

# YouTube is Allowing Reactionaries to Groom Kids

by Jackson Pacheco - 8 March, 2018

I was a white fourteen-year-old growing up in a conservative household in 2012 when Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman: old enough to understand the social controversy, and old enough to recognize that I wasn't well-informed enough to participate. Feeling young and stupid, I turned to YouTube to self-educate, and settled on the first video that came up when I typed in "Trayvon Martin Explained".

A kindly-seeming bald man with a vaguely Scandinavian accent appeared picture-in-picture over a slideshow, introducing himself as the host of the "largest philosophy show in the world", and proceeded to explain "The Truth About George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin" over the next thirty-five minutes.

The video had nearly a million views, and a very positive like-to-dislike ratio. The man conceded enough points to sound fair and impartial, cited FBI statistics, and referenced other similar cases. His calm demeanor and insistence on facts that other news sources seemingly refused to recognize were enough to plant the seed in my only partially-attentive, eager-to-repeat mind that not only had George Zimmerman clearly acted in self-defense, but also that somehow the real blame for the debacle fell on ... black mothers? Fortunately, Dr Pepper and video games were not fertile soil in which that rather weighty seed had the potential to become anything more, and the half-hour lecture I had sat through quickly faded in my mind.

*"Who the hell was that guy?"* I found myself thinking years later, ashamed at the memory of my sternly nodding in agreement, trying to mimic the self-confident gestures of the bald racist for later use in serious adult conversation. I went to YouTube and found the video I had once watched, and listened to the first few minutes of the same "truths" that I did then. Except that I recognized the face and the name, and wasn't as much of a naive chump willing to take the first YouTube video with a decent number of views as the word of God. The man was Stefan Molyneux: anarcho-capitalist, anti-feminist, alt-right "intellectual". And according to Steven Hassan, mental health expert who focuses on those affected by cults, someone who "knows how to talk like he knows what he's talking about, despite very little academic research. He cites this and cites that, and presents it as the whole truth. It dismantles people's sense of self and replaces it with his sense of confidence about how to fix the world."

Thank God for Dr Pepper and video games.

I often think about how many close calls with despicable people I had growing up online, constantly attempting to self-educate and many times only narrowly avoiding malicious mentors. And I often think about those who weren't as fortunate as me in avoiding the radicalization of their impressionable and insecure pubescent whiteness, their willingness to readily accept conservative ideas from sources of apparent authority, and their unbridled Internet browsing.

It seems as though the threat of early indoctrination of the young, disaffected, and online into dangerous and opportunistic political ideologies that tend to shift the blame for personal issues from the individual to a vilified outside group increases the more that kids grow up logged in. Because as with any slightly-asocial and internet-bound child hosting inevitable self-esteem issues and attempting to alleviate their angst with the help of their online anonymity, there is nothing more desirable than "having it all figured out", or at the very least, having it all figured out more than someone else. And that's exactly what many popular YouTubers offer to these young children.

Consider PewDiePie or H3H3Productions, two leading channels among younger audiences with nearly 70,000,000 subscribers between them, who predominantly post content that is little more than jeering commentary on the content of less-popular channels, for better or for worse. However, both of these massively popular channels with adamant young fan bases have something else in common. Through their videos, they have both promoted the works of booming, controversial Canadian intellectual Jordan Peterson. Whether it's PewDiePie complimenting his newest publish in a one-off book review segment, or H3H3 having him as a recurring guest on their podcast, they have definitely helped the professor bolster his online presence, where he has been gaining popularity ever since his first viral exposure after controversy surrounding his refusal to use gender-neutral pronouns.

Since then, Peterson's stoic videos on the nature of chaos and order have propelled him to the forefront of online academia, as his new self-help book has topped out the Amazon charts since its release seven weeks ago. And this is worrying, as impressionable and aggrieved adolescents are being linked by hapless entertainers to the content of this intellectual who now regularly affiliates with the likes of far-right/alt-right darlings Ben Shapiro, Steven Crowder, and Dave Rubin; teaches his predominantly white male audience to eschew "postmodernists" and "cultural marxists" as he instructs them to stand up straight, clean up their rooms, and embody the animalistic alpha-male; and even regularly appears on the aforementioned "largest philosophy show in the world", hosted by the victim-blaming racist Stefan Molyneux.

Social media platforms are the uniquely posed for this type of recruitment to the far-right and associated fringe groups, as disaffected young men who are isolated enough to stew in the nonsense of hateful punditry gravitate towards these sympathetic online voices, and historically, these platforms have made little to no preventative effort.

Consider Twitter, which in the wake of the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, NC simply “de-verified” neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, rather than removing him from the platform altogether. Jason Kessler, who organized the rally and Tweeted that the vehicular homicide of a “fat” counter-protestor by a neo-Nazi sympathizer was “payback time”, was also merely stripped of his verification. But their dangerous voices remained easily accessible.

However, just this week, YouTube finally took significant action against many channels that often seek to spread misinformation in order to gain followers. Although they began removing videos promoting the conspiracy theory that students from the terrorized Parkland High School were “crisis actors” as soon as news outlets realized they were atop the “Trending” page, YouTube only recently punished the channel owners further.

Notably, vile conspiracy theorist and supplement salesman Alex Jones received a strike on his InfoWars channel, which broadcasts a show that has become a a mainstay of the far-right’s media, one that President Trump has frequently supported and even called into. With 2.3 million subscribers and over 1.5 billion total video views, the channel will suffer greatly from the imposed two-week freeze on uploading new content, and perhaps be more closely monitored in the future and therefore more liable to receive further strikes. Advertisers also began to request their ads be removed from Jones’ content in wake of public outcry.

This of course does not mean that YouTube has suddenly decided to prioritize the safety of its primarily young users over the ad revenue brought in by giants like InfoWars. It does of course mean that massive criticism from the public can result in the proper pressure from advertisers for YouTube to take a step in the right direction, toward preventing impressionable audiences from being so easily reached by potentially radicalizing content.

The general public needs to stop dismissing dangerous, alt-right, online punditry as mindless and start accepting the serious repercussions it can have in growing a movement that preys on young male insecurities. Parents need to start checking the kind of innocuous videos their children are watching, not for what they are, but for what they may lead to, while misleading and sinister content that aims to satisfy conspiracy theorists and indoctrinate members of the iPad generation with a YouTube subscription should be as continuously flagged and hashtagged about as necessary until these platforms take accountability.