

More than Infotainment: Populist Newsfluencers' Participatory and Global Audiences

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Abstract

This study considers the role of active audiences as a crucial component of contemporary infotainment. By examining three politically and geographically diverse political influencers, this study describes the practices that successfully promote the creators and their political movements, while also demonstrating the potential to disseminate harmful narratives without consequence. This study also considers this type of programming as a tool for populist political actors, given the central role of audiences in its production. The three case studies presented here provide an in-depth analysis of the ever-evolving practices of influencers that can cross international and ideological boundaries, resulting in increased networked potential and/or political polarization.

Keywords

Populism; influencers; infotainment; YouTube; audiences.

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Más que infoentretenimiento: las audiencias participativas globales de los influenciadores populistas de noticias

Resumen

El presente estudio considera el papel de las audiencias activas como un componente crucial del infoentretenimiento actual. El estudio examina a tres influenciadores de distintos países y de ideologías políticas, describe las prácticas que promueven estos creadores y sus movimientos políticos, y demuestra el potencial de difundir narrativas dañinas sin consecuencias. Asimismo, considera este tipo de programación una herramienta utilizada por actores políticos populistas, dado el papel central de las audiencias en su producción. Los tres ejemplos presentados aquí ofrecen un análisis profundo de las prácticas de los influenciadores, que cambian constantemente y pueden trascender fronteras internacionales e ideológicas, lo que se traduce en un mayor potencial para hacer crecer su red, pero también en la polarización política.

Palabras clave

Populismo; influenciadores; infoentretenimiento; YouTube; audiencias.

Mais do que infoentretenimento: os públicos participativos globais dos influenciadores populistas de conteúdo noticioso

Resumo

Este estudo considera o papel das audiências participativas globais como um componente crucial do infoentretenimento atual. O estudo examina três influenciadores de diferentes países e ideologias políticas, descreve as práticas promovidas por esses criadores e seus movimentos políticos, e demonstra o potencial de difundir narrativas prejudiciais com reduzidos mecanismos de responsabilização. Além disso, considera esse tipo de formato de conteúdo uma ferramenta usada por atores políticos populistas, dado o papel central do público em sua produção. Os três exemplos apresentados aqui oferecem uma análise aprofundada das práticas dos influenciadores, que estão em constante mudança e podem transcender fronteiras internacionais e ideológicas, o que resulta em maior potencial para ampliar seu alcance, mas também na polarização política.

Palavras-chave

Populismo; influenciadores; infoentretenimento; YouTube; audiências.

Introduction

Terms such as “politainment” and “infotainment” have pervaded media studies and popular culture in the past several decades (Boukes, 2019; Cervi et al., 2023; Fischer et al., 2022; Humanes, 2024); however, the rapid growth in social media use, particularly as a source for news and information, urges their reconsideration as they are applied to political influencers. Recent research has suggested that these alternative media producers are becoming a go-to source for audiences around the globe, having closed the traditional producer-audience gap typical of legacy media while also reducing barriers to widespread content distribution (Goodwin et al., 2023; Lewis, 2018; Newman, 2024; Woolley, 2022). With content creation and distribution heavily reliant upon audience participation, we should also examine the parasocial relationships audiences have formed with these influencers (Hurcombe, 2024), in addition to their dual information and entertainment value. Furthermore, many of these producers belong to populist movements, utilize alternative distribution platforms to bolster their anti-institutional rhetoric, and orchestrate waves of collective knowledge-making known as “populist expertise” (Marwick & Partin, 2024) that can, at times, veer into disinformation and conspiracy theory territory.

Through three qualitative case studies of political influencers appealing to global Spanish-speaking audiences, this paper contributes to our theoretical understanding of news and entertainment in the participatory social media sphere. The purpose of this study is to highlight the growing presence and influence of participatory audiences in infotainment produced on social media, illustrated through examples of Spanish-speaking political influencers from populist movements. Infotainment as a genre should be understood beyond a clever mix of “information” and “entertainment” to also include the active role of audiences, particularly as they manifest in digital populist networks.

Literature Review

News Influencers and Participatory Culture

Emerging research at the intersection of political communication, social media, and disinformation has highlighted the influence of public figures through their social media platforms and/or online fandom. Sometimes referred to as microcelebrities, internet celebrities, or, more recently, influencers, these digital media producers are characterized by their high visibility in an infinite digital environment (Abidin, 2018). In Mexico, political influencers on YouTube are self-acclaimed “YouTubers” who have long occupied the political entertainment space on the platform and have gained legitimacy through the support and attention of former president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Atilano, 2022; Rodelo, 2023). Vocal supporters of his political party, MORENA, found success and community through creating digital video content for audiences who did not feel represented by mainstream media or politics. Similarly, Lewis (2020) examines the “reactionary” politics of far-right YouTubers in the U.S. and argues that their discourse extends beyond predictable partisanship by embracing numerous anti-mainstream and anti-elite positions.

Popular content creators on social media can become influential political actors, despite their status as (un)assigned by formal media or governmental institutions. For example, relational influencers are particularly important in the absence of trustworthy traditional news outlets (Goodwin et al., 2023), where people may turn to opinion leaders who have demonstrated authenticity and credibility within their wider ideological networks. In many cases, a coordinated network develops connecting political organizers, political relational influencers, and influencer communities who cross-post, promote, and push complementary narratives.

Unlike microcelebrities, internet celebrities, or even celebrities online, influencers demonstrate an ability to build their digital social capital and successfully turn it into income. Influencers monetize content

directly on the platform, through user donations, and by selling their own products and engaging in branding across platforms such as X and Facebook. Hurcombe (2024) introduces the term “newsfluencers” and describes them as “platformatised creators who operate according to the economic and cultural logics of online influencers to produce news content for participatory audiences” (p. 2). These audiences have direct input into the content produced through comments, likes, follows, and shares. As a result, news and political influencers have developed their own unique production techniques. For example, Fischer et al. (2022) observe that politainment and partisanship are significant characteristics of topics, format, and style, while a third set of practices—which they label “journalist extension”—is the least present in this form of content delivery. Journalist extension refers to content that most closely approximates the objective reporting styles of professional journalists while adapting to the YouTube format, allowing for more in-depth explanation of a topic and viewer participation. In lieu of traditional journalistic values, newsfluencers often rely on this participation to broaden the reach of their content within digital networks.

Henry Jenkins (2006) describes a participatory culture as one with “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” (p. 3). He discusses this in the context of youth media literacy; however, his work spans decades of research on entertainment fandom, and his description has expanded alongside our increasing knowledge and use of platforms and their users. He continues, “a participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another” (p. 3). Political networks on social media have created unique participatory cultures that may introduce audiences to new content and ideas through association with other content and users. Scholars argue that creating, sharing, liking, and reposting internet memes constitute a form of political participation (Johann, 2022) and that online political participation can coincide with, rather than replace, offline forms of political participation (Theocharis et al., 2023). These participatory cultures can also be compared to pop culture and entertainment media fandom. Sites like

X and TikTok propel certain candidates and issues to the forefront by emphasizing affective identities that resonate with large groups of people, such as gender, economics, and political ideology (Macnaughtan & Trott, 2024; Rodriguez & Goretti, 2022). Fandom works across the political spectrum, including QAnon, where scholars argue that affect-driven connections to other forms of popular culture help normalize the movement's dangerous beliefs rather than radicalize by taking its tenets at face value (Reinhard et al., 2022). Fandom and participatory cultures have only recently emerged as lenses for examining political movements on social media; more research is needed across platforms, languages, and ideologies. The first research question asks:

RQ 1: How do populist newsfluencers engage with participation from audiences?

Infotainment

Infotainment has been studied since the 1980's and is understood as a blend of news and entertainment, often using sensationalist, emotional, satirical, and "soft" news. (Boukes, 2019; Thussu, 2007). Research has spanned analyses into TV talk shows (Grondin, 2012), YouTube (Dai & Wang, 2023; Fischer et al., 2022), and, more recently, TikTok (Berdón-Prieto et al., 2023; Wirz & Zai, 2025). On television, the commercialization of news in global, neoliberal markets created demands to which many programs and outlets met by presenting hard news in soft news formats (Boukes, 2019). Satire and parody shows, such as *The Daily Show* in the United States, became spaces where culture wars were waged "for the media, by the media, and through the media" (Grondin, 2012, p. 360). Grondin (2012) presents an example of two prominent figures from the left and right—Jon Stewart of *Comedy Central* and Glenn Beck of *Fox News*—who mutually participated in interviews to address their previous reactions to recent current events, in essence responding to, and possibly deepening, the incredulity from their cultural opposition. These interviews were even covered by mainstream news, further mediatizing these cultural flashpoints. We see these same processes today in the era of social media; content creators are producing media *for* the internet, *by* the internet, and *through* the internet.

Infotainment can engage more viewers who would not otherwise be interested in informative, civic, and/or political content, but some have argued that infotainment can be “a poison or an antidote” to the traditional news industry in crisis (Wirz & Zai, 2025, p. 2). For example, Wirz and Zai (2025) find that traditional news outlets have begun to incorporate entertaining elements such as emotionalization, personalization, interactivity, and narrative presentation on Instagram and TikTok. Whether these social media logic-driven elements signal an increasing tabloidization or an increasing professionalization of “quality” news remains an open question for journalism and new media scholars. For example, Fischer et al. (2022) argue that quality infotainment often gets lost amidst the saturated media environment. This study measured the entertainment, hyper-partisan, and journalistic value present in YouTube political influencer content and found that a style they dub “partisan mockery,” or indignant, one-sided political perspectives, is significantly more present than “engaging education,” or quality political infotainment. These trends are especially concerning when we consider that, when used by traditional journalists, infotainment is often an experimental response to job insecurity (Hurcombe, 2024).

When it comes to infotainment as a specific type of content, we must examine the dynamic role of the audience to fully understand new media content as a “package deal”—content that users seek out, consume, and engage with to fulfill multiple needs at once. In other words, more work is needed to understand these needs beyond the mere blending of entertainment and information. Khan (2017) examined the uses and gratifications of the YouTube experience and found that entertainment, information-seeking, and *social* motivations have distinct impacts on audience behaviors. Similarly, Berrocal et al. (2014) identify four levels of a politainment prosumer—consumer, fan/follower, commentator, and producer. They argue that prosumers are limited in their ability to create new messaging and, instead, through processes of transmediation, strengthen digital partisan networks by reposting, replaying, and reinserting old pieces of media. But transmediation goes beyond simple remixes and cross-platform posting. For example, influencers can

manipulate audience engagement through a practice called “ratioing,” in which a reply to a social media post garners more likes and comments than the original post itself (Harris et al., 2023). This tactic is often used to drown out and ridicule the original poster. This practice, according to Berrocal et al.’s (2014) taxonomy, demonstrates again that the less participatory tiers of prosumers can have the biggest impact without presenting new information, instead contributing to increased polarization online.

The infotainment literature examines content across several genres and platforms and presents arguments that range from dumbing down society to successfully engaging otherwise uninformed citizens. Scholars have argued that the perceived intimacy of politicians’ social media interactions may lead users to form parasocial relationships (Dunn & Nisbett, 2014), and we have seen this transform into content creators utilizing parasocial relational labor to their advantage (Hurcombe, 2024). While infotainment identifies *content* that combines entertainment and information, the role of the audience in its *production* is often overlooked. Furthermore, in the world of influencers who align with a political style that is defined by its appeal to the people, more research is needed to understand the ways in which those direct appeals are produced as populist strategies by leveraging unique characteristics of social media platforms:

RQ 2: How do newsfluencers utilize platform affordances to shape the production of infotainment?

Populism and Participation

Entertaining, informative, and social media-driven content is especially important in populist networks, considering that populist movements frequently center on the role of the “people.” Here, populism is defined as a “political style” and a phenomenon that appeals to the people, emphasizes public crises, and expresses a disregard for political correctness (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Contrary to today’s colloquial use of the term, populism is not always right-wing, and particularly in Latin

America, the region's history is most closely associated with left-wing populism (Hallin & Echeverría, 2025). Waisbord (2013) argues that “populism never neatly fitted the left-right continuum, as it has drawn from nationalism, conservatism, and workerism” (p. 507). Still, we have seen a recent rise in global leaders such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, Javier Milei, and Nayib Bukele, to name a few, who align with a right-wing populist view. Many have analyzed (and refuted) this collective wave of right-wing populism through a lens of globalization (Rodrik, 2021), authoritarianism (Art, 2022), and a reaction to left-wing politics (Gayozzo, 2022).

The rejection of progressivism, though not new, is thought to have exacerbated around the time of COVID-19, and in Latin America, scholars have identified Argentinian authors Agustín Laje and Nicolas Marquez as thought leaders of right-wing Latin American neoconservatism that emerged around this time. Gayozzo (2022) describes the movement as one that “*reúne distintos intelectuales e influencers en una suerte de coalición anti-moderna y domina una marcada estrategia cultural en redes sociales*”² (p. 307). Understanding the region's political context is necessary for analyzing the practices of news influencers, especially those with international audiences, who may capitalize on social media's unique technical features to incorporate audiences into their production and expand the reach of their political movement.

The literature on alternative social movements on the internet presents concepts worth noting in a discussion of populist political influencers. For example, Abidin (2021) reflects on the framework of “networked publics,” in which the infrastructure and affordances of social media platforms can facilitate the formation of social networks. She reapplies this framework to examine social media influencers, particularly those who operate “below the radar,” using the same affordances to construct subversive social networks. She defines these networks

2 “brings together different intellectuals and influencers in a sort of anti-modern coalition and employs a clear cultural strategy on social media” (Translation by the author).

as “refracted publics,” who may engage in astroturfing, clickbaiting, content spamming, utilizing internet paranguages, etc. to identify and communicate within distinct internet cultures, who “have been mobilized to avoid detection, promote deflection, and facilitate the dissemination of specific messages away from or toward target audiences” (Abidin, 2021, p. 10). Though these subversive tactics may be innovative and harmless in many circles, in the context of political infotainment, they can harm civil society and civic engagement. For example, Lewis (2018) maps the “alternative influence network” on YouTube in order to document users’ and content creators’ incremental exposure to disinformation, conspiracy theories, and other harmful rhetoric. She argues that “the more extremist content they make, the more of an extremist and dedicated audience they build. Such audiences can, in turn, drive political influencers to deliver ever more extreme content” (Lewis, 2018). The circulation of these extreme narratives is especially hard to track on the internet, given its vastness, the specific (sub)cultural contexts, and the rapidity with which content is uploaded.

When these political narratives traverse into the realm of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories, they take the form of *populist expertise*, or “the rejection of legacy media accounts, scientific consensus, or elite knowledge in favor of a body of ‘home-grown’ forms of expertise and meaning-making generated by those who may feel disenfranchised from mainstream political participation” (Marwick & Partin, 2024). And although social media, in particular YouTube, is often blamed for a “rabbit hole” effect, where users who spend more time on the platform are helplessly sucked into a world of disinformation and conspiracy theories, we know that social media use alone does not predict belief in conspiracy theories (Enders et al., 2021). After all, Lewis (2018) contends that social media radicalization is not only a technical problem but also a social one. This social problem can be viewed through the lens of *dark participation*, as Quandt (2018) describes it as “the evil flipside of citizen engagement” (p. 37).

Gone are the days when scholars imagined the internet utopia of citizen engagement, as we are all now well aware of the pervasiveness

of hate speech, disinformation, trolling, doxxing, etc., and its effects on perceptions and attitudes towards quality news, civil society, and even individuals. This disruption of the newsmaking process online is often linked to populist movements, with identities and motives ranging from sporadic, anonymous individuals to coordinated, (trans) national campaigns (Quandt, 2018). Thus, despite their limited role in the traditional newsmaking process, audiences play an important role, particularly within populist movements. From manipulating likes to delivering tailor-made content, content creators are very cognizant that their personal and political success depends on audience engagement. However, it is important to examine the lengths to which they will go to achieve greater success. Thus, a final research question is proposed:

RQ 3: How is dark participation amplified by populist infotainment?

Methodology

Digital ethnography involves the prolonged use of observational methods that immerse the researcher in a digital culture, illuminating its values, understandings, and processes. The fluidity in technique, process, and time provides researchers with the opportunity to immerse themselves in various aspects of digital communities simultaneously, exploring subtleties and developing an intimacy with the research site to provide a more holistic picture of cultural practices relevant to both theory and the public. The purpose of digital ethnography for this study is to immerse the researcher in part of the YouTube user experience to identify and describe technical aspects of relevant channels and platforms—playlists, comments, recommended videos, genres, visual aesthetics, etc.—and how they do/do not constitute internet celebrity practices. This is done by observing these channels over time while systematically collecting field notes, manually documenting, and taking screenshots of relevant posts or comments.

This study relies on non-participant observation, as the groups under study may involve conflict and the researcher should remain more “neutral” or “passive” (Ciesielska et al., 2017; Murthy, 2008). Far-

right extremist groups often attack higher education, and thus, strict observation methods are appropriate when active participation might compromise the safety of the researcher or participants (Marwick & Partin, 2024; Stewart et al., 2023). The data presented in this paper were collected from public-facing accounts and media and were therefore exempt from institutional review. When user comments are shown, only usernames and publicly available information associated with their profiles are visible; no further information about their names, locations, or identities was sought for data analysis. Screenshots have been cropped or obscured to address ethical considerations regarding the use of a creators' image and likeness in a publication. Only text, comments, chats, and general program layouts are included in this paper.

Ethnography is both iterative and inductive throughout the research process, meaning the techniques employed vary across and within the research project as it unfolds (Pink et al., 2015; O'Reilly, 2012). The flexibility of ethnography often translates well to online contexts (Hine, 2020; Reich, 2015); however, this also means that "the sheer volume of potential data can become overwhelming" (Hine, 2020, p. 74). Thus, establishing a digital research site often blurs the distinction between offline/online contexts, participation, observed behaviors, and the duration of fieldwork. Furthermore, there remains a challenge posed by the rapidity with which content can be removed and/or altered by its producer, particularly in the context of disinformation (Abidin, 2013; Hine, 2020; Soto-Vásquez & Sánchez-Santos, 2022). Since few scholars have examined Spanish-language newsfluencers, the potential content for analysis is abundant; therefore, digital ethnography is appropriate for understanding these emergent networks.

After exploring the wider YouTube sphere of Spanish-language political news, three cases were selected that span local, national, and transnational audience appeal, who have been known to disseminate disinformation, are well-known in the popular culture/media, associate themselves with contemporary populist movements, and finally, distance themselves from the mainstream, legacy media, which is a unique and defining characteristic of populist newsfluencers. Anonymous accounts, news

aggregators, and otherwise infrequent or inconsistent infotainment producers were excluded from analysis. For example, many content creators simply “cross-post” from a main account like Instagram or TikTok, offering little insight into the unique affordances of a YouTuber beyond replication. Others appear experimental in their focus, with no consistent news, entertainment, or even regional identity. The main criteria that qualified inclusion was the consistent use of a live-stream technique that mimics typical newsroom setups.

Digital ethnography was conducted from January to March 2024, with thematic analysis of three channels taking place during the final month. The sample is theoretical, providing a snapshot of newsfluencer practices that may inform future studies that utilize representative or purposive sampling. The three cases were selected from diverse countries of origin, audience reach, and political ideology (Agustin Laje from Argentina, *El Chapucero* from Mexico, and Alex Otaola from Miami/Cuba). There is evidence of the public influence of each of these personas, from organizing a caravan for Donald Trump (Henry & Stephenson, 2022) to disseminating widespread misinformation about elections (Juárez & Celecia, 2023) to serving as a leading symbol of the global “new right” (Gayozzo, 2022). All three channels represent alternative, populist movements with similar live-stream production styles:

- Agustín Laje Arrigoni (*Agustín Laje*) is an international best-selling author from Argentina. He streams the least frequently of this sample but provides in-depth analyses of world events through a theoretical, political science lens. He touts his personal relationship with President Milei and author Nicolas Marques, both representing the “new right.”
- Alexander Otaola (*Hola! Ota-ola!*) is a Cuban-American former TV personality. He is openly gay and part of the MAGA movement, having organized a caravan for Trump in 2022 and launching a Republican bid for Mayor of Miami-Dade County. He streams for 5–6 hours a day, focusing on Cuban and American politics and celebrity gossip.

- Ignacio “Nacho” Rodriguez (*El Ganso Informativo*) launched the YouTube network, known as *El Chapucero*, which contains several different channels and programs. There were clear attempts in their programming to expand their reach beyond Mexican politics; however, observations revealed that their niche is exclusively towards Mexican audiences. Still, they represent leftist populism, grounding the study in a broader understanding of newsfluencer practices and of populism as a “political style” (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), rather than simply right-wing extremism online.

The researcher watched live streams from these channels over the course of one month, copying and pasting the video transcription into NVivo software for simultaneous annotation and subsequent thematic coding. Table 1 shows a breakdown of over 92 hours of content included in the analysis. Live streams as a production technique are understudied; thus, a one-month time frame was selected in order to document and explore the variety of production frequency and length, while also collecting data for analysis within a comparable time frame.

Influencers and platforms are constantly changing, and this work provides a snapshot of understanding how infotainment producers create content for their audiences. For example, Laje streams relatively infrequently and uploads videos ranging from one to two-and-a-half hours, yet he has the most followers. He relies on high-profile guests, live coverage, and his international speaking tours to elevate his digital media presence. Otaola and *Ganso Informativo* stream consistently (three hours and one hour, respectively) as part of a larger studio-like programming schedule. While the total hours in Otaola’s programming are significantly higher, nearly a third of each show consists of advertisements, jingles, and highly produced screensavers that play while viewers join the stream and wait for the program to begin.

Table 1. Sample Distribution of Three Cases Included for Thematic Analysis

Show name	Number of videos in sample	Total hours
<i>Agustín Laje</i>	8	12:30
<i>Hola! Ota-ola!</i>	22	64:40
<i>El Ganso Informativo</i>	15	15:21

Source: Own elaboration

Using an open coding technique, the researcher engaged in an iterative analysis process in which findings emerged and were connected to the literature. First-round coding identified topic themes (COVID, US politics, foreign policy, etc.), delivery styles (urgency, humor, partisan mockery, advertisements, subscriber pitches, etc.), and positioning (independent expert, anti-mainstream media, censorship victim). Second-round coding identified patterns and themes in the data, revealing a global, participatory audience addressed through direct engagement from the newsfluencer. This elevated role of audiences in YouTube newsfluencer production also leads to the circulation of potentially harmful narratives. These three themes are discussed further below.

Results and Discussion

Global Participatory Cultures

The most obvious evidence of participation from a newsfluencer's audience comes in the form of likes, comments, shares, and other interactions. At the start of a stream, users announce their presence in the live chat and may greet each other, the influencer(s), or the general public as they vie to submit one of the first or most radical political statements in the day's chat (Figure 1). Alongside these greetings, users often fill the chats with flags from their country of origin and/or announcements from where they are watching the program. These displays of national pride within the wider ideological community formed by the influencers continue throughout the stream, particularly when discussing various global leaders. Users often submit requests for the host to cover a

political topic or event in their country of origin. These examples provide clear evidence of a participatory community that values individual contributions and social connections as described by Jenkins (2006).

Figure 1. Screenshot of a Live Chat Replay from the Start of an *El Chapucero* Program

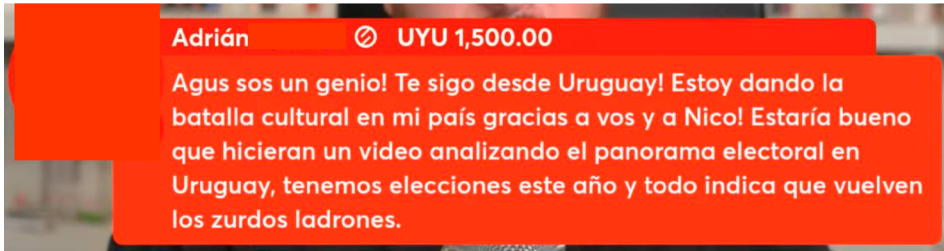


Note. Commenters' full names and images have been redacted for ethical considerations.

Source: Ganso Informativo (2024)

In addition to live chats, “SuperChats” are a novel form of both participation and part of the influencer business model. Users submit chats along with a financial contribution in support of the channel, and in exchange, their profile and chat may be displayed on the screen (Figure 2). SuperChats also demonstrate how globally vast their audience can reach, particularly with Laje, who also shows the currency in which a user submitted their financial contribution.

Figure 2. Screenshot of a “SuperChat” Sent by a User with a Financial Contribution and Praise for Laje’s Work



Note. Commenter’s full name and image have been redacted for ethical considerations.

Source: Agustín Laje Arrigoni (2024a)

Far more than participatory audiences, anthropologist Crystal Abidin (2021) describes them as *impactful audiences*, where “to even register an audience, one has to compete for human attention across a wealth of competing topics, and simultaneously aim to maximize algorithmic norms in order to trigger platforms to surface one’s content to its user base” (p. 4). The live streams regularly include pitches for audiences to like, subscribe, comment, and share. They usually make these pitches just after the program introduction and repeat them at the end, with the calls to action linked in the video description alongside any cross-channel promotions. They closely follow views and subscribers while streaming to adjust delivery in real time and maximize reach, often accusing YouTube of censorship or over-moderation while urging that sharing their content far and wide would overcome this type of unfair regulation. They feature headlines, chyrons, and advertisements using bright colors, all caps, and branding styles unique to their program to draw attention. Though the number of viewers and interactivity suggest these influencers have found success in their niche social media markets, it is clear that the ever-changing YouTube algorithms that define success and popularity on this platform regularly present new challenges for maintaining an engaged audience.

This is evident not only in their consistent calls to action but also in their constant adaptation of program and channel structure. For example, all content creators included in this study have more than one show or

channel, which have changed style, format, length, content focus, and even title over time. *El Chapucero Network* (the producers of *El Ganso Informativo*) provides the most evidence of newfluencers adapting to retain and/or gain audiences. From *El Chapucero* to *El Chapucero TODAY* to *El Chapucero USA*, these content creators have publicly experimented with creating new channels to serve specific audiences, though many of these channels or programs seem to fall by the wayside in favor of their already successful shows. The program examined in this study, *El Ganso Informativo*, has even seemed to shift focus, as its channel description states:

Un canal dedicado a creadores de contenido o aspirantes a youtubers, que tal vez se sientan abrumados por abrir un canal o deprimidos por ver que no crecen, pero que sencillamente carecen de habilidades y entendimiento de la plataforma. Yo te voy a ayudar.
(*Ganso Informativo*, n.d.)³

The content published on this channel exclusively covers Mexican politics, a clear departure from this description. However, at some point, the creators must have considered the potential market for aspiring YouTubers (likely political newsfluencers in Mexico) and aimed to engage these audiences in a way that would have fostered co-creation of their networked political movement. When examining the role of newsfluencers' participatory audiences in the context of infotainment, the focus on platform metrics and on expanding global reach is clear.

The remainder of the discussion focuses on the two right-wing programs, as the evidence of refracted publics engaging in the co-creation of content appeared more distinctly in these programs. In the case of *El Ganso Informativo*, while a participatory audience is valued, the observations revealed a less central role for it. This could be due to the particular style of left-wing populist politics or the distinct national focus of their programming. Given the rise in right-wing populism globally, it is not surprising that the role of the audience is more present in Laje and Otaola's programming. Still, Mexico was included in this study to highlight the comparisons and contrasts in digital populist programming.

3 "A channel dedicated to content creators or aspiring YouTubers, who might feel overwhelmed by the idea of starting a channel or depressed to see a lack of growth, but who simply lack the skills and understanding of the platform. I am going to help you" (Translation by the author).

A systematic approach to understanding regional or political differences in digital populism and their relationship to the audience could provide deeper insight into these observations.

Direct Audience Engagement: Digital Populist Appeals

Audience participation extends beyond using live chat boxes by inviting audiences to engage in novel offline/online contexts that both validate their participation and support the creator's programming. For example, Figure 3 shows a chat displayed from a user who says, "*El que no da like es globalista!*"⁴ *Globalista*, in this sense, is a pejorative for leftist, woke ideologies. With their quick, scrappy production techniques, this user's comment becomes the segment's subtitle (Figure 4). Users are now directly participating in the production of newsfluencer content. After all, Laje himself constantly dismisses traditional media, stating that users can "*ser uno mismo el periodista*"⁵ (Agustín Laje Arrigoni, 2022), by simply being at the right place at the right time with a cell phone.

Figure 3. Screenshot of a User Comment Selected to Display on the Screen during Laje's Live Commentary



Note. Creator's image has been blurred for ethical considerations.
Source: Agustín Laje Arrigoni (2024b)

4 "Anyone who does not like this is a globalist!" (Translation by the author).

5 "Be the journalist themselves" (Translation by the author).

Figure 4. Screenshot of the Stream’s New Subtitle, Derived from the User’s Comment



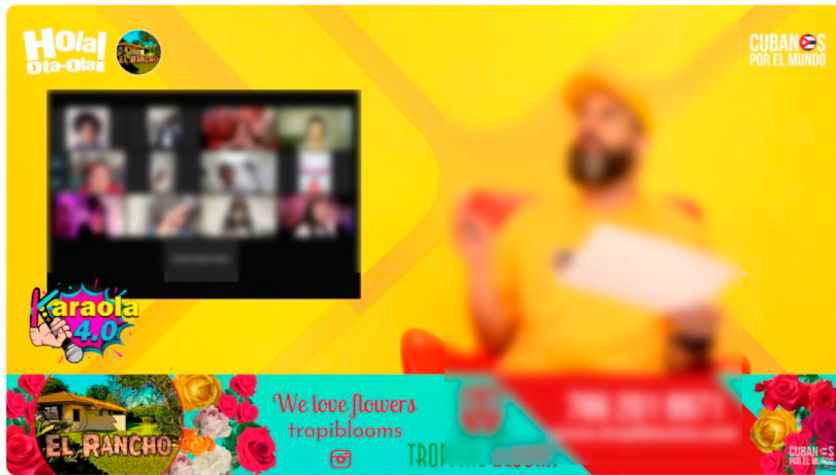
Note. Creator’s image has been blurred for ethical considerations.
Source: Agustín Laje Arrigoni (2024b).

Other unique engagement examples include content published by Cuban-American Alexander Otaola, whose morning show is more akin to the soft news morning programs on Telemundo or Univision, and features community guests, celebrity gossip, lifestyle, cooking, and even a mini “*Aprende inglés*”⁶ segment. Despite his reputation for sensationalism, he has experimented with engaging educational programming. He often features audience social media posts and testimonials for his advertisers, as well as photos and videos submitted from his supporters for his mayoral campaign. Most interesting, perhaps, is the weeks-long Zoom karaoke contest, where the winner is invited to perform at a popular Miami festival. Viewers of the program enter via Zoom to participate, where they sing a segment of a song and are then judged by a popular Spanish-speaking singer to determine whether they move on to the next round (Figure 5). Though this is likely a positive experience for those who participate, this particular blend of social media and entertainment

⁶ “Learn English” (Translation by the author).

can lend itself to some of the more harmful information circulation on the platform, as described below.

Figure 5. Screenshot of Otaola Incorporating the Audience into His Live Zoom Karaoke Show



Note. Creator's image has been blurred for ethical considerations.
Source: Cubanos por el Mundo - Live (2024c).

Despite his politicized comments towards Cubans still living in Cuba (e.g., “*cobardes*”), Otaola permits many on the island to join the contest. One singer, Ramón, advanced to the next round, but viewers began to question his complicity with the communist regime. After the outcry from his viewers, Otaola turns to his audience to conduct a poll, “*¿matas a Ramón?*” he asks, “*esa pregunta es: ¿lo matamos, no lo matamos a Ramón? ¿Lo comemos o no lo comemos?*”⁸ (Cubanos por el Mundo - Live, 2024a). The live chat is then ignited with a flurry of comments regarding whether or not to “kill” Ramón, though “kill” is clearly used here in the context of the contest, not literally. Upon revisiting this stream after it had ended, the live chat replay had been removed. YouTube’s community guidelines state that they use a combination of manual and machine-learning techniques to regulate violations such as violent or dangerous content, so it is

⁷ “Cowards” (Translation by author).

⁸ “Do we kill Ramon? The question is: do we kill or not kill Ramon? Do we take him or not?” (Translation by the author).

possible that chats using the word “kill” were flagged as violent; however, there are at least twenty other videos from this sample alone where the live chat replay has been disabled.

Some may classify the previous example as mere online bullying or trolling; however, these are forms of dark participation, and more importantly, are part of a larger common practice where Otaola frequently doxxes “haters” or alleged communists by using their social media and other public profiles. These attacks often span several shows where he builds a case in an attempt to turn them into a *persona non grata* in the community, and by extension in the United States, since their primary offense is allegedly sympathizing with the Cuban communist regime. Otaola has done this to individuals such as Ramón, advertisers of his program, as well as individuals not affiliated with the program who may be only tangentially related to a person or event in the news. In doing so, this represents another refracted public dynamic, in which he *alternates between public/private* (Abidin, 2021). The varying features across platforms result in unstable categories of “private” versus “public.” While Abidin (2021) discusses this in the context of unpredictable platform affordances, this case also shows an individual manipulating those categories. Otaola is inserting himself alongside traditional and technological gatekeepers by altering individuals’ experiences of publicity and privacy, using various cross-platform and internet-celebrity tactics, sometimes without their consent. He positions himself as a moral judge and facilitator of collective action, which exemplifies how infotainment can easily devolve into dark participation. Direct audience engagement may be exciting for viewers and innovative for content creators, but the negative consequences have the potential to move beyond violent speech and public doxxing, as we have seen in other historical instances of online-to-offline political organizing.

Refracted Publics and Incidental(?) Misinformation Dissemination

We must consider the social networking value of media content today, not just to better understand contemporary genres and practices, but because there are potential negative consequences, such as the

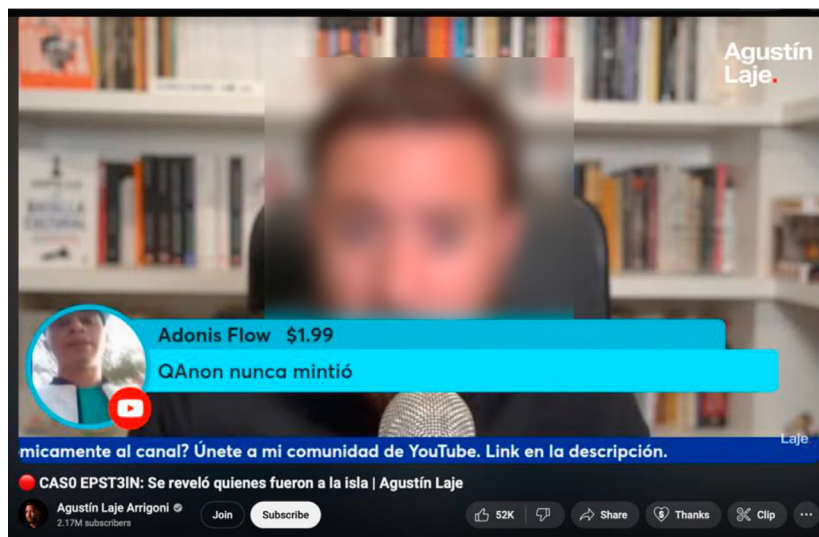
dissemination of mis- and disinformation. The spread of disinformation is understood to be intentional while misinformation is incidental (Hameleers et al., 2021), and YouTube newsfluencers continue to blur the lines between these categories in ways that are nearly impossible to document or fact-check. From *El Ganso Informativo* hosts consistently sowing doubt in Mexico's National Electoral Institute to Otaola not-so subtly sporting a shirt that reads "THE EARTH IS FLAT DIDN'T YOU KNOW THAT?" (Cubanos por el Mundo - Live, 2024b) during an entire program, these influencers shirk journalistic accountability while branding themselves as a news and information program.

In fact, the "SuperChat" feature on YouTube, where users can donate to a content creator in exchange for their comment being featured in a live stream, has been linked to the incidental dissemination of hate speech (Koh, 2018). Similarly, in this study, Figure 6 shows a screenshot from Laje's video titled, "CASO EPST3IN: Se reveló quienes fueron a la isla" (Agustín Laje Arrigoni, 2024a). The content is a nearly two-hour video discussing who (mostly from the left) visited Jeffrey Epstein's Island while simultaneously arguing to absolve Trump and others from any connections to the convicted predator. The use of numbers in the title rather than the actual words, "CASO EPSTEIN," represents an attempt to bypass platform triggers that could flag the video for disseminating conspiracy theories, a clear evasion tactic of refracted publics. The screenshot shows a user comment displayed with the caption "*QAnon nunca mintió*."¹⁰ Though Laje does not formalize this user's comment as he did with the globalist example, by selecting and displaying the statement "*QAnon nunca mintió*" when discussing the Jeffrey Epstein list, Laje is lending credibility to QAnon ideologies and the so-called "deep-state" without directly endorsing them. This phenomenon is similar to what has been described on Spanish-language radio in Miami, where many callers make extremist comments, and the hosts, program, and network almost never issue corrections (Bianco, 2024; Kelly, 2021). Still, the impact has been noted in the community and beyond.

9 "CASO EPST3IN: Who was on the island revealed" (Translation by the author).

10 "QAnon never lied" (Translation by the author).

Figure 6. Incidental Dissemination of Conspiracy Theories, “QAnon Never Lied”



Note. Creator's image has been blurred for ethical considerations.

Source: Agustín Laje Arrigoni (2024a)

Some extreme content intentionally avoids being labeled as mis- or disinformation while tapping into deeply polarized cultural tipping points. For example, as an influencer who subsists off advertisements and Patreon subscriptions, Laje offers exclusive access to his videos, live conferences, books, and even classes. One such class is titled “*Bioética: aborto, sexualidad y biopolítica*,”¹¹ which he describes:

Mi clase será sobre la biopolítica atrás de la agenda abortista cómo atrás de la agenda abortista en realidad hay poderes globales que tienen una intención deliberada por afectar las tasas de natalidad y ese es uno de los causales de que esa bandera la del aborto sea tan importante para por ejemplo Naciones Unidas.¹² (Agustín Laje Arrigoni, 2024d)

In this example, Laje bolsters his view that abortion is a deep-state agenda to control the population. He also has labeled the Barbie movie

11 “Bioethics: Abortion, sexuality, and biopolitics” (Translation by the author).

12 “My class will be about the biopolitics behind the abortion agenda, how behind the abortion agenda in reality there are global powers that have a deliberate intention to impact birth rates, and that is one of the reasons why the abortion flag is of such importance to, for example, the United Nations” (Translation by the author).

as feminist propaganda that sidelines pregnancy and the traditional role of women, and even devoted a segment of his livestream to ridiculing a women's SWAT team competition, "*no quiero que esto se interprete como una burla contra ellas, es una burla contra la ideología que los pone a ellas hacer esto, culpa de alguien que supone que es exactamente chicas contra hombres*"¹³ (Agustín Laje Arrigoni, 2024c). By constantly producing content that fuels partisan narratives, influencers prioritize sensationalist content over verifiable, traditional news reporting while still enjoying the vague classification as a news program. Some of these narratives may explicitly support mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories while absolving the content creator of any accountability, while other narratives simply contribute to a deepening cultural and political divide. Their extremism takes hold as a content creator's network grows, and they are more willing and adept at capitalizing on the unique sociotechnical affordances of a platform like YouTube.

Lewis's (2018) description of a stepwise radicalization occurs when audiences are incrementally exposed to more extremist positions through cross-promotions and collaborations between influencers. We see this when Laje appeared on Otaola's morning program for an interview. There is a clear merging of audiences that might not have occurred, given Otaola's focus on the Cuban diaspora and celebrity gossip, and Laje's focus on international politics and political science. They find common ground in right-wing populist and underdog narratives, and those who may already be sympathetic to their extreme content could be exposed to even more extreme content from new sources. Though this concept focuses mainly on radicalization within a network of content creators, we can also see how audience contributions can further push the boundaries of extremist content circulation within that network.

For example, a SuperChat from Laje's program reads, "*hola Agustín! ¿pensás que todas estas ideas como lgbt, ambientalismo, aborto, veganismo, son estrategias propulsadas por países más poderosos para debilitar culturalmente*

13 "I do not want this to be interpreted like a mockery of them; it is a mockery of the ideology that drives them to do this, the fault of someone who assumes it is girls against men" (Translation by the author).

a los países más débiles?”¹⁴ (Agustín Laje Arrigoni, 2024b). Here, a user is conflating topics such as globalism, veganism, abortion, etc., and again, Laje’s selection of this comment reinforces its value. This can be described as a form of sentiment seeding put forth by Abidin (2021), where, in this instance, refracted publics work to slowly infect the public reception of leftist-affiliated ideas by conflating them and associating them with a more sinister agenda. Some behaviors are more fleeting, such as trolling in the live chats. This type of dark participation was prevalent among all channels in both their comment sections and live chats.

On the Mexican program, some loyal viewers trolled then-candidate-elect Claudia Sheinbaum by referring to her as “*judía*”¹⁵ and “*globalista*,” despite her affiliation with the political party MORENA, of which the content creators and their audiences are supporters. These comments express doubt about Claudia’s identity and political purity and signal a departure from solely news and information as they push a boundary into antisemitism and antifeminism. This also calls into question whether the use of “globalism” as a pejorative may be more of a populist trait than a political one. In their search for new and innovative content that centers audiences in their production processes, these forms of dark participation can fuel the circulation of mis- and disinformation, hate speech, and other extreme content while economically supporting content creators and further solidifying their reach and credibility.

Conclusion

YouTube newsfluencers leverage several internet celebrity strategies unique to the new era of infotainment and social media. Those who occupy popular positions within broader populist political movements can often be legitimized by elected leaders and attract their own fandom, thus signaling an important area for social scientific inquiry. The role of social media audiences in shaping political influencer content is understudied, particularly in non-Western and non-English contexts.

14 “Hi Agustín! Do you think all of these ideas like LGBT, environmentalism, abortion, veganism, are strategies put forth by the most powerful countries to culturally weaken the weaker countries?” (Translation by the author).

15 “Jewish woman” (Translation by the author).

This study indicates potentially harmful consequences of the elevated, freewheeling role of audiences, thereby contributing to our theoretical understanding of the participatory practices of populist producers and their audiences within a relatively understudied population.

The naturalistic inquiry employed here enabled the participatory findings to emerge; more studies should examine user comments and perspectives through the specific lens of infotainment. Digital ethnography allows for a flexible, iterative approach to exploring new topics within these fluid networks, but it is also difficult to define strict timeframes or sample criteria. Ethnographic exploration began in January and continued through March, collecting 92 hours of data over a one-month period for analysis; however, qualitative researchers know that fieldwork is never complete. Because live streams are understudied, a one-month time frame with three notable influencers provided a manageable dataset to begin typifying some common production practices within these networks. Furthermore, this study relied on non-participant observation. Participant observation, interviews, and focus groups would provide deeper insight into audiences' perspectives and their perceived role in infotainment production.

Finally, considering populism as a political style rather than an ideology, the two cases presented here represent right-wing politics, while one represents left-wing politics. However, the case chosen to represent left-wing politics revealed that it published content extremely specific to the national context, with few strong observations about participatory audiences compared to the other two cases. Furthermore, Mexico's style of "left" wing politics does not fit neatly alongside many other political movements gaining global traction. Future studies should continue to examine the representation of various manifestations of populist influencers and their relationships with audiences. These studies could yield analyses of dark participation content that spans transnational or ideological internet communities, offering a more complete picture of radicalization processes (and moving us further from the myth of a dangerous "rabbit hole"). Still, within the infinite digital media

environment, where no distinct universe exists from which to draw a representative or purposive sample, qualitative inquiry and case study approaches, as utilized in this study, are appropriate. This is particularly true on platforms like YouTube, which have altered their APIs to make data less accessible and more costly for researchers.

YouTube newsmakers enjoy convenient accountability; they can embrace everyday users and their financial contributions under the guise of authentic engagement, while positioning themselves as common enemies, all while keeping them at arm's length to avoid direct association with hate speech, disinformation, and lies. Participatory culture is a double-edged sword that may lower barriers to collective organizing but can also amplify forms of dark participation. This paper demonstrates that studies into content that provides both information and entertainment value must go beyond this mere dual-genre classification. That is, we must also consider the social networking and participatory value in today's media environment, particularly on platforms like YouTube, which are increasingly used as primary sources of news and information (Newman, 2024). As trust, viewership, and financial contributions to traditional news sources wane, it is pertinent to understand the media logic and production processes of these popular sources that simultaneously provide news, entertainment, and social interaction.

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AI Usage

The author did not use generative AI tools for the creation of this manuscript. Transcripts were generated automatically by the YouTube platform and cross-checked by the author for accuracy. During these

checks, and in cases where English translations are provided, the author provides her own translation, at times verified by Google Translate to ensure additional meanings of a word, colloquialism, or phrase were considered.

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