

This is the author accepted manuscript of

Jurg, Daniël, Sarah Vis, and Ike Picone. 2024. "Making Sense of Ambivalence: Audience Perceptions and Uses of Ben Shapiro as an Alternative Political Commentator." *Information, Communication & Society*, June, 1–20. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2024.2363910.

ABSTRACT

Alternative Political Commentators (APCs) have gained prominence on digital platforms as new opinion leaders to politically engaged young adults. This study responds to a growing demand for an audience-focused exploration of perceptions and use practices of what has been described as reactionary digital media. We specifically examine the case of Ben Shapiro, a leading conservative voice on YouTube, employing a mixed-methods approach, triangulating computational analyses of YouTube comments ($n = 711,909$) with in-depth interviews with young (18–33) daily Shapiro viewers based in Belgium ($n = 15$). Positioning Shapiro as an ambivalent online political figure, our study conceptualizes the two primary roles he fulfills for his audiences: (1) the rational articulate and non-emotional news provider, and (2) the affective witty and sometimes rude entertainer who skillfully 'destroys' opponents in so-called YouTube drama. Within their everyday life context, we reveal how audiences, in a likewise ambivalent manner, oscillate between casual use of Shapiro the entertainer and structured use of Shapiro the news provider. Through a reconstruction of Shapiro's dual role, our contribution suggests his style, particularly his voice, as a central quality through which audiences navigate Shapiro's ambivalence in their sense-making practices of him as an Alternative Political Commentator.

Introduction

Young adults are increasingly likely to get their news from sources on social media platforms (Newman et al., 2023). Within this digital environment, legacy news organizations are competing with a growing alternative media market. For example, YouTube has become an especially popular place for right-wing Alternative Political Commentators (APCs) (Jurg et al., 2022) to engage audiences within a reactionary digital counterculture, fighting against ‘Mainstream Media’ and ‘Social Justice Warriors’ (Finlayson, 2021).

One such commentator is Ben Shapiro. Perhaps relatively unknown to legacy news users, Shapiro has become one of the most influential online figures providing a

conservative perspective on US politics and world events for English-speaking audiences. In a 2017 profile by *The New York Times*, Shapiro is said to function as ‘a provocative ‘gladiator’, [who] battles to win young conservatives’ (Tavernise, 2017). An apt description given that Shapiro garnered much of his popularity in what has become known as the ‘Anti-Social Justice Warrior Era’ on YouTube, where debating and antagonizing pro-gressive college students, activists, politicians, and legacy journalists in various public arenas emerged as an incredibly profitable political media genre (Lewis, 2018).

As former editor-at-large of the right-wing *Breitbart News Network*, and founder of the conservative media company *The Daily Wire*, Shapiro’s success may be attributed to his exemplary ability to refashion journalism and conservative ideology within a youthful and provocative vernacular culture, using memes and other natively digital genres to entertain and inform audiences. For example, in one video Shapiro ‘[...] Reacts to INSANE Woke TikToks’ (Shapiro, 2021b), whereas in another he presents his audience with ‘[...] THE TRUTH About the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict’ (Shapiro, 2021a). Leveraging the power of various digital media to reach and engage audiences, Shapiro boasts a substantial online following, with 6.8 million subscribers to his personal YouTube Channel as of writing. Additionally, his *The DailyWire* + network has garnered 3.3 million YouTube subscribers, hosting a roster of affiliated APCs, including Jordan Peterson (7.9M), Brett Cooper (4.1M), Matt Walsh (2.9M), Candace Owens (3.1M), Michael Knowles (2M), and Andrew Klavan (700 K).

In the past decade, many of the abovementioned figures have been entwined in discussions about the emergence of the so-called ‘Alt-Right’ movement and far-right radicalization (Lewis, 2018). The Alt-Right, named by white nationalist Richard Spencer, while arguably having contributed and benefitted much from the popularity of a transgressive reactionary counterculture, is fundamentally, and often explicitly, concerned with race and white supremacy (Hawley, 2019). Following stories of YouTube radicalization, many Alt-Right ‘affiliates’ have since been deplatformed and relocated (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2024). Shapiro, on the other hand, continues to grow in popularity and, in many ways, is much closer to the contemporary mainstream of conservative political discourse in the US (Holt, 2019). Therefore, rather than focusing on Shapiro as a gateway in a mostly online algorithmic radicalization process (Ribeiro et al., 2019), recent scholarship has argued to look at figures like Shapiro within the broader conservative ‘alternative’ tradition, and for more insights into their audiences (Holt, 2019). In fact, Munger and Phillips (2020) urge scholars studying reactionary digital politics to adopt a supply and demand framework employing ‘active audience theory’ (p. 197).

In direct response to calls for audience studies by scholars such as Holt (2019) and Munger and Phillips (2020), our grounded theory study aims to understand how audiences perceive and engage with APCs. While Munger and Phillips (2020) suggest focusing on rational audience theories popular within political science (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Prior, 2007), we argue that young YouTube audiences are more productively studied from a cultural studies perspective that conceptualizes online political culture as *ambivalent*, i.e., a complex and sometimes contradictory interplay of humor, irony, and jokes, coexisting with a profound quest for objective Truth and Reason (Hong, 2023; Phillips & Milner, 2017).

Taking Ben Shapiro as an exemplary case study of a successful APC, we pose the following overarching research question:

RQ: How do audiences make sense of Shapiro's ambivalent character as an Alternative Political Commentator?

Within this overarching research question, we specifically focus on how his alternative character is perceived, and the ways in which audiences use his content:

SRQ1: What are the perceived qualities of Ben Shapiro as an Alternative Political Commentator?

SRQ2: How do these perceived qualities accord with how users incorporate Shapiro in their daily media use routines?

In answering our research questions, we draw loosely on de Certeau's (1984) classic distinction between 'strategies' and 'tactics', to argue that audience sense-making results from the interplay between the strategic maneuvers of APCs, who carefully seek to construct and control alternative political spaces, and the tactics of audiences who actively engage with, navigate through, and potentially subvert these political spaces. We present a novel mixed-method approach to audience reception, triangulating computational analyses of YouTube comments ($n = 711,909$) with in-depth interviews with people based in Belgium ($n = 15$, ages 18–33 years) using Shapiro's content daily. The selection of Belgian-based participants was guided by the researchers' own position at a Belgian university, where they observed the popularity of Shapiro among both Belgian and international students attending the university.

Positioning right-wing 'alternative' media on YouTube

Countercultural conservatism and reactionary backlash

Scholarship describing the various (social) media channels and figures active within reactionary digital politics quickly adopted the term 'alternatives' following their explicit positioning against the 'Mainstream Media' (Lewis, 2018, 2020). Contemporary Alternative Political Commentators (APCs), such as Ben Shapiro, gained this 'alternative' status within the context of the widely referred to *online culture wars*. These cultural clashes took place on various message boards and social media platforms from 2013 onwards and signaled vehement opposition toward, and conflict with, newly formed progressive sensitivities around feminism and social justice (Donovan et al., 2022). A wide range of online communities portrayed these sensitivities as grounded in a toxic Tumblr style of 'identity politics' and 'political correctness', arguing that these progressive sensitivities threatened freedom of speech and cultivated new forms of victimhood (Nagle, 2017). Through these conflicts, many content creators cultivated and maintained a following by framing conservatism as a more political sound alternative: the 'NEW Counter-Culture' (Watson, 2017).

This conservative 'counterculture' idea has a long lineage and finds its roots in the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s. During this period, various influential figures wove together forms of neoliberalism, traditionalism, and anti-communism with an activist news culture (Hemmer, 2016). This movement continued as a powerful political force, countering 'international communism and social democracy, the New Deal and the liberation movements of the 1960s' (Robin, 2017, pp. XI – XII). This 'conservative countersphere' crafted a powerful position for itself by originating the term

‘liberal media bias’ against which a more ideologically oriented activist conservative media could be placed (Greenberg, 2008; Major, 2020). This discursively constructed elite, left-leaning media served as a potent adversary, mobilizing fears around desegregation and communism, culminating in arguments suggesting that ‘black liberation was not civil rights but rather a communist-inspired constitutional coup by special interest groups’ (Major, 2020, p. 38). Conservative counterculture thus grew within a highly racialized context in U.S. history, which in various forms carries on to this day.

While the earlier conservative counterculture focused more on policy and ideology, Shapiro’s brand, in some ways, aligns much more with the modern conservative counter-culture, embodied by figures like Rush Limbaugh, Matt Drudge, and Andrew Breitbart. As Nadler (2020) points out, rather than focus on ideology and policy, this ‘trifecta’ sought more pragmatically to learn from the progressive counterculture of the 60s by developing an *affective style* that builds on authenticity, rebellion and identifying with their ‘audiences as members of an embattled cultural identity’ (154). It is this specific appeal to a cultural identity, or way of life, that is central to the contemporary culture wars, not only in digital spaces such as YouTube, but also in ‘mainstream’ conservative media, for that matter. In fact, Fox News, the number one cable show in the U.S. for twenty-two consecutive years, positions itself as a defender of a cultural identity perceived to be under threat, a role that has become an integral part of the network’s identity (Peck, 2019). Still, figures like Breitbart and specifically his successor Shapiro perfected the affective style to win culture wars in the digital public sphere focusing on authenticity and rebellion but most importantly, and perhaps ironically, by emphasizing ‘facts’ and ‘reason’ in the face of progressive hysteria.

Performing facts and reason

Echoing theorizations by Papacharissi (2014) and boyd (2018), researchers studying alternative online news often argue that it blends drama, opinion, and information in ways that depart from the conventional deliberative logic of legacy journalism. For instance, Rae (2021) argues that alternative digital news media are ‘transgressive in style, openly ideological, extremely biased in favour of a political leader and attacks the other side’s point of view, often at the expense of facts’ (p. 2). Indeed, this observation fits well with the historical claim that ‘conservative media activists advanced an alternative way of knowing the world, one that attacked the legitimacy of objectivity and substituted for its ideological integrity’ (Hemmer, 2016, XIII). But while it is most certainly true that figures like Shapiro see themselves as covering the news from a specific ideological standpoint as an ‘opinion journalist’ (Shapiro, 2022), and engage in online drama to present their content, ‘deliberative logic’ and ‘facts’ still play a key discursive role in this alternative political commentary.

Shapiro’s main criticism is that traditional media outlets, driven by bias, sensationalism, and emotion, fail to facilitate reasoned, evidence-based debate – an idea that has its place within the broader right-wing media position that inverts the idea of an imagined liberal democracy while presenting more radical positions as common facts (Roberts & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022). As Hong (2023) points out, ‘Shapiro’s far-reaching media brand defines itself explicitly through fact signaling, emblematised by the unofficial slogan: facts don’t care about your feelings’ (p. 3). Indeed, these ‘new’ media figures often ‘speak from

traditional, pre-digital, bases of authority (commercial media and university professorships) [...]’ (Finlayson, 2021, p. 172). Shapiro holds a cum laude degree from Harvard Law School, which goes a long way in signaling intellectual authority.

Following the conservative counter-sphere tradition, Shapiro criticizes the ‘liberal media’ and new civil rights movements by casting his brand of ‘alternative’ journalism as rational in contrast to the emotiveness he attributes to progressives and liberal outlets. Shapiro thus performs an ambivalent position by discursively appealing to facts and reason within a vernacular culture that thrives on his affective ability to evoke drama and entertainment to engage audiences (Lewis, 2018). Yet where scholars examining YouTube’s reactionary digital politics have started to illuminate the ambivalence of APC strategies, these studies often pay less attention to the audiences themselves and how audiences navigate these seeming contradictions in their interpretations and uses of news.

Audience tactics: making sense of APCs

Drawing from de Certeau (1984), understanding how audiences navigate the informative and affective strategies of APCs requires us to be attuned to the various tactics they develop to actively engage with, sift through, and potentially challenge these political strategies. In this section, we briefly draw attention to the participatory culture found in comment sections and the offline tactics to incorporate media content into everyday life.

While often theorized as places for toxicity and hate, comment sections have also been argued to be productive feedback mechanisms that allow for reciprocity between audiences and content creators, serving as a key area to build an online reputation (Burgess & Green, 2018). In the alternative political community, comment sections serve as an active and collaborative space where audiences ‘perceive themselves less as observers and more as participants in a conversation in which their voices matter’ (Tuters & Burton, 2021, p. 759). The visibility of audience engagement acts as an instantaneous feedback loop for content creators, allowing them to quickly gauge what resonates with their audience. This is, of course, not only done by fans of the content but also by anti-fans, or non-fans (Gray, 2003) to counter much of the content that content creators upload. Comment sections are the space *par excellence* where audiences actively navigate and subvert the strategies of APCs to create meaning or find benefits for themselves, giving voice to their specific opinions and interpretations.

But while social media platforms such as YouTube facilitate and make visible the ways audiences actively engage with, navigate through, and potentially subvert influencer strategies, a more critical line of audience studies research argues that a heavy focus on such digital practices risks theorizing participatory understandings while simultaneously obscuring the sense-making practices of individuals in their everyday life (Picone et al., 2019; boyd & Crawford, 2012; Livingstone, 2019). For example, for certain news users, choosing to turn to APCs for news might be less prompted by community participation than by an appreciation of journalists who act as explainers, opinion facilitators, and even infotainers (Truyens & Picone, 2023). It’s important to recognize that media users are empowered not only through active participation in digital cultures, such as providing their interpretations in comment sections on YouTube videos, but also through their choices in media selection and consumption in their daily routine.

Within the so-called ‘cacophonous’ social media environment, characterized by the convergence of journalistic and alternative sources (Cotter & Thorson, 2022), along with a mix of emotional and factual information (Papacharissi, 2014), media users are increasingly adopting personal curation tactics to effectively navigate this ambivalent landscape (de Certeau, 1984; Merten, 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016). The digital infrastructure on which political ‘attention seekers’ like Ben Shapiro thrive, has also significantly transformed and enhanced users’ ability to make decisive choices (Strömbäck et al., 2022). In the absence of institutional content curation, do-it-yourself expertise has not only become crucial in selecting political opinion pieces and humorous videos for consumption on social media platforms but also when actively seeking political information via search engines (Cotter & Thorson, 2022) – acknowledging that these do-it-yourself approaches are also subject to the more infrastructural manipulation strategies of alternative right-wing media figures (Tripodi, 2022).

Therefore, understanding how audience members choose to integrate Shapiro into their news use practices and how they give meaning to his messages, also requires talking with people directly.

Methodology: computer-assisted grounded theory

In response to Burgess and Green’s (2018, p. 17) invitation for innovative methodologies that ‘address the missing middle between large-scale quantitative analysis and the sensitivity of qualitative methods’ in YouTube research, we developed a novel mixed-methods strategy to understand how audiences make sense of Shapiro’s ambivalent role as an Alternative Political Commentator (APC). Addressing our sub-questions, (A) one of the two researchers involved in the empirical analysis conducted a computational analysis to identify the most common associated characteristics with Shapiro as an APC, focusing on similar terms to ‘Ben’ and ‘Shapiro’ in his comment sections. Additionally (B), the other researcher carried out qualitative, in-depth interviews with fifteen of Shapiro’s audience members – daily consumers of his content – to contextualize how their perceptions of Shapiro aligned with the quantitative mapping, and how this perception was shaped by their everyday media practices. Consequently, our study adheres to a *convergent parallel design* (Figure 1), collecting both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, yet integrating the results to form comprehensive conclusions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Method A: computational analysis

When developing a dataset for computational analysis using YouTube comments, we utilized YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015) to gather all videos and their metadata from Ben Shapiro’s personal YouTube channel as on August 12, 2022 ($n = 3,145$). We subsequently categorized these videos into three groups based on their length to capture varying degrees of engagement. Lastly, we extracted all comments from the top-10 most-commented videos within each time group ($n = 711,909$) (see the appendix, Tables A1–A3 and Figure 2).

In line with the computational methodology, we uploaded this dataset to 4CAT: Capture and Analysis Toolkit (Peeters & Hagen, 2022), and generated ‘word embedding

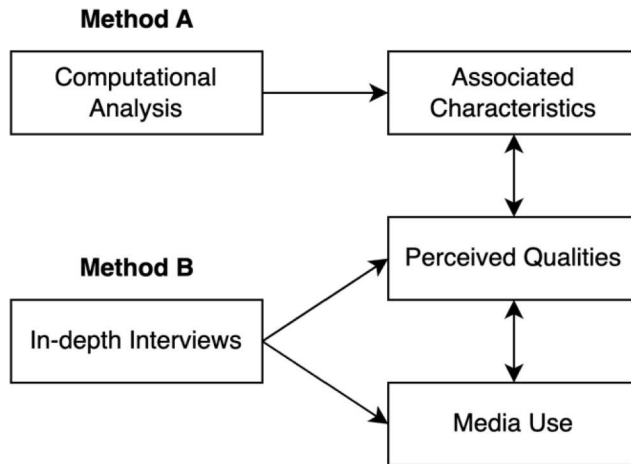


Figure 1. Convergent parallel design.

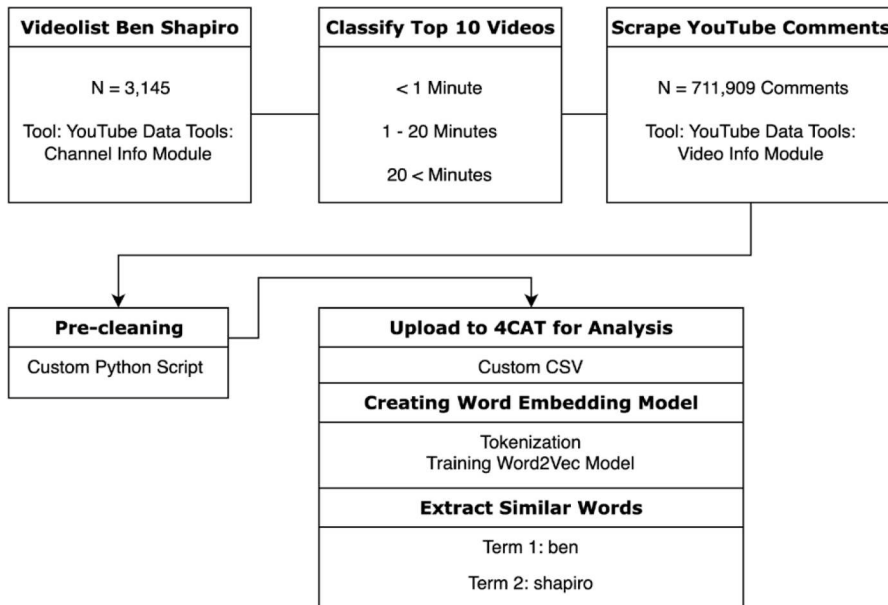


Figure 2. Workflow of computational analysis.

models’ to explore similar words to ‘Ben’ and ‘Shapiro’. This approach follows the central idea in distributional semantics that words (in this case ‘Ben’ and ‘Shapiro’) are defined by the company they keep (Gergen, 1985). It is important to note that the results of word embeddings can highly differ by adjusting the parameters. Given that our aim was mainly priming ourselves for important associations with Shapiro, we used three different set-tings and qualitatively explored the results for sensitizing terms for our comparison with the interviews.¹ YouTube comments have been rightfully obtained via the YouTube API and excerpts have been anonymized.

Method B: in-depth interviews

In addition, we conducted in-depth interviews ($n = 15$) with media users (age: 18–33 years old) to gain a more contextualized and layered understanding of how audience members perceived Shapiro. The participants were recruited by applying a snowball sampling both online via social media posts and closed Shapiro-dedicated Facebook groups, and offline amongst Bachelor students. Participation criteria included daily consumption of Shapiro content. While the participants varied in nationality, all were residing in Belgium at the time of the interviews.

The interviews were conducted both in person and online via Microsoft Teams, with each session being fully audio-recorded and transcribed. We used MAXQDA for coding the interview transcripts. Following Couldry and Hepp (2016), our goal was to situate social media figure Ben Shapiro within the context of everyday life. Therefore, during the interviews, we focused on analyzing the participants' daily use of Shapiro's content and their perceptions of his role as an ambivalent APC. All interviewees provided informed consent.

Feedback loops and reflections on the triangulation

The final methodology outlined here is the result of an iterative process. After collecting both quantitative and qualitative data on Shapiro's perceived characteristics, we exchanged initial observations and prominent patterns, which then were translated into further data gathering and analysis. For example, after some prior interviews, we understood that the use of 'YouTube shorts' was very different from longer-form videos and therefore divided the videos based on their duration. Moreover, certain computational analyses about Shapiro's voice sensitized our interviews and qualitative analysis.

Reflecting on our exploratory mixed-methods approach, we acknowledge the necessity to make a conceptual distinction between the 'associative characteristics' and 'perceived qualities' observed in our analysis. In our work, *associative characteristics*, as quantitatively assessed through computational analysis, refer mostly to how audiences conceptualize the qualities of Shapiro as an APC. This method served as an excellent pre-liminary investigative tool, where specific associations served as search terms for close reading of comments that provided an initial introduction to audience engagement with Shapiro. This analysis already hinted at the dual nature of Shapiro's character, encapsulated in both fan responses applauding his reasoning and articulation, and anti-fan reception that critiqued and made fun of his rhetorical style. These 'associative characteristics' productively sensitized us for the interviews with daily Shapiro audiences where we compared and enriched these insights with more robust in-depth data around perception and media use, culminating into Shapiro's *perceived qualities*: the general texture of sentiment around Shapiro's character. These in-depth interviews allowed us to deconstruct and reconstruct associative characteristics such as 'articulate' as emerging from ambivalent and affective predispositions and media usages.

Findings

To understand how audiences make sense of Shapiro's ambivalent character, we scrutinize what qualities audiences ascribe to him (RQ1) and point out how audiences use and

structure his content in their everyday life (RQ2). We jointly answer these questions by identifying two dominant roles Shapiro plays in the eyes of audiences: (1) the rational articulate and non-emotional *news provider*, and (2) the affective witty and sometimes rude *entertainer*. Following the ambivalent character of Shapiro, these roles should be considered as co-existing, uncertain, contextual, and dynamic over time. However, our goal here is to first deconstruct these roles in more depth to then reconstruct them with additional insights.

Associative characteristics: computational exploration

Following our quantitative mapping of linguistic similarities to ‘Ben’ and ‘Shapiro’ in comment sections, Table 1 presents an initial overview of characteristics mentioned near Shapiro by participatory audiences.

Table 1 already sensitizes us to how audiences make sense of Shapiro’s ambivalent character following the mention of ‘entertaining’ and/or ‘informative’. An explorative close-reading of comments mentioning ‘entertaining’ (n = 116), for instance, makes clear that entertainment is used by both audiences who associate it as his ‘only’ quality, as well as audiences that see it as an ‘additional’ quality. To illustrate, one commenter writes, ‘Why am I getting Ben Shapiro recommended all of a sudden?? But not gonna lie, it’s very entertaining, he is like a very small angry Donald Duck with questionable opinions.’ Or, as another commenter puts it, ‘I really don’t agree with anything this Shapiro says, but damn he’s entertaining.’ While these audience members find Shapiro entertaining, his political takes or informative function as a possible news provider seem less important. To other audiences the entertainment is precisely an additional educative quality: ‘As a European, I would say this was very entertaining and educational for me. Thank you, Ben.’ To this group, Shapiro presents a mix of entertainment and educational content.

The explorative computational analysis already reveals how Shapiro’s entertaining quality is compared to his informative role. To interpret and contextualize Shapiro’s

Table 1. Qualitative selection of associative characteristics resulting from three word2vec similarity analyses for the terms ‘Ben’ and ‘Shapiro’.

Ben	Shapiro
talking_fast	brilliant
counter_argument	sellout
debunking	insightful
entertaining	weasel
humor	civil_debate
informative	debater
intellect	articulate
rambling	disappointing
ramble	eloquent
concise	refreshing
articulate	debunking
body_language	sound_smart
troll	grifter
insightful	excellent
sound_smart	thoughtful
condescending	informative
clever	interrupt
thoughtful	entertaining

entertaining’ and/or ‘informative’ roles, the results of the in-depth interviews are combined in the following section.

Making sense of Shapiro’s ambivalence: news provider vis-à-vis entertainer

Table 2 provides a systemized overview of the two roles discussed in the following sections.

Table 2. Schematization of Shapiro’s roles.

	News Provider	Entertainer
Perceived Qualities	Articulate Voice, Non-emotional Reasoning	Wittiness, Rude Debater
Media Use	Structured Use of YouTube long videos on computer or tablet	Casual Use of YouTube-shorts on Smartphone

Shapiro the news provider

Shapiro’s role as a news provider is fed by two main perceived qualities: his *articulate voice* and ability to present himself as a *non-emotional debater*. As we will elaborate below, this informative role goes hand in hand with structurally embedded media use.

Perceived qualities as news provider: articulate voice and non-emotional

In merging the characteristics extracted from comment sections with observations of interviewees, we cluster ‘insightful’, ‘articulate’, ‘eloquent’, ‘body_language’, ‘talking_fast’ and ‘sound_smart’. We find Shapiro’s *articulate voice* as one of the central perceived qualities in his role as an informer. A key aspect frequently mentioned by audiences is Shapiro’s rhetorical skillset. Interestingly, it’s not so much *what* Shapiro says but *how* he says it that makes him articulate to our participants. Shapiro’s intonation and speed seem to put more force behind the credibility of his words: ‘You can say a lot of things about him but yeah, he talks fast, and he knows what he’s talking about’ (Interview M. B.). Participants often connect his fast way of talking with his confident attitude.

Remarkably, Shapiro’s credibility coming from his articulate voice is perceived as a quality that transcends political alignment. In other words, the significance of his argumentative style outweighs that of political agreement. Despite some participants not fully aligning with Shapiro’s ideological viewpoints, they still regard him as articulate and consequently a credible rhetorician. This perspective is exemplified by one of the participants: ‘I never felt like I totally agree with what this guy’s saying, but I always felt like: ‘ah, this guy definitely won the situation, no matter if he’s right or wrong’.’ (Interview A. A.). Shapiro’s confident attitude and verbal skills, especially the use of his voice, appear to be more influential in engaging his audience than the substance of his argumentation itself. This emphasis on *style* seems to keep the participants captivated and enthralled by the content.

It is important to note, however, that whereas our participants felt like Shapiro’s voice was a key factor in his credibility, a close reading of the comments mentioning ‘sound_smart’ and ‘talking_fast’ also reveals a highly dedicated anti-fandom that seeks to negate this perceived quality. As one illustrative comment reads: ‘Ben is a child who tries to

sound smart by speaking fast. Watching any of his videos in 0.75 speed makes you understand him really and realise how profoundly stupid he is.’ This anti-fandom, however, keeps in place the idea that rationality and reason are the key quality of an APC, but argues that Shapiro fails to meet that objective in the ways that he communicates with his way of speaking.

A second important quality clustering occurs around terms related to intelligence such as ‘clever’, ‘civil’, ‘thoughtful’. According to the interviewees, Shapiro’s intelligent and wise appearance is closely associated with his *non-emotional reasoning*. Our participants equalize Shapiro’s status as an excellent reasoner to him being ‘good in hiding emotions’ (Interview D. G.). Being ‘reasoned’ in their eyes is seen as the opposite of showing emotions and is therefore understood as being ‘non-emotional’. As one participant told us: ‘I see him as a rational man who can put his emotions aside when he’s debating’ (Interview A. M.). The fact that Shapiro refrains from displaying emotions enhances his credibility as an intellectual political commentator. Remarkably, this dynamic also operates the other way around: due to his non-emotional attitude participants tend to have a stronger belief in the facts Shapiro is telling in the videos. For instance, one of the participants even redefines the meaning of ‘emotional intelligence’ in relation to Shapiro’s style: ‘I think it’s a sort of emotional intelligence, when you can put your feelings aside to purely look at the facts, and to see ... what is and what is not’ (Interview D. G.).

We also find this sentiment in the comment section. For instance, close reading some of the comments containing the term ‘emotion’ surfaced the following insightful statement: ‘I have issues registering information if there is heavy aggression/emotion in the argument (..), but now I can see the other side clearly because of how objective Ben states his side. this is pretty cool. thanks!’ This sentiment is quite remarkable as Shapiro operates in a highly contentious and antagonistic space, but still seems to attract audiences that precisely engage with his content for a clear non-emotional way of communicating.

Role in everyday life: creating routine in alternative news use

When Ben Shapiro plays the role of a news provider in participants’ everyday lives, the participants not only perceive him as an articulate and non-emotional journalist, but also as a daily news anchor. As one of the participants illustrates: ‘It’s kind of like ... keeping up with the daily news’ (Interview P. E.). His YouTube channel is then regarded as a full alternative news source, playing a significant role in shaping participants’ views on societal issues. As Interviewee P. E. describes it: ‘It’s kind of a recap of the events with a bit of personal opinion interjected’. When participants see Shapiro as a news provider, they pay greater attention to his content: ‘It is something you actually want to give attention to, so it’s not something you put on in the back. I actually sit there, listen and watch’ (Interview R. N.). While doing so, the participants prefer watching the long-format videos on YouTube using a fixed device such as a tablet or computer to literally sit back and watch (or listen) carefully to the content.

Other participants, however, link this way of consuming Shapiro’s content to listening to a podcast or a radio show: ‘Actually, it’s a bit like a radio, you turn it on when you pass time’ (Interview R. N.). This way of using media to keep you company is reminiscent of the social uses of television or radio as described by Lull (1980) and their ability to shape

social life through formatting time. We see a similar dynamic emerge when one participant declares: ‘I don’t have a specific time, I just watch it kind of whenever he uploads’ (Interview P. E.), which reveals how participants form daily routines around Shapiro’s content.

In sum, Shapiro does not always escape the more routine ways people interact with media. Participants, even when they appreciate him as a news source, do not necessarily give him their full and undivided attention. They can also demonstrate a more routinized way of using his channels, using his monologues as soothing background noise, or tuning in after a push notification triggered their interest. This illustrates how ambivalent fans of Shapiro can be in their appreciation of him as a news provider: as with news use in general, some items get dedicated attention, while others just happen to come at the right time filling the need of the moment.

Shapiro the entertainer

Perceived qualities as entertainer: wittiness and rude debater

Besides playing an informative role, as discussed above, Ben Shapiro also performs as an entertainer. Remarkably, each participant alternates between using his content not only to be *informed* but also solely to be *entertained*, each time adopting different user tactics. From the perspective of Shapiro as an entertainer, a clustering occurs around terms related to Shapiro’s ‘humor’, ‘entertaining’ but also ‘concise’ and ‘talking_fast’. According to his audience, Shapiro is appreciated for his *wittiness*. Here, we understood how Shapiro’s articulate voice and fast pace of talking are not only linked to his intellectual credibility, but also underline his entertaining qualities. Participants described Shapiro as a ‘funny guy’. Shapiro’s reputation for wit stems from his articulate and rapid speech style, which is often laced with humor: ‘He is witty, so he is intelligent, he talks fast and answers fast. That’s what I find funny,’ as Interviewee M. B. notes. This quote highlights how Shapiro’s wittiness is perceived as reinforcing both his intelligence and entertaining qualities. This is also a sentiment that we found in the comment section, and some audience members perceived Shapiro’s witty style as something to emulate and aspire towards: ‘I wish I could be this quick and witty.’

One final prominent quality that audiences assign to Shapiro clusters around the characteristics ‘debater’, ‘debunking’ and ‘interrupt’. Not only do participants highlight Shapiro’s features with his articulate voice, non-emotional attitude, and wittiness, but they also perceive him as a *rude debater*. Despite the name, the perception of ‘rude debater’ is also seen as a strong entertaining quality. Participants interpret his rude debating skills as entertaining and funny and therefore emphasize the importance of debate settings in the videos. Interestingly, Ben Shapiro is mostly seen as funny in relation to others, when he’s, for example, debating ‘emotional college girls’. As one commenter write: ‘When they said this would be a civilized debate, I wanted to switch the video. There is nothing more satisfying and hilarious than watching Ben Shapiro completely shut down unworthy foes [...]’.

However, our participants do note a thin line between simultaneously being rude and being funny, as some participants drop out when Shapiro is too rude for their taste. For instance, this is where A. A. draws the line: ‘I don’t like it when he actually destroys his opponents [...]’ (Interview A. A.). The rude debater is a contentious ‘quality’. Many

discussions among participatory audiences evolve around Shapiro as an intellectual who subsequently engages with college students who are not on his level, and thus not seen as an actual challenge. Especially in relation to trans issues, Shapiro attracts many anti-fans, or disappointed fans, that see his insulting style as plain rude and unproductive. That being said, our participants, while agreeing to a certain extent that being rude is not very productive or informative, they do not see that as inherently problematic to his overall character as that is simply part of his entertainment brand.

Role in everyday life: casual laughter

Contrasting with the structured use of Shapiro as a news provider, participants appear to interact on a more casual level when viewing him as *an entertainer*. As one participant describes, ‘I’m just watching a cake decorating video, there’s a wholesome cat video, and then suddenly it’s Ben Shapiro’ (Interview R. N.). This entertaining role is associated with amusement, humor, and laughter. Using a casual user tactic, participants consume the video content more randomly, perceiving Shapiro as an amusing yet legitimate ‘political comedian’. They typically watch shorter video formats, such as YouTube shorts or brief debate clips on YouTube. Notably, this content often enters their media habits incidentally during ‘mindless scrolling’ (Interview S. S.), rather than through active selection. Consequently, the content is mostly enjoyed sporadically amidst everyday activities, for instance, while waiting or as ‘background noise entertaining’ (Interview L. C.). The primary aim of watching these videos is to laugh and relax. Some participants mention increasingly watching these videos when feeling down or even vulnerable: ‘I think I watch it when I’m a little vulnerable actually because then I’m just scrolling through my phone’ (Interview R. N.). Once more, this shows how ambivalent people are in their relation to Shapiro. One might not immediately think of watching *The Ben Shapiro Show* as something that people like to do to divert their attention from their negative emotions, but for some, it actually is the case.

Tipping points and triggers

Most participants make sense of Shapiro’s ambivalent character by constantly switching between his two roles during a short period of time (even within the same day or week): they alternate between being informed and getting entertained using the content of the same social media figure. However, some participants seem to radically switch over a longer period, mostly from casually consuming Shapiro’s content as entertainment to structurally embedding the YouTube videos as the main news channel: ‘Yes, I’ve definitely come to see him less as the funny guy who talks quick and [say] ‘Ok, this is epic’ and definitely more of a serious commentator and political analyst’ (Interview P. E.). Just as P. E., most interviewees describe how they initially started watching Shapiro’s content randomly, purely for entertainment purposes. However, over time, casual use of Shapiro’s channel becomes engrained in their daily routines, and with it, his role shifts from entertainer to daily news provider. The tipping point for people to shift from one to the other happens gradually and in line with Shapiro’s online influencer strategies of luring people in with entertaining skits before hooking them with his take on the news. On the other hand, participants who switched back to entertainment from using Shapiro’s channel as their daily news source after a long period of time, were

often triggered by offline factors, such as a concerned friend or classmate pointing out the problematic character of Shapiro.

Discussion

Having deconstructed Shapiro's ambivalence by describing his role as an entertainer and informer, this section reconstructs the ambivalence in which the two roles are co-existing, uncertain, contextual, and dynamic over time. We specifically like to stress two striking findings and their implications. On the level of perceived qualities, we find that our participants, were not so much concerned with Shapiro's ideological position, but rather with his communicative style and position as a rational figure. While Munger and Phillips (2020) suggest that the reactionary YouTube 'audience could have already existed, albeit without access to media more consistent with their ideological ideal points' (p. 198), our participants were not explicitly engaging with Shapiro for his political ideology but rather found his intellectual style and debating skills to be the main quality. This finding connects well with Hong's (2023) idea of how APCs like Shapiro engage in *fact signaling*, i.e., the 'performative invocations of facts and Reason' (p. 2). This fact signaling is closely connected to the performance of a specific *moral character* in which APCs embody the ideas that they aim to disseminate (Finlayson, 2022). Strikingly, our findings here closely align with recent research on the popular reactionary figure Andrew Tate, who, while differing in many ideological aspects from Shapiro, is perceived by teen boys as 'a voice of reason' (Haslop et al., 2024, p. 6).

It is crucial to emphasize that our findings are situated within the Belgian university context, where American political life is observed with a degree of intellectual curiosity. Our interviews did not surface many discussions on conservative political traditions, religion, or the implications of reactionary discourses effecting civil rights efforts. Given the European context, our participants, to a certain extent, are somewhat emotionally distanced from much of the implications of his discourse, specifically in the United States. Rather, it was the logical articulate style that captivated these (international) students, which seems to align with their academic endeavors in critical thinking and persuasive argumentation.

However, to a certain extent such an interpretation of audiences as people looking to quench their intellectual cravings already conceptualizes audience engagement too much as a dedicated activity and too little as a routinized activity that often happens in the background. In seeking to be sensitive to the ambivalent nature of media consumption, our research elucidates the notion of Shapiro as a 'voice of reason,' not merely conceptually but more affectively in a literal auditory sense. Our empirical data suggests that audiences make a direct connection between Shapiro's vocal attributes – specifically, the rapidity and tonality of his speech – and his perceived intellectual persona. While Shapiro's vocal attributes and performances are powerful in active engagement with, for example, his debates, our findings also echo prior observations on conservative media engagement, such as talk radio's background presence during other activities (Douglas, 2004). Our exploratory study hereby contributes another dimension to the 'fact signaling' idea, as audiences use Shapiro atmospherically, habitually, and in the background.

Based on these observations we should rethink Hong's (2023) astute observation concerning the seemingly 'inherent contradiction' in fact signaling on YouTube, noting its fusion of a 'bombastic war cry in the name of dispassionate Reason' (p. 3). Here it is important to stress that audiences are in turn also using ambivalent tactics to cope with Shapiro's 'infotainment'. While journalism literature has long pointed to the increasing ways in which political content comes in the form of entertainment (Brants & Neijens, 1998), we find that audiences also fluctuate from one user tactic to the other in both long – and short-term waves. Shapiro's role simultaneously fluctuates from a news provider to an entertainer, and vice versa.

Finally, the dynamic interplay between active and habitual media usage challenges the rigid categorization of Shapiro's appeal, as our participants' daily media habits oscillate between tuning Shapiro's voice to the forefront of attention and moving it to the background, in their pursuit of both information and entertainment. The political ramifications of this are as ambivalent. While our findings caution against too much emphasis on active demand theories for radical conservative ideology among young alternative YouTube audiences, they raise new questions about the subtle ways in which conservative counterculture, with its dire history in civil rights and equality struggles, can subtly infiltrate passive viewing habits of audiences, potentially triggering a sudden, engaged response during their routine activities.

Conclusion

This research departed from explicit calls within the study of reactionary digital politics to provide more insight into the audiences of Alternative Political Commentators (APCs). Taking Ben Shapiro as our case study, we argued that his appeal should be approached from a contextualization of the ambivalent digital political space in which APCs seek to appeal to audiences by positioning themselves as voices of reason, while adopting highly affective influencer strategies. Within this ambivalent space, we deconstructed how audiences ascribe two primary roles to Shapiro: (1) the articulate and non-emotional *news provider*, and (2) the witty and sometimes rude *entertainer* who skillfully 'destroys' opponents in YouTube drama. We found that within the two roles, audiences ascribe to Shapiro, his voice plays a crucial part in both the performance as an entertainer as well as an informer as audiences adopt various user tactics to consume his content in line with their specific perception of Shapiro at the time. From an audience perspective, the ambivalence of Shapiro lies in the way that his followers embrace both roles at the same time, even though one can take prevalence over the other over time, reflected in the way they shift the place that his content plays in their daily news use.

In light of our study's insights, we encourage fellow researchers to expand their examination of the dynamics at play in audience engagement, particularly focusing on the oscillation between entertainment and information in their sense-making processes. Our investigation, while modest in scope and conducted amongst highly educated news users in Belgium, suggests ambivalence as a valuable lens through which to gauge how APCs position themselves as intellectual alternatives. Furthermore, our findings dovetail with the understanding of audiences' media use patterns, which range from passive listening during daily routines to active engagement in specific dedicated moments. Given the inherent contradictions within reactionary digital politics, it is

essential to understand how audiences use various interpretative tactics to navigate this ambivalence.

Note

1. The settings for the analyses were as followed: model-type=Word2Vec, algorithm=skipgram, window=7, and the dimensionality of the vectors were 100, 200, and 300 (standard settings in 4CAT). Finally, we also used negative sampling and detecting bigrams. 4CAT: Capture and Analysis Toolkit allows for highly transparent computational analyses tracking every step in the analytical process. All information about the YouTube comments dataset and raw results from the similar word analyses are available on Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10640908>) (Jurg, 2024).

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank the students Nick Goovaerts and Adrien Rami for their help with recruiting part of the participants, conducting part of the interviews, and transcribing part of the recordings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (grant number FWOTM1133).

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Appendix

List of YouTube videos for computational analysis

Table A1. Most commented videos below 00:01:00.

Title	Date	Duration	Views	Likes	Comments
Shapiro Reacts to CONFUSING Pronouns TikTok	03/10/2021 22:00	00:00:56	8,494,164	467,799	35,853
Demi Lovato Comes Out As 'Non-Binary'	24/05/2021 21:36	00:00:57	4,789,216	178,223	27,690
Ben Shapiro on Abortion: Evil Is Still Evil Regardless of Politics	08/09/2021 20:26	00:00:59	15,362,004	628,150	19,536
THIS Is Why You Should Never Use TikTok	18/09/2021 22:00	00:00:53	8,573,318	368,298	18,944
INSANE Parents Convince Their Boy That's He's a Girl	26/03/2022 20:00	00:00:59	4,582,956	224,502	18,275
Ben Shapiro Reacts to Flat Earth TikTok	08/09/2021 22:00	00:00:55	15,899,803	676,803	17,878
Are Chairs Fatphobic?	17/10/2021 22:00	00:00:55	5,618,953	240,420	17,631
TikTok Teacher Reveals Sexuality to Students	17/10/2021 14:00	00:00:56	8,003,282	241,683	15,287
Shapiro Reacts to CONFUSING Leftist TikTok	19/09/2021 22:00	00:00:59	4,967,270	204,627	13,995
LOL: TikToker Says Trump RUINED the American Flag	02/10/2021 22:00	00:00:33	9,275,721	377,810	13,520

Table A2. Most commented videos between 00:01:00 and 00:20:00.

Title	Date	Duration	Views	Likes	Comments
Neil deGrasse Tyson's Thoughts on Transgenderism	18/07/2021 18:30	0:10:39	2,806,835	89,257	59,074
Actress Ellen Page Declares She is a Man Named Elliot	03/12/2020 1:46	0:09:17	2,912,769	159,734	53,370
Congresswoman Tries to Call Ben Shapiro Racist ... Regrets it Immediately.	22/03/2020 21:00	0:03:10	16,538,049	373,481	38,636
Why I'm Leaving California.	16/09/2020 22:03	0:05:34	3,472,030	180,973	32,601
U.S. Presidents Tier Ranking!	24/12/2020 20:28	0:17:28	3,327,888	127,268	32,211
Transgender Parent Tries To Breastfeed Child in BIZARRE Viral Video	14/07/2021 1:08	0:06:50	2,363,936	130659	31,714
Ben Shapiro Reacts to 'WAP' by Cardi B!	19/08/2020 2:38	0:09:00	2,921,097	128,072	30,327
LOL: Ben Shapiro Reacts to INSANE Woke TikToks	17/07/2021 17:00	0:13:00	3,635,417	199,605	29,739
Ben Shapiro DEBUNKS Viral 'Systemic Racism Explained' Video	10/06/2020 01:00	00:17:50	4,459,535	225,283	27,526
Shapiro Reacts To Meghan & Harry's Whine-Fest	08/03/2021 23:37:37	00:14:32	2,638,627	103,371	26,647

Table A3. Most commented videos above 00:20:00.

Title	Date	Duration	Views	Likes	Comments
Gina Carano The Ben Shapiro Show Sunday Special Ep. 111	21/02/2021 14:00	1:05:42	3,233,276	204,828	45305
Ben Shapiro vs. Ana Kasparian FULL DEBATE	06/10/2021 16:55	1:14:10	3,004,561	104119	31767
The Worst Day In Modern American Political History Ep. 1168	07/01/2021 19:00	1:08:24	1,389,542	41,265	24,144
Ben Shapiro Q&A: Transgenderism Debate, Kyle Rittenhouse, CRT in Schools	18/11/2021 20:16	0:37:17	4,375,868	119,926	19,809
Bill Maher The Ben Shapiro Show Sunday Special Ep. 124	13/03/2022 13:00	1:13:00	2,108,465	87,119	17,392
Here's THE TRUTH About the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (A Comprehensive History)	05/06/2021 21:00	0:39:23	93,8291	70,153	14,175
So ... How F#%&\$D Are We? Ep. 1167	06/01/2021 19:00	0:52:30	1,091,664	28,560	12,087
Prepare For The Left's Revenge Ep. 1169	08/01/2021 19:00	1:01:44	850,268	27,090	11,362
Candace Owens Ends Cardi B, And It's Hilarious Ep. 1217	17/03/2021 18:00	0:44:01	1,331,992	57,997	11,002
The Jury Got It Wrong Ep. 1240	21/04/2021 19:00	0:47:52	574,869	23,834	10,310