form of widespread or academic recognition, their views are taken more seriously than just a random content creator sharing their opinions. To the audience, the content is coming from the speakers in the video and not from me. Another point I'd like to make regarding these comments is they affirm that the content posted on the account is relatively accessible. The respondents agreed that the account was able to take a format like a scholarly lecture and break it down into chunks that could be easily digestible. However, this format still has its limits. As one user pointed out the content is

not as easily watchable sometimes as other more entertaining types of content such as meme sharing and various trends that go around TikTok. Another respondent said that the account is informative but they “could not consume too many of the videos at one time,” suggesting that the academic style grows tedious to some after a few videos.

Overall, the results of the survey are certainly encouraging. They confirm that the participants see leftist TikTok as an at least somewhat contained community and typically see themselves as part of that community and in general seem to be interested in educational content despite not being particularly enthusiastic about how productive TikTok in general can be. They do, however, see the style of the YellowParenti account to be both consistent and largely more productive than the average content they are consuming on the app.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the project was successful and demonstrates a particular strategy for steering an enclaved group towards productive discourse and seeking outside academic materials. From the first phase of the project, we can see that more inflammatory and passionate material (the style of all of Parenti's speeches) easily outperforms more academic and dispassionate styles like that of Chomsky. After the accounts were merged and a wider variety of speakers was shared, the account grew tremendously, showing that people responded well to a variety of perspectives being shared on the account. Since the account reached around 50k followers, the average amount of views per video has consistently been around 10-25k views, with a few breakout videos getting over 100k views. Essentially, this comes down to videos that were served mostly to my followers and videos that the algorithm pushed out in the broader TikTok public. The number of comments under a video is a major determining factor in how a video does. As people comment and argue back and forth in the comment section, the video continuously plays in the background. So, people who spend a significant amount of time in the comment section, either by commenting or reading the comments, the total watch time of the video increases. A crucial tactic for getting people to participate in the comment section is to post content that people disagree with, which is difficult to do while cultivating an audience. This is accomplished in two ways; when content designed for your audience gets pushed out to a broader TikTok audience who may disagree with it and posting content knowing it will be unpopular with your audience.

Exclusively using clips from lectures given by well-known scholars, and never posting videos of myself, makes it much easier to do both of those things. Since most of the lecturers posted to the account speak on matters of general political importance, there is often a good chance of the video being sent to non-followers or simply to people outside of the enclave. Then, since the account is based off of sharing the work of others, I can post a wider range of opinions that are still within a far-left perspective. All the individuals posted to the account identify as socialist or communist in some form but still share their views in a very general fashion. Effectively demonstrating that serious people who identify as socialists are not caught up with debating Marxist-Leninism versus Anarchism and instead focus on analyzing social and economic structures as well as history from a Marxist lens.

What we can see both from the conversations selected for analysis as well as the survey results, is both that account fostered productive conversations in the comments and followers overall found the account to be highly informative. In addition to this, there was very little discourse focused on leftist sectarianism and conversations centered around practical discussions of Marxism and criticisms of capitalism. This is one of the most crucial points this project sought out to show. That even in extremist enclaves we can and should attempt to steer conversations towards a productive direction. Rather than attacking different brands of leftism or defending or diminishing the authoritarian practices of past or current communist countries.

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