

Antisemitism in Online Communication

Transdisciplinary Approaches to Hate
Speech in the Twenty-First Century

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2. Jordan Peterson and Conservative Antisemitism Online

The Dethroning of an Intellectual Icon Following His
Interview with Netanyahu

Matthias J. Becker

*You Either Die a Hero, or You Live Long Enough to See Yourself
Become the Villain¹*

The age of digitalisation is characterised by an explosion of information as well as opinion exchange, but also by uncertainty and disorientation. In view of the polyphony of speakers and multitude of information, many web users tend to orient themselves to a range of new opinion leaders who could not have established their huge visibility prior to the era of the interactive web. Jordan Peterson, a former psychology professor, embodies perfectly the new 'globalised' public intellectual surrounded by a bevy of followers.

In December 2022, Peterson interviewed Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The reactions of web users were numerous and—in stark contrast to the bulk of Peterson's contributions—clearly negative. Peterson's fascination with

¹ User comment extracted from the analysed YouTube thread.

political heavyweights or strongmen is nothing new. Here, however, he provided a forum to one of the world's best-known Jewish figures and the representative of the Jewish state.

Peterson and Netanyahu's conversation seems to have triggered various antisemitic ideas among those with a far-right worldview. However, many of the comments seem to come from the conservative online milieu to which Peterson belongs. The online thread discussing the clip thus forms a symbolic arena for proximity and friction between conservative and alt-right milieus in relation to Jew-hatred—a relationship that is not given enough space in the media and in academic analysis, as the focus is too often on the confrontation between the left and the alt-right and white-supremacy milieus.

This paper qualitatively examines the commenters' diverse reactions—of disillusionment and reorientation, but also of their devaluation and exclusion of a former idol—identified in the corresponding *YouTube* comments section and reconstructs the underlying concepts in a pragma-linguistic framework.

1. Introduction

This chapter presents the case study examining *YouTube* comments on Jordan Peterson's interview with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. On 5 December 2022, the 1.5-hour conversation was uploaded to Peterson's *YouTube* channel.² Within two months, it was viewed at least 1.2 million times; almost 44,700 comments were counted. The assessment of many critics that the conservative public intellectual³ made a serious strategic mistake with this interview is reflected in the

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- 2 "Israel's Right to Exist? | PM-Elect Benjamin Netanyahu | EP 311", *YouTube*, video uploaded by Jordan B. Peterson, 5 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OcaMRLTyGI>. By 23 June 2023, the clip had been viewed 1,502,444 times; moreover, *YouTube* showed 44,811 comments, i.e. almost no increase from February, which may be due to intensive content moderation. The dataset for the analysis presented here was secured at the end of February.
 - 3 On the changes in the status of the 'public intellectual' in the digital age, where traditional epistemological gatekeepers (such as universities, publishing houses, etc.) have eroded considerably, see Dahlgren 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-012-9124-5>; Miller 2020; Peters 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2022.2141859>, and Basaure, Joignant and Théodore 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-022-09417-y>; see also Chapelan in this volume.

ratio of up- to downvotes below the line of the clip, as well as in various irritated statements by viewers highlighting the contrast with previous contributions, such as: “28k upvotes, 67k downvotes [...] interesting to see a negative ratio for the votes on a Jordan Peterson video”.

The viewers’ negative attitude towards the interview may come as a surprise, as Peterson is a dazzling figure of the conservative milieu in the online sphere. Most of his clips are regularly celebrated in the community, and he is constantly praised for his ability to convey complex ideas with simplicity and persuasiveness (compatible with the conditions of social media discourse). His popularity is explained by the explosion of pop culture and lifestyle influencers—a trend that also affects the status of public intellectuals. New ways of constructing intellectual authority have emerged, sometimes complementary, sometimes in opposition to traditional institutions such as universities, think tanks or major publishing houses. Peterson, a former psychology professor, embodies perfectly this new ‘globalised’ public intellectual. His no-nonsense self-help content has also been increasingly embraced, in particular, interestingly, by young, white, heterosexual men. In this way, Peterson became a driving force in anchoring conservative ideas throughout mainstream discourse. With this contextual knowledge, the interview should not really have created an uproar, because, all in all, Peterson’s position sits quite comfortably with what the hardline conservative position in North America: pro-Israeli, nationalistic (seeing the Israeli right’s unabashed embrace of nationalism as a model for the West) and anti-Iran (some might even say suspicious of Islam as a whole). Peterson, because of his conservative leanings,⁴ looks favourably on the brand of religious ethnonationalism Netanyahu advances. He has expressed sympathy for Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and Poland’s PiS [Law and Justice] party on similar grounds before.

Additionally, over the years, Peterson has gradually become a resolutely right-wing media figure, harbouring controversial positions on Islam, rejecting feminism⁵ and ‘cultural Marxism’ and serving as a mouthpiece for anti-progressive thought.

4 Jordan Peterson is considered part of the *Intellectual Dark Web*, a broader movement against the perceived political correctness and multiculturalism (Kelsey 2020, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55038-7_7, Finlayson 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211036731>).

5 “Jordan Peterson debate on the gender pay gap, campus protests and postmodernism”, *YouTube*, video uploaded by Channel 4 News, 16 January 2018,

Despite these observations, the downvotes mentioned above and the analysis presented on the following pages prove that Peterson's assumption about his audience's generally favourable attitude towards the Israeli prime minister was hasty. Unlike most of the posts, podcasts, interviews and debates with which Peterson has been involved, this event showcases a clear break in his media record and a chasm between the influencer and his followers. Many commenters see this manoeuvre as a turning point in Peterson's career, deploring that all his "good work" has gone "all up in flames" and that his followers now feel "completely lost". In contrast to these empathetic, regretful statements, tendencies of a clear and highly emotional rejection of Peterson set the tone in large parts of the *YouTube* comment section—and these objections are in many cases underpinned by Jew-hatred.

The material here suggests that the reason for this response could be that, while conservatives today tend to point to their support for Israel as evidence of their lack of antisemitism, political affiliation is often perceived as an elite-only affair. Denying antisemitism in that spectrum ignores the fundamental realisation that hostility towards Jews is a phenomenon that affects society as a whole and does not stop at any political milieu.⁶ As a hate ideology, antisemitism is persistent and corrosive enough to break the bonds in any particular context (even those between an idolised influencer and his flock). Another cause may be that, in line with Peterson's aforementioned role as a public (and very successful) mouthpiece for anti-progressive worldviews, Peterson has been accused of accelerating the mainstreaming of not only conservative but also alt-right opinions towards the general public.⁷

I see the online debate that followed the publication of the Netanyahu interview as the symbolic arena of a conflict between conservative and alt-right milieus in the US—a conflict that is not given enough space in the media and in academic analysis, as the focus has all too often been on the conflict between left or left-liberal and Trump supporters

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMcjxSThD54>

- 6 For this, see also the results of the Decoding Antisemitism project in relation to antisemitism in threads of conservative leaning media outlets in Britain, France and Germany, <https://decoding-antisemitism.eu/publications/#discourse-reports>.
- 7 "They think [Peterson] could be the culture war's Weapon X", see Lynskey 2018. On the mainstreaming of antisemitic worldviews in the extreme right see also Nagle 2017, Wendling 2018 and Ebner 2023.

or the alt-right and white-supremacy milieus (and in relation to antisemitism, the latter political milieus have also been discussed much more frequently). Nor are the dissenting commenters exclusively troublemakers coming from an extremist, openly anti-Jewish milieu. Rather, they are supporters of Peterson's earlier positioning, in which no devaluation or exclusion was to be found, at least not in relation to Jews. Despite this ideological basis, the interview provides a strong trigger for the reproduction of antisemitic stereotypes and, especially, conspiracy theories in various forms.

By projecting negative qualities onto Peterson, web users participate in his *desacralisation*. They enact this in the comments section in four main patterns:

- a. by expressing their fundamental disappointment about Peterson's alleged lack of background knowledge, but also about his lack of authority in discussing the subject matter;
- b. by alleging that Peterson is the victim of 1) a vaguely external influence or 2) a clearly JEWISH POWER;
- c. by accusing Peterson of now showing his true colours. He is characterised as demonstrating traits of GREED, HYPOCRISY and, ultimately, EVIL, which in certain contexts may be understood as bringing forth antisemitic projections; and
- d. by discursively excluding Peterson from the non-Jewish in-group based on his overt "judaisation".

The disavowal of a former idol, his marginalisation and exclusion by his erstwhile devoted followers, takes place linguistically in a variety of ways. In the following sections, I will present the theoretical framework and the methodological specifics applied to capture these patterns—a qualitative content analysis enriched by deductive and inductive categories drawn from the disciplines of antisemitism studies and pragma-linguistics. I will then mention quantitative specificities in this corpus analysis and, finally, discuss the qualitative results, following the main categories presented above to pre-structure my observations of the complex and lengthy online debate.

2. Dataset, theoretical framework and methodological approaches

Peterson's interview with Netanyahu was uploaded to Peterson's *YouTube* channel on 5 December 2022, with the title "Israel's Right to Exist? | PM-Elect Benjamin Netanyahu | EP 311".⁸ The analysis presented here refers to this one thread, which consists of about 44,700 user comments (as of 8 February 2023).

In order to examine the discursive dynamics enabled by the interview, this case study follows the theoretical framework of web-related antisemitism studies, in which the Decoding Antisemitism research project is also embedded. Here, the research fields of applied and pragma-linguistics (as well as multimodal analysis) are combined with antisemitism research and social media studies (see Becker 2019 and 2021, Becker and Bolton 2022; see also Schwarz-Friesel and Reinhartz 2017, Schwarz-Friesel 2019, and Troschke and Becker 2019).⁹ The aim of this research is to make statements about the form, frequency and trends of Jew-hatred in different online milieus through detailed pattern analyses. Hence, the focus is not on individuals and groups who may be conspicuous through antisemitic communication on the internet but on a precise understanding of the communicated patterns themselves, as these are ultimately the vehicles for the spread and transmission of antisemitic ideas in society.

The Decoding Antisemitism project aims to analyse the presence and normalisation of antisemitic hate speech in socially relevant, politically moderate online milieus in Europe on the basis of large-scale pattern analyses. The case study presented here takes up this research interest and the associated methodological approach but applies it to

8 "Israel's Right to Exist? | PM-Elect Benjamin Netanyahu | EP 311", *YouTube*, video uploaded by Jordan B. Peterson, 5 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OcaMRLTyGI>

9 Due to the limited scope of this contribution, reference is made to Becker and Bolton 2022, <https://doi.org/10.26613/jca/5.1.105>, and to Becker and Troschke 2022, <https://doi.org/10.26613/jca/5.1.100>, for questions on the theoretical background, the state of research on web-related antisemitism studies and on the definitional framing and operationalisation in our research. See also the 'About' page of the Decoding Antisemitism project's website (<https://decoding-antisemitism.eu/about>) and its Discourse Reports linked in footnote 5.

an international discourse event¹⁰ where the conditions (conservative interviewer, well-known Jewish interviewee) allow us to take a closer look at the relationship between conservative and right-wing milieus. To understand how far-right, openly antisemitic ideas can find their way into conservative spheres, the ideological transfer and dynamics of this thread need to be examined through a detailed study of its comments. In this respect, this case study relies almost exclusively on qualitative content analysis, in which both manifest and latent constituents of meaning are categorised and studied using very detailed classification guidelines (Mayring 2015).

Using a custom-designed tool that searches and crawls data from news websites and social media platforms, the content of the *YouTube* thread was downloaded in various data formats while maintaining its chronological and dialogic structure. A randomly-selected sample of 7,996 comments has been retained as the basis for the analysis. Wanting to include all comments that mention the word 'Peterson', I followed a mixed methods approach and started the analysis with a keyword search. The search for 'Peterson' in the corpus yielded a total of 576 hits. The ensuing qualitative content analysis focussed on a total of 791 viewer comments (about 10% of the total sample), taking into account the comments containing 'Peterson', their immediate context and relevant references to other statements. A data analysis programme for qualitative and quantitative analysis, MAXQDA, was used to examine the comments. By implementing the Decoding Antisemitism classification system in the programme, which is composed of (content-related) antisemitic as well as (form-related) linguistic and image-based categories, comments could be annotated in a systematic way, including the application of inductive categories that emerged during the study of this online debate (cf. Becker et al. 2024). The latter was crucial to the process of this case study, as the focus was not on antisemitism *per se* but on the argumentative link between Jordan Peterson and an alleged external, often Jewish factor.

10 The term *discourse event* refers to incidents in extra-linguistic reality, e.g., news items that have the potential to trigger antisemitic reactions in politics, conventional media as well as in web communities. In the research described here, these discourse events are used as a starting point for the focussed study of online reactions, whereby—analogue to a stimulus-response scheme—the conditions of antisemitic speech in different milieus and language communities can be reconstructed.

3. Quantitative insights

Presence of antisemitism

- Of the qualitatively analysed 791 comments, 237 comments (30%) contained at least one antisemitic concept;¹¹
- In this sub-corpus, the proportion of comments in which antisemitism could be reconstructed context-free (explicit as well as implicit forms) was 38.8% (92 comments);
- The number of comments where the immediate context in the thread was needed to decode the communicated meaning—as the commenters used anaphors, for example—was 145 (61.2%).

Rejection of Peterson

- Among the 791 comments, the proportion of comments disapproving of Peterson was 67.5% (534 comments);¹²
- Here, by far the largest proportion—326 comments or 61%—showed openly verbalised disappointment with Peterson (*Group A*);
- 206 comments (or 38.6%) problematised his externally influenced victim status (*Group B*);
- 151 comments (28.3%) spoke of Peterson's "true colours" and accused him of negative character traits (*Group C*);
- And 12.2% (65 comments) constructed a Jewish identity to explain why Peterson initiated the interview or conducted it as he did (*Group D*).

11 As mentioned above, the qualitatively analysed comments have been pre-selected by the keyword search ('Peterson'). In this respect, the 30% are not the result of a consistent analysis of a thread excerpt but, rather, detailed analyses of comments with 'Peterson' hits as well as the immediate context and further references to previous comments.

12 Since several of the patterns described here can occur simultaneously in one comment, the total number of all patterns is higher than 534 hits.

Overlaps of antisemitism and rejection of Peterson

- The overlap with antisemitism in *Group A* was 14%;
- In *Group B*, the number of comments (explicitly or implicitly) conveying antisemitic concepts (such as JEWISH POWER or CONSPIRACY) is 34%; the comments in which no antisemitic notions could be identified were, thus, 66%;
- In *Group C*, antisemitism was (explicitly or implicitly) reproduced in combination with negative character traits projected onto Peterson in 12% of comments;
- *Group D* overlaps completely with antisemitism due to its specificity.

4. Empirical findings

4.1 A disappointing hero (*Group A*)

This section discusses statements in which commenters seem to justify their distancing from Peterson on the grounds that he has undergone a fundamental change in the context of this interview, evidenced by his uncharacteristic lack of competence and/or assertiveness and, ultimately, leading to Peterson losing respect and reputation. It must be emphasised that this first set of comments does not constitute antisemitism; however, comments such as these can often lead to antisemitic conclusions that are presented in the following sub-sections.

1. "I have never seen any of JP's videos getting such scathing reviews/comments. Jordan you have lost a lot of respect in the eyes of many of your admirers. Terrible interview no hard questions absurd theories on right to ownership and absolute free pass to Netanyahu on his corruption record. What a shame!!!"
2. "Peterson caught out, inept and out of his depth".
3. "It's a shame someone so familiar with solzhenitsyn's work could fall so hard".

4. "What do you think of Jordan Peterson after you've watched his interview with this man fully?"
5. "Everyone is noticing. Jordan Peterson has enlightened us enough that his true fans would be a mirror for him to see himself...if he wants to look".
6. (6) "People fall from grace all the time. Peterson would be correct not to give a shit about anonymous comments that boil down to trolling or shit-posting. However, when it's thousands of genuine and heartfelt messages coming from people who quite believably express they've always been a fan now come out to question Peterson's motives, why, yes of course, that should be of Jordan's concern".

In addition to direct expressions of disappointment and rejection (as in (1), (2) and (3)), the alleged fundamental change on Peterson's part becomes clear from change-indicating phrases such as "out of his depth" or "fall so hard", which suggest that Peterson used to be on a much higher intellectual level. Disapproval is also communicated indirectly via rhetorical questions—such as in (4), where the request for an evaluation of Peterson's choice to interview Netanyahu, referred to by the distancing choice of words "with this man", indicates that the commenter considers the latter's presence in this interview to be at least unsatisfactory.

Moreover, what is striking in (5) and (6) is the reversal of the relationship between Peterson and his followers. Their relationship until this point was, apparently, characterised by a hierarchical 'teacher-student dynamic' that was not called into question. As a result of the discourse event discussed here, users now more or less directly call on Peterson to take an example *from them*, to reposition himself by taking the reactions and concerns of his fans to heart. Their "enlightened" status, which was ultimately triggered by Peterson (at least in part), should now serve as a point of reference for an intellectual who seems to be derailed. With the background knowledge of Peterson's earlier public presence, it can be reconstructed that what is at stake here is his restless adherence to principles and an idealistic search for truth that does not stop at authority and oppressive (or at least hindering) centres of power.

In various statements, commenters ironically question this former reputation of Peterson by saying: “Mr. Truth-Seeker Peterson” or “Mr. Speak-Truth-To-Power Peterson”. It is precisely this search for truth that, in their opinion, is absent from this interview. With formulations such as “You are the one who has changed. We are just noticing”, Peterson’s followers seem to have his decaying integrity firmly in view.

The counter-figure who, according to various commenters, captivates and provides support through loyalty, sincerity and rebellion against power is, significantly, the musician and influencer Kanye West. In the preceding months, he had made headlines for his pun-laden antisemitic DEATH WISHES and CONSPIRACY THEORIES (ADL 2022, Wilson 2022, Solomon 2023), provoking antisemitism in all kinds of online contexts (see Chapelan et al. 2023 and Chapelan in this volume). According to the commenters, West—also known as Ye—would provide guidance because he could see behind the scenes and would not shy away from reality. By openly endorsing West and his views, these comments, in contrast to those discussed in the first part of this section, can be classified as clearly antisemitic:

7. “bring back kanye the truth teller”
8. “God bless Ye. The truth is a lonely warrior”.
9. “Ye has opened a lot of people’s eyes to what is really going on. Peterson fawning all over an Israeli politician isn’t going to change that”.
10. “Who would have thought a year ago that Kanye had more wisdom, courage and insight than Jordan Peterson? What a crazy world we live in. Respect to you Ye!”
11. “So disappointed to see my intellectual godfather sitting there like statue. No questioning the right or wrong. I would just go and listen to Kanye West speak the truth”.

The commenters do not always clearly embed their disappointment with Peterson in a larger framework, as they leave semantic and conceptual gaps concerning what brought about Peterson’s change of direction. However, the multiple positive references to West and the knowledge of his explosive statements at the time easily allows for a reconstruction in which public figures such as Peterson and West are understood as being

driven by (or at least directing their focus towards) JEWISH CENTRES OF POWER. The commenters consider how differently the two react to these to be very revealing. In the following section, the notion of Peterson bowing to power is more clearly verbalised. The unspecified notion is then followed by antisemitic constructions, as users refer to an external influence compatible with or supported by ideas of a JEWISH LOBBY or STRING-PULLERS in the background.

4.2 The intellectual as a victim of an outside power (*Group B1*)

The questioning of Peterson's authority or intellectual desacralisation discussed in 4.1 becomes more evident in those comments in which users explicate, to a greater or lesser extent, the presumed external cause of his change of direction. According to such comments, it is not a causeless, random re- or disorientation. Peterson is not suffering from a self-inflicted moral or intellectual weakness but, rather, a victim status they assume to be part of the larger, (sometimes) invisible power structures that prompted him to conduct the interview. Such claims can be communicated in an extremely subtle way, for example, by simply expressing irritation, as in "Jordan you really have blinders on for this particular issue. I wonder why?" or "Jordan B Peterson didn't use his full guns on this debate,...strange". Alternatively, commenters speak more clearly of a hierarchical relationship—albeit with an unknown counterpart:

12. "Good job jordi . Even your worst enemies wouldn't have dreamed of seeing you next to this person, and we all know that you can't twist the realty ,It will snap back at any Moment (that's what you taught us)..., Anyway... don't worry, you were the most and only agreeable Pe'te'erson on the show, the talk-show Host kind of JP and not the Professor , did exactly what was supposed to do, and never bit the hand that fed you"

In this statement, the commenter uses irony and malice to effectively express his rejection of Peterson's role in this discourse event. The criticism—apart from the already mentioned point of betrayal of Peterson's behavioural maxims, which occurs increasingly in the thread—is mainly based on the insinuation that the public intellectual

would implement this betrayal in submissive accordance with a script or guideline that was imposed on him by an external power. Similar metaphorical phrases, some of them dehumanising, such as “He’s simply a dog that refuses to bite the hand that feeds it”, are a popular rhetorical device in the thread in order to sloganise Peterson’s obedience. This idea is also expressed in the following statements:

13. “this is not shocking as he is just following orders”
14. “JP knows who his master is”.
15. “Whoever “forced” you to host this murderer has damaged your image and reputation Dr. Peterson”.
16. “My first thought..... JP is compromised”

Here, comments conceptualise Peterson as, on one hand, a simple recipient of orders, someone who was “forced” to act; on the other hand, they portray him as simply compromised. In either case, his behaviour is framed as contrary to what is expected of him. The comments specify the opposition, that is, the centre of power from which this forced reorientation emanates, only vaguely, in the frame of passive constructions or by general, ambiguous terms as in (14)—the site of power will be articulated in the following contributions.

4.3 The intellectual as a victim of JEWISH POWER (Group B2)

Examples in this group name the external power with sufficient specificity that their comments do not remain in the communicative grey area, but can be counted as part of the repertoire of antisemitic constructions.

17. “Peterson went from biblical lectures to being in bed with Satan Now that’s a plot twist 😂”.
18. “I was very excited and intrigued to see how Jordan Peterson was going to investigate and challenge many of the repulsive ideas but this was a big disappointment. Eventually everyone must bow down to their bosses and we all know who controls media”.

19. “we are simply pointing out the idiocy of Peterson. And yes, I do get jumpscared when a mighty nose appears from around the corner”.

In (17), Peterson’s interviewee is identified as the devil. With this reference, the user means Netanyahu himself (and not, as in 4.2, an ominous lobby operating in the dark). Thus, the driving force behind Peterson’s repositioning is the interviewee, who is demonised in a historically charged way. Even if the reference to “Satan” is used here as a characterisation of a politician (which could generally be understood as sharp criticism *ad hominem*), it must be taken into account that references to the DEVIL are a popular characteristic of antisemitism throughout its history (Trachtenberg 2002, Bolton 2024). Its hyperbolic mode of action leaves the ground of justified (neutral, but also harsh) criticism since, firstly, it is directed against a person whose Jewish identity and role as representative of the Jewish state are known worldwide; and secondly, the notion activated by such demonising hyperboles dichotomously divides the world into good and evil, with the figure of the *Devil*, *Satan* or *Shaytan* as the fundamental evil and climax of evil among monotheistic religions. Conceptualising Netanyahu in this sense as a universal EVIL potentially establishes the construction of an antisemitic image in the framing of which Peterson plays the role of a subjugated bedfellow.

In (18), the reference to the centre of power through “bosses” remains similarly vague as in (14), which militates against a hasty classification of the comment as antisemitic. However, the last turn in the comment indirectly reproduces the stereotype of JEWISH POWER (in the form of assumed media control). It insinuates an unspecified bias in the media that can be traced back to one or two corporations, and the reading of an antisemitic stereotype arises from the general context—namely, that Peterson interviews a Jewish person and, according to the comment, “bow[s] down” in the process. In (19), the commenter accuses Peterson of “idiocy”, which they contrast, however, with the feeling of fear, whereby this admission almost reads like a justification of the lack on Peterson’s side. The originator of this fear felt by the commenter is a danger described synecdochically as a “mighty nose”. The physiologically oriented imaginary devaluations of Jews—be it the long nose, the fingers that look like claws (expressing GREED), the feminine body, the stooped gait—have shaped the verbal and visual

caricatures of antisemitism ever since the earliest times (see Chapelan 2024, see also Königseder 2022);¹³ the deictic-metaphorical turn of phrase thus activates an antisemitic notion that memorably communicates acting in secret and causing fear. The image that sticks in the reader's mind is the idea of a foolish Peterson, but at the same time one guided by a comprehensible fear, acting out of his victim status.

In addition to insinuating a DIABOLICAL nature, POWER and specific physical characteristics, comments do not shy away from using conventions of white supremacists—as in the form of the triple parentheses:

20. A: "This one [interview] should be titled Message to Corporate 😊"
 B: "message to (((them)))"
21. "the quality and content of Jordan's Peterson's videos sure took a (((strange))) direction after joining Daily Wire"

These brackets, also known as *echoes*, are typically used as semiotic markers to implicitly identify, deride and exclude Jews (Fleishman and Smith 2016). In (20), A claims that Peterson serves certain economic interests—a contextual form of antisemitism, as the implied idea of 'pleasing Israel' (due to the interview) is read as a positive message to "Corporate", which, in turn, corresponds to the classic trope of SERVILITY or close ties of the financial sector to Jews. B, then, breaks the context-dependent ambiguity by resorting to the rather unequivocal device of echoes and thus evaluating the interview as Peterson's attempt to align himself with the Jewish out-group. (21) initially only voices criticism of what the commenter sees as the qualitatively questionable orientation of Peterson's most recent contributions. Via the specific use of semiotic markers, the characterisation of the realignment that is imputed to Peterson as "strange" coincides with the imputed triggers (or driving force) for this change. Another implicit reference to the Jewish community is enacted through the mention of the *Daily Wire*, a

13 In the analysed thread, this antisemitic concept even goes as far as one comment calling himself a "nose noticer". Not only do racist tropes appear in their comments, but also holocaust denial and instrumentalisation in the form of puns directed at other users: "Your religion Holohoax". Moreover, in response to counter speech from obviously Jewish commenters, remarks such as "No one is reading that nose", "Noseberg" or "hand rubbing and big nose intensifies" appear.

conservative news website headed by Ben Shapiro, a Jewish American vocal supporter of Israel. Snide jokes also express Peterson's alleged subservience to the Jewish community:

22. "Next Peterson book, 'Seven More Rules for Life: How to be a Noahide Goy'"

This, on one hand, is an allusion to Peterson's bestseller *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, through which, in addition to his online appearances, the author gained fame and popularity. The variation, on the other hand, activates a second allusion: The "seven more rules" refers to the "Seven Noahide Laws", also known as the "Noahide Laws". In Judaism, these represent a set of universal moral laws given by God as a covenant with Noah. This comment thus indirectly presents Peterson as a mouthpiece of Judaism. The recourse to the term "goy" as a pejorative (and sarcastic) designation for a non-Jew, which is also often used in far-right repertoires (for example, by the neo-Nazi *Goyim Defense League* or *Goyim TV*), clearly suggests that Peterson himself is not part of the Jewish in-group but a mere servant. This connects back to the idea of Peterson being a (consenting) victim of JEWISH POWER, an argument that destroys his reputation for intellectual agency and assertiveness.¹⁴

Another notable response from the thread, in which Peterson's submissiveness is implied, is the reframing and reevaluation of a past scene against the backdrop of the clip discussed here. "I can't do it" is used several times to allude to another public event in 2019 in which Peterson was asked during a Q&A whether he believed Jews were taking advantage of their perceived powerful position in US politics and media to retaliate against "Europe and Russia who have a history of expelling Jews".¹⁵ In response to this question, Peterson turned away and signalled to the audience—non-verbally, by means of posture but

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- 14 Indirect references to Jews crop up constantly in the thread, including in compounds such as "tinyhatbergs", alluding to the kippah, the cap traditionally worn by Jewish men, and the typically Jewish name ending *-berg*. These reinforce the implied reference to the Jewish out-group and its relation to Peterson.
- 15 "Jordan Peterson Asked to Answer the Jewish Question: 'I Can't Do It'", *YouTube*, video uploaded by RexMode, 31 January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbZZyVyEHGo>; see also: [username], "Jordan Peterson said 'I can't do it' when asked about Jewish Influence. I wonder why that is", *Reddit*, 16 May 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/JordanPeterson/comments/bpixpr/jordan_peterson_said_i_cant_do_it_when_asked.

also through a long pause of silence, as well as, subsequently, using irony—that he considered the question to express a resentful and distorted worldview that has no place in the public debate. After several half-hearted attempts to deconstruct this worldview, Peterson finally responded with “I can’t do it”. Knowing the longevity and persistence of antisemitic images of POWER and CONSPIRACY in all sorts of contexts of expression, many audience members will have interpreted his response as an attempt to banish a clearly anti-Jewish admission from the public space of this event. However, the Netanyahu interview seems to have prompted commenters to reinterpret Peterson’s inability to answer the question clearly as lack of permission to tell the truth or not wanting to address the so-called “Jewish question” because of his own bias. The same pattern is suggested in the following statements:

23. “Remember when Jordan Peterson would actually engage in intellectual argument rather than ad hominem smears of anyone who criticizes his hypocrisy with anonymity? Notice how Peterson will not address the JQ. All he has is sophistry”
24. “Remember the video where someone asked Jordan Peterson if the bankers are a threat to freedom, JP said no, now we know why he has that answer”.
25. A: “Question. Does anyone here remember when an audience member asked Matt Walsh about the large Jewish influence on gender ideology and Matt basically just stared down at the floor and insulted the guy? I think that playing that sort of game, as many conservatives do, is what has allowed for this whole Kanye thing to occur. If conservatives were not so spineless and willing to hold all groups equally accountable we would have no need for Kanye’s theatrics”.
B: “They cry out in pain as they strike you”.

The statement in (23) paints the picture of Peterson’s avoidance strategy as soon as the Jewish Question (“JQ”) is addressed. In (24), the commenter seems to accuse Peterson of continuous submissive behaviour in his dealings with both bankers and Netanyahu, thus establishing an equivalence between the two distinct groups—Israel and “the bankers”—ostensibly read from Peterson’s attitude. This indirectly activates the antisemitic CONSPIRACY MYTH that the two are allied and that

Peterson would be obedient to both parties.¹⁶ In (25), reference is first made to the (right-wing) political commentator Matt Walsh, who is said to have a similarly biased approach. The bias, according to the comment, is a specific feature of the conservative spectrum in the USA that thinks Jews enjoy special treatment—a defect that was only brought into focus by the Kanye West scandal. User B responds by reproducing a popular line among white nationalists and antisemitic milieus. It is based on a proverb that translates as “The Jew cries out in pain as he strikes you” and has become a popular antisemitic slogan in the context of the subreddit ‘TheDonald’.¹⁷ Underpinning it is the idea that Jews claim to be victims of an act because they secretly want to harm the non-Jewish in-group.

The bias and lack of demanded responses addressing the role of Jews in world affairs today are juxtaposed with commenters’ own justifications and fake quotes, which further emphasise the fundamental bias on Peterson’s part:

26. A: “I must have missed your ‘Message to Jews’ video, you were so eager to lecture Christians and Muslims”
 B: “It will never happen unless it is some kind of apology to them for everyone else’s shortcomings”.
27. “Jordan Peterson be like: ‘We must secure the existence of our people and a future for jewish children.’”
28. “JP: Message to the Jews – ‘On behalf of the rest of the world, we are so sorry for how you’ve been treated. You guys are so smart, man. Sniff. We just..we just ...want to do whatever we can to help you all out. And golly, maybe just one day we’ll deserve you all. Sniff.’”

16 Research in recent years on antisemitism in online debates related to Brexit has revealed interestingly similar indirect connotations of domains that, though separate, are interpreted differently when linked together. For example, referring to an antisemitic incident in France, a British commenter said: „And our bankers really believe that they are better off in France?” The comment is not problematic in itself, but, as part of a discourse event related to an incident directed against Jews, it establishes an equivalence relationship between the domains *Jews* and *bankers*. The negative orientation created by the linking is an example of everyday antisemitism.

17 ‘r/The_Donald’ was a subreddit wherein participants created discussions and Internet memes in support of former U.S. President Donald Trump.

This section shows how subtle and coded the accusation of Peterson's *SERVILITY TO A JEWISH POWER* is. However, such insinuations are not communicated exclusively via allusions, semiotic markers and slogans. In some places, although much less frequently comments resort to more direct patterns of communication by explicitly addressing the Jewish out-group or Israel by proxy (for example, via rhetorical questions):

29. "Peterson's great logic and analytical reasoning suspends when it comes to Israel. I wonder why"
30. "Maybe JP is being blackmailed by the Jewish mafia"

4.4 The intellectual showing his true colours (*Group C*)

So far, the analysis has examined the notions of Peterson's self-inflicted incompetence on the one hand and his externally or Jew-induced victim status on the other. Next, I will briefly describe the attributions of character traits that dominate the *YouTube* thread and that identify Peterson as a self-responsible subject who has gone astray or has strong character deficits. In comments with such an orientation, corresponding statements can certainly be associated with antisemitic projections such as *GREED*, *IMMORALITY* and *HYPOCRISY*; however, corresponding conclusions cannot be drawn as references to Jewish identity are missing (see, by contrast, the following section).

What first stands out is the image of greed. Users claim that Peterson got carried away with the interview and other undertakings in order to enrich himself. Behind this stands the insinuation that the interview was not motivated by an interest in the Middle East conflict from an Israeli perspective but by pecuniary considerations:¹⁸

31. "Jordan Peterson loves money, this is what love for money does to a man".

18 Insinuations like these are particularly common in online comment sections about documentaries or articles that denounce conspiracy theories related to the Jewish philanthropist George Soros. The idea that Jews supposedly *BENEFIT FROM SUCH CRITICISMS* of hate speech directed against them is often carried by the insinuation that they were the funders of these publications (*INFLUENCING PUBLIC OPINION*) or want to capitalise on them (*INSTRUMENTALISING ANTISEMITISM*) (cf. Becker, Troschke, and Allington 2021, Becker and Troschke 2022).

32. "He was a gatekeeper from the very beginning, he never really fought globalism to begin with. Globalism is great when you're paid handsomely for just talking in to a microphone for a living".
33. "It is not worth trading your decency, intellect, truthfulness for a small amount of benefit Mr. Peterson. But it seems this one hour of podcast of yours sheds an illuminating light on many followers mind on what you truly hide deep in your heart..."

In (33), a user refers, again, to the relationship between Peterson and his followers. Although the comment's last part is semantically ambiguous as to what exactly is assumed to be at the heart of the intellectual (the feature that distinguishes him from his fans), the gap can be filled by the allusion to financial advantage in the first line ("for a small amount of benefit").

Observations of Peterson's supposed general moral depravity and mendacity, particularly with regard to his perceived withholding of empathy for the suffering of actual victims, are evident in the *YouTube* thread:

34. "I thought your tears of compassion for humanity were authentic Mr. Peterson. I felt repulsed by your apathy towards real suffering of innocent people because I have invested so much time in listening to you, reading your books, crying with you etc. Power and high status really do show ones true colors, and turns out you're not ALL THAT, after all..."

Finally, commenters claim that Peterson has not only made a pact with the evil side but represents evil itself. Here, again, are references to the devil, as mentioned earlier:

35. "'If someone says i am all good than look for the opposite, because either he is Jesus Christ and all angels combined or there is the dark side which he is hiding. Devil is somewhere.' Jordan Peterson Thank you for correcting yourself and unveiling your devil. You are no more a honest man in my opinion."

36. A: "And when, exactly, did Jordan Peterson claim he is all good?"
 B: "his reputation was like this. But now he has revealed his dark side".

In this brief overview, analysis shows that the qualities of greed, lying, immorality and wickedness attributed to Peterson are closely linked to the repertoire of antisemitic ideas. This interpretation of the discourse about a non-Jew may seem surprising, but it is underscored by other passages in the *YouTube* thread in which Peterson himself becomes the object of antisemitism.

4.5 The 'judaisation' of the interviewer (*Group D*)

The insinuation that Peterson is showing his true colours and behaving in at least morally questionable ways is, in some cases, heightened by association with clearly antisemitic terms. This section presents contributions in which Peterson is positioned as an active, self-directed actor within an alliance with a group described as Jewish, or in which he himself is characterised as Jewish.

37. A: "When do you think Jordan will realize that he is now a gatekeeper for globalism?"
 B: "Oh he knows... That's his main purpose anyway ..."

In this dialogue, A proposes a connection between the Netanyahu interview and globalism. Peterson is presented as the "gatekeeper" of the latter, while, in his role as interviewer and initiator of this media event, he is also regarded as a supporter of Netanyahu. In this respect, the two spheres of Israel's government and globalism are linked through Peterson. The comment draws an antisemitic image in which Peterson plays the role of the right-hand man of an alleged Jewish-Israeli internationalist CONSPIRACY (see also the link between "bankers" and the Israeli government in (24)). This allegation is particularly interesting in light of Peterson's positioning as a supporter of ethno-nationalism and the politicians who represent it.

38. C: "Definitely universalism. Absolutely something that Judaism preaches and pushes for the world expect for Israel".
 D: "Globalism worldwide but nationalism in Israel is what he [Peterson] wants".

In (38), two other commenters responding to the previous dialogue refer to the idea of Judaism as a promoter of “universalism”—a claim that, in accordance with the antisemitic concept of *PRIVILEGE*, would not apply to Israel’s nationalism. This double standard is used to illustrate Peterson’s alleged bias.

In addition to insinuating a close relationship between Peterson and Jews or Israel—one desired by both sides—the interviewer himself is constructed as a Jewish person. This is performed linguistically in various ways. For example, commenters use allusions to a central motif from Christian anti-Judaism:

39. “I’ll respect him [Peterson] when he repents and gives up his 30 pieces of silver”.

Applying cultural knowledge, the phrase “30 pieces of silver” is commonly interpreted as a reference to bribery. However, within a thread focussing on a famously Jewish person and on Peterson’s involvement in allegedly whitewashing Israel’s reputation, it refers to the biblical account of Judas betraying Jesus in exchange for thirty pieces of silver.¹⁹ By invoking other sources of knowledge, the interpretation of the overarching meaning can be extended in two ways. First, the comment draws on three core concepts of Christian anti-Judaism, namely *GREED*, *BETRAYAL* and *DEICIDE*. Secondly, it appeals to the concept of *INFLUENCE ON THE MEDIA*. Both additional meanings are communicated via the applied allusion. According to the comment, Peterson indirectly becomes Judas: his role as interviewer re-enacts the latter’s treachery and immorality. Moreover, use of this rhetorical device associates Netanyahu with the notion of opinion control. The implication is that Peterson can regain his reputation only if he returns the thirty pieces of silver, that is, abandons the alleged alliance with Netanyahu and/or an invisible *JEWISH POWER*.

Another very popular form of Peterson’s ‘judaising’ exclusion is the rhetorical device of puns, in which the intellectual’s name is changed by means of references to conventional, universally known Jewish names:

40. “Juden Peterstein”
 41. “Judas Peterson”

¹⁹ For comparable references to Soros, see Becker, Troschke and Allington 2021, Becker and Troschke 2022.

It is striking how often users resort to irony and wit, expressing a false appreciation and support for Peterson, to emphasise the effect of the pun as well as to communicate their contempt and disdain:

42. "Juden Peterstein is my hero"
43. "Rabbi Judas Peterstein has a nice ring to it".
44. "Stop hating on my hero Juden Peterstein!"

In conjunction with these rhetorical devices, stereotypes regularly arise in which Peterson is juxtaposed with a JEWISH POWER (see 4.3) and once again exposed to ridicule:

45. "Jewdon Peterson sure won't bite the hand that feeds him".
46. "Judas Peterson; 'Yes master, please don't hurt me'"
47. "Yes, PeterSTEIN is being fairly biased in his shilling for Israel. Yes, Peterson has been quite cringe lately".

While the first two of these comments remain unspecific regarding the identity of the power, the commenter in (47) explicitly link Peterson's subservience to Israel. The concept of DUAL LOYALTY is a popular antisemitic stereotype used to indirectly accuse Jews worldwide of a SECONDARY OR LACK OF LOYALTY TO THEIR OWN (US, British, German, etc.) HOMELAND and a (too) STRONG ATTACHMENT TO ISRAEL (see Troschke 2024). In (47), precisely this accusation is levelled against Peterson, who was previously conceived as a Jew by means of wordplay.

Overall, the exclusion of Peterson by means of wordplay is very popular: "Peterstein" appears 33 times in this sample alone, "Judas" in combination with Peterson's name twelve times. Due to the research design of this case study, not all puns involving Peterson's name could be taken into account; the total number, including those which were not picked up by the chosen search terms, is probably much higher. Nevertheless, it is significant that, in this online milieu, these mocking rhetorical devices, which virtually turn Jewish names into swear words, find unchallenged acceptance.

5. Conclusion and outlook

This contribution examines the reactions to Jordan Peterson's interview with Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu in December 2022. The qualitative linguistic case study takes a closer look at about 800 viewer comments that refer directly to the interviewer by name and focuses on the overwhelming subset in which negative and even antisemitic attitudes towards the conservative, non-Jewish intellectual are voiced. It is interested in understanding how antisemitism, triggered by Netanyahu's participation, is able to break the intimate bond between influencer and followers. The analysis showed that a high number of comments from Peterson's supporters, who thus appear to be influenced by a mainstream conservative stance, contained antisemitic concepts, especially notions of JEWISH POWER and CONSPIRACY THEORIES.

The analysis is divided into four main parts that discuss two conflicting strains of response. It notes that comments, on one hand, openly express disappointment with Peterson in a sometimes Jew-hostile way and insinuate that he is acting under the influence of an imagined external, partly JEWISH POWER; on the other hand, it observes attributions of negative character traits (which, in other contexts, often serve as ingredients of antisemitic discourses) to Peterson but also statements in which Peterson himself is discursively constructed as Jewish. These phenomena take place implicitly—through semantic gaps, puns, the use of malice, irony and references to other scenarios and prominent figures—but also through directly expressed hatred.

The insults, devaluations and conspiracy theories eruptively expressed in the thread shine a light on the presence of antisemitism within the conservative camp online. They also highlight the frictions and compatibilities between this faction and the extreme right—dynamics that are far too little examined in recent research. This deficiency must be addressed through consistent analyses, this study proposes, since, especially in the USA, fragments of antisemitic conspiracy theories cultivated in the far-right end of the spectrum threaten to enter the mainstream. If allowed to do so, they will decisively determine the shape of a normalised antisemitism in large parts of society.

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