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Debate videos, polarizing content and warlike metaphors in conflictual online discourses

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Abstract

Debate videos have been taking social media platforms by storm in recent years, with the YouTube channel “Jubilee” as one of the most prominent audiovisual avenues for conflictual content. This study investigates what combative, warlike metaphors are at play in Jubilee’s YouTube channel, metaphors that might be more polarizing than unifying. Through analysis of video titles, thumbnails, content categorization, and debate prompts, this paper examines how war metaphors are present throughout Jubilee’s online presence and their role in debate content. The findings reveal that metaphors of war and combat commonly add polarizing elements to the rhetoric that may change the affective perception users have of debate content, transforming the platform into a participatory battlefield where everyone is invited to debate or fight.

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1 Introduction

Debate videos have been taking social media platforms by storm in recent years, with the YouTube channel “Jubilee” as one of the most prominent audiovisual avenues for conflictual content. Owned by the US-based company Jubilee Media, the YouTube channel has amassed more than 9.5 million subscribers as of January 2024, and organizes, among other things, sociopolitical discussions. It often invites ideological entrepreneurs like Ben Shapiro and even hosts *gamified* debates which have been defined by Vox as “Battle Royale-like” (Cunningham 2024-10-10, 2024). According to the media company’s founder, this discursive shift took place in 2016, in the aftermath of the U.S. presidential race and its consequential polarization (Shanfeld 2024-11-04, 2024). The purpose of its debate content is to bridge this widened gap surrounding contemporary sociopolitical issues. Evidently, the media company’s tagline is as follows: “We believe discomfort and *conflict* [emphasis added] are pivotal forces in creating human connection” (Jubilee Media, n.d.).

Skimming through the content catalogue of Jubilee’s YouTube channel, it becomes evident that its political debates commonly take place between the privileged and the underprivileged, the majority and the minority, the oppressor and the oppressed. The topics of such conflictual discourses can range from individual rights to war-related matters, as observed in video discussions between Palestinians and Israelis. The combative nature of Jubilee is not only encountered in the war-related debates it hosts, but also in the ways that such content is produced, categorized and communicated by the YouTube channel.

In an online space that is meant to bring polarized audiences together, what are the factors that may be operating against that? At a time where allegorical terms like “culture war”, “TikTok War” (Chayka 2022-03-03, 2022) and “information warfare” are often deployed and weaponized in relation to online debates, it is critical to investigate what combative, warlike metaphors are at play in Jubilee’s YouTube channel, metaphors that might be more polarizing than unifying. As the YouTube account in question is one of the most prominent of its kind, whose content spills into multiple social media platforms, understanding how combative metaphors may add an extra layer of conflict to massively watched debate videos is of academic importance as well as societal.

As such, the research question of this paper is as follows: “*What war metaphors are present in Jubilee’s YouTube content and what is their role in debate content?*”

With this research question as a guiding light, the below-presented analysis begins with a literature review of relevant texts about war and metaphors. These texts serve as the theoretical and conceptual prism through which the content of Jubilee is to be analyzed, as discussed later in the Methodological approach.

2 Theoretical framework: a study of metaphors

The theoretical starting point of this study is that metaphors can assume the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), especially when such metaphors are of a warlike nature and deployed in a discursive context. In today’s polarizing political climate, they can become “weapons in the hands of everyone around them, annexing their targets into a war zone where anything is permissible” (Hermann 2017-03-14, 2017).

What is, then, the self-actualizing prophecy that is of concern with war metaphors? Steuter and Wills (2008) claim that war metaphors—to be at war with something, for instance—create a dichotomy of rightful and wrong sides, actions and actants. By default, war metaphors can have conflictual properties, depending on the context to which they are applied (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2018).

For example, the metaphorical rhetoric of warfare and militarization has been historically employed in different kinds of settings, even in the world of medicine and public health education (Sontag 2013). In such medical settings, war metaphors are not simply a rhetorical device with a view to communicating the urgency of a health issue more efficiently, but can also produce stigmatizing, polarizing, demonizing and guilt-inducing allegories that seep through the public consciousness. The disease is painted as a public enemy, while those afflicted by it are in one way or another *othered*. A *medical battlefield* emerges with a crystal-clear enemy/threat.

The consequences of war metaphors, generally, can be of an *affective* nature that may mobilize their intended audiences by evoking specific emotions. Shapovalova (2024, 108) underlines that to be at war with something, as Alex Jones has often claimed to be through his far-right rhetoric, “only adds urgency...seemingly channeling the built-up frustrations of his viewers”. In a sense, emotionally impactful metaphors are excellent tools of warfare, since the latter often triggers and then weaponizes the emotions of others to achieve specific goals (Davies 2019).

In the world of online debates and discourses, multiple warlike terms and metaphors have been put to use to describe cases of civilians/users creating their own war narratives to challenge the status quo (Shapovalova 2024) and state-actors responding to them or reappropriating them for their own goals (Oates 2016). This pattern has been termed as *discursive battlefield* by Filimonov and Carpentier (2021). Other war-related terms have been used to describe discursive phenomena pertaining to matters of social issues and individual rights. The focus of this study, however, is not what kind of war metaphors are put to use to describe or conceptualize online debates and conflicts. Instead, its main focus is to better understand what kind of war metaphors debate content uses that might make it more conflictual.

Such combative terms can appear in various forms and formats. Cappelle (2023, 13) notes that in the conservative online ecosystem, titles and content thumbnails often include terms like “destroyed” in capital letters, usually in relation to debates about sociopolitical issues, something that “dramatises the issue at stake”. Real-life argumentative language has been closely tied to war terminology (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and so it should not come as a surprise that online content is utilizing similar tactics. These choices create a moral and ideological dichotomy—to circle back to Steuter and Wills (2008)—through which online users are introduced to the content.

Sensationalist tactics tend to capitalize on outrage and result in increased clicks and views, and metaphorical language is a convenient tool to achieve that. While there is a literature gap in how online debate content deploys war metaphors to create more conflict and, possibly, increase its virality, Cunningham (2024-10-10, 2024) does mention that Jubilee creates specific content series and debate prompts that “feel primed to become ‘rage bait’ clips meant to get viewers excited or angry, to the tune of millions of clicks.”

3 Methodological approach

With the above-discussed theoretical intersections of warfare and metaphorical language in mind, a more critical look at the content of Jubilee is necessitated. While its debate content is shared by official accounts on different platforms, the focus of this study remains on YouTube, where Jubilee’s long-form videos are posted in their entirety. Elements that are to be analyzed for potential use of warlike or combative language are video titles, thumbnails, content categorization (Jubilee has different types of debate series that follow different discursive conventions) and debate prompts. These elements allow one to investigate how Jubilee presents and communicates its debate content to online audiences and whether it “breaks” its neutrality by including more conflictual and warlike elements.

While Jubilee has posted more than 1.2k videos on its YouTube channel, the purpose of this paper is not to make a quantitative analysis of the number of war metaphors that appear across

its content actions. Instead, specific pieces of content—from videos to community posts—are singled out and analyzed, whose headlines, visuals, prompts, debate structure/rules and general rhetoric may allude to warfare in a non-literal sense. Relevant instances of combative metaphors are thus to be discussed in the following section in relation to the study’s theoretical grounding. To narrow down the content that is deemed relevant for this analysis, the chosen timeframe includes content from 2023 and 2024, so that the potential usage of war metaphors can be of relevancy to the contemporary climate of online discussions.

An additional layer that is included in this study is how Jubilee makes use of different platform affordances to make its content more conflictual. While these choices may not be directly associated with war metaphors, they can help us understand how debate videos encourage users to become part of the conflict or to consume it in more one-sided and biased ways.

Any relevant pieces of content are either referenced and linked to or captured and demonstrated through cropped screenshots.

4 Findings

By scrolling through the main page (Home) of Jubilee’s YouTube account, one quickly encounters, among other things, different playlists of debate videos that have been curated by the channel. The playlists that have been chosen to appear on the channel’s main page are not thematic, however. They do not pertain to specific discussion topics but modes of debating.

The main forms of debating that appear here are *Surrounded* and *Middle Ground* (or *Middle Ground Roundtable*). Interestingly, both debate series adopt a loose combative metaphor; in the former, a famous political personality or ideological entrepreneur is literally surrounded by their “opponents” who have to race each other in order to debate the singled-out guest; and in the latter, two different sides come together in a neutral, peaceful territory where they are expected to hear each other out—like two opposing sides in a war coming together in an attempt to negotiate. The *Middle Ground* series, based on its playlist description, “explores whether two different groups of people, opposed in their beliefs, can come together empathetically and find middle ground.”

The metaphors are present in the headline of every debate video found in the respective playlists, regardless of the discussion topic in question. In the case of *Middle Ground*, however, the metaphor becomes more conflictual with debate topics that are actually war-related. In the case of debate content between Pro-Israel and Pro-Palestine supporters (Jubilee 2023-12-10, 2023), Jubilee attempts to make a discursive intervention, as though the two opposing sides can “empathetically” find a middle ground not in the real-life genocide that is being committed in Gaza, but through the spectacularized content of YouTube. The challenge of finding a middle ground, in this case, does not make the discussion any less combative, as each side still has to *fight* to communicate its points. More pressure is thus applied to both sides to achieve peace, a process that is not devoid of conflict—especially when an asymmetry of power is at play.

Potentially combative metaphors are then present in video headlines, playlist titles and descriptions, but also in the entirety of these debate series. Specifically, the *Surrounded* series is an exemplar of dramatized content that plays out as a *gamified conflict*. From beginning to end, participants race each other to secure a spot against the debate guest, be the one to “defeat” them and take the glory for it. These metaphors are, then, not just present in how debate videos are titled, described, categorized and communicated through content features and platform affordances; they are also deeply ingrained into the structure and rules of these filmed discussions.

However, these conflictual metaphors do not create an evident dichotomy of what is right and what is wrong (Steuter and Wills 2008). Nevertheless, they do create a dichotomy of two opposing views that the audience has to choose between (or even debate for, as discussed later).

Moving on to the more visual aspects of these debate series, it is critical to observe some of their chosen thumbnails. Their typical formula consists of the debate topic, a background photo of all the participants, and usually close-up shots of two participants, one from each side. Interestingly enough, these cherry-picked participants are not always portrayed neutrally. In the thumbnail presented below, the minimum wage worker appears to be “dramatically” defending their side of the debate, while the teen millionaire assumes a judgmental/condescending stance. Here, we do observe a less subtle dichotomy (Steuter and Wills 2008) that implies who to take seriously in the debate.



Figure 1: Thumbnail of a *Middle Ground* video that depicts participants from both sides of the debate.

Another example is the following thumbnail, where the left participant (supporting the feminist point of view) is shown to have a dismissive body language towards the Men’s Rights activist. It is also important to note here that even though men’s rights activists are mentioned first in the title, their view is actually represented by the female participant on the right, creating a false expectation of who is dismissive towards whom. Which side is which becomes blurry, as it often happens in war.



Figure 2: A Jubilee thumbnail of a debate video that includes men's rights activists and feminists.

These video thumbnails do not directly invoke war metaphors. However, they attempt to represent each side of the debate through participants that assume offensive and defensive stances, encouraging the audience to make a (biased) choice in a given conflict. Even in *Surrounded* videos, thumbnails tend to include both the surrounded guest and one of their “enemies” to better visualize the conflict that is taking place.



Figure 3: Video thumbnail portraying Ben Shapiro and one of the 25 Kamala Voters debating.

Another section of Jubilee's channel that deserves attention is its community posts. They mainly consist of memes, image-based and/or textual content, surveys and debate invitations.

A 2024 meme, for instance, includes a collage of 4 people that have participated in Jubilee’s *Surrounded* series. Captioned as “Choose your fighter”—commonly present in fighting video games and online meme formats—this post metaphorically refers to debate participants/guests as fighters and, by extent, to debating as fighting. It also invites users to choose one of the participants as though to represent them in the battlefield.

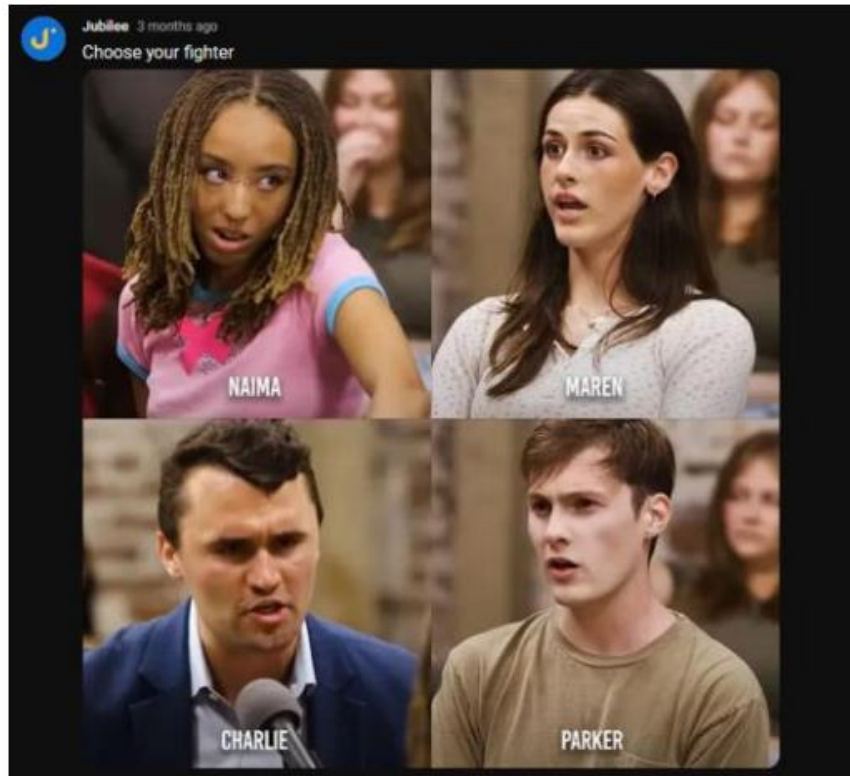


Figure 4: Community post shared by Jubilee that shows 4 debate participants.

Other community posts, as mentioned above, invite users to participate in upcoming debate videos, thus becoming part of Jubilee’s discursive content. In a sense, its debate content is not just filmed material that the audience passively watches and reacts to but becomes an arena where everyone can participate—a conflict that becomes democratic (Davies 2019). Such invitations resemble a *drafting* process, a term which is not only used in real-life military situations but even in online discourses and matters of memetic warfare (Peacock 2022). Here, it must be noted that these invitations are not only shared through community posts, but also through in-video material. Users are encouraged to apply right in the middle of the “conflict”.

Apart from these warlike invitations, it is important to consider the affordances of YouTube and how they may play a role in fostering online conflict. All debate videos of Jubilee, even those pertaining to sensitive and war-related topics, have an enabled comment section, inviting users to join. This is also true of community posts, where users can similarly become part of online discussions. In more recent videos, Jubilee has also been making use of the platform’s timestamps (Video Chapters) to help the users navigate the different thematic segments of a given debate video more easily. These timestamps are present in the descriptions as well. The title of each such segment is usually derived from a debate prompt, as seen in the image below (Jubilee 2024-10-24, 2024).

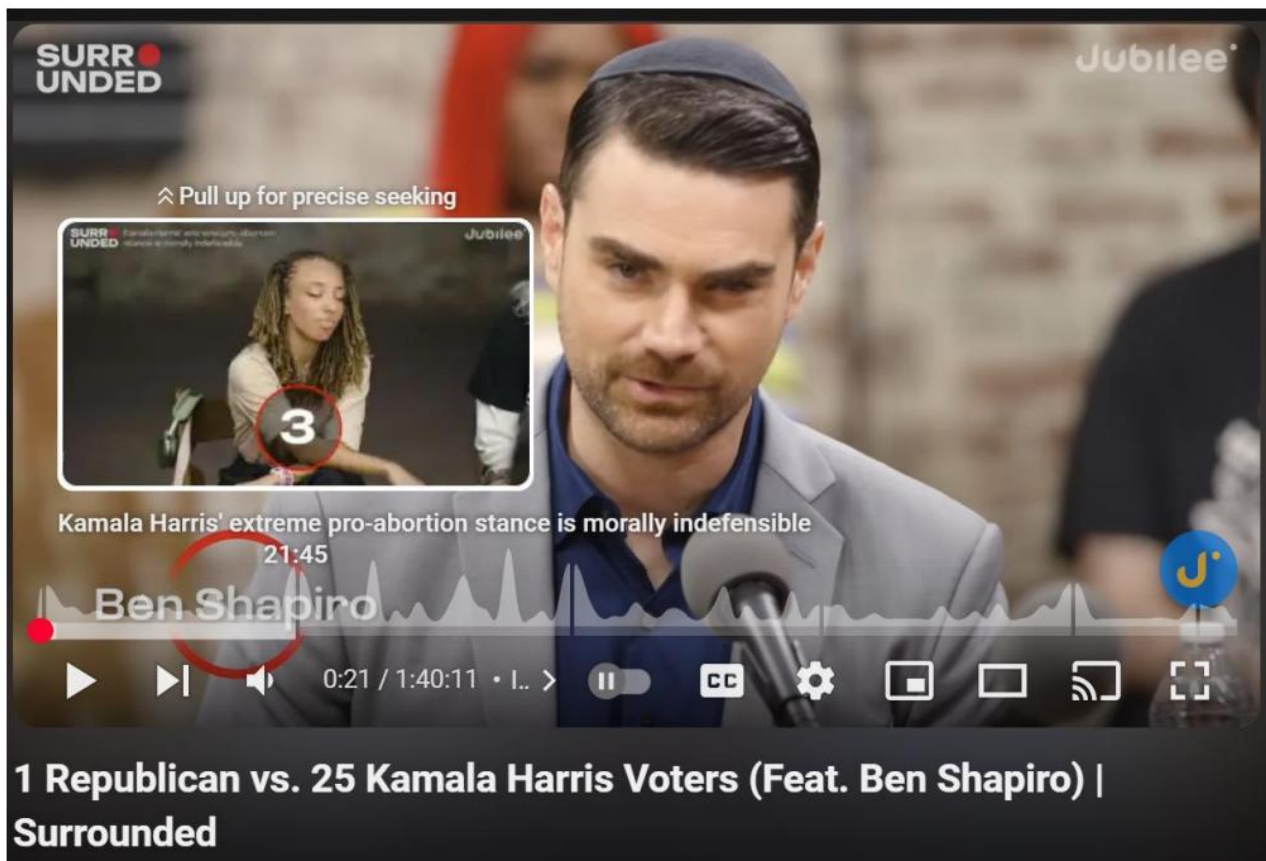


Figure 5: Timestamps on a Jubilee video that also showcase which segments are watched the most.

Such timestamps encourage users to (re)watch specific segments of the debate while ignoring others. Typically formulated in the language of rage-bait (the words “extreme” and “morally indefensible” are by no means neutral), they may encourage users to make their own debates in the comment section. Debates are not consumed, echoed and engaged with in their entirety but in a monolithic manner.

5 Conclusion

Metaphors of war and combat are present throughout Jubilee’s online presence. With combative memes and debate series that simulate attempts of conflict and peace, the YouTube channel of Jubilee commonly adds polarizing elements to its rhetoric that may change the affective perception that users have of its debate content. Instead of treating each and every discussion as a democratic debate—which is the channel’s self-proclaimed goal—Jubilee spectacularizes the structure of its debates, presents them in a more gamified and warlike manner, and curates an online image that not only encourages users to treat it as a battlefield for different opinions but even participate in it.

Despite their undeniable presence, such combative metaphors are much less obvious than in the case of Cappelle’s (2023) analysis of conservative discussion videos, and they do not necessarily push users to root for a specific side over the other (with certain thumbnails being a core exception). More broadly, however, they do push users to become a part of the conflict, one way or another. War metaphors are an integral part of Jubilee’s content, as it is impossible to consume *Surrounded* and *Middle Ground* videos without an allegorical war perspective; it is through this conflictual angle that such debate series are conceptualized, produced and shared

with online audiences. And when a conflict is present, viewers are often prompted to root for one side or the other.

In the rest of Jubilee's YouTube presence, elements like memes and humorous video thumbnails add a lighter tone to the channel's content while simultaneously invoking combative metaphors. It is this intersection of humor and conflict that characterizes the entirety of Jubilee and transforms it into a *participatory battlefield*, where everyone is invited to debate (or fight). This is further heightened by YouTube's platform affordances which create an ecosystem for discussions, conflictual and biased though they may be.

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