

The economic logic of right-wing populism in the culture industry: The case of Russell Brand's online content

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Abstract

What role does an economic rationale play in the drift of cultural figures towards the populist conspiratorial right? This study addresses this question by analysing the case of Russell Brand and his transition from a figure of the progressive left to the populist conspiratorial right. Using a theoretical frame which draws on Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of the culture industry with that of a strategic-relational approach to populism, the article argues that Brand's drift towards right-wing conspiratorial populism correlates with the economic opportunities generated via platform capitalism, his ability to construct an economic participatory culture with his audience, and his inculcation within a broader right-wing populist and libertarian media sphere. Drawing on a deductive analysis of Brand's YouTube content and media analysis, the article illustrates that despite claiming to be outside the mainstream, Brand's adoption of right-wing populist conspiratorial content represents the standardisation and rationalisation of interchangeable podcast content created to capture a specific audience. This study of Russell Brand demonstrates the importance of focusing on cultural sites, and the culture industry in its diverse yet homogenising forms, in explaining contemporary shifts towards right-wing populism and conspiratorial discourse.

Keywords

Critical theory, populism, Russell Brand, Social Media, the culture industry

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Introduction

Orthodox populism studies underestimate the role of the modern media and the culture industry in shaping and enabling contemporary populism (Jones, 2020: 3). This article aims to shed light on the relationship between the dissemination of right-wing populism and the culture industry by analysing comedian/political activist Russell Brand's shift from a left-wing 'progressive' position to one on the conspiratorial populist right, via his digital platforms. Russell Brand transcends cultural and political fields, having transitioned from his role as a broadcaster and actor to a political activist (Arthurs and Little, 2016). His move energised those on the left as he took up anti-capitalist causes and became the source of several studies on his role as an agent for social justice (Brassett, 2016; Monbiot, 2014; Watts, 2020). His transition to a figure now aligning with the conspiratorial populist right has received less scholarly attention, aside from the types of comments his videos attract below the line (Topinka, 2024).

In examining Brand, this study aims to reintroduce cultural sites and critical theory into the study of contemporary right-wing populism, a necessary approach to understanding the cultural attractiveness of right-wing populism in liberal democracies (Jones, 2020). The study of populism, whether left or right, is largely located in conventional sites of political analysis such as parties, movements, parliaments, voters and elections (Akkerman et al., 2014; Bernhard and Kriesi, 2021; Di Cocco and Monechi, 2022; Otjes and Louwerse, 2015; Yoshida, 2020). However, scholars have long known that the contemporary malaise of political disenchantment pushes the 'political' outside of these conventional, formal and state-centric sites (Hay, 2007). Simultaneously, critical theory was central to understanding the emergence of fascism and authoritarianism in the 1930s, although with few exceptions it has been overlooked in discussions of contemporary right-wing populism (Jones, 2020; Morelock, 2018). During the 1930s and 1940s, for critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, cultural sites such as radio, art and newspaper columns were central to their approach to understanding the underpinnings of antisemitism and the potential for fascism to take root in America (Adorno, 1994; Benjamin, 2008; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997; Rose, 2024: 83). It is hard not to see historical parallels between the Frankfurt School's focus on culture and new mediated sites within platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) and the elective affinity and affordances between populism and social media (Gerbaudo, 2018; Hopster, 2021).

Brand is a good case study to explore the drift of cultural figures towards the populist right. The aim here is to understand the economic logic which can explain this journey. Naomi Klein has argued that economic incentives go a long way to explaining why there is a burgeoning of online content which is 'angrier; more willing to burn bridges, to make outlandish claims, and to share unreliable and poorly sourced information', especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Klein, 2024: 108). Brand's shift to producing content attuned to right-wing conspiratorial discourse evokes the 'ideological entrepreneurship' that Alan Finlayson (2023) has claimed is part of an emergent Reactionary Digital Politics. This article builds on Finlayson's (2023) ideas but draws out the economic logic which underpins how ideological entrepreneurs like Brand have commodified 'tendentious political ideas, analyses, images and slogans' (p.36).

Thus, Brand is illustrative of this new media ecosphere of Reactionary Digital Politics, of 'podcasters, live streamers, social media stars and other outlier media figures' who

have monopolised online discourse and are having political impact (Caramanica, 2024). This includes figures like Joe Rogan, Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino. Donald Trump's election victory in 2024 has partially been credited to these content creators (Barrett, 2024; Wolfson, 2024). Brand, therefore, is symptomatic of a more fractured culture industry media environment of hyper-partisan news and commentary, which is undermining traditional journalism and re-shaping politics towards right-wing populism (Dowling et al., 2022: 17). Understanding Brand's positionality within this media eco-sphere, and his adoption of right-wing populist tropes and conspiracies, is important for grasping the role the culture industry plays in the spreading of right-wing conspiratorial populist discourse (Pittz, 2024).

Considering the above, the study asks: To what extent has Brand's adoption of a right-wing conspiratorial populist position been governed by economic logic? In addressing this question, the article analyses how Brand's move towards right-wing conspiratorial content correlates with the economic opportunities generated via platform capitalism, his ability to construct an economic participatory culture with his audience, and his inculcation within a broader right-wing populist and libertarian media sphere.

In developing this analysis, I draw on Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry, its relationship to platform capitalism, and an approach to populism that views it as a rational strategy to attract followers (Weyland, 2001). I then apply that framework to an analysis of Russell Brand's YouTube content to trace the economic logic underpinning his shift towards right-wing conspiratorial populism.

The culture industry and populism

For Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the concept of the culture industry concerned how they understood the productive forces underpinning the 'sameness' of 20th-century culture (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997: 94). What they were pointing towards was the totalising effect of cultural production. Central to their work was the idea that economic value drives cultural production. As they argued, the demands of reproduction 'inevitably lead to the use of standard products to meet the same needs at countless locations', pointing ultimately to a rationalisation of culture (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997: 95).

Gillian Rose has remarked that the concept of the culture industry has been widely misunderstood, as it was largely construed as an attack on the popular culture of the 1940s (Rose, 2024: 35). But the critique was not temporally specific; as Fredric Jameson noted, we have yet to make 'an exhaustive inventory of variant models and other features besides commodity reification in terms of which such artefacts might be analysed' (Jameson, 1997). We need only observe 'cinematic universes' like Marvel or Star Wars to grasp the kind of 'sameness' and to understand the contemporary conceptual relevance of the culture industry. Plots, characters, narratives, scripts and cinematic techniques can all be perceived as largely interchangeable.

Applying the culture industry to such contemporary forms of cultural production is not unproblematic. Not least, consumers actively engage, interpret and extend cultural products (Fiske, 2011), something highlighted in trends in transmedia storytelling and fan fiction (Ryan, 2015; Schiller, 2018). While such fan-driven cultural creation is demonstrative of consumer agency, rather than passiveness, transmedia storytelling is still operating within pre-defined modes of cultural production (the cinematic universes

are already established), and because of copyright law, fan fiction cannot make any profit (indicating an alienation from labour). Adorno and Horkheimer's central point remains. The culture industry can be understood as analogous to the entertainment industry as 'control of consumers is mediated by entertainment' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997: 108). Cultural products are subsumed to the market and 'dutifully admits to being a commodity, abjures its autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumer goods' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997: 128).

But there is also diversity within the culture industry. As the analysis below discusses, Russell Brand positions himself as an autonomous figure outside of the culture (mainstream entertainment) industry. However, his production of content follows a well-worn, standardised and rationalised path. Along with other popular podcasters of the right (and libertarian perspective), such as Joe Rogan, Dan Bongino, Tucker Carlson and Ben Shapiro, Brand's content exists as *part* of the culture industry, not *separate* from it, despite positioning himself as an insurgent. Arguably this is what Adorno and Horkheimer were alluding to when writing of the culture industry as being where 'aesthetic manifestations of political opposites proclaim the same inflexible rhythms' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997: 94). Despite the appearance of difference, what Brand and other cultural podcast figures in his media sphere represent is sameness. Not least, the logic of the market subsumes the podcast and continues to represent 'entertainment as the prolongation of work under late capitalism' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997: 109). Differently put, market imperatives underpin audience consumption in the political economy of the platformisation of podcasts (Sullivan, 2019: 1).

The culture industry also perpetuates dominant ideological capitalist interests in which films and radio no longer need to be presented as art, but rather as a business and ideology reinforcing larger economic interests (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997: 95). On the question of diversity, cultural products such as Brand's podcast affect individuality (Brand as the outsider), but 'individuality itself serves to reinforce ideology, in so far as the illusion is conjured up that the completely reified and mediated is a sanctuary from immediacy and life' (Adorno, 1991: 101). What is central here is that the broader ecosystem in which Brand is inculcated, and the technological mode of production underpinning that system (platform capitalism), is driving the ideological production of right-wing conspiratorial populist discourse. Indeed, scholars have argued that right-wing ideology was built into the technical and social construction of platform capitalism from the very beginning (Golumbia, 2024). But before proceeding, how can contemporary right-wing populism be understood *vis-à-vis* the culture industry?

Populism

Populism is a widely deployed yet contested concept (Kaltwasser, 2018; Mackert, 2018; Taggart, 2000), viewed variously as an irrational large-scale agrarian response to the ills of modernism (Hofstadter, 1955); a discursive approach articulating popular democratic interpellations as antagonistic to a dominant ideology (Laclau, 2005); a political style (Moffit, 2016); and a thin-centred ideology which divides the world into the two antagonistic groups of a venal, corrupt 'elite' and the pure, sovereign 'people' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). However, rather than becoming mired in the definitional debates

encompassing populism studies, I draw upon Weyland's (2021) strategic-relational approach as it fits with a focus on the agency of actors and with Finlayson's (2023) conceptualisation of 'ideological entrepreneurs' within reactionary digital politics.

Weyland (2001: 14) has defined populism as a 'political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers'. The populist leader adopts a strategy underpinned by rhetoric that upholds the supremacy of the will of the people against an 'over-educated', effete, supercilious, aristocratic, idle, wealthy, functionally unnecessary, degenerate and corrupt elite (Worsley, 1969: 244). As part of this strategy, a leader will adopt the rhetoric of latent grievances against an elite, and the emotions provoked by them, to build a following with the ultimate objective of obtaining power (Betz, 2002). The strategic approach emphasises the opportunistic, rational and goal-centred behaviour of populist leaders (Weyland, 2021: 185–186). While it has been criticised, not least for its stress on the agency of leaders, its normativity and its conceptual broadness (Rueda, 2021: 168; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 386), that breadth offers an apt framing for populists in non-conventional political sites, such as social media and platform capitalism. While not a political leader in the traditional sense, in that he is not seeking to *exercise* government power, Brand has positioned himself as a political activist seeking to *challenge* government power, and the evidence presented below regarding Brand's shift towards right-wing populist and conspiratorial content implies an opportunistic strategy bounded by an economic rationale.

Populist discourse can exist in the context of the culture industry as a strategy to achieve the objective of attracting followers and, thus, revenue. The medium within the culture industry is also important. For Brand, digital platforms (i.e. YouTube and Rumble) are the medium which are part of the wider context of 'platform capitalism' (Srnicsek, 2017). Platform capitalism is 'understood as a distinct mode of socio-technical intermediary and business arrangement incorporated into wider processes of capitalisation', whereby a participatory economic culture imbricates users within a paid subscription service, providing access to exclusive content and the paid promotion of specific commodities (Langley and Leyshon, 2017: 11). Platform capitalism, as the contemporary economic logic underpinning the culture industry, provides the mechanism to commodify populism into a rationalised and standardised format (i.e. the podcast).

Populism as a strategy	Culture industry
• Strategy to attract followers • Adoption of a populist discourse which divides the world into two antagonistic camps • Opportunistic, rational and goal-centred	• The economic logic of platform capitalism • The commodification of right-wing populism • A participatory economic culture • Rationalisation and standardisation of culture as a product

Method

The study undertook a desk-based analysis of a data corpus comprising Russell Brand's YouTube output alongside media and analytical commentary (i.e. news articles and opinion pieces). A series of codes emerged from the analysis related to views, content, strategy, visual aesthetics, discourse and media context. I grouped the codes under four larger thematic categories: platform capitalism, commodification, economic participatory culture, and standardisation and rationalisation.

Brand's YouTube content was analysed in two stages. First, I manually analysed all of Brand's YouTube content from 2014 to 2024, when he began posting videos which focused on the commentary of news events (a show called *The Trews*, see below). At this stage, I was seeking to identify broad themes of the nature of the content and discourse being purveyed and the number of views concerning how the content changed over time. Second, I then sought to take a deeper analytical snapshot of Brand's contemporary content by focusing on a thematic analysis of 1 month's content (February 2024). This was to get a specific grasp of the relationship between the economic logic underlying Brand's right-wing populist discourse (especially as it pertains to paid sponsorship) and to have a deeper understanding of the shift in content. The reason for solely focusing on Brand's YouTube channel was that it is a more ubiquitous and accessible video-sharing platform with a wider audience, reaching an estimated 122 million daily users compared to Rumble's 500,000, demonstrating greater embeddedness within the culture industry (Chi, 2025; GMI Research, 2025).¹ Furthermore, it is possible to overstate the difference between the content of the two channels. Brand uses the YouTube channel to entice users to engage with his Rumble content, thus there is considerable overlap. The remainder of this article discusses the economic rationale for Brand's right-wing conspiratorial discourse.

The economic logic of Brand's right-wing populism

Russell Brand became a mainstay of the British entertainment industry, and then eventually Hollywood, in the 2000s and early 2010s. He hosted mainstream British television and radio shows, had literary success with two memoirs, and appeared in several successful Hollywood films. In 2012, Brand moved into the political field by producing a B.B.C. documentary on recovery from addiction, giving evidence at a drug policy inquiry in the U.K. parliament, guest editing the centre-left political magazine *The New Statesmen*, appearing on U.K. politics shows, and undertaking political activism centred on housing in London, which gave profile to a series of grassroots local campaigns (Arthurs and Little, 2016: 96). This shift from entertainment to the political attracted attention from public figures of the left and the scholarly community. The environmental campaigner George Monbiot proclaimed Brand his hero of the year for 2014, describing him as the 'best thing that has happened to the left in years' (Monbiot, 2014). Critical and public perception foregrounded Brand's role as an authentic anti-austerity spokesperson for the disenfranchised left in the United Kingdom (Arthurs and Shaw, 2016). Likened to other satirical 'political' comedians in the United Kingdom, such as Charlie Brooker and Stewart Lee, scholars argued that Brand's use of comedy within politics provided a

sophisticated critique of market life, reaching a large audience in a democratising, inclusive and participatory manner (Brassett, 2016). As such, Brand was part of a broader tendency for comedians to become politicians, comparable to Beppe Grillo in Italy and Dieudonne in France, a trend which was testament to the power of populist storytelling (Milburn, 2019).

‘Left’ populism and a concern with social justice, anti-austerity and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups in society characterised Russell Brand’s populist style during this period. He railed against corporations, was avowedly anti-establishment, and fought passionately against all forms of discrimination. The relevant question here is, how did Brand ‘transform from challenging injustice to conjuring phantoms’ (Monbiot, 2023) from the perspective of the populist right? The answer, according to George Monbiot is ‘that’s where the audience is’ (Sentient, 2023). Monbiot’s comment implies that Brand shifted in response to economic opportunities within platform capitalism. This analysis below seeks to analyse the extent to which an economic logic underpinned Brand’s move to the conspiratorial populist right.

Platform capitalism

A triangular relationship involving a platform, workers and customers forms the basis of platform capitalism and distinguishes it from conventional economies (Liang et al., 2022; Rochet and Tirole, 2003). The platform promotes the development of interactive communities that facilitate interactions that connect users through two-sided platform-based marketplaces (Cockayne, 2016). The platform establishes individuals as the main economic actors as they develop products, services and/or content, which form a transactional relationship between producers, retailers and viewers (Ørmen and Gregersen, 2023). With Brand, his YouTube (and Rumble) channel is the platform where he has commodified his political style to develop a participatory economic culture with his audience. In analysing Brand’s online content over the last decade, we can discern how this commodification of his politics via content eventually steered towards a rationalised and standardised product satisfying a particular audience. Differently put, the economic logic of platform capitalism, in developing interactions between content creators and an audience, correlates with Brand drive towards producing content that attracted larger audiences and consequently generated greater income. The more views online content gets, the larger the cut the content creator receives from ad revenue.²

Abbie Richards identified three periods within Brand’s online content, marking the shift towards right-wing populism (Richards, 2024). The first is *The Trews*, Brand’s progressive ‘left-wing’ phase. Typically filmed inside Brand’s East London flat, videos had titles such as ‘How does the media scare us?’, ‘How can we stop discrimination?’, ‘Are the media making us Islamophobes?’ and ‘Do Fox sound like Nazis?’ (Brand, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). The videos featured interviews with journalists, comedians, philosophers and activists broadly perceived as being on the left, such as Alastair Campbell, Alain de Botton and George Monbiot. On average, *The Trews* attracted 200,000 to 300,000 views per video. The second phase Richards points to is what she calls the ‘Guru’ phase. From 2017, Brand’s online content adopted a more philosophical and spiritual character. This coincided with the publication of his book *Recovery from Addiction*

(Brand, 2018). His content became more esoteric, with titles including ‘Men, it’s okay to talk’, ‘How to deal with trolls’ and ‘On being in toxic relationships’ (Brand, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Guests on Brand’s show during this period were diverse, from the critically acclaimed director, David Lynch, the motivational speaker and extreme athlete Wim Hof, and the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell. As Richards (2024) notes, viewing figures for Brand’s ‘Guru’ period are lower than the Trews era and what was to follow. This is not to suggest all his videos during this period had low viewing figures. Interviews with celebrities such as Ricky Gervais and Matthew McConaughey received 3.4 million and 1.5 million views, respectively. Rather, the typical, day-to-day, solo-to-camera videos, in which Brand focused on his esoteric interests in meditation and spirituality typically garnered views in the low 100,000s, and often in the tens of thousands.³ The third period was a shift to more right-wing, populist and conspiratorial discourse. The discussion which proceeds analyses this transition.

The commodification of right-wing populism

In December 2020, just as the COVID vaccine was on the verge of being publicly distributed, Brand uploaded a video titled ‘COVID Vaccine–Scepticism or Trust?’. The video proved popular, amassing 1.1 million views (Brand, 2020a). In the video, Brand gave vaccine scepticism considerable space without being overtly conspiratorial. However, the early seed of his discourse regarding the co-optation between government elites and private business is present when he insinuates that a big tech company is colluding with the NHS regarding the ‘track and trace’ app (Brand, 2020a). After this, Brand returned to esoteric output, which received far fewer views. This included videos on social anxiety (325,000 views) (Brand, 2020b), ‘If you want to change the way you feel, try this’ (16,600 views), ‘Save yourself by saving others’ (37,000 views) (Brand, 2020c) and an interview with Annie Lennox (82,000) (Brand, 2020d). Then 2 weeks later, he posted another COVID-critical video, ‘Is the pandemic being used to mask a wealth and power transfer?’, which attracted 1.5 million views (Brand, 2020e).

In early 2021, Brand released two videos a week apart, which revealed his conspiracy theory of the ‘Great Reset’. They attracted 1.4 and 2.7 million views, respectively, (Brand, 2021a, 2021b).⁴ The videos on the Great Reset marked the start of a gradual transition from his esoteric to right-wing populist content. This shift took shape in 2021, with the interspersing of right-wing conspiratorial populist-themed videos. This included high viewing figures on the Great Reset (Brand, 2021c), (1.4 million views), COVID lies and leaks (Brand, 2021d, 1.2 million views), an interview with right-wing commentator Ben Shapiro (Brand, 2021e, 6 million views), big pharma (Brand, 2021f, 1.1 million views), Joe Rogan’s use of ivermectin to treat COVID (Brand, 2021g, 1.2 million views), conspiracies about Bill Gates (Brand, 2021h, 2.2 million views) and Joe Rogan’s criticism of CNN (Brand, 2021i, 4.2 million views).

There are three points to note about this transition in 2021. First, not all of Brand’s videos garnered above 1 million views. However, the overall viewer rate was much higher, with videos typically attracting 500,000 plus views. Also, the number of videos receiving more than 1 million views increased as Brand drew on more conspiratorial and right-wing topics for his content, especially regarding COVID scepticism, media censorship and the

machinations of a global establishment (typically aimed at figures such as Bill Gates or ‘liberal elites’ including Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi). Second, across 2021, Brand began to draw much more on a media eco-system attuned to the right (not least by interviewing figures such as Ben Shapiro) or libertarianism (such as Joe Rogan). Arguably, this drew Brand towards figures who already had a large audience. The higher number of views he received for his content regarding Ben Shapiro and Joe Rogan, which far outstripped his other content, was evidence of this. This is a strategy which continued in succeeding years (2022–2025) when guests on his show included those from the right or a libertarian perspective (i.e. Tucker Carlson, Robert F. Kennedy Jr, Jordan Peterson, Candace Owens, Jimmy Dore, Tulsi Gabbard and so on). Third, gradually, over 2021, there was a clear aesthetic change in the presentation of content. This was most evident in the adoption of clickbait titles. Clickbait titles are those which are generally sensational, and often deceptive, with the principal aim of generating traffic to online content to increase viewership and thus the economic opportunities from paid advertising (Jung et al., 2022: 2), and form part of a larger a libidinal economy which ‘speaks directly to the intersection between money, technology and desire’ (Samman and Gammon, 2023: 1). Titles for Brand’s videos took on a clear clickbait style, such as ‘So . . . Trump was RIGHT About Clinton & Russia Collusion!!’, or ‘THE ESTABLISHMENT WANT YOU DEAD: Wake Up NOW or DIE!!!’ and ‘Thought the Pandemic Was Bad? THIS Is What’s Coming’ (Brand, 2021j, 2021k, 2022a). Simultaneously, thumbnails for his videos began to include provocative pictures suggestive of a conspiracy. For example, in a video from early 2022 titled ‘WW3! So, THIS Is Why They Want Russia War’ (2.3 million views) (Brand, 2022b), the thumbnail includes a split screen with Brand on one side and a photo of Joe Biden on the other, with a nuclear explosion in the background. In another video, also from early 2022, ‘They’re Putting COVID Microchips WHERE Now?! This Is CRAZY!’ (1.2 million views), Brand discusses how a Swedish company developed a microchip that could be implanted under someone’s skin, allowing their COVID passport to be scanned (Brand, 2022c).⁵ The thumbnail featured a split screen again of Brand, opposite a mocked-up photo of an X-ray hand with a microchip implanted, while an unseen person is somehow connecting to the microchip via a phone and QR code. This presentation evokes a strategy primed to engage and maximise audience viewership, and thus revenue (Koller and Grabner, 2022). Research has illustrated there is a correlation between the use of strong sentiments and punctuation, and all capitals and increased user engagement (Cui et al., 2024: 1).

Brand’s shift over 2021 towards content aligned with right-wing populist conspiratorial discourse illustrates an ongoing process of commodification regarding the increasing generation of such content. Brand’s material, which tended towards COVID scepticism, conspiracy and broad arguments about the threat to individual freedom from a global elite, garnered more views than his previously esoteric content, which circumstantially facilitated the production of more populist and conspiratorial content.

‘Stay Free’: a participatory economic culture

Brand’s commodification of right-wing populist conspiratorial discourse generates considerable income. He earned between £2000 to £4000 per video and roughly 1 million a year from YouTube ad revenue (Hibaq and Waterson, 2024). However, such content

eventually fell afoul of YouTube's misinformation guidelines. The platform took down one of his 2022 videos after he misreported that Ivermectin was included on the list of treatments for COVID-19 when, in fact, it was only being trialled. Brand apologised and admitted his mistake, but also claimed it was censorship (Dickey, 2022). Following these events, Brand established the daily show, 'Stay Free', on the right-wing site Rumble.

'Stay Free' saw Brand establish a participatory economic culture. Brand's YouTube earnings were generated by ad revenue, so amassing views correlated with higher income. On Rumble, with his show 'Stay Free', the strategy alighted on an expansion of his economic interaction with his followers. Brand invites his 'awakened wonders' to join his community on Locals, an independent subscription-based community builder for content creators, owned by Rumble, for \$60 a year. For this membership fee, subscribers get access to a community where they can converse with one another, receive extended exclusive interviews with Brand's guests, and access content unavailable on the free service.

As part of this participatory economic culture, Brand began running sponsored advertisements. These sponsors are largely, but not exclusively, situated within the wellness economy, and the companies tend towards libertarianism. For example, taking February 2024 as an analytical snapshot, Brand had the following paid promotion sponsors: Brickhouse Field of Greens nutritional supplements, Wellness Company's emergency medical kit (in case of another pandemic or health problems associated with the COVID-19 vaccine), American Hartford Gold (gold savings), the religious app Hallow, Charlis luxury skincare, Verso Cell Being supplements (promoted to boost energy production), and Freedom Chat (a private social media chat app). The use of direct paid promotion sponsorship proved crucial for Brand in sustaining the monetisation of his online content, not least because, in September 2023, a joint investigation by the British Times Newspaper and UK Channel Four revealed a series of accusations of rape and sexual assault by multiple women stretching back to the mid-2000s (Zhou, 2023). While Brand publicly denied any criminal wrongdoing, YouTube suspended his ability to monetise his content, while other sponsors pulled their ads from his Rumble channel (Gecsolyer, 2023). The push for the demonetisation of Brand's content fed into Brand's conspiratorial discourse. A video uploaded in February 2024 uses footage of ex-Fox News presenter Tucker Carlson, commenting how the British Government was pressuring social media sites to demonetise Brand because he attacked 'legacy media' and his vaccine-critical stance (Brand, 2024).

The impact of these accusations against Brand meant his ability to monetise his content narrowed to financial opportunities present in the more right-wing populist conspiratorial platform of Rumble. Paid sponsors, alongside exclusive community subscriptions, now represent Brand's main revenue stream. Brand has reached 2.07 million followers on Rumble. As with YouTube, creators' capacity to earn on Rumble varies. Brand has a large following and reportedly earns between £27,000 and £80,000 per month on the platform (Gecsolyer, 2023; Masters, 2024).

The rationalisation and standardisation of the podcast

Brand's commodification of right-wing populist conspiratorial discourse is illustrative of the rationalisation and standardisation of the podcast as a cultural product, akin to

the sameness Horkheimer and Adorno saw in the culture industry. While podcasting has amateur and DIY roots, it has taken on standardised features such as ‘podcasting networks and a shared set of entrepreneurial practices, largely focused on attracting advertisers or otherwise monetizing shows’ (McGregor, 2022). Recent research illustrates that such a standardisation of formats produces a loyal listenership based largely upon parasocial relationships between the media producer and consumers (Zuraikat, 2020), and that emotion, connection, praise and the loyalty of the audience are higher with right-wing podcasts (Funk et al., 2023: 89). In steering his content towards right-wing conspiratorial populist discourse, Brand is drawing on, and situating himself, within an existing right-wing conservative media sphere. As noted earlier, Brand either uses content from popular right-leaning or libertarian shows, or has hosts from those shows on his podcast. In the United States, this right-wing media sphere is not new; its roots lie in the success of late 1980s and 1990s conservative talk radio symbolised by Rush Limbaugh, whose show became the dominant model for a standardised form of commercial conservative (and libertarian) talk radio which other nationally syndicated hosts followed (e.g. Glenn Beck, Mark Levin and Sean Hannity) (Berry and Sobieraj, 2011; Rosenwald, 2019).

As much as right-wing and libertarian talk radio followed a standardised and rationalised format, right-wing populist podcasts also feature a degree of standardisation. Brand’s content is easily interchangeable with the content of other right-wing, libertarian, populist-leaning content creators who have neatly packaged and commodified right-wing populist and conspiratorial tropes into a digestible and voluminous video podcast format for audience consumption. In doing so, Brand has become part of a profitable media ecosystem with a large audience. A study undertaken by Media Matters (2025) found that across 320 of the most popular online shows, 191 were right-leaning compared to 129 on the left, and of the 584.6 million total followers and subscribers to those shows, 480.6 million were for right-leaning shows, roughly 82% of total followers. Russell Brand has the fourth-highest total followers and subscribers across all platforms (22.5 million), behind Jordan Peterson, Ben Shapiro and Joe Rogan (Media Matters, 2025). Therefore, despite some of these podcast hosts setting themselves up as anti-establishment figures external to the (mainstream) culture industry, they now dominate the contemporary podcast culture industry, and have ultimately established an alternative to mainstream journalism, which now exists as a hegemonic media space (Dowling et al., 2022: 23).

Company ownership is also an indicator of the standardisation and rationalisation of the podcast as a cultural product. For example, the same company, Westwood One, runs and produces Dan Bongino’s and Mark Levin’s podcasts, and is itself a subsidiary of Cumulus Media, the third-largest broadcasting company in the United States. Westwood One also syndicates Ben Shapiro’s podcast, despite it being branded as being produced by the Daily Wire. Moreover, Rumble, the platform through which Brand and other right-wing populist podcast hosts curate their content, received substantial investment from the venture capitalist and co-founder of PayPal, Peter Thiel, in 2021, among other wealthy backers, including US Vice-President J.D. Vance (Hagey, 2021), illustrating how podcasts can be integrated with broader right-wing infrastructures (Quah, 2020). This is reminiscent of Horkheimer and Adorno’s reminder that the culture industry includes political opposites proclaiming the

same inflexible rhythms (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997: 94). In other words, there have long been multiple publics within the US media sphere (Major, 2015: 484), demonstrating diversity within the culture industry which, although formulaic, rationalised and standardised, producing homogeneity, still seeks to appeal to diverse audiences.

This conservative, right-wing-populist and Trumpian media sphere, in which Brand has inculcated himself, remains *part* of the culture industry, governed by the very same economic logic which underpins other forms of mass cultural entertainment. Multi-platform and transmedia strategies engage audiences by cross-referencing content across platforms like YouTube, Rumble, Spotify and Apple, but also in efforts to dominate social media shares via Facebook or X (Dowling et al., 2022: 23). This is what Russell Brand does – requesting his audience on YouTube to continue viewing on Rumble and then appealing for them to join his Locals subscription service.

Brand's inculcation within this right-wing populist media ecosphere reveals one final point about the relationship between the culture industry and right-wing populism in this case. The economic logic underlying Brand's shift to the right, due to its constitution within platform capitalism, is driven by a mode of technological production which better facilitates the spread of right-wing populist discourse. This happens at two levels. At the macro level, there is a view that many of the tech billionaires behind digital platforms are ideologically driving a form of right-wing populist and libertarian form of politics (Coles, 2017; Golumbia, 2024). While it would be an oversimplification to say digital entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey and Jeff Bezos all share the same ideological view, they have largely centred around a libertarian form of politics which is anti-censorship (thus allowing the breeding of disinformation and conspiracy) and illiberal (Banaji, 2025; Mitnick, 2024), and are observed to have ushered in a new economic paradigm described variously as 'data colonialism' (Couldry and Mejias, 2019), 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2023) and 'techno-feudalism' (Varoufakis, 2023). At the micro level, research has demonstrated how digital platform algorithms privilege and are biased in favour of right-wing politics (Bryant, 2020). This supports the amplification of right-wing populist discourses (Huszár et al., 2022). Thus, both the ideological preferences and the technological mode of production within this media ecosphere might contribute to explaining why there is a larger audience for right-wing conspiratorial populist discourse, which Brand has tailored his content towards.

Conclusion

The above analysis illustrates Brand's path towards right-wing conspiratorial populism, correlated with the economic opportunities presented by the specifics of the mediated context of digital platform capitalism, and an audience attuned to right-wing populist conspiratorial discourse.

Russell Brand is a creature of the culture industry. He attended one of the most sought-after drama schools in the United Kingdom, worked for major culture industry organisations (MTV, BBC) and was embedded in Hollywood. Yet, his shift to being a right-wing conspiratorial podcast host could arguably locate him, as he declares himself alongside other similar podcast hosts, outside of the mainstream; representing a critical voice outside of the culture industry. As the argument above suggests, such claims are a mirage.

What Brand and his form of right-wing populist conspiratorial discourse signify are the varieties of the culture industry. Russell Brand and other podcasters of the populist right might seem on the periphery of the mainstream 'liberal' culture industry they rail against, but they present a 'sameness' in form and content, and exist as a counter media sphere which arguably is in the ascendancy, if not already a hegemonic cultural force.

The culture industry manifests in different ways, and rationalisation of culture concerns the capital value of the cultural product, and this is no different in the age of platform capitalism. Brand, Rogan and others, via digital platforms, are heavily curating the totalisation and the rationalisation of their cultural product, via their daily podcast shows, with similar formats, themes, tropes and cross-pollination of content. As Adorno and Horkheimer argued years before, in the culture industry 'something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997: 97).

Ultimately, what the case of Brand offers is an insight into the importance of the culture industry, in its diverse yet homogenising forms, to understanding the logic underpinning the shift for an entertainer such as Brand from progressive/leftist forms of populism to the conspiratorial populist right. The paper does raise a further issue regarding the relationship between the culture industry and right-wing populism, which can inform future research concerning the extent to which the economic logic underpinning the drift to right-wing populism in the culture industry is driven by audience demand or the supply side regarding the logic of platform capitalism. The analysis in this article does not discount that audience demand is partially responsible, although that would be a role for further explanatory research, but rather it seeks to emphasise that in the case of Brand, it is rather the logic and technological mode of platform capitalism which is facilitating the spread of right-wing conspiratorial discourse in this case.

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Notes

1. Rumble is an online video platform established in 2013 by Chris Pavlovski. Rumble claims to be driven by a mission to 'protect a free and open Internet'. However, the site has become home to conservative and alt-right commentators attracted by the lack of guidelines and

regulations of the site leading to a trend in conspiratorial content and disinformation being hosted on the site.

2. YouTube generates revenue from adverts, and the platform and content creator divide the money. Revenue generation varies depending most obviously on the number of views, but also audience location, content category and video length. Earnings can range from between \$1.61 and \$29.30 per 1000 views. The best estimate of what Brand was earning during the Trews era was approximately \$8000 per video (Perelli, 2024).
3. For example, the three videos noted above (Brand, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c) had 48,000, 65,000 and 320,000 views, respectively.
4. The ‘Great Reset’ theory was inspired by the World Economic Forum’s annual summit in Davos. The conspiracy alleges that global elites instigated and/or manipulated the global pandemic to enforce social and economic control via vaccinations, digital ID cards and the renunciation of private property (Christensen and Au, 2023; Slobodian, 2022).
5. Brand takes this one obscure case (it was not Swedish government policy to implant micro-chips in citizens so they could monitor COVID passports) to make claims about the deterioration of individual freedom.

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Biographical note

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