



Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:  
The 26th Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

## WHAT IS LEFT OF BREADTUBE? EXPLORING YOUTUBE-BASED POLITICAL CULTURES WITH SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Marius Liedtke  
University of Salzburg, Austria

### Introduction

The rise of social media has seen the emergence of new, mediatized forms of political collectivization. Drawing from a case study of the digital subculture of “BreadTube”, this article addresses specific challenges researchers face when exploring collectivities constituting around YouTube-videos.

BreadTube formed on YouTube in opposition to the dominance of right-wing voices and networks on the platform around the time of Donald Trump's first presidential election in 2016. At a time when YouTube gained itself the title as “the great radicalizer” (Tufekci, 2018) for its supposed role in the surge of the radical right in the United States, content creators of BreadTube started to actively engage in counterspeech towards right-wing channels on the platform. Using tactics like algorithmic hijacking and vernacular genres like video essays and reaction videos in order to “debunk” their talking points and ideas (Gekker et al., 2019; Maddox and Creech, 2021), sometimes even engaging directly with them in live-streamed debates, BreadTube became known for successfully deradicalizing former alt-righters (Roose, 2019; Somos, 2019). Attention by legacy media as well as an overall increased interest in more radically left ideas in US-society contributed to a steady rise in popularity and the subsequent growth of BreadTube to one of the larger political subcultures on the platform (Liedtke and Marwecki, 2019; Cotter, 2022).

The contribution provides an innovative methodological framework for investigations into the social dynamics of these novel kinds of collectivities within this particular platform ecology. To gain a better understanding about BreadTubes inner workings, this article analyzes an internal controversy of this media-based collectivity to reconstruct the underlying assumptions of various participants about the groups aims, values, shortcomings as well as its economic and technological prerequisites.

### Methodology

Within the subculture, YouTube videos do not just function as vehicles for outward

Suggested Citation (APA): Liedtke, M.. (2025, October). *What Is Left Of Breadtube? Exploring Youtube-Based Political Cultures With Situational Analysis*. Paper presented at AoIR2025: The 26th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Niterói, Brazil: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

political engagement but are also frequently used for contributions to in-group negotiations of norms, values, and strategies. In these often-contentious videos, creators address each other reciprocally, constantly (re-)constructing their mediatized social world (Hepp and Krotz, 2014). A controversy addressing the ethics and strategic effectiveness of different video-genres presented therefore a fitting focal point for research interested in the current state and make-up of this collectivity. On the one hand, it is indispensable to analytically focus here on the contents and the inter-textual relationality of the videos released as part of this controversy. Due to their embeddedness in the algorithmic environment of YouTube, it is, on the other, also paramount to account for the platform's role as a broker of visibility and, therefore, as a structuring force for the sociality of this collectivity.

To capture the controversy for exploration and properly account for the videos high level of intertextual referentiality as well as their algorithmic interrelatedness, the article proposes Clarke's (2005) Situational Analysis (SA) as an adequate methodological framework for coherently integrating both tasks, as it represents an interpretative approach that is demonstrably compatible with computational methods (Marres, 2020). Specifically, the paper shows how SA's emphasis on the creation of situational mappings is suited to fruitfully incorporate social network visualizations based on digital traces into a qualitative research process. Meta data extracted with the help of DMI's YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015) and visualized via Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009) illuminates the networked context of the videos which can be conducively integrated into SA as *relational maps*, opening access for additional "media-theoretical sampling" (Passmann, 2021).

The analysis of the videos themselves followed an Audiovisual Grounded Theory Methodology (AVGTM) approach (Dietrich and Mey, 2018), allowing for thorough engagement with the data while at the same time allowing for a necessary object sensitive flexibility. Video data is inherently complex due to its multilayered nature, but AVGTM's coding and sampling paradigms facilitate a controlled identification of key sequences relevant to the research interest and ensure comparability across the dataset.

## **Findings**

The research explores the internal controversy regarding the rise of debate streaming as an alternative vernacular genre to the long-form video essay already established within BreadTube. The dispute highlights different perspectives on the role of BreadTube, its function as a political force versus an entertainment medium, and the legitimacy of various content formats. The findings reveal deep tensions about platform dynamics, political strategy, and audience engagement.

A major point of contention is whether debate streaming is a legitimate tool for political education. Critics, argue that video essays serve as structured, in-depth analyses shaping public discourse, akin to traditional news editorials and documentaries. In contrast, debate streamers are perceived as prioritizing engagement over substance,

fostering parasocial relationships, and promoting performative argumentation rather than genuine debate. This perception challenges their authenticity and legitimacy as part of BreadTube. The debate streamers on the other hand position themselves as instrumental in countering right-wing radicalization, arguing that their confrontational style prevents a return of right-wing dominance on YouTube. These conflicting narratives shape how different factions within BreadTube perceive their contributions and strategic priorities.

Another key point of friction is how BreadTube should handle internal disputes. Some creators advocate for a deliberative communication model, emphasizing unity and constructive discourse. Critics of debate streaming argue that its aggressive, adversarial nature undermines these goals, reinforcing a toxic environment—particularly for marginalized creators. Generally, conflicts – internally and externally - are exacerbated by platform incentives, as YouTube’s algorithm rewards controversy and high engagement content (Cotter 2022), favoring debate streamers over video essayists.

The controversy also frames BreadTube as both a political space and a market segment within YouTube’s attention economy. Success is tied to algorithmic visibility, and video essayists often adapt their content to match BreadTube’s conventions. However, this competitive environment poses challenges, particularly for non-white creators who struggle with visibility biases. The structural differences between video essay production and live-streaming contribute to ongoing tensions. Video essayists spend weeks on research and production, while streamers can generate and monetize content daily. This discrepancy creates economic inequalities, further fueling resentment between the two groups.

The findings illustrate how BreadTube is both a political counterpublic and a competitive media space, shaped by conflicting goals, platform logic, and audience expectations. The digitally and visually enhanced SA framework was able to deliver a comprehensive mapping of the complex and dynamic constellation of perspectives and segments BreadTube is composed of and illuminated arenas in which adverse interests overlap and conflict arises over questions of representation, legitimacy, shared history, and resource allocation.

## References

Bastian, M., Heymann, S., & Jacomy, M. (2009). *Gephi: An Open Source Software for Exploring and Manipulating Networks*. 3.

<https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/13937>

Clarke, A. E. (2005). *Situational analysis: Grounded theory after the postmodern turn*. Sage Publications.

Cotter, K. (2022). Practical knowledge of algorithms: The case of BreadTube. *New Media & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221081802>

Dietrich, M., & Mey, G. (2018). Grounding Visuals: Annotationen zur Analyse audiovisueller Daten mit der Grounded-Theory-Methodologie. In C. Moritz & M. Corsten (Eds.), *Handbuch Qualitative Videoanalyse* (pp. 135–152). Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-15894-1>

Gekker, A., Mniestri, A., Briones, Á., Coggins, T., Chateau, L., Facchin, A., et al. (2019). Slicing BreadTube: Leftist discourse networks. Digital Methods Summer School, University of Amsterdam. <https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/pub/Dmi/SummerSchool2019/BreadTube%20Report%200%E2%80%9393%20Digital%20Methods%20Summer%20School%202019.pdf>. Retrieved March 19, 2022.

Hepp, A., & Krotz, F. (Eds.). (2014). *Mediatized Worlds*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137300355>

Liedtke, M., & Marwecki, D. (2019). *Von Influencer\*Innen Lernen: YouTube & Co als Spielfelder linker Politik und Bildungsarbeit*. Berlin: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung. <https://www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/41321/von-influencerinnen-lernen>

Maddox, J., & Creech, B. (2021). Interrogating LeftTube: ContraPoints and the possibilities of critical media praxis on YouTube. *Television & New Media*, 22(6), 595–615. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420953549>

Marres, N. (2020). For a situational analytics: An interpretative methodology for the study of situations in computational settings. *Big Data & Society*, 7(2), 205395172094957. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720949571>

Passmann, J. (2021). Medien-theoretisches Sampling Digital Methods als Teil qualitativer Methoden. *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*, 13(25–2), 128–140. <https://doi.org/10.14361/zfmw-2021-130213>

Rieder, B. (2015). YouTube Data Tools (Version 1.24) [Software]. <https://tools.digitalmethods.net/netvizz/youtube/>

Roose, K. (2019, June 8). The making of a YouTube radical. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html>. Retrieved June 24, 2019.

Somos, C. (2019, October 25). Dismantling the „Alt-Right Playbook“: YouTuber explains how online radicalization works. *CTVNews*. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/dismantling-the-alt-right-playbook-youtuber-explains-how-online-radicalization-works-1.4655174>. Retrieved March 19, 2022.

Tufekci, Z. (2018, June 8). Opinion | YouTube, the Great Radicalizer. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics>

[radical.html](#)