



“Immigration Will Destroy Us” & Other Talking Points

Uncovering the tactics
of anti-immigration
messaging on YouTube



Contents

1	Executive Summary
4	Introduction
6	Identifying the Moveable Middle
9	The Great Replacement Network
18	The Power of Packaging
24	Conclusion
25	Acknowledgments
26	Appendix



Executive Summary

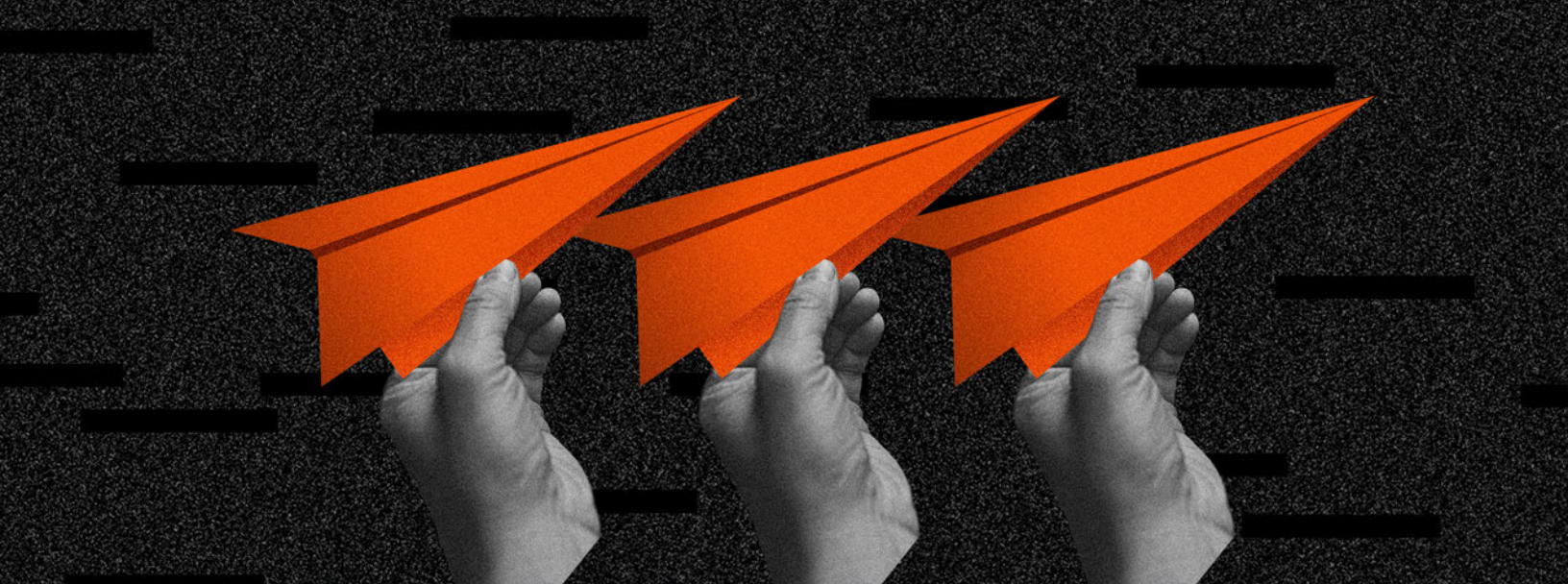
The Scope of the Problem

The most successful anti-immigration videos on YouTube, which have collectively garnered over 100 million views, prominently feature variations of the Great Replacement, a white nationalist theory. With repetition and reach, this narrative is having a profound effect on American attitudes on immigration. Through research, we determined that with similar packaging, pro-immigration content can be significantly more effective.

The central narrative across top performing anti-immigration videos is:

It's logical to be against immigration → **because immigration will destroy us.**

- Opposing immigration is a rational, reasonable position.
- Pro-immigration advocates are overly empathetic, incapable of responsible decision-making.
- Pro-immigration advocates are too concerned with being politically correct to solve any real societal problems.
- The “data” logically show that the U.S. is undergoing an invasion by foreigners.
- This invasion threatens you, your family, and your way of life.



Distribution Tactics

The messages are distributed through the following tactics:

Misrepresent Data

Anti-immigration content creators purposefully mislead their audiences, often sharing credible information from reputable research organizations, like Pew Research Center, while leaving out key context that would discredit or complicate their claims. Their arguments appear to be supported by data when they are not.

Capitalize on Stereotypes

Deep-seated stereotypes, common in anti-immigration video content, are used to scare audiences. While many stereotypes and tropes exist in nativist content, in our analysis of the top performing anti-immigration videos, most of them feature one of two stereotypes: undocumented Latine* immigrants or Middle Eastern Muslim legal asylum seekers.

Target All Immigration

While much advocacy work and news coverage has focused the immigration narrative around the undocumented experience, anti-immigration content on YouTube also pushes messaging for extreme cuts to legal immigration.

*Also known as Latinx. Define American uses “Latine,” which originated within the Latine genderqueer community, because it’s easier to conjugate in Spanish and due to criticisms of the anglicization of “Latinx.” Like identity, language is constantly evolving, and we look forward to seeing how this conversation continues.



Testing Counternarratives

Our research determined that with similar packaging, pro-immigration content can be significantly more effective than anti-immigration content.

Here's what we learned:

Videos effectively drive real-world action.

Online narratives have real world implications for immigrant communities. Our research in key swing states shows that YouTube is not only a critical space for shaping opinion on immigration, but those viewpoints translate into real-world actions, including voting patterns.

The explainer video genre builds trust.

In randomized controlled trial tests where we compared various popular digital video styles, we found that a genre referred to as “explainer videos” are the most powerful for shaping, and changing, opinions on immigration. Explainer videos are educational in style, featuring a host who concisely explains complicated issues. We also found that explainer videos are the most common format in the anti-immigration network we studied.

Video aesthetics make a difference in how the content is received.

Visual cues within videos have a significant impact on how messages are received. For example, we found that the same immigration message performs better with animation, rather than with photographs.

Expertise doesn't always matter.

Despite being regarded by audiences as qualified to speak on immigration, hosts who had impressive credentials such as ‘Princeton professor’ or ‘Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist’ were not trusted much more than the same person with no listed qualifications.

Influencer strategies are not one-size-fits-all.

Audiences have a high trust level in influencers who they know and already follow. However, our research revealed that a high subscriber count can cause active distrust if the influencer is speaking to an audience outside of their fanbase.



Introduction

At Define American, we advocate for more humanized and accurate portrayals of immigrants in the media. We believe that through narrative change, we can shift the culture around immigration in the United States, and ultimately improve the lives of immigrants in our country, regardless of their status. Our work over the years has involved close collaboration with creators in Hollywood, as well as reporters and editors in legacy news media. But in 2018, we began noticing a disturbing trend. From healthcare to our political system, the rise of online mis- and disinformation was reshaping our national rhetoric and culture.

On January 6, 2021, when the U.S. Capitol came under attack, the line between digital conspiracy theory and real-life consequences blurred. The attempted coup was born out of the far-right echo chambers of the internet — spaces that continue to exist and grow regardless of who holds power in Washington. The fight for America’s digital identity is well underway, and digital video — especially YouTube — is a critical battleground.

Scholars have been mapping the forces driving these trends for close to a decade. The work of Benkler, Faris, and Roberts¹ as well as Lewis, Marwick, and Partin² exposed the extent and power of far-right influencer networks, specifically on YouTube. Moreover, Lewis³ revealed a vast network of far-right social media influencers on YouTube who were using its algorithm to create an ecosystem of disinformation and far-right rhetoric. Through the work of these and other scholars, we learned the reach and impact of vitriolic narratives attacking immigrants, and the mainstream media’s amplification effect.

We set out to discover how extreme narratives online were shaping public perception of immigrants offline as well. What does narrative advocacy look like in the digital space, where the gatekeepers are diffuse, and the editorial standards for social media are all but non-existent? There is an urgent need for a better understanding of how anti-immigration narratives succeed online, if we hope to develop the advocacy tools to fight back.

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1. Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.
 2. Lewis, R., Marwick, A. E., & Partin, W. C. (2021). “We dissect stupidity and respond to it”: Response videos and networked harassment on YouTube. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(5), 735–756. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221989781>
 3. Lewis, R. (2018). *Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube*. Data & Society. Retrieved from: https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/DS_Alternative_Influence.pdf



The best place to start in developing an effective digital strategy to combat anti-immigrant rhetoric is to establish what prevalent narratives on social media are already shaping public opinion. A study by the investigative non-profit *bellingcat*⁴ makes a strong case for YouTube as the most influential site for far-right radicalization online. The work of **Becca Lewis at Data and Society** further underscores the power of YouTube. However, the anti-immigration narratives outlined in this report have a pervasive impact beyond the YouTube platform. We view this work as a starting point for more essential exploration into anti-immigration rhetoric across all of social media.

The objectives for this report are twofold: map the landscape of anti-immigration content on YouTube and test tools for pro-immigration counter-narratives. First, we conducted landscape and content analyses of anti-immigrant videos on YouTube. The findings point to a cohesive narrative that is repeated and amplified across digital and mainstream media outlets.

Second, we aimed to understand what content is powerful enough to persuade the public to shift their attitudes around immigration. Our randomized controlled testing revealed that the video genre and animation styles most prevalent in the anti-immigration content are also the most effective in shaping people's opinions on immigration. Using the same packaging, however, pro-immigration messages are significantly more effective in shifting opinion. Our research points to an opportunity for advocates to better communicate with online audiences. Our findings and recommendations for content creators are included in the companion **toolkit** for this research report.

By understanding anti-immigration content on YouTube, we can build effective communication strategies to disrupt it. More broadly, we hope this study can contribute to a larger body of work in the development and implementation of research-based narrative change strategies for the digital age.

4. Evans, R. (2018). *From memes to Infowars: How 75 fascist activists were "red-pilled."* *bellingcat*. Retrieved from <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2018/10/11/memes-infowars-75-fascist-activists-red-pilled/>.



Identifying the Moveable Middle

By Sarah E. Lowe and Shauna Siggelkow

Who is the Moveable Middle?

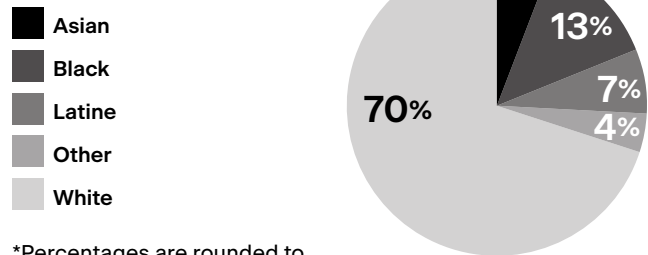
Media and politicians often characterize immigration as a partisan issue that divides neatly along political lines. While general patterns exist, our findings suggest that this simplistic alignment is not accurate. Instead, a critical mass of Americans waver somewhere in the middle on matters of immigration. They represent a wide swath of the U.S. population and cannot be consistently categorized into political, regional, or ethnic groups. This “Moveable Middle” on immigration have views that are relatively unformed; they are neither strongly anti- nor pro-immigration. Reaching this audience is critical for shifting the rhetoric and politics around immigration in the United States.

Drawing from *More in Common's*⁵ research, we developed a litmus test for identifying the Moveable Middle. This survey asked research participants to identify with core belief statements around immigration. The process sorted them into a spectrum of viewpoints. Those who did not identify clearly with pro- or anti-immigration rhetoric were defined as the Moveable Middle, a political swing group with varying but no staunchly held opinions on immigration. This audience is critical in national discourse because of its size; according to scholars at the Norman Lear Center and futurePerfect lab⁶, this population is approximately 18% of the U.S. population. Even a slight shift in this group’s opinions could sway them into either a pro- or anti-immigration mindset.

Our audience polling revealed that the Moveable Middle, compared to the general U.S. population, tends to be whiter (70% compared to 60%) and less Latine (7% compared to 18.5%). Asian and Black demographics look similar to the general population.

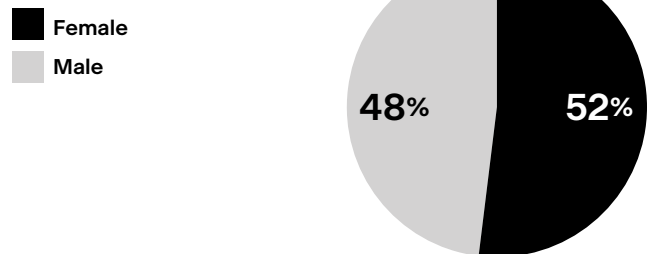
A Snapshot of the Moveable Middle

Ethnicity*

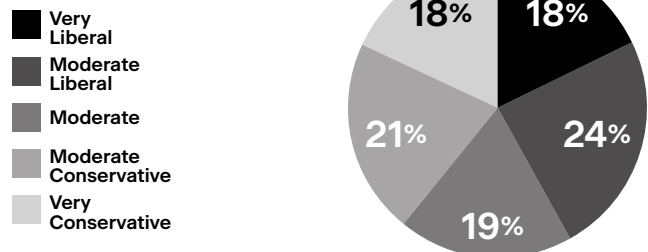


*Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

Gender



Politics



Our audience polling revealed that the Moveable Middle, compared to the general U.S. population, tends to be more white and less Latine.

5. Hawkins, S. (2019). (rep.). Speaking to Core Beliefs: Communicating about Immigration in 2019-2020. More in Common. Retrieved from: <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/qdwpkoux/pdf.pdf>

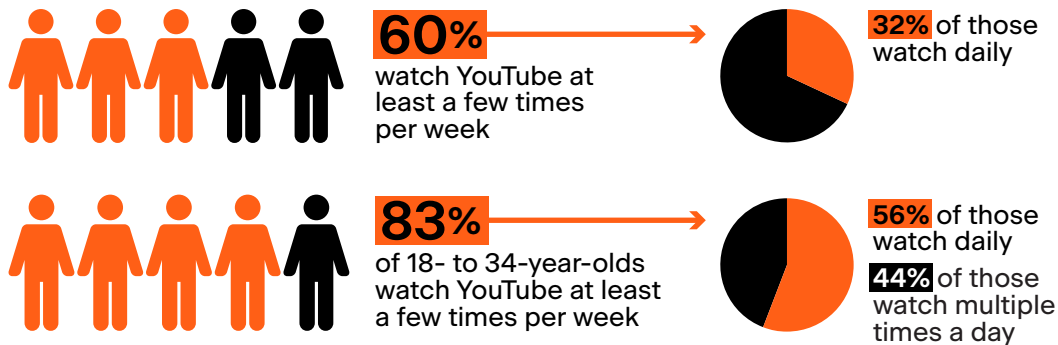
6. Blakely, J., Watson-Currie, E., Shin, H., Trotta Valentini, L., Saucier, C., & Boisvert, H. (2019). (rep.). Are you what you watch? Tracking the political divide through TV preferences. Norman Lear Center. Retrieved from https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/are_you_what_you_watch.pdf

How important is YouTube in shifting attitudes and actions on immigration?

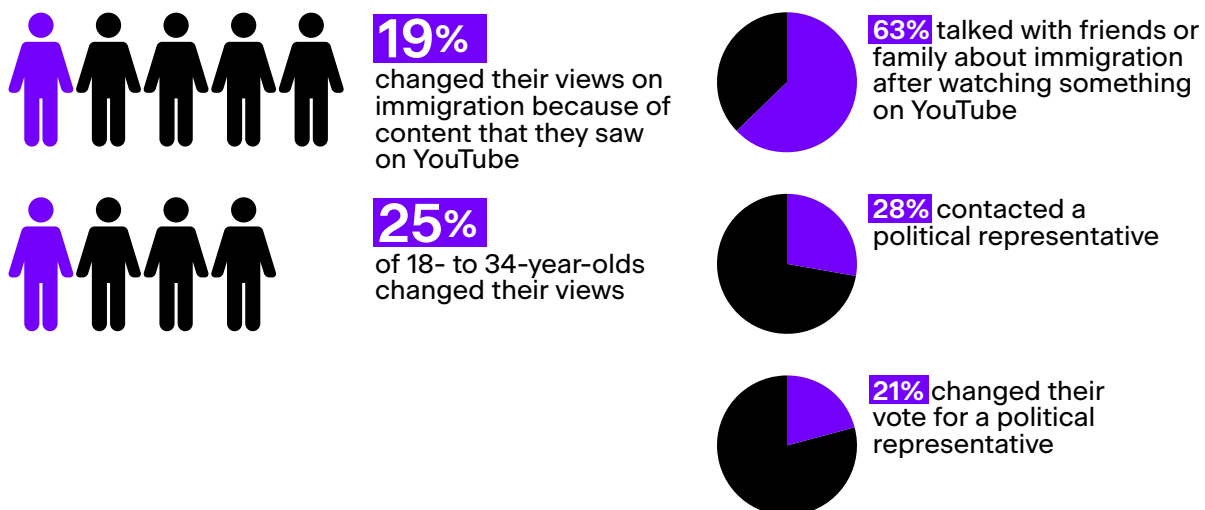
By polling⁷ likely voters in swing states, we saw remarkable results that show the power of YouTube. In this group, 19% report having changed their views on immigration because of content they saw on YouTube, including 25% among those aged 18–34. 63% have also talked with friends or family about immigration after watching something on YouTube; 28% contacted a political representative; and 21% changed their vote for a political representative.

Social media platforms are fertile ground for shaping real-world thought and actions around immigration in the U.S. What, then, is the video content that is so persuasive to the Moveable Middle audience?

Among YouTube viewers who vote in swing states:



Does YouTube affect their beliefs and the actions they take? (Yes!)



7. Original research conducted by Change Research in collaboration with Define American



The Great Replacement Network

By Dr. Francesca Tripodi, Shauna Siggelkow, and Sarah E. Lowe

A toxic narrative system

“Some people say mass immigration into the United States can help reduce world poverty. Is that true? Well, no, it’s not, and let me show you why...”

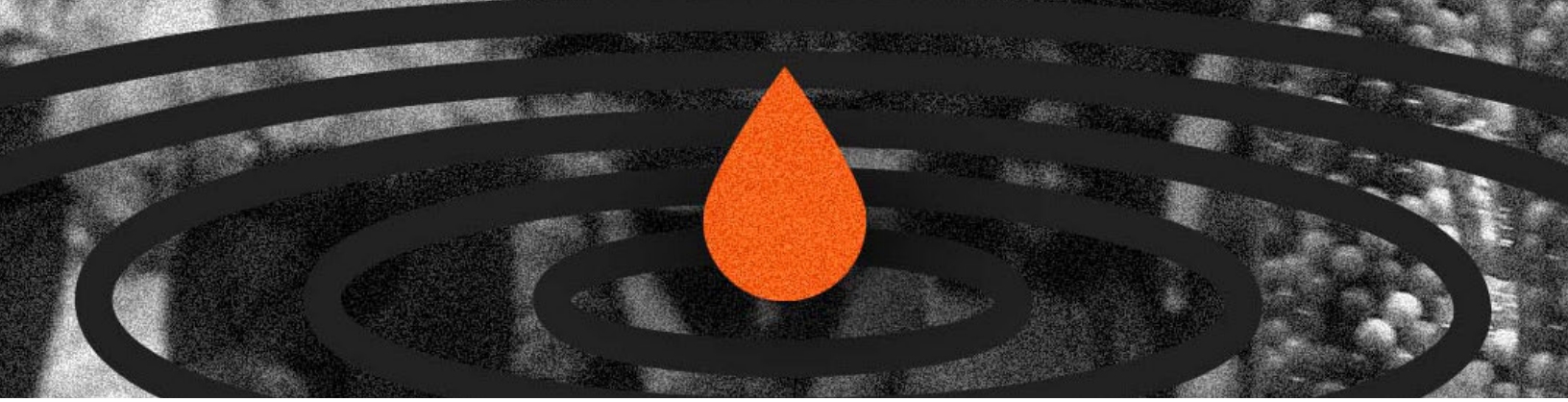
These are the first words of a viral video (6.5 million views on YouTube, over 130 million views on Facebook) entitled “Immigration, World Poverty, and Gumballs.” Posted over 10 years ago, the video features a relatively unknown presenter, Roy Beck, standing in front of a large audience in what looks like a college lecture hall. He proceeds to conduct a demonstration with gumballs with a clear central message: there are too many poor people in the world, and they all want to come here and take our resources. They want to come here to take over our country. Immigration will destroy us.

The presentation looks like an academic lecture and feels like a TED Talk. But Beck is not a professor, and this is not a college course. This video was created by NumbersUSA, one of the most prominent anti-immigration think tanks in the country.

NumbersUSA, the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), and the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) are the three largest anti-immigrant organizations in the United States. They were all founded by the late John Tanton. An ophthalmologist turned philosopher, Tanton’s original organization was called the Society for Genetic Education, inspired by ideas he formed in his 1975 paper, “The Case for Passive Eugenics.”

Beginning in the 1980s, under the banner of environmentalism and population control, Tanton started building the Tanton Network, a collection of anti-immigration think tanks. Today, this well-funded network operates as a powerful lobbying machine. Members from these organizations have gone on to serve in the White House and in Congress. You can see them regularly on TV news, or in print articles from major media outlets, being quoted as reliable, credible experts on immigration. These organizations, some of whom have been designated as official hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center, are also prolific on social media, producing their own digital content. Their goal is simple: to limit or stop all immigration to the U.S. by convincing Americans that immigrants threaten national security, the economy, and collective social order.





The logic of the “Immigration, World Poverty, and Gumballs” video has continued to inspire influencers to create videos with similar arguments and framing. Considering the reach and impact of this pivotal piece of content, the video is a useful starting point for a landscape analysis of subversive anti-immigration content on YouTube.

Our methodology used qualitative content analyses to identify keywords in conjunction with Tubular, a marketing software for understanding audience insights. The keyword searches brought in additional anti-immigration content that ultimately resulted in a list of the top 23 most viewed anti-immigration videos on YouTube and, more importantly, the network of channels that published them. These videos served as the foundation of our analysis.

With upload dates spanning thirteen years (2007–2020), this group of **23 videos** represents the most watched anti-immigration videos on YouTube as of this writing (November 2021). Most videos in this network have over four million views, and cumulatively, they have amassed over 100 million views on YouTube alone. These videos can be considered the “head,” while thousands of videos reaching smaller audiences are the “long tail” of anti-immigration media on YouTube. The network in this study focuses solely on the anti-immigration videos with the highest view count. Within our data set, thematic and stylistic consistencies emerged. The most common characteristic is a shared narrative called the “Great Replacement Theory.” For this reason, we call this collection of channels the “Great Replacement Network,” or the “GRN.”

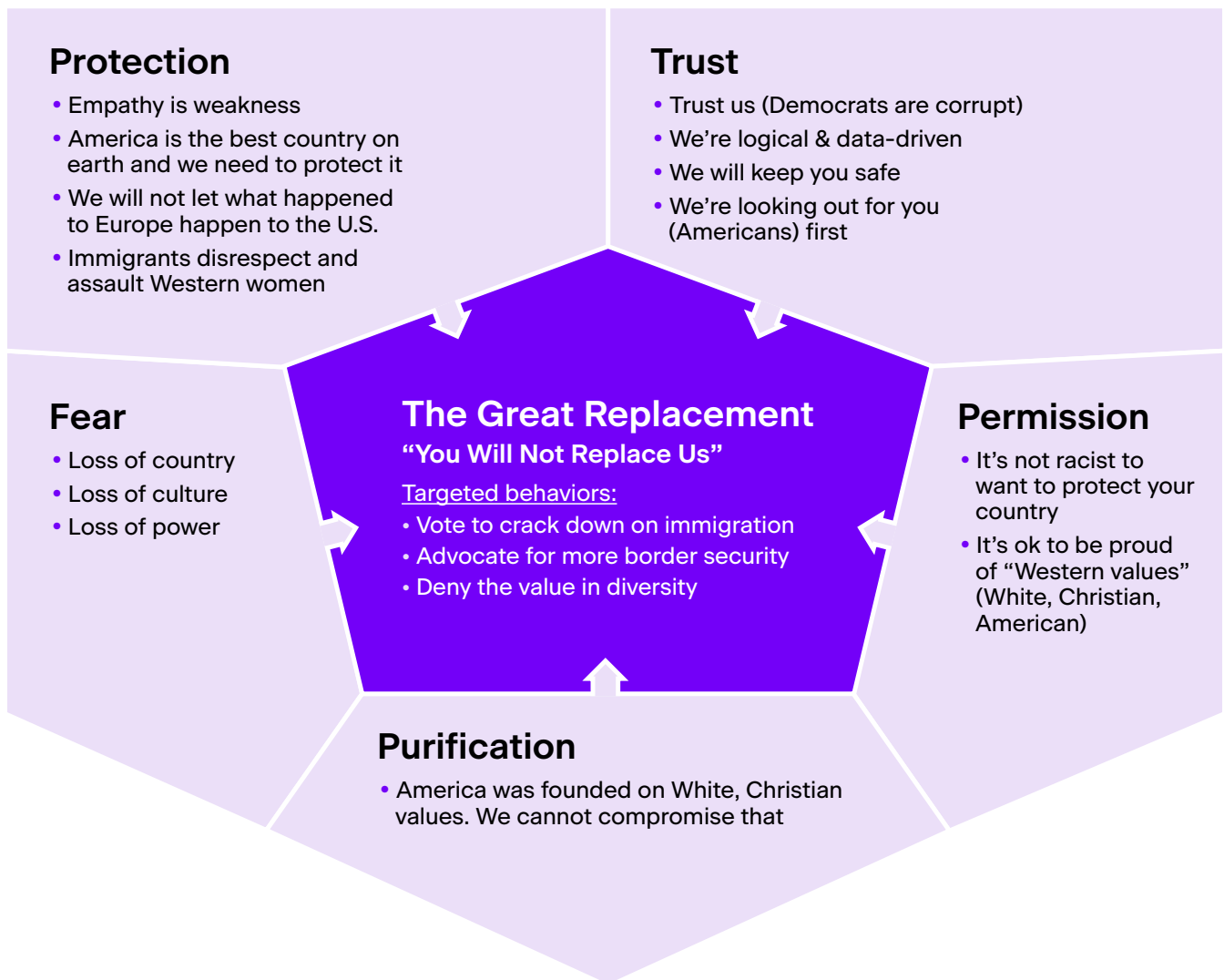
The Great Replacement Theory originates from critiques of migrants starting in the 1890s by French nationalist Maurice Barrès. In 2012, it was re-introduced to modern audiences by Renaud Camus. The theory explains how non-white foreigners will migrate en masse to white, Western nations, overwhelm these economies, and bring about the collapse of Western civilization. Current U.S. supporters of the Great Replacement Theory rely on census data that show America moving towards more racial plurality as evidence for their argument. White nationalists then justify anti-immigration rhetoric as a form of self defense, since the ultimate result of the Great Replacement is believed to be a “genocide” of white people. In 2019, both the shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51, and in a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, killing 21, were inspired by the Great Replacement Theory.

GRN videos commonly draw on demographic data to insinuate that immigrants will soon outnumber existing residents, overwhelm natural resources, create unfavorable economic conditions, and negatively impact the culture. The GRN also regularly draws on the same personalities to support their arguments, creating a unified narrative around the Great Replacement. Rooted in fear of loss of culture, nativists invite the viewer to trust them, since they are presented as the *logical* side of the argument. The audience has permission to feel proud and protective of Western culture, which is framed as homogenous and under attack.

Ultimately, the messaging system slowly walks the Moveable Middle audience towards extremist positions on immigration.

Three prominent YouTube channels emerged from our analysis: FAIR and NumbersUSA (both from the Tanton Network), and the prolific explainer video channel PragerU. Of the top 23 anti-immigration videos of the past 15 years, eight were produced by PragerU and six were produced by a Tanton Network channel.

How the the GRN's messages feed into the Great Replacement Theory:



The GRN's two major immigrant villains

GRN content invites the collective “we” to fear two major villains: undocumented, Latine border crossers who are the face of illegal immigration; and Islamic, asylum-seeking, undercover terrorists who are the face of legal immigration. Both stereotypical boogeymen trigger fear and anxiety. Lay audiences are steeped in visions of invasion from dangerous, law-breaking criminals who seek to destroy everything about America, from jobs to values.

Villain #1 Undocumented immigrants

Despite the diversity of the undocumented population, GRN videos about undocumented immigrants *overwhelmingly highlighted Latine subjects*. Common stories featured undocumented Latine immigrants committing crimes, bringing drugs into the country, taking jobs from the working poor, and exploiting social safety nets.

Undocumented immigrant boogeymen:

- Are Latine
- Are dangerous
- Are criminals
- Take advantage of social security
- Take jobs from Americans
- Flood school systems
- Leach off the country's resources
- Spread drugs

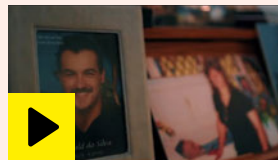
Villain #2 Legal immigrants

Legal immigration is also under attack from the GRN, but the content features a different villain. Storylines focus on Muslim immigrants and show Islam as an existential danger to the U.S. and its predominantly Christian values. The videos portray Muslims as supporting terrorism, threatening Western culture, and endangering women.

Like in the Clarion Project video “By the Numbers: The Untold Story of Muslim Opinions and Demographics,” hosts of GRN videos are often from the very immigrant populations they disparage. White supremacist ideas are thereby packaged as colorblind statistics, as if they are racially neutral because a non-white person is articulating them.

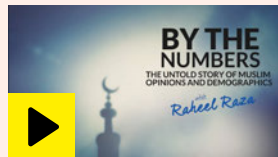
Legal immigrant boogeymen:

- Are Islamic terrorists
- Are migrants who refuse to assimilate
- Are a threat to Western women
- Spread Islam, a threat to Christianity
- Will exploit the system to bring over many more relatives



Example “A Stolen Life: The Ronald da Silva Story” (FAIR), 4.8M views – About four minutes long and shot in a documentary style,

this video shares the story of a Hungarian mother who immigrated to the United States legally. It follows her son's tragic murder at the hands of an “illegal alien” from Mexico. Her single, heartbreaking story is meant to represent the danger posed by all undocumented immigrants, bolstering a violent and inaccurate view of immigrants as dangerous criminals. The goal of this framework is to center fear and vengeance in the immigration policy debate.



Example “By the Numbers: The Untold Story of Muslim Opinions and Demographics” (Clarion Project), 4.5M views – In this

14-minute video, Raheel Raza, a self-identified Sunni Muslim, speaks directly to camera and uses demographic projections and powerfully disturbing images to equate the rise of Muslim populations as inextricably tied to the rise of violence in Western countries. She also argues that Western society is vulnerable to this rise in extremism because it cannot engage in honest, fact-based conversations due to “PC culture.” Again, the goal of the framework is to center fear around immigration policies.

Prager U

“ PragerU, short for Prager University, is an American conservative organization that produces content to promote ‘Judeo-Christian values’ to their millions of followers through short, lecture-style videos.

Although PragerU is not an academic institution, the word ‘university’ in its name implies that the right-wing messaging they spread is factually correct and expert-driven. A number of PragerU’s videos spread anti-Muslim rhetoric and conspiracy theories. The organization was founded in 2010 by conservative radio talk show host Dennis Prager and radio producer Allen Estrin in order to combat perceived ‘liberal bias in the American education system.’” **(Bridge: A Georgetown University Initiative)**

According to their bi-annual report, PragerU’s 2021 budget was \$50 million. In that year alone, their content was viewed over 5 billion times.



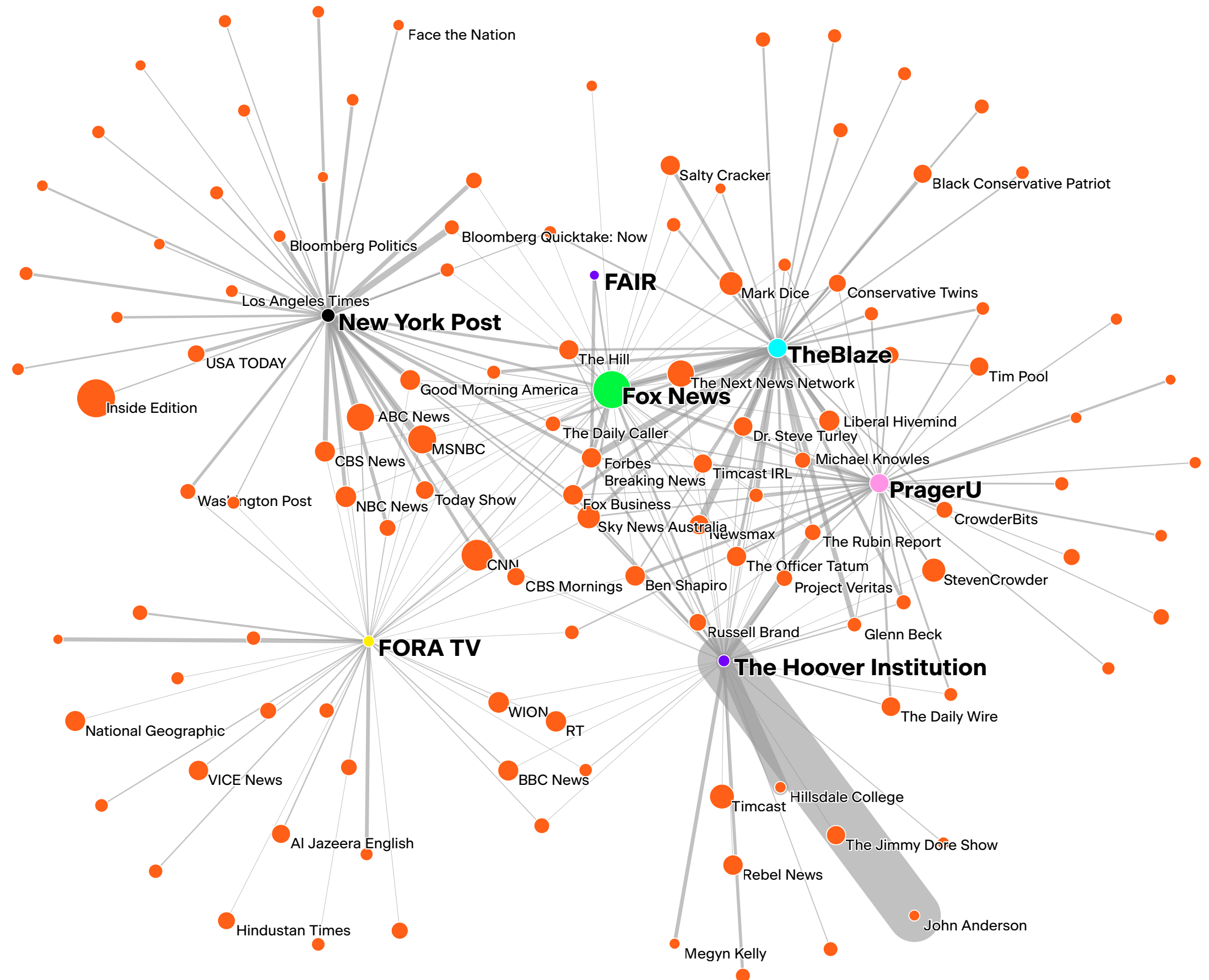
National Geographic’s “Border Wars”

Produced by National Geographic, “Border Wars” is a series that follows border agents as they catch illegal activity — like drug smuggling — on the Southern U.S. border. The videos earn tens of millions of views per episode. The series associates the Southern border and the act of crossing it with criminality. While the videos did not quite fit into our criteria for inclusion in the GRN, it’s important to note that mainstream outlets, like National Geographic, can amplify the anti-immigration frames identified in this report.

The Audience Landscape of the Great Replacement Network

In this graphic, we can see the audience relationship among the various GRN channels. The audience relationship was determined by a relevance score, which factored in audience affinity (likelihood of an audience member to subscribe to both channels) and audience overlap (the number of audience members who watch both channels). Each of the channels in the network had other GRN channels within its top twenty audience relevance scores.

The result is this visualization, showing the interconnected audience landscape of the GRN. The size of the circle equals total audience engagement for the lifetime of the channel. The thickness of the line represents the audience affinity between the channels. The channels within the GRN are multicolored, and appear in bold. Channels with shared audience relevance scores are represented in orange.



Data visualization by Jonathan Zong

Tactics of anti-immigration YouTube

Our analysis identified three tactics the GRN relies on to legitimize their nativist messaging and sway their audiences.

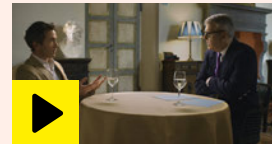
“Trust me, I’ve done the research”

GRN creators position themselves as the voice of reason and “common sense,” while characterizing pro-immigrant advocates as overly emotional and illogical. Many of their videos draw a direct line between their logic and the truth: “You can trust us because we are not afraid to speak the truth.”

By manipulating demographic data to support their claims, these videos spread misinformation about immigration policy. GRN creators suggest that pro-immigration advocates have not considered practical concerns, but those on the anti-immigration side have the intelligence and courage to see things logically.

Be afraid. Very afraid.

Anti-immigration videos often label pro-immigration advocates as emotionally manipulative, since they often reference human suffering to advocate for immigration reform. Yet our analysis revealed that the GRN is consistently playing on their own audiences’ emotions through fear-based messages.



Example “The Suicide of Europe” (PragerU), 4.3M views, and “The Death of Europe” (Hoover Institute), 3.5M views,

both feature Douglas Murray, a prolific neoconservative author, who argues that Western European countries are in decline because of lax immigration regulation. The central theme is that Western Europe’s immigration policies are determined by feelings over function, and by political correctness over logic. The emotional decision-making means Europe accepts too many refugees seeking asylum. Since refugees have no real interest in the host countries’ cultures, they will not assimilate, and eventually their culture will overwhelm Western civilization. Thus, being anti-immigration is not racist; it is an imperative for the survival of Western civilization.



Example “Glenn Beck: Zeta Gang Takes Control of Border,” 3.3M views

– In this news clip, talking heads discuss the

Zeta gang, a highly trained paramilitary group who are wreaking havoc in Mexico, and bringing that violence to the U.S. Its central argument is that our border is completely out of control, and is vulnerable to Mexican cartels and terrorists. As Mike Cutler, a fellow for the Center for Immigration Studies, a Tanton Network organization, states: “If we have no control over the borders, we have no control of our national security.”

Kernels of truth used out of context

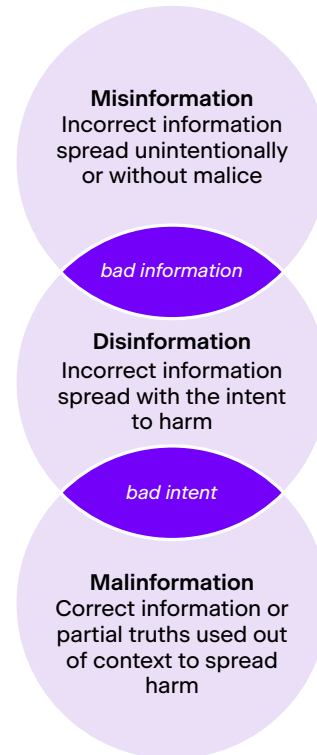
While mis- and disinformation are commonly discussed around the spread of harmful digital content, malinformation is the tactic most commonly seen in GRN videos. Malinformation contains kernels of truth, but the messengers of the information manipulate data to mislead their audiences into unsupported conclusions.

Use of data in the GRN is often misleading and blended with anecdotal evidence. For example, in “A Nation of Immigrants” (PragerU), 6.3M views, host Michelle Malkin claims “the overwhelming numbers [of immigrants] have stymied our ability to assimilate the huddled masses.” The example she gives is that “176 different languages are spoken in the New York public school system. How did we get here?” While this statistic may be true (no source is provided), Malkin insinuates that a multilingual student body impedes learning. While this number simply reflects the diversity of the population, it is used to imply a strain on public resources. The way this number is used brands ESL as an epithet, implying that people who speak multiple languages are unwilling to speak or learn English and are reluctant to assimilate to American society. The strategy presents prejudice as grounded in fact.

This tactic produces an anti-immigrant narrative system that is difficult to disprove through fact-checking alone because the inaccuracy lies in the framing, and is therefore nuanced and complex.

Malinformation also includes misleading data visualizations in which evidence-based statistics are taken out of context and represented in misleading ways.

This tactic produces an anti-immigrant narrative system that is difficult to disprove through fact-checking alone because the inaccuracy lies in the framing, and is therefore nuanced and complex.



Examples

Misinformation –

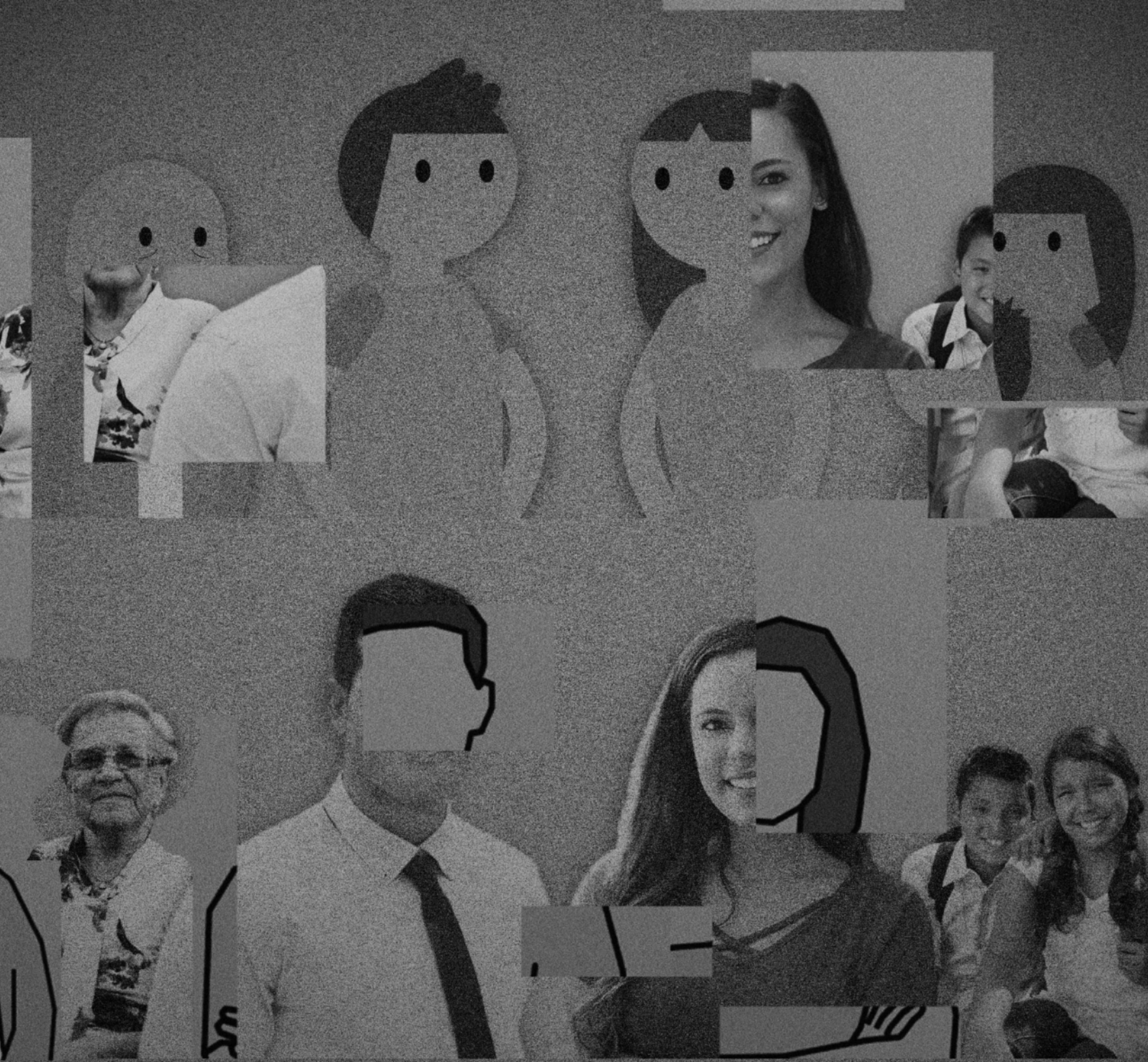
A news anchor on television *unintentionally* reports an incorrect statistic about the number of refugees coming into the country which *misinforms the audience*.

Disinformation –

A nativist influencer on social media *intentionally* creates a graphic using false data to make it seem like immigrants are committing high levels of crime, *lying to the audience* to make them think immigrants are dangerous.

Malinformation –

An anti-immigration organization *intentionally* takes a demographic statistic out of context, which *misleads the audience* into believing an unsupported conclusion, like the inevitability of white genocide.



The Power of Packaging

By Shauna Siggelkow and Sarah E. Lowe

How to speak to the Moveable Middle

Why are GRN videos so popular? Is the style of their videos compelling for the Moveable Middle audience? Do they succeed in changing hearts and minds?

Through randomized controlled trial testing of video content with the research technology platform Swayable, we uncovered powerful learnings about how visual signifiers subtly communicate to the Moveable Middle on YouTube.

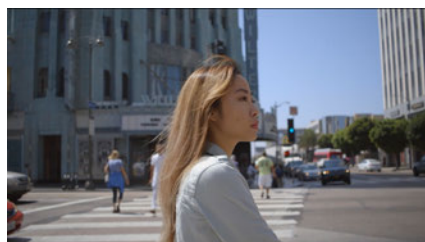
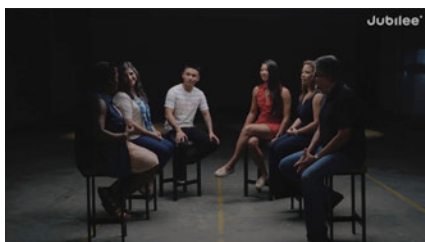
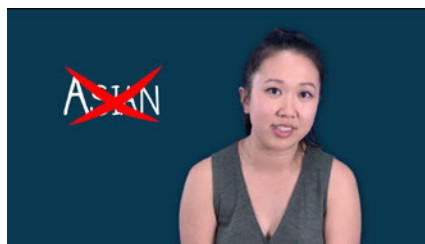
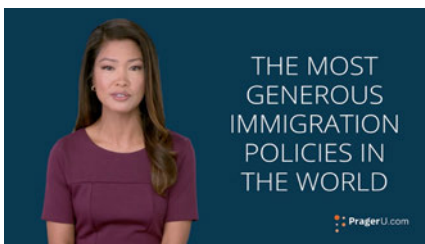
Many of the videos in the GRN have the aesthetics and tone of educational or journalistic content, regardless of a video's affiliation with academic institutions or news organizations. Our preliminary findings on pro-immigration content showed a starkly different pattern: content that leans toward personal narratives and scripted storytelling. More landscape analysis of existing pro-immigration content in this area is needed. For our research purposes, we tested the appeal of different stylistic approaches to a Moveable Middle audience.

Our first test examined genre. We conducted a randomized controlled trial test with 6,534 participants that compared common digital video styles employed by both pro- and anti-immigration YouTube creators.

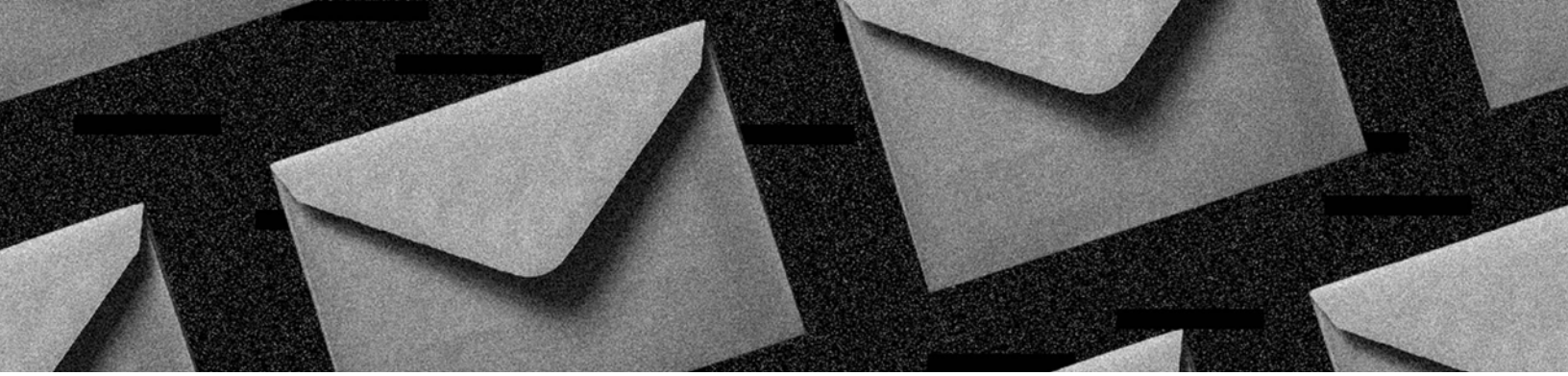
We pulled clips from:

- An anti-immigration explainer video produced by PragerU
- A pro-immigration explainer video shot in PragerU's style, but produced by Define American
- An animated personal narrative
- A documentary
- A roundtable group discussion

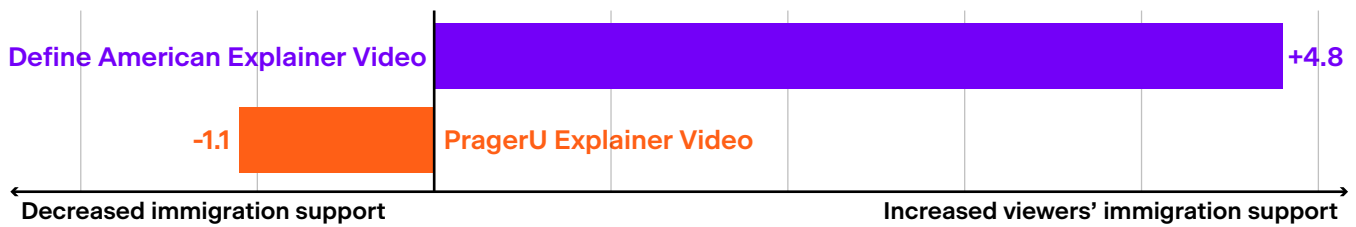
Our goal was to eliminate as many variables between the videos as possible. In each video, the subject matter was the same (family-based migration) and the host was always a young Asian woman, with the exception of the roundtable group discussion. In that clip, a young Latine woman and young Black woman were also featured speaking. None of the videos featured music.



Top left to bottom right: anti-immigration PragerU explainer video, pro-immigration Define American explainer video, animated personal narrative from Storycorps, documentary personal narrative produced by Define American, and round table discussion produced by Jubilee.



With similar packaging, pro-immigration content can be significantly more effective than anti-immigration content.



The pro-immigration Define American explainer video performed significantly better with the Moveable Middle than the anti-immigration PragerU video. Again, this clip looked and felt like a video produced by PragerU, but contained pro-immigrant messaging. When pro-immigration advocates lean into presenting perspectives as grounded in logic and package the message in a visual language that appeals to the Moveable Middle, arguments are better received by the audience.

When packaging of the video content was the same, but the messages opposite, the Moveable Middle were swayed more pro-immigrant than anti-immigrant.

Animation style plays a role in shaping opinions on immigration

GRN videos often use animation to oversimplify the complexity of the U.S. immigration system. Animation styles vary, but they often look basic and approachable, almost like children's cartoons.



Example “It’s Time to End Chain Migration” (FAIR), 3M views. The animation style looks low-budget and cute, making it feel simple and approachable.

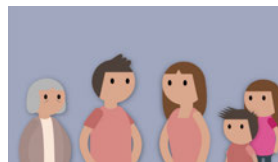
Explainer videos in the GRN commonly spread misinformation through animation. Statistics and facts are used out of context, in a visually appealing way, to draw false conclusions and shape public opinion.

Animation styles are infinitely variable, so we decided to test four aesthetics with 2,524 Moveable Middle participants, drawn from an overall sample size of 7,372. The graphics in the four videos that we produced, all focused on the benefits of family-based migration, ranged from abstract to realistic. We used the exact same voice-over for each video, and the same images. The only difference between the videos was the animation style.

The randomized controlled trial test revealed that a semi-realistic animation style is highly effective at swaying Moveable Middles.

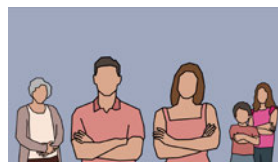


The first clip was highly **abstract animation**, similar to figures you might see on bathroom signage.



Next, we presented a slightly more stylized, but still fairly abstract, style that we named **“clean cartoon.”**

This most resembled “It’s Time to End Chain Migration” (FAIR).



For the third video, we tested a style created from outlining and animating photographs, which we dubbed

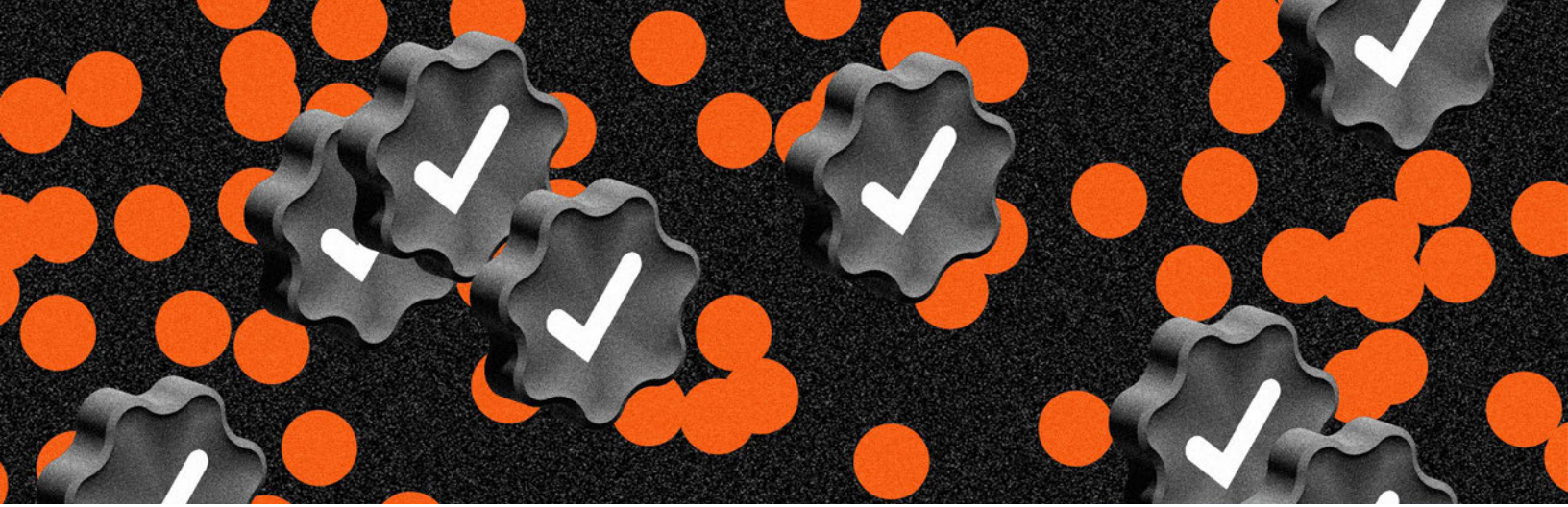
“semi-realistic.” This style is still clearly animated, but the proportions and shapes are closer to real life. This style most resembles PragerU’s preferred animation.



Finally, we played a video with **photographs** of real people.

The semi-realistic animation style was the most effective at swaying the Movable Middle. It was twice as effective in swaying the audience as Abstract Stick Figure, which was the least effective animation style. Again, this semi-realistic animation style is very similar to an aesthetic commonly used by PragerU.

Animations created by William Johnston-Carter



Professional credentials do not necessarily increase trust

The “Immigration, World Poverty, and Gumballs” video positioned a relative unknown, Roy Beck, who does not have a PhD, as a professor-like figure in a lecture hall. We wanted to understand whether Beck’s lack of academic credentials had any impact on the audiences’ trust of his message.

To test trustworthiness and its relationship to qualifications, we used an excerpt of a Define American video in which a bearded white man in a button-down shirt and glasses talked about immigration history in a relatively dry manner with no bias. With a sample size of 1,787 Moveable Middle viewers, we tested the same video with different listed credentials:

- A Princeton professor
- A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist
- A YouTube personality with five million subscribers
- No title

We were careful not to indicate a news publication for the journalist’s credentials, as we did not want news brand preferences to impact the results.

Interestingly, when specifically asked about the qualifications and trustworthiness of the presenter, the Moveable Middle viewed both the professor and the journalist as highly qualified to talk about immigration, but only slightly more trustworthy than someone with absolutely no credentials.

Both the highly qualified professor and journalist were trusted at almost the same level as someone with no credentials.

The “YouTube personality” credentials received low scores across every group polled. However, when the same group of respondents were asked what type of content they find most trustworthy in real life, “explainer videos from influencers they follow” scored higher than news clips and college lectures. This requires additional research.

Our interpretation of these data is that YouTube influencers have a significant amount of trust from their followers. A subscriber count alone does not equal trust. In some instances it can even generate active distrust if the influencer is addressing an audience outside of their following. Trustworthiness for popular creators is not a one-size-fits-all strategy, nor is it necessarily transferable. Regardless of credentials, YouTube influencers are the most trusted among audiences, as long as the audience is already familiar with their brand.



Areas for future research

Pro-immigrant ecosystem

While we were able to do a deep dive into the content creators, messages, style, and narratives of anti-immigration content, we did not seek to measure pro-immigration content on YouTube. A comparable study of the pro-immigration digital video landscape may offer fruitful insights for the immigrant rights movement.

Style

We conducted studies on the genre, animation style, and messenger for impactful video content, but there are endless possibilities for continued research in aesthetic preferences. For example: color palettes, music choices, image quality, variations on messenger identity, video length, etc.

Other social platforms

YouTube is by no means the only social media platform to host anti-immigration narratives. Further research is needed to illustrate the full cross-platform, anti-immigration digital ecosystem.



Conclusion

The messages of the GRN have clearly infiltrated the mainstream. They are no longer surprising and are repeated by political leaders and celebrities. It is not shocking that these videos reflect extremist ideas of undocumented immigrants as violent, nor is it surprising that they use fear to promote isolationism.

What *is* revealing is the consistency and cohesion of both the messages and tactics across multiple channels. What is surprising is the sophistication with which anti-immigration content has been delivered to digital audiences for well over a decade.

The Great Replacement does not typically look extreme. It might be in the subtext of FOX News coverage, a talking point in an explainer video, or baked into a meme that is reshared through social media. It can look educational with appealing animation, and is often delivered by familiar, trusted influencers. The result of its spread is the systematic and sustained dehumanization of immigrants and people of color.

Yet, in our research, we find great hope.

The narrative system that drives the GRN is predictable, clear, and decipherable. So, too, are the tactics for the packaging and dissemination of its content. For human rights advocates, it is imperative for us to understand anti-immigration, digital narrative systems in order to disrupt them effectively. At Define American, we hope to do just that.

We continue to build research-backed resources for our partners and allies. Ultimately, our goal is to create our own network of content, one that provides a better, more compelling vision of this nation than the fear-fueled Great Replacement narrative.

We hope you will join us.



Acknowledgments

Authors & Contributors

This report was written by Sarah E. Lowe, Francesca Bolla Tripodi, and Shauna Siggelkow.

Define American is led by Jose Antonio Vargas.

Research collaborators: Francesca Bolla Tripodi, Change Research, Swayable, and Tubular.

Research assistant: Shauna Siggelkow.

Network analysis data visualization: Jonathan Zong.

Video editing and production: William Johnston-Carter and Shauna Siggelkow.

Design: Gabriel Lee.

Special thanks to Elizabeth Grizzle Voorhees, David Craig, Chi Zhang, Nicco Mele, and the entire Define American team.

Contact

To learn more about the research, contact Define American's Director of Research and Impact, Sarah E. Lowe, at sarah@defineamerican.com

About Define American

Define American is a culture change organization that uses the power of narrative to humanize conversations about immigrants. Our advocacy within news, entertainment, and digital media is creating an America where everyone belongs.

Images

All images used in the report are the sole property of their creators. The still images and thumbnails are used under educational fair use guidelines, for the explicit purpose of supporting this research report.



Appendix

Methodologies

Landscape and Content Analysis of the GRN

We mapped the landscape of the GRN by using Tubular, a global video measurement and analytics platform. Traditionally, Tubular is used as a tool to help brands promote their content on social media by tracking engagement and audience overlap in relation to their competitors. It enables them to keep track of trends, use metadata and keywords to search themes across platforms, and have a clear vision of different channels' audiences.

We began by conducting a content analysis on NumbersUSA's "Immigration, World Poverty, and Gumballs" video and developing a list of keyword search terms based on the metadata. The search, via Tubular, brought in additional anti-immigration videos that repeated core characteristics of the original video's argument, logic, and themes.

We then repeated the process of content analysis and metadata collection with the new set of videos, and again ran those additional data points through Tubular. When search terms began returning content we had already coded, we considered the dataset to have reached saturation. A thematic content analysis was then conducted on the top-performing 23 videos (see criteria below).

In conclusion, we searched all keywords in YouTube's own search engine to cross reference the findings from Tubular. Five additional videos were found but excluded because they did not meet the criteria for inclusion. Narrative framing across the content was largely consistent with the tenets of the Great Replacement Theory, and for this reason we have dubbed the collection of channels the Great Replacement Network or "GRN."

Inclusion criteria for the GRN:

- at least two million views
- U.S.-based YouTube channel
- produced with commentary that is disparaging, defaming or derogatory towards immigrant communities and/or immigration

Audience Survey

Change Research is a leader in polling innovation. The team at Change recruits new participants online for each poll and uses proprietary and patent-pending approaches to recruit fresh participants. They collect survey responses by publishing targeted online solicitations via advertisements on websites and social media platforms. By finding a representative set of respondents via web and social media to take a poll, Change Research is able to cast a net that is wider than phone polls.

For this study, Change Research applied its proprietary Dynamic Online Sampling Engine to yield a representative sample of likely voters across Arizona, Florida, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin using prior turnout in presidential year elections from the state voter files as a reference. The sample size was 3,282 likely voters with a margin of error of 1.7%. Weighting was performed on gender, race/ethnicity, age, state, and 2016 presidential vote.

Randomized Controlled Trial Testing of Video Styles

Swayable is a research technology platform that uses randomized controlled trial (RCT) testing to measure how effectively media content changes opinions.

Each respondent in a Swayable test is randomly allocated either to a control group or test group. They are then shown one piece of creative, and asked a set of questions. All respondents have the exact same experience except for the creative shown. If they are in test group 1, they see creative asset 1; test group 2 sees asset 2, etc. The control group is shown irrelevant 'placebo' content, often a blank image or a PSA video. This ensures the control group has as similar an experience to the test groups as possible.

The questions are a mix of segmentation questions, which the platform uses to categorize people into demographic and behavioral segments (generally asked before the creative), and metrics questions on outcomes like issue support or intent to vote, which must be asked afterwards. Wherever possible, high resolution 0–100 scales are used for answers. Swayable computes the Swayable Impact Score as a difference between the average answers in the test group compared to the control group.

This is because the average answers in the control group reflect the baseline of the public opinion. If a message is successful at increasing any metric, average responses in that test group will be higher than the baseline. If it does nothing, they will be the same.

This design is a “captive” or “forced exposure” RCT test design. Its benefit is that the overwhelming majority of people who see the creative also complete the survey. By contrast, in-channel tests from advertising platforms lose at least 95% of viewers post-exposure, creating inefficiencies and biases. While they can measure distribution effectiveness well, ad platforms do not have reliable information on creative impact, which is the more important metric — because you cannot make up for ineffective creative with better reach or engagement. The job of the creative is to change attitudes, not just drive views and clicks.

RCTs are also more reliable than pre/post tests, because those require respondents to self-report a change in attitude, which may be an easier test to execute, but yields less reliable data.

Key Themes and Keywords of Anti-Immigration YouTube

Central keywords and themes were identified from viral anti-immigration videos. These words were used within Tubular to map the GRN:

- “Protect borders”
- “border security”
- “immigration laws”
- “the open borders left”
- “Immigrants are criminals”
- “Immigrants” and “uncivilized”
- “Western Civilization”
- “western culture” and “immigration”
- “Value system of the west”
- “western value system”
- “Sharia law”
- “Cologne Germany”
- “Assimilation
- “Chain migration”
- “end chain migration”
- “Diversity visa lottery”
- “Allegiance to american values”
- “Strain on healthcare”
- “The truth about immigration”
- “Mass migration”
- “Cesar Chavez”
- “Economic effects of immigration”
- “Zeta gang”
- “illegal immigrant gangs”
- “Border wars”
- “border crises”
- “no control over border”

Videos of the Great Replacement Network

1. **Immigrants! Don't Support What you Fled (PragerU)**, 11.7M views
Oct 24, 2016
2. **Skyrocketing Unemployment - Why are Companies Hiring Illegal Workers? (FAIR)**, 10.4M views
Jul 9, 2020
3. **Immigration, World Poverty, and Gumballs (Numbers USA)**, 6.5M views
Sep 10, 2010
4. **Why Don't Feminists Fight for Muslim Women? (PragerU)**, 6.3M views
Jun 27, 2016
5. **A Nation of Immigrants (PragerU)**, 6.3M views
Aug 20, 2018
6. **Joe Horn 911 Call While He Killed 2 Intruders, Very Shocking, I Love This Guy, (MTParanormal)**, 5.8M views
Feb 20, 2015
(Note: Video has been removed)
7. **Trump Border Wall Construction by Drone (the Truth)**, 4.9M views
Feb 12, 2020
(Note: Channel has been removed)
8. **A Stolen Life: the Ronald da Silva Story (FAIR)**, 4.7M views
Aug 15, 2017
9. **MUSLIMS ATTACK CHRISTIANS IN AMERICA OVER SHARIA LAW (Rhub Bauer)**, 4.7M views
Feb 15, 2012
10. **Illegal Immigration: It's About Power (PragerU)**, 5.2M views
Oct 29, 2018
11. **By the Numbers - The Untold Story of Muslim Opinions & Demographics with Raheel Raza (Clarion Project)**, 4.5M views
Dec 10, 2015
12. **The Suicide of Europe (PragerU)**, 4.3M views
May 14, 2018
13. **The Death of Europe with Douglas Murray (Hoover Institute)**, 3.5M views
Oct 7, 2019
14. **Glenn Beck: Zeta Gang Takes Control of Border (pesosforcongress)**, 3.3M views
Jun 25, 2007
(Note: Channel is not an influencer)
15. **It's Time to End Chain Migration (FAIR)**, 3M views
Apr 4, 2018
16. **Control the Words, Control the Culture (PragerU)**, 3M views
Apr 30, 2018
17. **A Stolen Life: The Sarah Root Story (FAIR)**, 2.4M views
Aug 26, 2016
18. **America Wants Legal Immigrants (PragerU)**, 5M views
Feb 11, 2019
19. **Mass Immigration Is Too Dangerous For America (FAIR)**, 2.2M views
Nov 1, 2016
20. **Do Muslims believe sharia law supersedes the constitution? (FOX News)**, 2.1M views
Sep 23, 2015
21. **Mexicans caught scaling wall into US definitely up to something sketchy (The New York Post)**, 2.0M views
Apr 13, 2016
22. **Sam Harris: Islam Is Not a Religion of Peace (FORA.tv)**, 2.0M views
Dec 30, 2010
23. **ICE Official Has to Explain to Democrat What "Illegal" Means (Blaze TV)**, 2.0M views
May 9, 2019



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