

Exposing Bias, Disinformation, and Hate Speech in Educational Materials

Abstract: Manifestations of hate speech can be observed in overt acts of homophobia, bullying, and race/ethnicity-based discrimination. While these are clear examples, hate speech can also manifest in more subtle yet equally harmful ways, such as deceit, bias, half-truths, and systemic disinformation, which may infiltrate protected spaces like educational institutions. One notable example is PragerU, an organization accused of bending historical and scientific facts and spreading disinformation about critical social issues through its controversial K-12 teaching materials. This paper, utilizing the Pyramid of Hate framework alongside Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, and Wodak’s argumentation strategy from Discourse Historical Analysis, examines the extent to which PragerU’s visual and verbal narratives contribute to the normalization and legitimization of biased ideologies, potentially fueling divisive discourse. By deconstructing multimodal elements such as language, imagery, and framing techniques, this study explores how specific rhetorical strategies evoke emotional responses, reinforce stereotypes, and subtly propagate exclusionary or discriminatory views. Additionally, by mapping this content onto the Pyramid of Hate framework, the research aims to identify how such narratives may facilitate the progression from more subtle forms of bias and prejudice to more overt manifestations of hate. Ultimately, this paper seeks to determine whether PragerU’s content fosters an environment where conflict is incited and capable of evolving into more dangerous, hate-filled discourse, thereby contributing to broader societal polarization.

Keywords: *argumentation theory, educational resources, alternative media, bias and disinformation, Pyramid of Hate*

*The time will come when diligent research over long periods
will bring to light things which now lie hidden.*
Lucius Annaeus Seneca - *Natural Questions Book VII* [25,4]

1. Introduction¹

Seneca’s quote resonates with the aim of this study which is to expose the discursive strategies employed by conservative media outlets to spread bias and disinformation in the private and public spheres, including the educational arena. Drawing inspiration from the philosopher’s wisdom, the study specifically addresses the growing demand for a nuanced understanding of the cultural, sociopolitical, and technological roots of the mediated proliferation of distorted information, highlighting the dangerous repercussions this unsolicited interference can have on educational processes.²

Generally speaking, what stands for biased attitudes and disinformation is certainly a challenge to discern, mainly due to the fact that these features are not always acknowledged as such, or they might be unconsciously harbored. Indeed, being unaware of one’s opinion of people, institutions or world issues can shield potentially harmful mindsets and behaviors which may manifest in forms of hate speech.³

¹ The present paper is the result of a collaborative effort of both authors. In particular, Margaret Rasulo is responsible for sections 1.1, 1.2, 2, 3, 7.2, 8; Maria De Santo is responsible for sections 1.3, 1.4, 4, 5, 6, 7.1, 9.

² Randall Calvert, “The Value of Biased Information: A Rational Choice Model of Political Advice”, *The Journal of Politics*, 47.2 (1985), 530-555.

³ Andrea Prat and David Strömberg, “The Political Economy of Mass Media”, in Acemoglu Daran et.al., eds., *Advances in Economics and Econometrics: Tenth World Congress* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013), 135-187; Simon Anderson et al., eds., *Handbook of Media Economics*, vol. 1A (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015).

The bias and disinformation nexus is readily exploited by online partisan media which thrive on the endorsement of political affiliation to further their shared interest in influencing people's attitudes towards all things political, including private lives and personal welfare. One tactic employed by these social actors is to selectively present information based on the criterion of like-mindedness.⁴ This concept is described as homophily, wherein audiences opt to receive information from sources that align with their political, religious, or identitarian beliefs, often facilitated by the persuasive influence of powerful media echo chambers.⁵

1.1 *Explaining the Bias and Disinformation Nexus*

Bias and disinformation lie at the core of this investigation, thus it is essential to define these terms, beginning with the more threatening concept of disinformation.

The term disinformation is often used interchangeably with misinformation, yet the motivation underlying these communication practices differs. Disinformation is deliberately fabricated to mislead the general public by intentionally misstating the facts, thus foregrounding the notion of purpose of the agent. Misinformation entails getting the facts wrong, resulting in the unintentional spreading of false or inaccurate information.⁶ Keeping this distinction in mind, the present study makes use of the term disinformation as it best describes the premeditated and calculated spreading of falsities in the provision of educational materials regarding well-established knowledge recognized by solid epistemological institutions.⁷

The concept of bias refers to an inherent imbalance of points of view, often leading to belief extremism and polarization. Particularly in educational contexts, the interference of bias in knowledge dissemination processes can hinder the pedagogical advancement of critical thinking skills, especially with reference to young learners.⁸ More alarming is the consideration that because information processing is the result of acts of assembling and constructing, the presence of bias is nearly inevitable. This implies that individuals or entire organizations whose main activity is to create content, might do so in a self-serving and advantageous manner as they are enabled to pass on their own ideological, political and social biases.⁹

In this analysis, we examine the case of two K-12 educational videos commissioned by Prager University Foundation (PragerU), a US ultra-conservative media organization. These educational resources serve PragerU's purpose of providing alternative right-wing narratives regarding various issues, including critical concerns such as climate change, gender identity, immigration, slavery, racism, and hate speech. In the exemplification of their conservative perspective, PragerU utilizes the core content of these issues to present their counter-narratives by means of denialism, skepticism, conspiracy theories, prejudice, and white nationalism which oppose existing scientific or historical information.

⁴ Kristoffer Nimark and Stefan Pitschner, "News media and delegated information choice", *Journal of Economic Theory*, 181 (2019), 160-196.

⁵ Daron Acemoglu et al., "Misinformation: Strategic Sharing, Homophily, and Endogenous Echo Chambers", NBER Working Paper No. 28884, (2022), www.nber.org.

⁶ Patricia Alonso-Galbán P and Claudia Alemañy-Castilla, "Curbing Misinformation and Disinformation in the Covid-19 Era: A View from Cuba", *MEDICC Re*, 22 (2022), 45-46; Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan H, "Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making", *Council of Europe Rep*, 27 (2022), 1-107; Don Fallis, Don "What Is Disinformation?", *Library Trends*, 63.3 (2015), 401-426.

⁷ Michela Del Vicario et al., "Polarization and Fake News: Early Warning of Potential Misinformation Targets," *ACM Trans Web (TWEB)*, 13.3 (2019), 1-22.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Emily Haisley and Roberto Weber, "Self-serving Interpretations of Ambiguity in Other-regarding Behavior", *Games and Economic Behavior* 68.2 (2010), 614-625; Bruno Deffains et al., "Political Self-serving Bias and Redistribution", *Journal of Public Economics*, 134.C (2016), 67-74.

Indeed, under the guise of First Amendment rights, PragerU's revisitation of educational content has only been partially contested but never discontinued.¹⁰

Self-described as alternative media sources, organizations such as PragerU exist outside mainstream media as plausible substitutes,¹¹ and often promote radical or extreme political views in their agenda-setting. Some media consumers, disillusioned with mainstream sources, turn to these platforms for content which they believe is closely aligned with their belief systems. For instance, a 2020 Gallup survey found that only nine percent of respondents trusted mainstream media, while nearly sixty percent expressed little to no trust, citing misinformation and polarization as possible causes of dissatisfaction.¹²

Within this frame of reference, it is important to recognize that alternative media platforms are bipartisan entities, covering the political spectrum from extreme left to extreme right, allowing parties to advance their interests.¹³ Among these platforms are those that produce educational content, a focus that has enabled them to penetrate US curriculum provision. PragerU, for example, is currently a provider of extra-curricular resources adopted by schools in Florida, Arizona, and Oklahoma, and with other states closely considering adoption.¹⁴

1.2 Falsity as a Trigger of Hate Speech

The presence of bias or disinformation, in the form of inaccuracies, contradictions, and out-of-context claims, often remains unnoticed in educational resources produced by alternative education vendors.¹⁵ This observation has prompted the investigation of the spreading of slanted or false information, intentionally crafted to cause public harm or gain personal profit, to be treated as a human rights issue protected by national and international constitutional law.¹⁶ According to this principle, causing public harm can potentially incite hatred manifested through hate speech. Determining the level of harm or danger, however, is complex as some acts may not immediately exhibit physical evidence of discrimination, violence, or criminal activity. Instead, these traces are often embedded in subtler expressions such as humor-based insults, jokes, and even in argumentative discussions,¹⁷ making them less likely to be recognized as hate speech.¹⁸ To address this insidious issue, the study employs the Pyramid of Hate.¹⁹ This tool is used to identify harmful discursive behaviors by evaluating their severity based on a 5-level scale which encompasses seemingly innocuous behaviors positioned at Level One to the most distressing ones positioned at Level Five.

¹⁰ "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Cong. Rsch. Serv., *First Amendment, Constitution Annotated*, (2019) constitution.congress.gov.

¹¹ Nimark and Pitschner, *Mainstream Media*.

¹² Saman Malik and Sarah Peterson, "How U.S. Media Lost the Trust of the Public", *CBC News*, (2021), www.cbc.ca.

¹³ Geoffrey Cohen, "Party over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85 (2003), 808-822.

¹⁴ Natasha Holt, "Controversial PragerU Curriculum Approved for Florida Classrooms, but It's Unclear Where It Will Be Used", WUFT, (2023), www.wuft.org.

¹⁵ Olivia B. Waxman, "What It Means That Florida Will Allow Conservative PragerU Content in Schools", *Time* (2023), time.com.

¹⁶ Carme Colomina et al., "The Impact of Disinformation on Democratic Processes and Human Rights in the World", *Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the Union PE*, (2021), www.europarl.europa.eu; PGA, "Disinformation vs. Misinformation: The Issue of Dangerous Speech", *Parliamentarians for Global Actions*, www.pgaction.org.

¹⁷ David Hitchcock, "The Practice of Argumentative Discussion", *Argumentation*, 16.3 (2002), 287-298.

¹⁸ Nadine Strossen, "Freedom of Speech and Equality: Do We Have to Choose?", *Journal of Law and Policy*, 25.1 (2016), brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu;).

¹⁹ ADL, "Pyramid of Hate", *Anti-Defamation League* (2021), www.adl.org.

1.3 Navigating Alternative Knowledge and Hate Speech in Educational Settings

The educational sphere has long grappled with hate speech in its various manifestations. As purveyors of established knowledge, one might assume that these educational environments would be impervious to the manipulation of facts, particularly concerning educational materials. However, whether driven by social ideology, political interference, or educational reform initiatives,²⁰ education is no stranger to transformation, and has frequently been exposed to inaccurate or incomplete information.

This paper aims to explore how educational spaces serve as coveted access points for proponents of alternative truths targeting new generations. In the case in point, the intervention of these ultra-conservative content providers is often framed as safeguarding American values against a perceived dominant ideology, which they identify as left-wing, liberal, or woke. As a contrastive measure against an authoritarian bend, platforms such as PragerU advance their own ideological perspectives by implanting a bold argumentation framework in their video narratives. As evidenced in the analysis, these stories contain rhetorical and visual elements that coalesce to alter some well-established facts, events or occurrences, and critical social policies regarding theories of gender and race.

Given this backdrop, one may question how these alternative outlets evade oversight from educational authorities. Reflecting on the contentious global debate surrounding political interference in educational content, particularly within the US context, this could be attributed to the decentralized nature of curriculum development across the 50 states.²¹ In particular, state boards of education, agency leaders, school districts, local schools, and teachers and parents play varying roles in the design and approval of K-12 curricula, often resulting in a lack of centralized regulation.²²

In adopting the case study structure of data presentation, the study examines two short K-12 educational videos sourced from PragerU's archive of 80 videos dedicated to this age range. It is essential to specify that the two products are analyzed as separate case studies, and are therefore representative of other videos under the same typology, namely those targeting 3rd, 4th and 5th graders and those targeting 6th graders to high school students. To corroborate this approach, the analysis touches upon the most frequently occurring aspects of rhetorical argumentation and multimodal composition, and is therefore illustrative not only of the other series of videos, but also of the methodological framework employed.

The videos were downloaded from PragerU's website and transcribed. As mentioned, given the inherent multimodal nature of these products, and the significant issues addressed which span across historical, scientific, geographical, and social topics, an interdisciplinary analytical approach was deemed necessary. Consequently, the study adopts a combination of two prominent approaches within the field of Critical Discourse Studies. For the analysis of linguistic evidence, the study employs the argumentation strategy of Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), and the associated concept of *topos*.²³ Multimodal Discourse Analysis²⁴ is subsequently applied to the exploration of other semiotic

²⁰ Imad Harb, *Higher Education and the Future of Iraq*, Special Report 195 (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2008).

²¹ Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893-1958* (New York: Rutledge Falmer, 2004).

²² NCES, "Who Influences Decision Making about School Curriculum: What do Principals Say?," *National Center for Education Statistics* (1995), nces.ed.gov.

²³ Martin Reisingl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-historical Approach (DHA)", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer eds., *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Sage, 2009), 87-121; Ruth Wodak, *Politik mit der Angst. Zur Wirkung rechtspopulistischer Diskurse* (Berlin: Konturen, 2016), 254.

²⁴ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021).

resources which also contributes to the identification of a multimodal argumentative structure underlying the video representations.²⁵

1.4 Research Focus

To best address the issues briefly described above, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Can educational resources be susceptible to disinformation and bias?
2. How does an argumentation framework enhance the discursive strategies of bias and disinformation fabricated by PragerU?
3. To what extent can biased and misleading information serve as a reservoir of hate speech?
4. How can the Pyramid of Hate be used to understand, identify, and interpret varying intensity levels of hate speech?
5. What are some of the possible implications on learning processes that can be expected from the infiltration of distorted information?

2. Disinformation Tactics as Facilitators of Hate Speech

*No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate... ”.*²⁶
Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr King’s quote reminds us that hate speech needs to be taught, indicating that people learn it from others in a variety of contexts, including educational settings where the dissemination of established knowledge and scholarship is both a practical and ethical responsibility. From this perspective, the study argues that the teaching and assimilation of misleading or distorted information, embedded in the retelling of historical events and scientific facts, can potentially exacerbate polarized opinion and lead to the propagation of conspiracy theories, thus detrimentally affecting society in general, and particularly impacting younger adults and children.

Disinformation poses a significant threat to these young minds, especially when organizations such as PragerU deploy communication tactics that are potential triggers of political or social divisions. Unfortunately, inattentive educational stakeholders exposed to such tactics often unwittingly facilitate the dissemination of disinformation as they fail to recognize its infiltration. According to the American Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA),²⁷ some of these tactics are designed to build trust and credibility over time by employing strategies such as cultivating fake or misleading personas, crafting conspiracy theories to drown out opposing viewpoints, and amplifying narratives tailored to resonate with the views of specific audiences.

It is also plausible that disinformation tactics exploit the notion of *identity protective cognition*, wherein individuals selectively credit or discredit evidence based on their commitment to competing cultural groups.²⁸ Some studies suggest that the foundation principle of this cognitive process is culture,

²⁵ Bruce E. Gronbeck, “The Vision/Visuality Dichotomy in Argument Studies”, in Charles Arthur Willard, ed, *Critical Problems in Argumentation* (Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 2005), 487-495; Assimakis Tseronis, “Argumentative functions of visuals: Beyond claiming and justifying”, in Dima Mohammed and Marcin Lewiński, eds., *Virtues of argumentation: proceedings of the 10th International Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA)* (2013), 22-26.

²⁶ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, (New York City: Little, Brown and Company, 1994).

²⁷ CISA, “Tactics of Disinformation”, *Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency* (2022), www.cisa.org

²⁸ David Sherman and Geoffrey Cohen, “The Psychology of Self-defense: Self-Affirmation Theory”, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, (2006), 183-242.

which is understood to be cognitively prior to the assimilation of fact.²⁹ According to this mechanism, individuals tend to acquire habits of mind that reinforce beliefs aligned with their identity-defining affinity group, regardless of contrary evidence.³⁰ Despite new evidence supported by current, updated, and fact-checked information, individuals of opposing persuasions often persist in supporting their group's position or identity, as seen in the case of climate change denialism, where notwithstanding overwhelming scientific evidence, deniers continue to obstruct legislation and spread conspiracy beliefs.

Therefore, it is apparent that hate speech thrives on disinformation tactics and biased attitudes, and the absence of a universally accepted definition of such phenomena at both international and national levels weakens efforts to eradicate all hate-related incidents. Fortunately, there are some recommendations issued by different governing bodies, including the Council of Europe's Recommendation No. R (97) 20, aimed at fostering consensus. This document defines hate speech as encompassing "all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin".³¹

However, if hate speech is seen as a discursive response rooted in existing systematic discrimination targeting groups identified by their protected characteristics,³² other targets might be overlooked or excluded. Hate speech destabilizes not only protected vulnerable groups but also other members of the general public, including children and adolescents who are particularly vulnerable. For instance, the dissemination of bias and disinformation in educational materials, while not directly causing physical violence, hinders the public's ability to critically discern truthful information from biased or false information. In essence, the distortion of information poses a significant danger as it can potentially escalate into conflict and lead to hate-inducing behaviors.

Clashing with academically-established knowledge raises concerns about exacerbating the polarizing fear of 'the other',³³ primarily due to conflicting values and identities. Polarization of positions can also foster conspiracy theories, often involving suspicions that certain outgroups are dangerous and harbor secretive plans.³⁴ Although there is abundant literature on the nature of conspiracy theories, little is known about the inclination of younger age groups towards these beliefs.³⁵ However, there is sufficient evidence that increased exposure to conspiracy or to biased attitudes could influence the extent to which younger age groups are more susceptible to believing anti-scientific or anti-historical facts than older adults, likely due to the age-related insufficient development of critical thinking skills.³⁶

²⁹ Dan M. Kahan, "Misconceptions, Misinformation, and the Logic of Identity-Protective Cognition." *Cultural Cognition Project Working Paper Series No. 164*, Yale Law School, Public Law, Research Paper No. 605, Yale Law & Economics Research Paper No. 575, (2017).

³⁰ Kahan, *Identity Protection*.

³¹ CoE, "Recommendation No. R(97)20 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States on "Hate Speech" (Rec(97)20 1997); "Recommendation CM/Rec (2010)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Measures to Combat Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity" (CM/Rec(2010)5 2010); "General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech" (CRI(2016)15 2015); "Recommendation CM/Rec (2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Combating Hate Speech". (CM/Rec(2022)16 2022).

³² Katharine Gelber, "Differentiating Hate Speech: A Systemic Discrimination Approach," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 24.4 (2021), 393-414.

³³ Teun van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: Sage, 1998).

³⁴ Alfred Moore, "On the Democratic Problem of Conspiracy Politics", in Joseph Uscinski, ed., *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (New York: Oxford U.P., 2018), 111-21.

³⁵ Michael Wood and Karen Douglas, "Are conspiracy theories a surrogate for God?" in Dyrendal Asbjørn et al., eds., *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 87-105.

³⁶ Ibid.

3. The Pyramid of Hate

As hate speech manifests in various layers and intensities, the study utilizes a taxonomic framework to pinpoint the perilous nature of discursive behaviors recognized as offensive, aggressive, and discriminatory. This framework, known as the Pyramid of Hate,³⁷ serves as a powerful visual tool to identify and assess the level of severity of discursive strategies. Originally conceptualized as a scale by psychologist Gordon Allport in 1954,³⁸ it was adapted into a pyramid format by the Anti-Defamation League in 2018. The Pyramid delineates five levels of hate-inducing language, symbols, and images, progressing in complexity from the least dangerous Level One to the most perilous Level Five. Analogous to an actual pyramid, the upper levels rest upon the foundation of the lower ones. This suggests that if individuals or institutions normalize or accept behaviors at lower levels, it is likely to pave the way for the acceptance of behaviors at higher levels. Once normalized, these behaviors can effortlessly permeate various contexts, including educational environments, thus possibly compromising the integrity of knowledge and learning. In the context of this study, the Pyramid of Hate (Figure 2) is employed to examine a reservoir of biased attitudes, facilitating the classification of the risk level posed by PragerU’s educational resources.

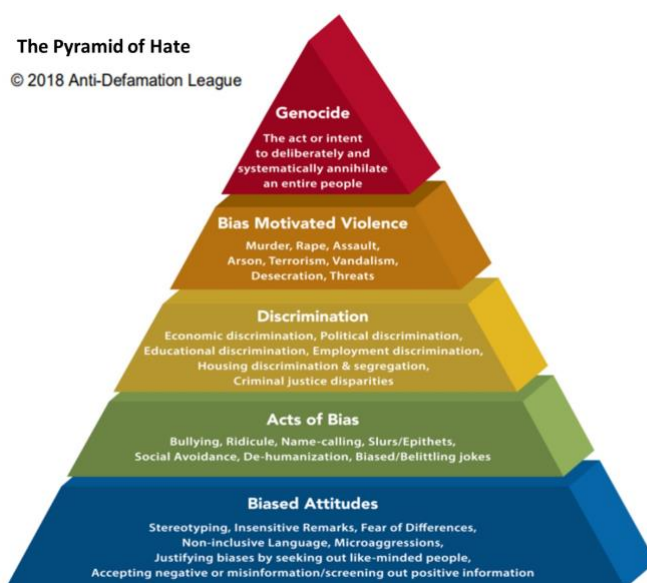


Fig. 1. The Pyramid of Hate

4. PragerU

For decades, both liberal and conservative partisan groups have leveraged affiliated media outlets to promote educational policies aligned with their respective worldviews.³⁹ Among these media

³⁷ Anti-Defamation League (2018).

³⁸ Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

³⁹ Ruth Milkman, “A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest”, *American Sociological Review*, 82.1 (2017), 1-31.

organizations involved in educational content creation with their own communication channels is PragerU, the frontrunner of our case study.⁴⁰



Fig. 2. PragerU homepage: <https://www.prageru.com>; <https://www.prageru.com/prageru-in-your-school>

The conservative foundation PragerU produces animated, 5-minute videos and social media content that cover a diverse array of topics, attracting millions of followers, including children and educators.⁴¹ The organization’s burgeoning popularity largely stems from its videos, which offer conservative perspectives on economic, political, scientific, and cultural matters. Above all, PragerU’s ultimate purpose is “to offer a free alternative to the dominant left-wing ideology in culture, media, and education”, thus protecting children from what they call ‘woke’ narratives taught in most schools.⁴²

PragerU’s ethos centers around cultivating conservative values, as encapsulated in their motto of *starting them off young*.⁴³ From this standpoint, the organization critiques the left-wing concept of cancel culture,⁴⁴ contending that this practice undermines traditional family values, gender identity, and established scientific and historical facts. The following quote from PragerU’s 2023 annual report elucidates the organization’s stance:

The left makes up its own “truth.” Using cradle-to-grave messaging, these lies about America and Judeo-Christian values are told to Americans on a massive scale. If these lies are told often enough – without being challenged – young people will believe them. Not because they make

⁴⁰ www.prageru.com.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Najida Gvozden and Lovisa Zetterlind, “The Complexity of Cancel Culture: Unveiling the Personal and Social Drivers that Influences the Decision to Cancel” (Umeå University, 2023), umu.diva-portal.org.

sense, but because that's the only thing they hear... We are dedicated to: A life guided by Biblical values, protecting children's innocence, celebrating America's exceptional history, civic responsibility, rejecting woke culture, and defending free speech.⁴⁵

However, PragerU's branding can be misleading at first sight as the organization is not a university. Established in 2009 by Allen Estrin and conservative radio talk show host Dennis Prager, PragerU operates as a content-producing, conservative and nonprofit foundation, despite seeking validation as an educational institution. To justify its role, PragerU criticizes the American education system for allegedly "indoctrinating" students with radical ideas concerning critical race theory, systemic racism, gender fluidity, and anti-Americanism.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, PragerU boasts a substantial footprint, hosting over 900 videos on its platform and more than 2000 on its YouTube channel. Its free materials, available in multiple languages, including English, Arabic, Spanish, French, and Russian, cover diverse subjects such as Biography, Life Lessons, Civics, Global Issues, Clean Energy, Environment, Honesty, Life Skills, Science, Self-Help, and Stewardship. The company claims to have garnered over 3 billion viewers across its webpage and social media platforms, with nearly 2.5 million subscribers, including over 700,000 parents, grandparents, and educators subscribed to its kids' content.⁴⁷

Presumably, in the effort to boost their credibility level, PragerU's K-12 video material is presented by over 170 famous presenters, including two of the most widely-known conservative and right-wing political commentators and TV anchors, namely Ben Shapiro from The Daily Wire, and Charlie Kirk from Fox News. Adding to the appeal of these videos, those targeting younger audiences are produced by using limited animation technique which is quite recognizable and easy to understand as it employs child-friendly language, stereotypical characterization, full color, bigger-than-life cartoon subjects and lots of humor. However, these videos often omit, distort, or dismiss important historical facts, indicating the presence of various forms of disinformation. The videos that target older students are not cartoon-like, but feature real-life characters and incorporate symbols of youth culture such as music, fashion, slang, hobbies, and social media. While these videos may exhibit a higher level of factual reporting compared to those for younger audiences, they still prioritize overtly conservative values and biased perspectives.

5. The Dataset

This study's dataset comprises two videos which were selected from a collection of 80 products targeting K-12 students. As space is always an issue, the selection was based on the following criteria: age range, topic significance, and overt occurrences of bias and disinformation. Of the two videos, the first targets third, fourth and fifth graders from one of the most popular and most viewed brother-and-sister cartoon series entitled *Leo and Layla's History Adventures*. This series uses time traveling to obtain answers to some questions about past or current issues such as slavery and climate change. For older students, the selected video regards the highly controversial topic of masculinity. Additional information extracted from the PragerU website is provided in the figure below.

⁴⁵ PragerU, "2023, Annual Report", www.prageru.com.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.



<p>HISTORICAL FIGURES</p> 	<p>Leo & Layla Meet Christopher Columbus – (3rd – 5th) Oct 07, 2022</p> <p>Why is Columbus Day being replaced with Indigenous Peoples’ Day? Do your kids know the truth about Christopher Columbus? This animated episode explains why we honor Columbus and teaches elementary students not to judge events of the past by the standards of today.</p>
<p>LIFE LESSONS</p> 	<p>How to embrace your masculinity! (6th+) Feb 20, 2023</p> <p>Is masculinity toxic? No! Your teens will learn the value of independence, courage, strength, and respect in this helpful episode all about embracing their masculinity.</p>

Fig.3 Selected PragerU Videos

It is important to note that prior to the analysis, the content of the video about Columbus was fact-checked against pre-existing and established knowledge regarding the historical figure.⁴⁸ With regards to the video about masculinity, a review was conducted concerning the worldwide current debate on gender identity and discrimination as well as studies about inclusivity as a practice against prejudice and bias.⁴⁹

6. Methodology

This study is inspired by the interdisciplinary field of Critical Discourse Studies⁵⁰ which draws together a group of approaches applied to the critical analysis of linguistic and other semiotic resources in their social contexts. In particular, the present methodological framework draws on verbal or rhetorical argumentation as its primary method of analysis, thus relying on the tools afforded by Wodak’s argumentation strategy in the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA),⁵¹ and the concept of *topos*. The videos, due their inherent multimodal nature, are also analyzed by employing the socio-semiotic approach to Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA).⁵² As this study’s second analytical approach, MDA contributes to exposing the verbal argumentation strategies by visually expressing their underlying scheme. The methodological framework is therefore designed to detect and analyze biased or distorted knowledge that is articulated through grammatical, rhetorical, and lexical devices as well as through

⁴⁸ B. Myint, “Was Christopher Columbus a Hero or Villain?”, www.biography.com.

⁴⁹ Roger Andre Soraa et al., “Diversifying diversity: Inclusive engagement, intersectionality, and gender identity in a European Social Sciences and Humanities Energy research project”, *Energy Research & Social Science*, Vol. 62, (2020), 101380, www.sciencedirect.com.; CSHA, “Gender Equality and Inclusivity”, www.csha.org; IESOGI, “Reports on Gender: The Law of Inclusion & Practices of Exclusion”, 2021, www.ohcr.org.

⁵⁰ Johann Wolfgang Unger, “The interdisciplinarity of critical discourse studies research”, *Palgrave Communication*, 2.15037 (2016); Majid KhosraviNik, “Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)”, in John Flowerdew and John Richardson, eds., *Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2017), 583-596; Norman Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁵¹ Wodak and Reisigl, *The Discourse-Historical Approach*.

⁵² Kress and van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*.

visual evidence.⁵³ These devices are used to construe narratives containing denial strategies, one-sided argumentation, and justification of positions, usually formulated as metaphors or symbols, claims, warrants, emotive language, self-positioning vs. positioning of opposite others (us vs. them), good vs. evil and other dichotomies, and counter-attribution of responsibilities and values.⁵⁴

Yet, while Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodal toolkit is remarkably useful for the identification of relevant semiotic resources other than language, such as symbols, images, and music, the actual analysis constitutes a challenge as children's limited animation products often lack the variety of critical representational, interpersonal and compositional features commonly afforded by multimodal products. The study, as argued in the following sections, attempts to find a feasible solution by focusing on salient meaning-making features.

6.1 *The Discourse Historical Approach*

The DHA deals with the linguistic aspects of a text and discourse while providing a multifaceted social critique aimed at integrating "a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources, the background of the social and political fields in which discourse is embedded, and the context where analyzed discourses take place".⁵⁵ In other words, the DHA considers the historical context of a problem, and facilitates the integration of knowledge about the historical sources and the social and political fields in which discursive "events" are embedded.⁵⁶ This is accomplished by implementing four strategies which are: 1) nomination (how social actors, objects, phenomena and events are named and referred to linguistically); 2) predication (which characteristics and features are attributed to the actors, objects and phenomena); 3) argumentation (a process used to justify claims of truth and often relies on *topoi*, i.e., argument schemes, used to connect the premise of an argument to its conclusion); 4) perspectivization (deals with positioning the speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance); 5) intensification/mitigation (modify the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances). This study primarily focuses on the strategy of argumentation as explained in the following section.

6.2 *Verbal or Rhetorical Argumentation, and the Concept of Topos/Topoi*

Persuasiveness is the principal strategy of argumentation, and the subject matter of rhetoric, technically residing in reasoning processes that lead a communicative act from assumed premises to a conclusion. Wodak defines argumentation as "a nonviolent linguistic as well as cognitive pattern of problem-solving that manifests itself in a (more or less regulated) sequence of speech acts which form a complex (and more or less coherent) network of statements. Thus, argumentation allows challenging or justifying validity claims such as truth and normative rightness."⁵⁷

Wodak's work and the present study draw on Aristotle's original notion of argumentation, and the concept of *topos*, which means place or location in Greek.⁵⁸ In Aristotelian terms, the argument is guaranteed its transition towards the conclusion by means of an argumentation scheme which is

⁵³ Reiner Keller, *Doing Discourse Research: An Introduction for Social Scientists* (London: Sage, 2013).

⁵⁴ Axel Gelfert, "Fake news: A definition", *Informal Logic*, 38.1 (2018), 84-117; Siegfried Jäger and Florentine Maier "Analysing discourses and dispositives: A Foucauldian approach to theory and methodology", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (London: Sage, 2016), 109-136.

⁵⁵ Ruth Wodak, *The Discourse-Historical Approach*, 65.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 63-94.

⁵⁷ Ruth Wodak, "Argumentation, Political," in Gianpietro Mazzoleni, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015), 1-9.

⁵⁸ Gideon Burton, *Silva Rhetoricae*, Brigham Young University, rhetoric.byu.edu/.

formulated and represented as *topos*. Examples of the latter can be found in Aristotle’s *Ars Rhetorica*, classified into two main types as shown in Table 2: the general *topoi* that apply to commonplace topics, and the specific *topoi* that apply only to a specific discipline.⁵⁹

Common <i>Topoi</i>	Special <i>Topoi</i>
Definition	Judicial
Genus/Species	Justice (right)
Division	Injustice (wrong)
Whole/Parts	Deliberative
Subject/Adjuncts	The Good
Comparison	The Unworthy
Similarity/Difference	The Advantageous
Degree	The Disadvantageous
Relationship	Ceremonial
Cause/Effect	Virtue (the noble)
Antecedent /Consequence	Vice (the base)
Contraries	
Contradictions	

Fig. 4 Aristotle’s list of *topoi*

Originating from Aristotle’s definition, the concept of *topos* in the DHA is expressed as follows: “[*topoi* or *loci*] are parts of argumentation which belong to the obligatory, either explicit or inferable premises. They are the content-related warrants or ‘conclusion rules’ which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim.” Provided below is a list of Wodak’s *topoi*.⁶⁰

1. Usefulness, advantage	9. Finances
2. Uselessness, disadvantage	10. Reality
3. Definition, name interpretation	11. Numbers
4. Danger and threat	12. Land and right
5. Humanitarianism	13. History
6. Justice	14. Culture
7. Responsibility	15. Abuse
8. Burdening, weighting	

Fig. 5 Wodak’s list of *topoi*

With reference to the identification of a *topos* or *topoi*, during the initial viewing of the videos, one main and recurrent *topos* began to emerge, corresponding to Wodak’s ‘Usefulness and Advantage’ which was previously formulated by Aristotle as ‘the Advantageous’. However, according to the authors, the adjective-used-as-a-noun form ‘the Advantageous’, seemed to be a more fitting metaphor as it evokes

⁵⁹ Aristotle, *Topica*, trans. by Forster Edward S. (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 1989); Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, trans. by Freese John H. (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 1991); Sara Rubinelli, *Ars Topica: The Classical Technique of Constructing Arguments from Aristotle to Cicero* (Berlin: Springer, 2009).

⁶⁰ Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 74.

the notion of exploitation to procure an advantage, thus extending the former's notion of what is merely useful or handy (7).⁶¹

As for the argumentation scheme through which the *topos* of 'the Advantageous' is operationalized, the study draws on Wodak's adaptation of Toulmin's model.⁶² This model, illustrated in the analysis of the two videos, presents three basic moves: 1) the data, or the argument described as the premise that establishes the case; 2) the warrant which backs the argument on the basis of the evidence presented, and answers the question why the argument/data means the claim is true; 3) the claim which asserts the initial argument by producing an epiphanic moment.

6.3 Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and Argumentation

Video products are mostly hybrid or multimodal ensembles as they comprise intersemiotic meaning-making resources.⁶³ With reference to PragerU kid's videos, especially those for very young children, these are characterized by limited animation, and are therefore performed with reduced action. However, as mentioned, these ensembles contain many other salient features that help to get meaning across, such as facial gestures, saturation of color, symbols, vectors, and information layout.

It is important to specify that although the study does not fully implement what is properly known as multimodal argumentation, mainly due to the limited animation feature of these video sequences, it does take into consideration one of its founding aspects which the study acknowledges and adopts.⁶⁴ This consists in the understanding that multimodal arguments are basically different ways of conveying an argument whose message is interpreted by the interlocutor, and reconstructed by the analyst as a set of propositions that support or attack a conclusion.⁶⁵ With this in mind, the deployment of a multimodal argumentation approach to decode the sequence of visual expressions is subsequent to a detailed multimodal analysis of the meaning-making resources, and primarily used to visually galvanize what is claimed in the verbal argument scheme. This means that the claim, with its epiphanic moment, is brought to the fore only if the selected images are read as a multimodal ensemble, and not as separate units.

A relevant example of how different semiotic modes perform within multimodal argumentation is the analysis of cartoons which have long been regarded as visual arguments. Functioning as such, the cartoonist's art is to express a definite standpoint through multimodal and argumentative expedients that must be sufficiently persuasive to convince intended audiences. Considering such premises, many of PragerU's videos are about cartoon characters, and possess cartoon features that require an amalgamation of intersemiotic resources of image, text, and audio, including music. In this case, the analysis focuses on how the words of the speakers coordinate with the series of images, so that the latter become more understandable, and the former become more vivid because they are coordinated with images.

As for the foundation of MDA, the term multimodality was used for the first time at the Sydney school of semiotics by Halliday and refers to the modes of analysis applied to objects and words inferred from semiotics, and from semiotic modes, such as image, sound, and language.⁶⁶ Grounded in social semiotics of visual communication,⁶⁷ MDA is an approach that looks at multiple modes of

⁶¹ Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-historical Approach", in Karen Tracy et al., eds., *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

⁶² Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2003).

⁶³ Gunther Kress, *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁶⁴ Leo Groarke, "Going Multimodal: What is a Mode of Arguing and Why Does it Matter?", *Argumentation*, 29.2 (2015) 133-155.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Theo van Leeuwen, "Multimodality", in Deborah Tannen et al., eds., *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2015).

⁶⁷ Kress, *Multimodality*.

communication such as spoken and written text, images, color, audio-visuals, music, and diagrams or graphics in a media text. It is a systematic way of studying not just how these individual modes communicate, but how they interact with one another to create semiotic meaning.

The three metafunctions of multimodal analysis are inherited from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics approach to language as a social semiotic process.⁶⁸ These are the Representational extrapolated from Halliday's Ideational metafunction, the Interpersonal from the Interactional metafunction, and the Compositional from the Textual metafunction.

In brief, the analysis of the intersemiotic relationship between visual and verbal modes in representational terms requires the identification of participants, the processes or the activity described, their attributes or qualities, and the circumstances in which the action takes place. As for the interpersonal metafunction, the relationships between the visual, the producer and the viewer are considered according to the power relations that are established. Compositional features, which are the primary source of this study's analytical framework, are related to the layout of the page in terms of coherence. Some of these are: the positioning of the information value (placement of elements to the left - given information or to the right - new information), visual salience expressed in terms of color, shape and size, and visual framing.⁶⁹

7. Video Analysis

Figures 6 and 7 used for the analysis of the videos contain three columns. The first column on the left contains the three argumentative moves; the middle column contains the corresponding transcribed sequences; the right column contains the visual resources that correspond to the sequences. The commentary explaining the argumentative moves is provided after each table.

7.1 Analysis of *Christopher Columbus: Explorer of the New World*

In this video, Christopher Columbus is a controversial historical figure who, according to PragerU, has been delegitimized, and his identity cancelled by wokeism. Through the brother and sister investigators, PragerU aims to boost Columbus' heroic nature by giving him a total remake from a controversial figure to absolute hero who should be celebrated.

The first video sequence (Screenshot 1), corresponding to the argument in Column 1, begins with the most salient character of the video, namely Leo, center-screen and working on his laptop. His sister Layla enters the room and asks: "What's up with the face?", directing the audience's attention towards Leo's puzzled look, thus addressing the issue of the public sentiment about Columbus Day, and why some people are against celebrating this important historical figure. He tries to enumerate the reasons by using his fingers, a multimodal expedient that signifies logical thinking. The dark colour of the grey computer that highlights the seriousness of searching for the truth, contrasts with the bright yellow of the sofa. The term FREE THINKER is written in white letters on the laptop, emphasizing that Leo and Layla are not influenced by common opinion. This expedient most likely serves as a priming technique through which the viewers are prepared to accept the alternative version that Columbus himself will provide. The children then time travel to meet Columbus who is portrayed as a positive character driven by the desire to explore new worlds. This is another priming technique used to construct the turning point in which Columbus talks about his bravery, acknowledging that slavery was a necessary evil, and violence was used to defend himself and his people from the indigenous people.

⁶⁸ Michael A.K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning* (London: Hodder Education, 1978).

⁶⁹ Kress and van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*.









Argumentation scheme	Rhetorical argumentation	Multimodal argumentation			
<p>Argument:</p> <p>Some historical figures are controversial because they commit some objectionable but necessary acts.</p>	<p>Leo: ... Some of the teachers at my school really don't like Christopher Columbus and don't think he should have a holiday, but some do... Columbus ... was a really mean guy who spread slavery, disease and violence.</p>	 <p>Screenshot 1 Time: 0:43</p>	<p>Columbus: Some of the native folks from where I just left do those things [eating people and human sacrifice] regularly. So, these people in your time who think it was a peaceful paradise are misinformed. Or lying.</p>	 <p>Screenshot 5 Time: 9:25</p>	
<p>Warrant:</p> <p>Christopher Columbus is a controversial historical figure who acted for the good of humanity according to the standards of the day.</p>	<p>Columbus: Allow me to give you a little biographical information so it all makes sense.</p> <p>Columbus: ... and that opened up the desire and the opportunity to figure out a path by the sea.</p> <p>Columbus: ... they were vicious warring cannibals!</p>	 <p>Screenshot 2 Time: 2:25</p>  <p>Screenshot 3 Time 4:05</p>  <p>Screenshot 4 Time: 8:53</p>	<p>Layla: Yes, but what about slavery? You didn't deny that.</p> <p>Columbus: Deny? No. Slavery is as old as time and has taken place in every corner of the world. Even amongst the people I've just left. Being taken as a slave is better than being killed, no? I don't see the problem.</p> <p>Columbus: Ah. Magnifico. That's wonderful. I'm glad humanity has reached such a time. But you said you're from 500 years in the future. How can you come here to the 15th century and judge me by your standards of the 21st century?</p>	 <p>Screenshot 6 Time: 9:28</p>  <p>Screenshot 7 Time: 9:56</p>	
			<p>Claim:</p> <p>Christopher Columbus is a controversial but heroic figure.</p>	<p>Leo: I don't think Christopher Columbus was a villain and maybe he wasn't a hero but he sure did some heroic things that are definitely worth celebrating.</p>	 <p>Screenshot 8 Time: 12:24</p>

Fig. 6. Christopher Columbus: Explorer of the new world

In this second move, or the warrant, through which the turning point occurs, Columbus provides factual information about his life. On the deck of a caravel, in Screenshot 2, Columbus is on the left (given information, established, and confirmed by Columbus), and the children are on the right (new information that will be conveyed through the children's renewed perspective). The larger-than-life Columbus represents his authoritative figure, owing to both his age and his reputation, thus enhancing his credibility. As this is a limited animation cartoon video, action is reduced, and the only other element that changes position, along with Columbus' arms, is the caravel that rises and falls, creating a rhythmic movement that accompanies the explorer's narration with background music. Resembling a documentary-style soundtrack, such as those used for historical documentaries, the music sets the tone for a celebration in commemoration of the explorer's expeditions. Indeed, as the narration unfolds, the rhythm is quick-paced as Columbus tells us about his feats, then pauses to allow the viewer to take it all in, but only to pick up momentum again towards the final outcome. The caravel is also a salient element as it draws attention to Columbus' extraordinary adventure. This part of the narration is visually represented through graphic materials and itineraries (Screenshot 3) which, at the end of the story, will contribute to the redemption of the historical figure in the eyes of the two protagonists.

In an abrupt fashion, the atmosphere and the music change, prompted by Leo's affirmation: "I'm sorry Mr. Columbus, but I heard at school that you spoiled paradise and you brought slavery and murder to these peaceful people". Columbus then gives his version of the story stating that those places were not a "paradise of civilization".

Screenshot 4 shows Leo's reaction to Columbus' narration about cannibals. Leo, center-screen, but Leyla's position, instead, is that of a mere observer of the scene as she is partially visible on the left in the background. Leo's big blue eyes are indeed the real protagonists in this screenshot as on one hand, they are the same color of the sky, representing his infinite desire for knowledge, while on the other, they seem to show doubt. Leo's gaze is indeed a powerful semiotic resource in all of the scenes. In the

meaning-making process, his gaze, which is at times a demand for attention (when looking at the viewers), and at times an offer when searching for information (when looking towards Columbus or his sister), contributes and supports the rhetorical argumentation process in each of the moves.

In Screenshot 5, Columbus, with a worried look and open arms, ready to provide the missing information, is probably aware that his truth will disturb Leo and Leyla. On the right side of the image, the children are ready to receive this new information. This frame creates an intersemiotic connection between their puzzled facial expressions, and the verbal information as the explorer simultaneously asserts: “So, these people in your time who think it was a peaceful paradise are misinformed. Or lying”. This frame also triggers an intertextual connection to PragerU’s video introduction where the video authors ask: “Why is Columbus Day being replaced with Indigenous Peoples’ Day? Do your kids know the truth about Christopher Columbus?”.

In Screenshot 6, the issue of slavery is once again addressed. Leo is tight-lipped, while Layla’s arm is extended towards Columbus, thus forming a connecting vector. The children are both aware that Columbus’ answer will be crucial in resolving the issue.

In Screenshot 7, Columbus is zoomed in as he needs to create a personal moment with the children while he affirms that his actions cannot be judged by people who have a different perspective because they live in a different epoch.

In the third move, or the Claim, the two young people seem to realize, in a closing epiphanic moment, that Columbus deserves a celebration of his own. In Screenshot 8 Leo and Layla are back in their living room. Leo is on the sofa with his laptop again, but he is now smiling, and his eyes show no sign of worrying. He extends his finger to highlight that they have concluded that Columbus is a heroic figure worthy of a proper celebration.

The multimodal analysis of this cartoon focuses mainly on the intersemiotic connection between the verbal and the visual resources by means of eyes, gaze, and hand and body gestures, resulting in a multimodal artefact crafted to offer a different perspective on Columbus, thus responding to PragerU’s initial question “Do your kids know the truth about Christopher Columbus?”.

7.2 Analysis of *How to embrace your masculinity!*

The analysis of this video aims to explore the meaning-making process by means of which the semiotic resources have been combined to provide a positive standpoint on the concept of masculinity. In this video, the narrator is a young man who tells his viewers to value their masculinity by embracing it, against those who say that masculinity is toxic.

The first move, or the argument, is constructed using three statements to assert the importance of masculinity, namely to (1) “defeat Nazi German in World War II”, (2) “mine coal and keep Americans warm”, and (3) “have a solid family and a strong country today”. Textual information in (1) and (3) is reiterated through captions that appear on the screen while the narrator is speaking, while only (2) is represented visually. In Screenshot 1, the argument is visually constructed by means of a scene depicting two men, dressed casually, and working in a mine with a pickaxe in their hands. The two characters, representing the archetype of the hardworking man, are center images and therefore salient elements. Their mining activity conveys strength and the power of masculinity.

The warrant is gradually constructed by means of a series of statements, formulated on the idea that masculinity makes men strong and courageous and respectful towards women. Screenshot 2 depicts a young man with a grimace on his face, and dressed in typically traditional college clothes. His gaze turned towards the young woman on the right seems to express uncertainty as she is looking at him with disapproval. The term “wuss” used in the text offers an explanation of how the young man is perceived by the woman, which is the exact opposite of the image of masculinity PragerU is trying to build throughout the video.








Argumentation scheme	Rhetorical argumentation	Multimodal argumentation		
Argument: Masculinity is not toxic.	Male narrator It took masculinity to defeat Nazi German in World War II. It took masculinity to mine coal and keep Americans warm. And it takes masculinity to have a solid family and a strong country today.	 Screenshot 1 Time: 0:47		 Screenshot 5 Time: 4:42
Warrant: Masculinity respects women and makes you strong and courageous.	Because, let's face it, it's easier to shirk responsibility, mooch off of others and cling to codependent relationships. But that's not being a man, that's being a wuss. ... Use your strength in useful ways like manual labor, self-defense or saving the Daniel in distress. ... Every boy has a hero whether it's Superman or a football star ... but that means you have to choose your heroes carefully.	 Screenshot 2 Time: 1:53  Screenshot 3 Time: 3:59  Screenshot 4 Time: 4:28	... Realize that men and women are very different and sometimes it's hard to understand the opposite gender. It can be frustrating.	 Screenshot 6 Time: 6:26
			Claim: Young men should be taught to openly value their masculinity.	In conclusion, masculinity is not about all the stereotypical things, it's about having character, respect, and strength on the inside and out.
				 Screenshot 7 Time: 7:05

Fig 7. How to embrace your masculinity!

Screenshot 3, on the contrary, represents men’s strength and courage, and is a stereotypical representation of gender. Indeed, a young woman, or a “damsel in distress” is being robbed by a young man (given element on the left), while another young man (new element on the right) saves her by defeating the aggressor.

Screenshots 4 and 5 respectively illustrate two examples of men with hero status. The narrator introduces these scenes by affirming that it is important “to choose your heroes carefully”. In Screenshot 4 there is a policeman, or an iconic image of law and order, who is able to stop unruly drivers simply by raising his arm. This image is followed by that of a negative hero, in Screenshot 5, represented by a famous TV presenter. This TV personality is mocked as he uses exaggerated gestures and facial expressions making him look like a buffoon host in a Woke show, a clear intersemiotic connection to PragerU’s stance against woke culture.⁷⁰

Screenshot 6 shows a boy and a girl having dinner. Both are dressed up for the occasion, and the blond hair, finely dressed young lady represents the typical white American female. The young man is reprimanded on his bad manners, thus supporting the narrator’s affirmation that men should have good manners, have patience and pay the bill! Upon leaving, the young man remarks that “women are complicated”.

The epiphanic moment occurs when the claim is made by the narrator that men are naturally heroic and strong in nature thanks to their masculinity. This leads to Screenshot 7 which recaps the main tips provided in the video. The image is composed of a colored background with waves that create a movement effect, and a numbered list of actions that recall the instructions provided throughout the video on how to become a man and embrace masculinity. This list has the function of a text that has to be “used rather than read”⁷¹, as it conveys the core message of the authors: “grow up and be a man”, which means being independent, strong, courageous and gentle (with women).

⁷⁰ www.prageru.com

⁷¹ Kress and van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*.

The multimodal analysis evidenced that this video constructs and conveys specific narratives about masculinity, employing visual and textual elements to create a cohesive and persuasive argumentation strategy.

8. Discussion

According to dictionary definitions, the term advantageous means something that is beneficial, good, but also discriminatory, utilitarian, opportune, and profitable. It also states that the term refers to any action that is “appropriate for achieving a particular end [or] implies a lack of concern for fairness.”⁷² The *topos* ‘the advantageous’, as exploited by PragerU, according to the video evidence, is all about opportunism, profitability, and unfairness. In fact, the perceived advantageousness of young minds is not lost on PragerU whose tactics leverage the willingness to be motivated that children and young adults usually have.

The learning principle of providing multiple perspectives regarding an issue is a cornerstone of social studies teaching practice in K-12 schools.⁷³ Teachers commonly provide students with various primary sources documenting the same event or prompt them to compare historical interpretations from different secondary sources. The objective is to foster critical evaluation of sources, guide students in formulating sound historical or scientific inquiries, and instill the understanding that individuals hold diverse viewpoints that shape their perceptions and evaluations of the world.

This pedagogical and uncontested practice is the foundation on which this study builds its line of reasoning. In other words, every PragerU action, affirmation, or attitude contained in their video material is tested against and contested according to the soundness, robustness and reliability of educational principles. The stoutness of this approach has led the authors towards the firm belief that PragerU capitalizes on the principle of multiple perspectives by creating videos that introduce alternative and often conflicting views on past and present issues, while advancing a general argumentation scheme that aligns with their partisan agenda. Throughout the paper, it is argued that PragerU’s nexus of bias and disinformation is positioned against what is perceived as a pervasive leftist and ‘woke’ agenda embedded in American K-12 curricula. PragerU, following the lead of numerous right-wing affiliated think tanks, seeks to influence young audiences who will eventually constitute a significant source of electoral votes.

Indeed, the study’s theoretical and methodological foundation draws on argumentation theory, and specifically on a unique dual scheme which operates through both rhetorical and visual strategies. With reference to the paper’s core *topos*, that of ‘the Advantageous’, PragerU presents its own version that builds on the act of ‘doing what is best for the well-being of the collectivity’. However, as noble as this resolution might sound, the interpretation of content creators such as PragerU can even teach kids that slavery was a necessary evil, white folks are superior, men are strong and heroic while women need saving, and that cancel culture is a destruction of history invented by the left to indoctrinate humanity against tradition and Christian values.

As discussed, through the deployment of both rhetorical and visual discursive strategies, PragerU taps into the emotional aspect of argumentation theory, as exemplified by Aristotele’s rhetorical triangle of Ethos, Logos, and Pathos.⁷⁴ The appeal to Ethos is done by presenting itself as a legitimate educational institution or benefactor of learning. Logos is used to reason with viewers and convey its conservative values and perspectives. Pathos is the most exploited of the three emotional aspects as it emerges as the

⁷² “Advantageous”, www.vocabulary.com.

⁷³ Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Sciences Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2001).

⁷⁴ Robert Bartlett, *Aristotle’ Art of Rhetoric*, Translation with an Interpretive Essay (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Omar Rosas and Javier Serrano-Puche, “News media and the emotional public sphere – Introduction”, *International Journal of Communication*, 12, (2018), 2031-2039.

most prominent rhetorical element, elicited through relatable, engaging, and emotionally resonant characters interacting with the audience.

By looking at the results in a broader perspective, one of most significant findings of the study is the involvement of alternative and politically affiliated media platforms like PragerU in the misappropriation of educational content. At this pivotal age, students often lack the critical discernment necessary to navigate complex life events, rendering them vulnerable, as are their parents, to bias and disinformation. This vulnerability occurs even in the absence of support from educational institutions, which are expected to safeguard students from unreliable materials, even those used for extracurricular purposes. Consequently, exposure to biased and distorted content can distort learning processes that should ideally foster impartiality.⁷⁵

As mentioned, the digital revolution has reshaped the landscape of digital spaces in today's information society.⁷⁶ Some of these spaces serve as breeding grounds for harmful social phenomena, where hate speech can proliferate unchecked under the guise of presenting different perspectives or voices. PragerU's platform, by their own admission, spearheads a vigorous campaign against leftist ideologies, thereby enabling ignorance, disinformation, and manipulation to dominate discourse on critical issues.

While the precise impact of content manipulation on student learning cannot be realistically quantified within the scope of this study, as it would need the implementation of other methods of inquiry such as questionnaires and interviews, it is evident that this phenomenon is on the rise, largely due to the progressive influence of digital media with ramifications in educational spheres worldwide. The proliferation of hate speech as a consequence of bias and disinformation has been exacerbated by digital technologies, often undermining and discrediting mainstream media.⁷⁷ This has led to increased polarization among the general public, a phenomenon leveraged by PragerU as part of its '*the Advantageous*' rhetoric.⁷⁸ Thus, based on extensive research conducted on the general impact of bias and disinformation in everyday life, the study can only speculate on the potential trajectory that this oppositional behavior can follow, and the mystification it could produce in learning materials.⁷⁹

Referring to the Pyramid of Hate, its application enables the identification of escalating behaviors that pose a threat, along with an understanding of the challenges associated with halting their progression once initiated. This implies that by examining the various levels, it becomes feasible to determine the stage at which intervention would be most effective. Specifically, the Pyramid delineates factors likely to contribute to advancement toward higher levels, including tolerated offenses, puns, and stereotypes perpetuated by the media, and even biases stemming from one's community and family. With this perspective in mind, by way of illustration, the study has identified the levels and the main discursive strategies employed in the narrative accounts presented in the videos. As a reminder, the upper levels include the attitudes of the lower levels. These are:

⁷⁵ Jared Piazza, "Fake News: The Effects of Social Media Disinformation on Domestic Terrorism", *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 15.1 (2022), 55-77; Badar Mohamed and Florijančič Polona, "Assessing Incitement to Hatred as a Crime Against Humanity of Prosecution", *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 24.5 (2019), 656-687.

⁷⁶ Matthew Costello et al., "Social Group Identity and Perceptions of Online Hate", *Sociological Inquiry*, 89.3 (2019), 427-452.

⁷⁷ Raphael Cohen-Almagor, "Freedom of Expression v. Social Responsibility: Holocaust Denial in Canada", *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 28.1 (2013), 42-56.

⁷⁸ Morgan Kelly, "Political Polarization and Its Echo Chambers: Surprising New, Cross-disciplinary Perspectives from Princeton", (2021), *Princeton University*, www.princeton.edu; Donato Vese, "Governing Fake News: The Regulation of Social Media and the Right to Freedom of Expression in the Era of Emergency", *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 13.3 (2022), 477-513.

⁷⁹ Brittan Heller and Larry Magid, "Parent's and Educator's Guide to Combatting Hate Speech – ConnectSafely" (2029), www.connectsafely.org; Waldron Jeremy, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard U.P., 2012).

Level One - stereotypes and insensitive remarks; justifying biases, screening out well-documented information, racism (Columbus video);

Discursive strategies: metaphors, symbols, language exemplifying self-positioning as good vs. evil (or the other);

Level Two - fear of differences; misogynist behavior (Masculinity video);

Discursive strategies: symbols, emotive language such as expressions highlighting the weakness of women and the strength of men, and cisgender values;

Level Three - economic, educational and political discrimination (Columbus and Masculinity videos)

Discursive strategies: counter-attribution of responsibilities and values, self-positioning vs. positioning of 'the other', language of conforming to the expected societal role.

The Pyramid of Hate therefore serves to enhance comprehension of how content manipulation that emphasizes societal reprimand and exclusion can lead to hate-inducing behaviors, including those that are seemingly innocuous such as those masquerading as educational activities. These must be acknowledged and mitigated before they evolve into more severe behaviors on the uppermost levels of the Pyramid.

9. Conclusion

Hate, defined as an intense, sustained, and enduring aversion to others,⁸⁰ serves as the primary catalyst for hate speech behaviors. While there exists significant variation in the definitions of hate speech,⁸¹ and a consensus on its boundaries remains elusive, it is generally agreed that this form of expression fundamentally involves the manifestation of hatred toward specific individuals and groups, implicitly or explicitly labeling them as undesirable and legitimizing hostility towards them.

Upon initial examination, PragerU's educational videos may not appear stigmatizing, hostile, or dangerous, and this realization presents a challenge as biased attitudes and disinformation infiltrate learning materials without detection. Indeed, contrary to common thought, hate speech is not limited to more evident acts of bullying, body shaming, or violent anti-civil rights protests or criminal activity. As argued, the discursive strategies employed in PragerU's videos seem to encourage a wide range of conspiracy theories, false assertions, and various forms of denial that have the potential to challenge the epistemology of knowledge.

The complacent and often desensitized attitude towards the dangers posed by a media-controlled market of educational materials provides opportunities for organizations like PragerU to infiltrate content that aligns exclusively with their value system, thus curtailing the development and nurturing of a critical approach to life.

⁸⁰ Allport, *Levels of Hate*.

⁸¹ Matteo Vergani et al., "PROTOCOL: Mapping the Scientific Knowledge and Approaches to Defining and Measuring Hate Crime, Hate Speech, and Hate Incidents" *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 18.2 (2022), e1228.