This is the Author Accepted Manuscript of

Jurg, D., Tuters, M., & Picone, I. (2024). "Alex, DO NOT BACKPEDAL ON SANDY HOOK!": Reactionary Fandom, Cancel Culture, and the Possibility of 'Audience Capture' on YouTube. Television & New Media.

https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764241277473

Abstract

"Cancel culture" has gained tremendous attention in contemporary political discourse. On platforms like YouTube, reactionary ideological entrepreneurs often employ what Ng terms *second-order discourses on cancel culture*, that is, portraying call-out practices such as shaming public figures as left-wing censorship efforts stifling free speech. This article argues that such call-out practices, generally ascribed to progressive communities, also occur internally within reactionary communities where fans hold ideological entrepreneurs accountable for adhering to potentially extreme political canons. Adopting a fan studies perspective, this exploratory investigation used "close" and "distant" readings on 1.8 million comments from the now-canceled "The Alex Jones Channel" on YouTube (2017–2018). Focusing on Jones' recantation of the "Sandy Hook Hoax," the authors show that, akin to traditional fandom conceptions, radical audiences engaged in call-out practices demanding "character" and "narrative" fidelity. This contribution, theorized as "audience capture," emphasizes the bottom-up efforts of audiences to maintain the radical views of ideological entrepreneurs.

Keywords

audience capture, cancel culture, conspiracy, ideological entrepreneurs, reactionary fandom, YouTube

Introduction

In August 2018, major social media companies such as Apple, Facebook, Spotify, and YouTube removed reactionary political commentator and notorious conspiracy theorist Alex Jones from their platforms (Chappell and Anastasia 2018). The "canceling" of Jones, who had amassed millions of online followers on the respective platforms, has been described as "one of the biggest purges of popular content by internet giants in recent memory" (Coaston 2018). Those in favor of the cancelation claimed that these social media companies finally awakened to a global societal crisis that for too long had been ignored, at last providing a sense of accountability (Coaston 2018). Among the proponents were survivors of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting (henceforth referred to as 12/14[1]) in Newtown, Connecticut, United States, who, nine years after the tragedy, successfully sued Jones for over 1.4 billion dollars in punitive damages for spreading false conspiracy theories that resulted in years-long harassment of the victims' families (Williamson 2022b). To many conservatives, however, the cancelation of Jones did not imply accountability; rather, it underscored another episode in their struggle against cancel culture on social media platforms, framing it as a "collusion" by "Big Tech" against "free speech" (Coaston 2018).

Within contemporary discourse, "cancel culture" has emerged as a highly ambivalent and politically charged phenomenon. Delving into the origins, Clark (2020) traces cancel culture back to the rich tradition of Black vernacular culture and the enduring struggles of historically marginalized communities. In its contemporary usage, the term often refers to a "digital accountability praxis," notably exemplified by the activities of Black counter-publics on platforms like Twitter (X) (Clark 2020, p. 88). Broadly speaking, the practice of digital accountability encompasses a range of *cancel practices*, which may refer to discourse employing terms such as "cancel" or "cancelation" (or vernacular variations) but may also relate to broader (discursive) efforts that "involve withdrawing public support from the cancel target, such as unfollowing them on social media, no longer buying the brands in question [. . .], no longer watching the television/films or listening to the music they are associated with [. . .]" (Ng 2022, 5). Such cancel practices, which aim to establish a sense of accountability for the cancel target, have been widely recognized in earlier fan studies explorations, theorizing the connection between activism and fandom (Earl and Kimport 2009). The active and activist fan readings of popular media texts are often characterized by a highly affective and critical stance, exemplified by the readiness to critique, and withdraw support in response to production decisions perceived as deviating from the established premises of the fictional universe or what Proctor (2018) has called "canonical fidelity."

On the other hand, there are also reactionary "second-order discourses *about* canceling" that portray progressive companies and online "mobs" as increasingly engaging in widespread censorship of dissenting free speech (Ng 2022, 75, emphasis in original). This reactionary culture war discourse has served as a foil for various ideological entrepreneurs like Alex Jones, who present themselves as the true defenders of an imperiled "free marketplace of ideas," even though they are ideologically opposed to most other liberal political ideals, whose advocates they typically caricature as

"Social Justice Warriors" (Finlayson 2021). This particular genre of reactionary commentary channel was extremely popular on YouTube in the mid-to-late 2010s, to the extent that YouTube itself is said to have privately identified such channels as a *vertical*, a category that the video platform uses to cluster content in its video database (Bryant 2020). Within this vertical, Jones has been argued to be one of the most successful and visible content creators (Birchall and Knight 2022). At the height of their popularity, one of Jones' protégés, Paul Joseph Watson, referred to their brand of conservatism as "the new counterculture," which he claimed was replacing former progressive countercultural movements through its "playful" transgression and defense of free speech, though not its commitments to social justice (Paul Joseph 2017).

These two different conceptualizations of cancel culture frequently engender public discussion and research that engage with either (1) "cancel practices" associated with social movements and progressive fandoms, or (2) "second-order cancel discourses" linked to political attacks "perceived to originate from one side [the Left] of the political spectrum" (Ng 2022, 90). However, an overly reductionist and politically oriented interpretation of cancel culture risks overlooking how reactionary ideological entrepreneurs on platforms such as YouTube may likewise deal with reactionary communities engaging in cancel practices.

In the year leading up to his complete removal from YouTube, Jones increasingly found himself on the receiving end of various cancel practices within mainstream public discourse. Critics particularly argued that Jones' coverage of 12/14 was unacceptable and undeserving of platforms like YouTube, leading the online video platform to become more vigilant about Jones' content. Given this mounting pressure, Jones attuned his coverage of 12/14 as it increasingly put him at legal and financial risk. However, such backpedaling ran counter to his personal brand, carefully cultivated over his career as "rebellious." While much attention has been directed at activist and institutional cancel practices such as YouTube's eventual deplatforming, we know little about how Jones' backpedaled position impacted his own audience engagement. In many ways, as Ng (2022) pointed out, "from an analytical perspective, celebrity and popular media cancellings illustrate interactional and financial elements central to digital cultures" (p. 15). In other words, the point at which Jones became a notorious cancel target, prompting adjustments to his commentary, also marks the onset of discussions concerning his role within his "own" reactionary community.

Adopting a fan studies perspective, this article gages the interactional elements of Jones' cancelation through the eyes of his audience in the eventful final year of his YouTube channel. Focusing specifically on the (re)negotiated coverage of 12/14, we pose the following two central research questions:

1. How did Jones' partial recantation of the Sandy Hook school shooting conspiracy affect audience engagement on YouTube?
2. In what ways can the affective response of Jones' audiences be theorized as cancel practices?

In answering these questions, we draw on a unique historical dataset of "The Alex Jones Channel" (2017–2018) with approximately 1.8 million comments. Following

distant readings of our dataset, we set out to answer our research questions by close reading comments following Jones' controversial interview with the broadcast journalist Megyn Kelly on NBC, where he was interrogated about his exposé of 12/14 as a "hoax."

Our article is structured as follows: We first conceptualize the rise of conspiracy theories and ideological entrepreneurs operating within reactionary digital fandom. We then set out our computational grounded theory methodology, followed by a description and interpretation of audience engagement with Jones.

Alex Jones, Ideological Entrepreneurs, and Conspiracy Fandom

The appeal and expansion of conspiracy theories over the past decade has become increasingly significant area of scholarly interest tackled within a wide range of fields such as psychology, sociology, and political science, resulting in various frameworks, concepts, and methods (Baden and Sharon 2021). Much recent work on conspiracy theory has emphasized the impact of digital media and the mediatization of conspiracy theory (Frankel 2022). In fact, an increasing body of work theorizes the relationship between the networked era of social media and the rise of conspiracy theory, as voices of a pervasive new form of epistemic contestation emerge from the "leveling out" of once authoritative gatekeepers and the blurring of boundaries between previously distinct fields of discourse within the new hybrid media environment (Valaskivi and Robertson 2022). Within this networked environment, new alternative opinion leaders emerge capitalizing on such trends, with YouTube proven to be especially well suited for these voices (Finlayson 2021; Lewis 2018).

One specific beneficiary is Alex Jones, who became one of America's most notorious conspiracy theorists (Birchall and Knight 2022). Starting on local radio and public-access television in Austin, Texas, Jones successfully built a counter-culture conspiracy media company, InfoWars, whose content gathered billions of impressions from a worldwide audience on a wide range of digital platforms, most notably YouTube (Leon 2019). The views expressed by Jones can be characterized as *reactionary*, "philosophically conservative but temperamentally radical," as he often takes radical stances against a perceived hostile ruling regime to reconstruct "hierarchical, often private regimes of rule" (Robin 2017, 24–5). His association with Donald Trump, who appeared on Jones' channel, brought him close to real political power as well as a position of leadership in the insurgent so-called alt-right movement, which would gain ground during the Trump years (Van Den Bulck and Hyzen 2020).

To account for the success of figures like Jones, scholars have drawn on North's (1981) notion of the *ideological entrepreneur*, that is, someone who draws on collective estrangement at times of great upheaval to create a counter-ideology that opposes the existing hegemonic structures, while responding to innovation and profit opportunities (Birchall 2021; Campion-Vincent 2015; Finlayson 2022; Hyzen and Van Den Bulck 2021). In these accounts, conspiracy theories are not merely seen as the result of a cognitive malfunction but as a specific ideological stance. In the wake of the Trump

presidency, scholarly observations show a growing utilization of counter-hegemonic belief by a diverse set of reactionary actors who argue progressive ideology as an encroaching hegemonic force that threatens individual liberties (Finlayson 2021). Additionally, platform economies offer innovations and profit opportunities, allowing successful conspiracists to accumulate notable financial resources through advertising revenue (Birchall and Knight 2022).

A "successful" digital ideological entrepreneur, Van Den Bulck and Hyzen (2020) point out, functions as a *celebrity ideological entrepreneur*, that is, someone who extracts "political conviction from their mediated celebrity status and performance" (p. 46). In other words, the appeal of conspiracy entrepreneurs does not only, or perhaps mainly, lie in the content they disseminate but in the way their celebrity performs that content. As Finlayson (2021) convincingly argues, online video platforms such as YouTube put at the center the celebrity image of the ideological entrepreneur and how they present their moral character on camera. These performances invite "audiences [. . .] to identify with and to become fans of a politics through identifying with the individual who embodies it, for whom it is an attribute, an expression of inner moral character and something to which one may aspire" (Finlayson 2021, 69). This argument aligns well with the work of Lewis (2020), who contends that the success of ideological entrepreneurs on social media platforms comes from their influencer tactics to cultivate a sense of "relatability, authenticity, and accountability" (p. 1).

However, while the celebrity ideological entrepreneur is often placed center stage, the narrative of counter-ideological conspiracy is not always bound by their control and influence. For instance, while Hyzen and Van Den Bulck (2021) point out that "conspiracy-ideological entrepreneurs create and curate ideology in the form of conspiracy theory and elaborate this position through *propaganda campaigns* sustained by their own and/or third-party (social) media," they acknowledge that this position can only be maintained "until the message/theory takes on a life of its own" (p. 182, emphasis added). In fact, Finlayson (2022) even takes this point a step further, arguing that, rather than top-down influence, "direct responses such as likes/dislikes and comments, enables producers rapidly to adapt their productions, increasing and retaining audiences by giving them what they seem to want" (p. 67). Such observations emphasize the fact that the distinctive digital media environment, which promotes audience transformation into dedicated fans, amplifies audience influence. Consequently, it becomes imperative for academic research to broaden its analysis from ideological entrepreneurs to encompass the complex dynamics within fandoms, where conspiracy narratives are not just disseminated but also critically examined and modified.

Although fan studies have historically focused primarily on the participatory and democratic power of fan communities, scholars in the field are now grappling with the neglected dimensions that delve into the intersections of reactionary elements and fandom, conceptualizing "reactionary fandom" (Stanfill 2020), "dark-fandom" (Broll 2020) and "anti-fandom" (Click 2019; Gray 2003). For example, through such a lens conspiracy theories might be reconsidered in terms of shared "affect" that allows for "disparate, diverse individuals" to cohere "into a community of shared stakeholders" who nevertheless "remain idiosyncratic in their interpretations" of the theory (Reinhard et al. 2022,

1153). This implies that rather than consolidating a single identity, audiences or fans inscribe parts of their identity into the community, and the negotiation of the meaning of various elements of a conspiracy theory conform to the practices of fandom, notably the concept of *canonical fidelity*, that is, "what is deemed 'factual' within the imaginary world" (Proctor 2018, 160).

For instance, as Van Den Bulck and Hyzen (2020, 43) acknowledge, Jones attracts an audience that is "socio-politically diverse, even fractured [with] loosely networked groups of conspiracists, white supremacists, libertarians, members of the 'manosphere,' end-of-day Christians and preppers [. . .]." Such epistemological pluralism is not uncommon for conspiracy theorists with large followings. Scholars observed how other conspiracy entrepreneurs such as David Icke attract followers who do not share a coherent ideology but rather "a discontent with our current societal order, and more precisely with the way our epistemic institutions [function]" (Harambam and Aupers 2021, 5). In this sense, conspiracies assume the role of a negotiated space for different "interpretative communities" (Fish 1980) who become stakeholders in various elements of the conspiracy theory.

This negotiated relationship is further intensified by Jenkins (2008) theoretical proposition that fans interact with texts they perceive as fulfilling specific desires, yet that very object of desire—the text itself—never quite manages to meet the fan's expectations. As a result, the continuous reappropriation of the text becomes the ultimate objective. Such reappropriation is one of the central features of social media, where the participation threshold is lowered. For instance, YouTube invites a participatory culture where various audiences upload interpretations of conspiracy theories, performing *preferred, negotiated, or oppositional readings* (Hall 1991 [1973]) of various videos (Grusauskaite et al. 2022). Moreover, audiences on YouTube can participate in the interpretations of conspiracy videos in the comment section, as research shows that "YouTube's comments feature can, like anonymous message boards such as 4chan and 8kun, function as an under-regulated epistemic space in which conspiracy theories flourish" (Ha et al. 2022, 2).

It is this negotiated, participatory relationship that makes ideological entrepreneurs like Jones susceptible to cancel practices *from within* that have been noted in cancel culture discussions in relation to fan studies, namely as means of promoting accountability. However, within reactionary fandoms, this accountability is not necessarily linked to a progressive or democratic norm that seeks to keep figures like Jones from crossing the boundaries of acceptable discourse, but rather the collaborative efforts to shame ideological entrepreneurs into maintaining various conspiracy narratives that fans see as collaborative products. The following section describes our methodology to explore this negotiated relationship that may lead to accountability and cancel practices within reactionary fandoms.

Methodology

Our study of audience cancel practices surrounding Alex Jones was based on a unique historical dataset from the now-removed "The Alex Jones Channel" on YouTube,

which we uploaded to the "4CAT: Capture and Analysis Toolkit" (Peeters and Hagen 2022). After removing duplicates, we had 1,843,388 unique comments for the year 2017 and 21,946 YouTube videos dating back to 2008. The comments contained the following metadata: "author_id," "video_id," "author_name," "comment_text," and "upload_time." The videos contained: "video_id," "video_title," "video_description," and "upload_time."

In her seminal work on cancel culture, Ng (2022) makes the case for "addressing [cancel culture] through both quantitative, 'big data' approaches as well as qualitative investigations" (p. 139). Given Ng's impetus and the volume of our dataset, we drew inspiration from the *computational grounded theory* approach that seeks to combine "expert human knowledge and hermeneutic skills with the processing power and pattern recognition of computers, producing a more methodologically rigorous but interpretive approach to content analysis," enabling a transition from large-scale observations to meaningful interpretations (Nelson 2020, 3).

We started our analysis with an overall *word count analysis*, a lexical-based technique to locate dominant conversation objects. Given the prominence of "alex," we then performed a diachronic *word collocation analysis*, mapping the two most frequently collocated words with "alex" each month. We then extracted trigrams with a window size of three to get the most closely associated terms with "alex" without losing too much context. These analyses were performed by first tokenizing the "comment_text," including lemmatization, filtering for general stop words and "people," "time," and "video" as noise.

These computer-assisted analyses enabled us to observe some large-scale patterns and select a meaningful moment for theorizing cancel practices: the Megyn Kelly interview with Alex Jones concerning 12/14. Sampling the comments around the interview hinted at a fracturing moment in Jones' community following the partial recantation of his Sandy Hook Hoax reporting. Following this observation, we created a sub-dataset with comments containing the term "Sandy Hook," performing a *keyword-in-context analysis*, showing common comment structures (Wattenberg and Viégas 2008), and a *close reading* of these comments ($N = 1{,}423$).

Findings and Interpretations

Affection With Alex

Starting with aggregate insights into the key objects of our study, we found that, behind "trump," "alex" himself was most frequently mentioned in the comments. This confirmed the idea that ideological entrepreneurs play a central role in the discussions conducted by audiences. Moreover, "alex" references reveal that many audiences display intimacy by calling Jones on a first-name basis. Following the centrality of Jones' person in the dataset, we performed word collocations to spot frequently associated terms with "alex," directing our attention to the top five per month in 2017 (Figure 1).

Most collocations in Figure 1 show the affectionate relationship audiences feel with "alex." Predominantly audiences are blessing "alex" evoking "god," stating "love,

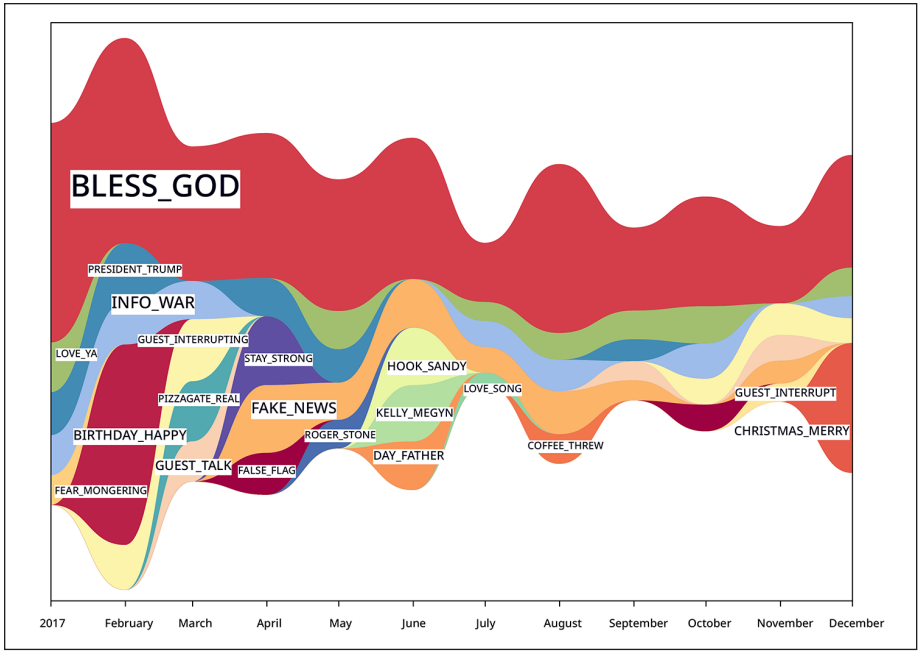

Figure 1. Stream graph of trigrams containing "alex" per month during 2017 (word combinations are sorted alphabetically).

ya," showing support with "stay strong," and wish him a "happy birthday," and "merry christmas." Moreover, audiences evoke Jones' close ties with "president trump" at the time. They also appear to be quite critical of Jones interrupting his guests and letting them have their talk too.

The results in Figure 1 directed our attention to Jones' interview with Megyn Kelly in June, which aired on Father's Day. After exploring various comments expressing disappointment, anger, and frustration, we decided the interview served as an illuminating case study for a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the relationship between ideological entrepreneurs and their reactionary fandom.

Recanting the Sandy Hook Hoax: Backlash and Fallout in the "Truth Community"

On June 18, 2017, Megyn Kelly aired her interview with Jones in the first episode of *Megyn Kelly Today* on NBC News. The interview presented a highly controversial media moment causing outrage and public backlash due to Jones' participation and propagation of various conspiracy narratives, specifically the *Sandy Hook Hoax* (SHH), referring to the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting—which took the lives of 28 people, 20 of whom were children—as a *false flag operation* where victims were

framed as "crisis actors" in a plot for stricter gun control (Williamson 2022a). In the interview, Kelly confronted Jones about his 12/14 conspiracies and the subsequent harassment of his followers tormenting the victims' families.

Jones framed the interview in his typical antagonistic ingroup-outgroup style: Jones versus the "Mainstream Media" (MSM). Kelly, who had just moved from Fox News to NBC News, was already well underway to become an "enemy" within Jones' community. She was accused of "cozying up" to the mainstream press and progressive politics, serving the interests of the so-called *globalists*, a dog whistle within the *New World Order conspiracy* that theorizes the formation of a totalitarian world government (Spark 2000). In videos with titles like: "Hillary Has A Crush On Megyn Kelly" (12-08-2015) and "Megyn Kelly: TV Programing The Masses" (18-03-2016), Jones portrayed Kelly as a corporate "shill" for the interests of the liberal political establishment and the institutions of the mainstream media that it has "captured." The announcements of the interview with Kelly were hyped in provocative videos titled "Alex Jones Will Go Toe To Toe with Globalist Operative Megyn Kelly" (01-06-2017) and activating audience engagement: "Should Alex Jones Accept Megyn Kelly Interview?" (04-06-2017).

The actual interview, however, showed Jones as defensive and unable to bring out his combative self. In fact, he formulated somewhat of a recantation of his SHH claims:

> [Kelly quoting Jones] You said: 'the whole thing is a giant hoax. How do you deal with a total hoax? It took me about a year with Sandy Hook to come to grips with the fact that the whole thing was fake, I did deep research, and my gosh, it just pretty much didn't happen.' [Jones] At that point, and I do think there is some cover-up and manipulation, that's pretty much what I believed. But then I was also going into devil's advocate, but then we know there are mass shootings and that these things happen (NBC News 2017, 8:58-9:25).

When Kelly pressed further on his response, Jones told her that "listeners and other people are covering this. I didn't create that story" (NBC News 2017, 9:35-9:37). With this response, Jones seemed to distance himself from the SHH community.

Jones had already dropped much of his coverage of Sandy Hook before the interview, and there was a growing concern among his more radical audiences that he was backpedaling. Figure 2 shows the most common associations with "sandy hook was" in comments mentioning "Sandy Hook."

As revealed in Figure 2, the most common structure in comments mentioning "Sandy Hook was" present the shooting as "a hoax," "a false flag," "faked," and "staged," a narrative that Jones broadcasted for over half a decade. The SHH narrative and the public pressures around it, reveal much about the negotiated relationship between ideological entrepreneurs and their audience. One self-described "hardcore follower" illustrated and anticipated the backlash following the interview quite well:

> [. . .] Alex is so pathetic. I have been a hardcore follower since 2012. But him acting like Sandy Hook was real now when he used to call it out as fake and staged. Him backing off

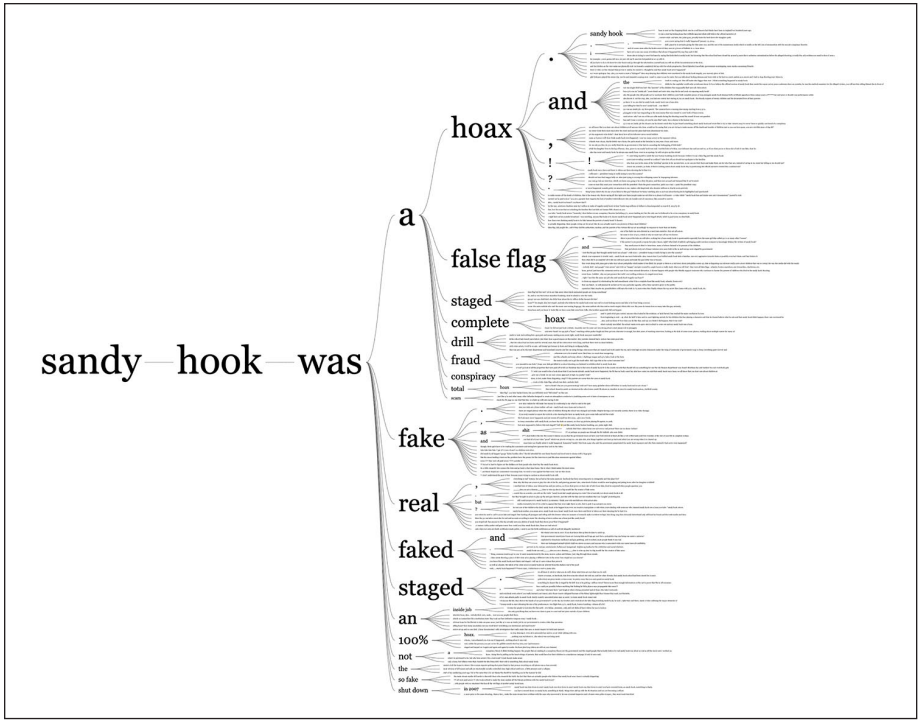

Figure 2. Word tree of comments containing the term "Sandy Hook" in our dataset.

> Pizzagate and siding with the deniers when ten minutes of research make it evident it's legit [. . .] is too much to ignore and be quiet and be a good little fan. Why is no one else calling him out? Why do people keep saying "I support Alex and Trump [...] (2017-06-12).

This fan comment contains an explicit incentive for other audience members to *call-out* Jones, a familiar cancel practice in the fan repertoire that aims to shame someone for their actions (Clark 2020), withdraw support and/or hold him accountable for his commitment to specific conspiracies. Following the recantation, we found that a more substantial call-out discourse emerged within the SHH interpretative community, with audiences commanding in all caps: "Alex, DO NOT BACKPEDAL ON SANDY HOOK! [. . .]" (16-06-2017). Drawing on Proctor's (2018) conception of canonical fidelity, we suggest viewing this call-out culture as pertaining to *character fidelity*, the faithfulness of Jones' performance to the reactionary ideological celebrity, and *narrative fidelity*, the faithfulness to the SHH narrative.

In terms of character fidelity, audiences refer to Jones as a "fence walker," "sell-out," "shill," and "flip flopper," playing "both sides." These terms highlight the experienced backpedaling aspects of Jones' brand by specific fans, as he appeared to be more concerned with his platform and business than with the "truth." Following

Finlayson's (2021) observations about the performance of *moral character*, we discovered that Jones lost moral character fidelity to the SHH community with this backpedaling. For instance, one fan comments: "Alex, you destroyed yourself and in the process you made fools of your listeners and totally discredited the truth movement" (17-06-2017). In this comment, we observe both the fractured parasocial connection and the discursive formations of a *truth movement*, which imagines the ideological entrepreneur as part of a broader collective carrying responsibility for faithfulness to the ideas presented in the community.

In terms of narrative fidelity, we observe a distinction between "disappointed fans" and those appearing to support a radical "anti-fandom." To disappointed fans, Alex was not doing justice to all the work *they* had put in. These audiences had invested significant time and effort into investigating the SHH and now saw Jones cast their ideas aside, implying that *their* conspiracy was no longer part of the "legitimate" conspiracy universe. Alex often told his audience to do their own research, and much of the backlash reveals how audiences spent significant time doing this: "Alex, I have spent countless hours sorting out the contradictions and anomalies of Sandy Hook [. . .] Sandy Hook is a complete and utter fraud. You know it. Now show the backbone that you're famous for" (13-06-2017). This comment illustrates how the conspiracy canon is a collaborative effort, as audiences expect their findings and contributions to be acknowledged, and how that ties into Jones' "character fidelity," giving a voice to the alternative community and standing up against the enemy.

To an even more radical interpretative community, which hinted at formations of an anti-fandom, the backpedaling reveals how to some audiences Jones already belonged to an outgroup, the enemy, integrating Jones into a *super conspiracy*, in which "multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically [by an] all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors" (Barkun 2013, 6). Parts of this super conspiracy anti-fandom draws on various antisemitic tropes: "All media is owned by Jews and Jews created Sandy hoax [. . .] Alex's radio station is also owned by Jews. He is a gatekeeper, which is why he prevaricates and back-peddles [...]" (17-06-2017). In this antisemitic reading, Jones is perceived as *controlled opposition*, a term used to refer to lesser conspiratorial actors who are placed as fake opponents to make the other side look ridiculous, accompanied by antisemitic slurs such as "Zionist shill." This interpretative community embedded the backpedaling into their more general call-out culture in which Jones never truly revealed the "real" conspiracies. This finding aligns well with observations by scholars such as Hawley (2019), who argue that actual alt-right supporters think Jones' conspiracy thinking lacks many of the white supremacy and Jewish elements.

Discussion and Conclusion

This exploratory study has sought to nuance the discussion on cancel culture that regularly incites public conversation and academic investigation into either cancelation practices within progressive movements and fan communities or the second-order conservative and reactionary discourses critiquing the various progressive

cancel practices. Answering our first research question, that is, the affect of Jones' partial recantation of the Sandy Hook Hoax (SHH) on audience engagement, we showed that while affective parasocial relationships are an important source for engagement, with audiences speaking on a first-name basis with many expressions of blessing and love, such relationships may fracture when Jones is perceived not to provide faithfulness to his celebrity character and the conspiracy narrative. In response to this betrayal, affected interpretative communities expressed their discontent by vocalizing their frustration and/or categorizing him as an outsider. Responding to our second research question concerning the ways that this response can be theorized as cancel practices, we would argue that while commenters do not predominantly call for explicit cancelation or censorship, the responses of SHH audiences closely resemble the "call-out" practices theorized in fan studies aimed to activate and mobilize a broader audience base and shame Jones into adherence to the conspiracy canon.

Shifting the critical focus from the ideological entrepreneur to their audience yields certain gains for both the study of cancel culture as well as reactionary political engagement. By examining Jones through the lens of reactionary fandom and in-group cancel culture, we offer a different viewpoint on the *accountability mechanisms* attributed to the digital accountability praxis, which may not inherently align with the democratic, participatory aspect of social media theorized in classic fan studies and social movement studies (Stanfill 2020). As Nadler (2020) has noted in relation to the radical countercultural conservative news spheres, "journalistic truth comes about not from following the procedures and norms of professional conventions; instead, [it comes from] subjecting one's claims to public scrutiny and accountability" (p. 161). Based on our research, we would argue that accountability here is then best understood as being answerable to one's fans, who are actively involved in the collective production of alternative narratives. This collaborative practice unfolds through small acts of engagement offered by YouTube's feedback mechanisms, such as views, likes, and comments, which get power in their aggregate form (Picone et al. 2019).

The reevaluation of accountability makes more pressing the observation that reactionary ideological entrepreneurs engage with participatory, and occasionally more radical, audiences, who actively dictate what should be covered and how. Munger and Phillips (2022), in their study of the right-wing media market on YouTube, showed that alt-right content from 2014 to 2018 consistently had the highest comments-to-view ratio, revealing that extreme audiences are highly participatory. The consequences of this extreme participation might eventually be that, as Lewis (2018) hints at, ideological entrepreneurs are "being radicalized by their own audience's engagement" (p. 6). In fact, Eric Weinstein, a mathematician who founded the so-called Intellectual Dark Web (IDW), a group of self-proclaimed "renegades" active in the online culture wars, claims to have coined the term *audience capture* to highlight the possible radicalizing effects of maintaining and catering to extreme audiences (Weiss 2018).

The term "audience capture" has gained traction among various commentators in the digital counter-culture. For example, following a public fall-out, Sam Harris, a

former member of the IDW, contended that Dave Rubin, also an early member of the IDW, "was being 'captured' by his audience [with] fear of offending his right-wing viewer base" (Fisher 2023). The term "audience capture" has been used in media and communication studies, referring to the strategies used to "both measure and maintain an audience" (Stockbridge 2000, 190). However, Weinstein's audience capture touches on the possible consequences of these strategies within an environment that attracts extreme audience engagement. In line with the goal of (computational) grounded theory, our modest study regarding cancel practices around Alex Jones can help in further theorizations and conceptualizations of *audience capture* as the processes by which *influencers are influenced by their audiences*.

On this last point, while our study highlights call-out culture dynamics by reactionary audiences, we did not assess the scale and effectiveness of this practice. Concerning the overall dataset, the SHH interpretative community appears relatively small, and we cannot be sure about the extent to which comments about SHH were removed by Jones or YouTube (which some commenters in our data alluded to). Moreover, Jones was removed from YouTube soon after the interview, and there was little to no financial reason for him to be further captured by his audience at that point. That being said, introducing the concept of audience capture in academic discourse raises new questions concerning the conditions and underlying power dynamics of reactionary cancel culture. Future research could quantify and track cancel practices in reactionary communities over a more extended period to examine the impact of call-out culture on content production by ideological entrepreneurs. The YouTube comment section is an understudied yet pertinent accountability and feedback feature in which hyper-active (radical) networked fans can demand faithfulness to *their* alternative narratives. We hope this exploratory study opens up new ways of thinking about cancel culture and sparks more investigation into reactionary fan dynamics, moving toward a more comprehensive understanding of digital political engagement as well as a general rethinking of the concept of "influence" as a capacity of active audiences.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to especially thank Fabio Votta for his invaluable efforts in archiving political engagement on YouTube and providing us with this dataset. In addition, many thanks to the participants of the 2022 Digital Methods Winter School for their help in exploring the historical dataset.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (grant number FWOTM1133).

Note

1. In line with the perspectives of certain survivors of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, this article will use the date of the tragedy, "12/14," to depict the event, much like 9/11, as a momentous catastrophe (Williamson 2022a).

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