

What is urgent publishing? - Request for Comments (RFC) in art & design education

Florian Cramer, Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam

Abstract

Publishing is increasingly being challenged through instantaneous social media publishing, even in the fields of scholarship and cultural, philosophical and political debate. Memetic self-publishers such as the right-wing “YouTube intellectual” Jordan Peterson and his left-wing counterpart Natalie Wynn seem to tap into urgent needs that traditional publishing fails to identify and address. Does their practice amount to a new form of urgent publishing? How is it different from non-urgent publishing on the one hand and from propaganda on the other hand? Which urgencies can be addressed by urgent publishing? What is the role of artists and designers in it?

Tags: publishing, social media, memetics, propaganda, urgency, art, design

publishing as propaganda

To begin with an example: In 2020, the psychology professor and political influencer Jordan Peterson had 3.2 million YouTube subscribers and up to 6.9 million views for his individual videos.¹ Peterson’s political message could be broadly characterized as traditionalist conservatism that resorts to mythology and its (controversial) use in C.G. Jung’s early 20th century psychology² for backing up its opposition to “political correctness” and “postmodernism” (in Peterson’s own words), respectively to feminism and intersectional politics in more general terms.³ He factually continues a discourse that begun in the late 1980s with Allan Bloom’s book *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*, using the same targets and similar arguments. However, Peterson reaches a much wider audience than Bloom did. The *New York Times* even called him “the most influential public intellectual in the Western world right now”.⁴ Peterson is also popular among art school students who reject feminist, decolonial and intersectional curricula. This has been epitomized in a meme created by a teacher of Rotterdam’s Willem de Kooning Academy in May 2020:

¹According to the view numbers on (Peterson, 2020). More than 3 million copies of his self-help book *12 Rules for Life* were sold, according to (Peterson, 2019).

²I.e. Jungian archetypes; for a comprehensive critique of Jung, see (McGowan).

³Intersectionality is a form of politics that considers racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination and suppression not as being isolated from each other but as interrelated. The term was coined and explicated by (Crenshaw).

⁴See (Brooks).

Me: (prepares reading list and lecture and assignment on depatriarchalizing design)

Student: I think women should be subservient to men because Jordan Peterson and the Bible say so

Me: There's a teaching moment here.

Also me:



Figure 1: From the Instagram account *wdka.teachermemes*

Both Peterson's YouTube videos and the meme reactions to them could be characterized as forms, and ways, of publishing that meet existing popular demand. On top of that, they are built on formats and networks outside traditional publishing. Even if one doubts Peterson's intellectual depth (since, for example, his take on Jacques Derrida's deconstruction appears to be at best superficial, at worst not even based on first-hand reading), he is - whether one likes it or not - the first global YouTube 'intellectual'; someone who rose to fame through his self-produced YouTube videos, not print publications. Peterson's YouTubing does not exist in isolation, but is part of a larger "Alt-Right" discourse and network that includes, among others, the former *VICE* journalist and founder of the militant right-wing street fight organization Proud Boys, Gavin McInnes. (Among others, Peterson appeared in 2016 in McInnes' YouTube talk show under the headline "Prof. Jordan Peterson: 'Bloody neo-Marxists have invaded the campuses' ".⁵) Peterson's videos take up central "Alt-Right" talking points such as the "manosphere" view of traditional gender roles, the conspiracy narrative of "cultural marxism" and the meme "Pepe the Frog", normalize them into mainstream conservative discourse, and give his social media audience the feeling that what they otherwise know only through trolling and meme subculture is scholarly sanctioned.

Peterson's success factors can be summed up as follows:

1. speed, thanks to the immediacy of YouTube as a publishing medium, in contrast to traditional publishing;
2. reach, thanks to the ubiquity of YouTube/the Internet;
3. tapping into existing subcultures and popular desires, discourses and concerns (as opposed to scholars, mainstream news media and traditional publishers who are not in touch with them);
4. partisanship; dividing the audience into either followers or adversaries;
5. meme-ability; where the quality of a statement lies less in its reasoning or consistency, but its potential of "going viral".

These success factors also apply to publishers in the opposite political camp to Peterson, such as the transgender YouTuber Natalie Wynn who posts her lavishly and elaborately produced videos on issues such as "Cancel Culture", gender, and Peterson himself, on her channel *ContraPoints* where they have up to 3.8 Million views.⁶

Do the above five points - speed, reach, tapping into existing subcultures, partisanship, meme-ability - amount to criteria, or even a definition, of urgent publishing?

A historical side note: In all these five points, Peterson follows the footsteps of an other Canadian scholar and political conservative, Marshall McLuhan (only that McLuhan's electronic medium was television, not the Internet).

A second note: All five points are typical characteristics of propaganda; not only the political propaganda of totalitarian regimes, but also, for example, anti-catholic propaganda in the European reformation age and counter-reformation propaganda of the catholic church. (Cross-reference to the previous note: not only was McLuhan a devout catholic, his "global village" was a literal

⁵Source: (McInnes)

⁶According to the view numbers on (Wynn).



Figure 2: Jordan Peterson (in the middle)

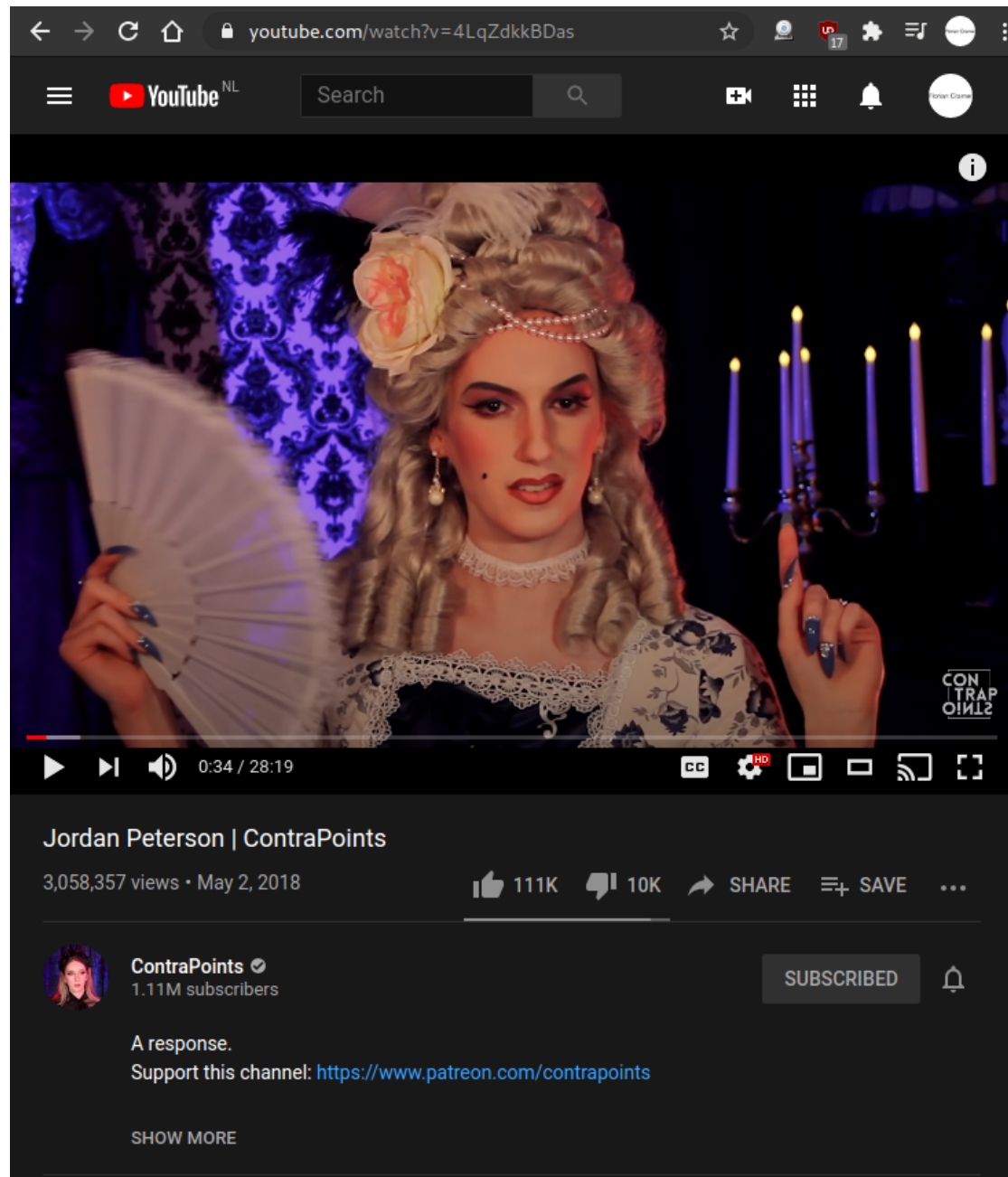


Figure 3: Natalie Wynn, ContraPoints, discussing Jordan Peterson

riff, via James Joyce, on the pope's annual prayer "urbi et orbi" ["for the city and the globe"].) Even visual meme propaganda pre-existed in reformation and counter-reformation propaganda emblems and flyposter caricatures.

That the production of propaganda (or counter-propaganda) memes can be a critical publishing practice, has been exemplified among others in Berlin Dadaism and John Heartfield's photomontages of the 1920s:

But ultimately, this discussion dates back to the political-philosophical and ethical debate on the validity of rhetoric (as a school of persuasion, seduction and propaganda) versus logic/dialectics (as a school of finding the truth through sound reasoning) that, in Western culture, had first been articulated by Plato. In the *Phaedrus*, he concludes that rhetoric can only be justified when it is firmly based on dialectics; when, in other words, it helps to make a logically sound argument more persuasive. Since Plato articulated this position in the historical period of the decline of Athenian democracy,⁷ it has gained new relevance in the present times of globally surging fascist populisms. The dispute between dialectics and rhetoric is now being re-enacted as a dispute between analytical philosophy (which continues the position of logic being the only valid form of argumentation) versus continental philosophy and critical theory (which, in its deconstructionist and social-constructivist schools, has rhetoric and subjective epistemology as its foundations). This extends into an opposition of scientific research paper publishing versus popular - and populist - visual culture and social media publishing.

This opposition is most clearly visible in the current societal debate on the Covid-19 pandemic. The (often "Alt Right"-affiliated) Covid-19 "skeptics" alternatively claim that the virus is not real, that its harmfulness is being exaggerated, that it can be better fought with alternative remedies, and that both quarantine measures and vaccinations are the product of a global conspiracy. Since rational scientific method and logical argumentation seem to be the only way of countering these positions, with rhetoric being - along the lines of Plato - used to support them, the Covid-19 crisis forced continental philosophy and critical theory to either align themselves with analytical and scientific discourse, or to side - like (Agamben) - with the "skeptical" camp and thereby cast doubt on its soundness.

The corresponding question for artists, designers, cultural workers, respectively producers of popular visual culture would be: Am I just supposed to create "good" propaganda for knowledge and discourses in whose development I wasn't involved (but which were created among others by virologists and policymakers) in order to amplify, in line with Plato, a given, sound logical argument with persuasive visual rhetoric? Does urgency, and urgent publishing, exhaust itself in that, and thus ultimately boil down to illustration? Will the art schools that educate these visual culture workers and publishers just play their due role in the Dutch higher vocational education ("HBO") system where they are supposed to (merely) receive research knowledge from traditional universities and put it into practice, but be involved in developing research knowledge themselves?

⁷Leaving aside the issue of Athenian democracy not being a democracy, but an oligarchy, by today's political standards.



Figure 4: "I am the Pope" - anti-catholic meme, 16th century



Figure 5: John Heartfield, "Adolf, the Übermensch - swallows gold and talks garbage", 1932

rephrasing the issue

To get out of this impasse, and out of being stuck in repeating Plato's argument, it might help to flip the question of what urgent publishing is: If urgent publishing differs from publishing in general, there must also be non-urgent publishing. But what would be examples and a working definition of non-urgent publishing? And could we use its characteristics to define urgent publishing *ex negativo*?

The difficulty in answering these questions lies in the nature of urgency: it is neither set in stone, nor universal. If one chooses, for example, telephone books as a seemingly evident form of non-urgent publishing, one would overlook the fact that a telephone book may be a literal life-saver for a person in a particular situation (such as: finding an emergency number while having no Internet access). Conversely for visual culture producers, receiving a design commission for telephone books may be of critical financial importance.

The non-urgency of a publication can perhaps best be defined as a situation in which the urgency for the creator is not the same as for the reader; where, in other words, no communal urgency defines a publication and the act of publishing. A PhD thesis, for example, always has individual urgency - that of gaining an academic title and qualification -, but not necessarily communal urgency; i.e. if the urgency of the thesis exhausts itself in obtaining the title, but otherwise it remains virtually ignored in some university archive. On the other hand, a zine written out of personal urgency (such as, for example, struggling with a queer coming-out) and published in an edition of five copies, with the hope of finding only one person who shares the publisher's feelings, is defined by communal urgency.

In art and research publishing, most forms of ritualistic publishing are non-urgent in the above sense: While they are urgent for individuals or a project group to retroactively legitimize their work, that urgency is rarely communal in the sense of being shared outside their own project. Publications that are made out of institutional logic and legitimation, but for which there is no wider community urgency, include the majority of catalogs, research papers, conference proceedings, academic journals that primarily serve scholars' needs to meet ranking and evaluation criteria; as well as showcase, prestige and other p.r. publications, no matter whether these are books, periodicals, blogs, podcasts or YouTube videos.

In unsubsidized commercial publishing, any book or periodical that is primarily a coffee table publication, or any other publication to be shelved away after at best superficial reading, is by definition non-urgent. While non-urgent publications of any kind may still gain urgency in future contexts and circumstances, they were in most cases not developed from and with a larger community and its self-defined urgent issues and articulations.

Therefore, successful propaganda is always urgent publishing; but not all forms of urgent publishing are propaganda.

When revisiting the previous five criteria of speed, reach, tapping into existing subcultures, partisanship and meme-ability with a focus on communal urgency, the picture - and definitions - become more nuanced:

1. while urgency always somehow implies speed or at least timeliness, the corresponding criterion for communal urgency cannot be quantitative but needs to be qualitatively measured (and could, in some cases and situations, even entail intentional slowdown and delay): in other words, the criterion is *responsiveness* rather than merely speed;
2. likewise, reach needs to be a qualitative rather than quantitative, criterion when applied to communal urgency, in the sense of a publication (or an act of publishing) that actually reaches the community for which it is meaningful;
3. instead of merely tapping into existing subcultures and their desires, the publication and the act of publishing emerges from communities and their needs;
4. while partisanship is not necessarily the criterion or intended effect of a publication in its intended community - or, put differently: reaching a community does not need to mean to alienate others -, but *identification* remains crucial;
5. meme-ability, while being helpful as urgency metrics, depends on the particular community and discourse for which the act of publishing and the publication is meant; while a meme that goes viral is urgent publishing by definition, not all forms and acts of urgent publishing are viral memes; but at least they spread ‘peer-to-peer’ within their communities.⁸

To avoid misunderstandings: These five modified criteria do *not* amount to criteria of ethically “good” communal urgent publishing versus “bad” propaganda publishing. For example, both Jordan Peterson’s and Natalie Wynn’s/ContraPoints’ YouTube videos do not only fulfill the five criteria of propagandistic urgent publishing, but also those of communal urgent publishing through their combination of propaganda-style meme tactics and psychological self-help. Even a crass Neonazi propaganda website like *The Daily Stormer* ticks all the above boxes, which may explain why it has been more successful than more traditional Neonazi websites; the same of course is true for imageboards like *4chan* and *8chan/8kun* and the “QAnon” conspiracy myth that emerged on them.⁹ All these examples fulfill all five criteria of propaganda urgent publishing as well at least two of the five criteria of communal urgent publishing; or, more precisely, they work as propaganda catalysts for communities which further elaborate those stories, visuals and memes in communal acts of urgent publishing.

the larger picture

In all above examples, the notion and definition of “publishing” was kept deliberately broad. This is, in my opinion, necessary for opening up space for radical imaginations and re-imaginings of publishing, in times of fundamental changes in media, communication and visual culture; re-imaginings in which artists and designers need to play a role. The urgent publishing of the Berlin Dadaists broke with fine art and materially engaged with the urgent publishing media

⁸A good example being *El Paquete* in Cuba, a 1TB hard drive of popular movies, tv shows and music that is updated every week and gets copied and distributed across Cuba, because of the absence of broadband Internet.

⁹Covered in more detail in (Cramer, Wu Ming 1).

of their time - newspapers which in the 1920s often appeared with three issues per day -, re-imagining these both in form and content. *ContraPoints* is doing (structurally) the same with today's YouTube propaganda.

Publishing then includes any act of making something public - including street interventions and performances and low-resolution meme images for example -,¹⁰ but one that in most cases travels over a distance and can be archived. Aside from these technical characteristics, publishing has informational and educational aspects. This includes the use of Internet meme images and YouTube videos as educational resources for self-study,¹¹ which explains Jordan Peterson's and Natalie Wynn's respective success. Major intellectuals and philosophers of the 20th century, including Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, mainly published in journalistic periodicals after their academic careers had been cut off, which was unfortunate for them personally but not for their readership and for the public role of the humanities. Other philosophers (from Adorno and Heidegger to Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler) followed suit by lecturing on radio and television and publishing in newspapers, but to date have remained stuck in these classical editorial mass media.

An early example of memetic urgent propaganda publishing were the controversial "Zeitgeist" videos published on YouTube from 2007 to 2011 by the designer and activist Peter Joseph. Originally produced in close neighborhood to *Infowars* of the later Alt-Right personality Alex Jones, they spun a conspiracy narrative and "post-scarcity" economic vision that instigated a homonymous "Zeitgeist movement". In 2011 and 2012, *Zeitgeist* activists played central roles in the *Occupy* movement both in New York and in Europe. *Zeitgeist* may therefore be called an early (or perhaps even the first) example of Internet-based theory construction in which memetics and viral success acted as editorial filters and thus replaced peer review.

This form of urgent publishing has created a problem for academics, artists, designers and journalists who have not been educated or trained in this system and logic, but in peer reviews, group critiques, editorial boards and institutional curatorship. The political takeaway of the 2016 Trump elections, that "the left can't meme", at that time could be rephrased as "artists, designers and academics can't meme". Both are no longer true if one looks at contemporary political activism - with *ContraPoints* just being one example - or, in the Netherlands, at the anonymous meme accounts run by students and teachers of particular art schools such as "wdkamemes" and "wdka.teachermemes" for WdKA Rotterdam (the first picture in this article was taken from the latter) and "kabkmemes" for the KABK Den Haag.

The examples and definitions of urgency I used to this point included societal and political urgency, personal urgency and (in the case of *Zeitgeist* and *Occupy*) economic urgency; but they should also include - among others - aesthetic urgency (for which tattoo culture is a good example of an urgent publishing practice) and technological urgency (with, among others, Free/Open Source software as a form of urgent publishing).

¹⁰For an early reflection on the digital "poor image" as visual culture production, see (Steyerl).

¹¹Years ago, a theory curriculum coordinator of a Dutch art school told me that she prefers learning cultural theory from YouTube videos to reading books.



Figure 6: Still from René van Zundert's documentary *Thuisprikkers* ("Home Tattooers") showing a self-taught, unlicensed discount tattoo artist running his home studio in Rotterdam's Tarwewijk

In both arts and design and in academic research, there is a lack of courage for *not* doing something because it either lacks urgency or addresses it in the wrong way. A good example for such courage is, in my opinion, the 2012 social design project "WIJkonomie" (a pun on "we-conomy" and "neighborhood economy") in Rotterdam's poor neighborhood Tarwewijk. The architects Theo Deutinger, Stefanos Filippas, Elisa Mante and Ana Rita Marques had been hired to improve local conditions, but gave up after having researched the area:

"Four architects spending two months of thinking about Tarwewijk and spending three weeks physically in Tarwewijk does not make any difference. The people of Tarwewijk have a lot of people like us seen come and go. Well educated groups with high flying plans, spreading hope for a prosperous future. When they are gone, live in Tarwewijk is more miserable than before. All expectations and trust by the people of Tarwewijk did disappear with the people foreign to the place.

Tarwewijk does not need us to know what to do; Tarwewijk knows exactly what to do. Do it yourself Tarwewijk! We propose a project stop, a concept stop and a subsidy stop for initiatives from outside of Tarwewijk. The people of Tarwewijk know how to do things; they know how to start a business, they know how to work around regulations. We trust in the power of the people in Tarwewijk".¹²

¹²Quoted from (Deutinger).

This example shows how urgency, and one's true capability of living up to it, is an important self-evaluation criterion. For less experienced people, however, it could also be suffocating. Art and design educators are faced with the dilemma that they want and need to foster urgent work (as opposed to art and design that is, for example, just complacent and decorative), but at the same time need to give room, especially in undergraduate education, for "pre-urgency": the opportunity for students the opportunity to develop their voice and experiment without urgency as a hard requirement. Correspondingly, there can be "post-urgency" in works of artists and designers. Examples could include Andy Warhol, who - after enabling a queer and underground community in his Factory period and surviving Valerie Solanas' gun assault - became a high-society artist who factually printed his celebrity portraits as money; or Nam June Paik, who resorted, after having radically deconstructed and re-imagined electronic mass media in the 1960s and 1970s, to building decorative video sculptures which allowed him a better lifestyle than the unheated lofts that had ruined his health.

The crisis of traditional publishing and media industries may be explained with the high amount of non-urgent publishing it involves while urgent publishing conversely moved on to other channels (including memes, YouTube, zines). And, to clarify again, "urgent publishing" by itself does not say anything about the quality let alone the ethics of a publication or act of publishing, but it only describes its performativity.¹³ The subject matters and visual-cultural language of YouTube "truthers", Covid-19 deniers and trolls of any kind are urgent, otherwise they would not find their audiences - and would the subscriber numbers of even semi-obscure YouTubers not exceed those of large newspapers by the factor of ten and more.

When I moved to the Netherlands in 2006, before the financial crisis and the slashing of Dutch public art funding, I subjectively experienced most contemporary Dutch art - particularly what could be seen at art schools graduation shows - as lacking urgency and tending to be visually decorative.¹⁴ The unfortunate and perhaps perverse logic of social, economic and political crisis and divides is that they re-instill urgency into arts and publishing practices, as the aforementioned examples from the Weimar Republic to Trumpist America demonstrate. In these times, the criteria I proposed for a working definition of urgent publishing - responsiveness, reaching intended communities, emerging from communities and their needs, fostering identification, and (to some extent) spreading virally - will hopefully become subject to discussions, critique, improvement and alternatives.

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¹³Or, to borrow from Peirce via (Diederichsen)'s theory of "post-popular arts", its indexicality.

¹⁴On the popular contemporary Dutch art blog (trendbeheer), many examples of such art can still be found.

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