THE SOCIAL *OIKOS*: EXAMINING ARENDT'S CONCEPT OF A PUBLIC-PRIVATE DIVIDE THROUGH THE LENS OF A YOUTUBE VLOG

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ABSTRACT

In one of the foundational articles of persona studies, Marshall and Barbour (2015) look to Hannah Arendt for development of a key concept within the larger persona framework: "Arendt saw the need to construct clear and separate public and private identities. What can be discerned from this understanding of the public and the private is a nuanced sense of the significance of persona: the presentation of the self for public comportment and expression" (2015, p. 3). But as far back as the ancient world from which Arendt draws her insights, the affordance of persona was not evenly distributed. As Gines (2014) argues, the realm of the household, oikos, was a space of subjugation of those who were forced to be "private," tending to the necessities of life, while others were privileged with life in the public at their expense. To demonstrate the core points of this essay, I use textual analysis of a YouTube family vlog, featuring a Black mother in the United States, whose persona rapidly changed after she and her White husband divorced. By critically examining Arendt's concepts around public, private, and social, a more nuanced understanding of how personas are formed in unjust cultures can help us theorize persona studies in more egalitarian and robust ways.

KEY WORDS

Hannah Arendt; Social; Private Sphere; YouTube; Family Vlogs; Race-Based Persona Disparities

INTRODUCTION

In July of 2017, the name of a popular family vlog, *Nive Nulls*, was suddenly changed to *Britt's Space*: "If you would have asked me years ago if I saw myself as an almost-31-year-old single mom of three, I probably would have said no. ... So the *Nive Nulls* are no more, the *Nive Nulls* channel is gone" (Null 2017a). In that moment, Brittany Null's digital persona suddenly moved from one of a U.S. woman successfully navigating an interracial marriage to one of a single Black mother, a role traditionally stigmatized not only for living outside of the normative definition of a "family" (i.e. two parents), but also because in the United States, "... Black motherhood has been reinforced by stereotypes that blame Black mothers for the problems in the black family ..." (Warner 2020, p. 4). The response from viewers in the first video, was overwhelmingly positive and filled with advice, support, and admiration. But over the next year, something changed. Laced into the support and praise was advice about both her life and channel that became paternalistic, and even condemning, as if Null's husband had been the only person making the

decisions behind a channel that grew to more than 350,000 subscribers. Complaints about headlines, topics covered, even life choices made, became fodder for conversations about her and directed at her. What *Britt's Space* reveals is the emotional, social, and financial toll of shifting a digital persona, especially when that persona is central to your work.

The multiplicities of burden that Black women face in Western culture is well known to scholars and beyond at this point in history. More than 30 years ago, the legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw demonstrated how in both law and culture the intersection of racism and sexism that, "factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately," (1991, p. 1244). This is not simply two problems, but rather "racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing" (1991, p.1283). Surely, these statements imply a burden on a Black woman's persona as well. For Brittany Null, the additional intersections of divorcee and single mother only mounted greater pressure to negotiate with a public in highly complex and precarious ways, lest she lose the means of her living as a YouTube celebrity.

At issue is persona studies' reliance on a concept developed by the political theorist Hannah Arendt. The reliance, which revolves around publicness and privacy in modern life, is warranted. Both *Nive Nulls* and *Britt's Space* reflect a key element of modernity, which Arendt outlines in The Human Condition (1958) as the collapse of public and private life into a single realm. The exigency of persona studies is partially driven by this reality, as Marshall and Barbour, make clear: "Arendt saw the need to construct clear and separate public and private identities. What can be discerned from this understanding of the public and the private is a nuanced sense of the significance of persona: the presentation of the self for public comportment and expression" (2015, p. 3). The intention of this essay is to do two things that involve Arendt. First, to deepen the understanding of Arendt's argument about the public-private divide in modern society, and especially to examine her concept of social. Secondly, to examine a deep flaw that concept of social, one that is revealed in a controversial essay in which she provides intellectual cover for the racist policies of school segregation in the U.S. in the middle of the 20th Century. The essay, written in the same era that she wrote The Human Condition, not only demands we reconsider Arendt's moral positioning when developing her theories, but also what this essay says about applying her theory in general. Both considerations have methodological and ethical implications for scholars.

It is important to stress that Arendt's central insights around the collapse of public and private spheres remain important and useful in our field. In fact, those insights' centrality to persona studies is what makes this reckoning so necessary. Today, as Arendt might have predicted, phenomena like family vlogging have conflated the *oikos*, or household, with the public sphere. Watching the power dynamic of the household, shared for the public to see, allows us to consider important questions about the private realm throughout history. Who could actually be private in the household? Who shouldered the labour? Who was free to enter the public realm, to do the action? These are questions on which Arendt did not place enough weight. Null's experience can help us consider those experiences and critique the equity of identity performance in modern times.

In this essay, therefore, I will alter the direction of a traditional theory-based empirical study in one fundamental way. Rather than using theory to examine data, I will use the learnings I have gathered from *Nive Nulls* and *Britt's Space* to consider Arendt's theory about the private, public, and social spheres. To do this, I will begin by describing in some detail Arendt's arguments on how and why the spheres were radically altered by modernity. I then examine her controversial essay, "Reflections on Little Rock" (1959a), as well as contemporary and more

recent critiques of Arendt's troublesome application of social. With Arendt's arguments in mind, I will then use textual analysis of both videos and comments from *Britt's Space* to demonstrate how the public-private line presents unique difficulties for Brittany Null. Her mediated story of loss, survival, and recovery provides a unique opportunity to watch a human being's persona radically shift, and provides a clear window into why persona negotiation, like most of all of life, is unduly burdensome for historically marginalized people. Finally, after examining the theory and the vlog, I will attempt to show a way out from the flaws of Arendt's concept to a new perspective for persona, and persona studies, that considers a much broader and more inclusive approach. This approach will not conclude with a set of answers but rather a set of questions that recentres persona studies into a more pluralistic position.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

Before critiquing Arendt, it is important to understand why her description of modernity is so useful in studying persona, in general, and digital persona in particular. Imagine Arendt was not one of the most important political theorists of the twentieth century, but is a twenty-first-century media scholar, and she is watching *Britt Space*'s first episode, "A NEW JOURNEY." She would certainly have an opinion about whether Null appears as a *who* in public space via this video. When Arendt refers to *public*, she means the world that humans build, one that can be seen and shared by all (Arendt 1958, p. 50). In pre-modern times, there was a gulf between the *public* and the *private* spheres and the very definition of modernity, in Arendt's estimation, is the loss of that clear distinction: "In the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself" (Arendt 1958, 54). Arendt means *private* in both the sense of a psychological interiority and as a space to live outside of the gaze of the public spectre, within the household, or *oikos*. Arendt argues that human beings were once able to present the *who* of themselves through public action and speech in the midst of others, even as mere appearance in that realm revealed their *what*, base attributes and abilities (Arendt 1958, p. 181). At the heart of this concept is *natality*, the condition of being born into the world as something new, unique and unrepeatable, which provides us the ability to appear. It is in these appearances, where we act and speak among each other, that we construct both the story of self and the reality of the world, and enter *plurality*. Arendt might argue that what is missing today, especially in digital connectivity, is a shared experience of space, time, and context—the main ingredients of a public space as Arendt conceives it—and this makes "appearing" as a *who* particularly difficult, which tumbles us toward becoming a *mass*. For Arendt, *plurality* is defined by the gathering of distinct people who see each other clearly, while *mass* is a group defined by indistinguishable conformities (1958, p. 175; p. 41). What is common in *plurality* is concern for building the world that we share, but in a *mass* we are most concerned with ourselves as labourers, about the business of survival, prosperity, which means tapping into the conformist instincts of others, and thus a shared world vanishes.

For one quick example, consider the rapid scrolling through posts on a site like Instagram or TikTok, where the individuals referenced in the scene begin to blur together. One could argue that, in digital terms, this loss of shared space of appearance is similar to what Wesch (2009) called "context collapse," in which a myriad of offline spatial, temporal and psychological contexts collapse into a chaotic heap online. In the following quote about a *mass* of humanity, Arendt could very well be explaining how digital life and context collapse make it difficult to appear:

> *What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.* (Arendt 1958, p. 74)

If one cannot genuinely appear in a public realm, the prospect for persona is bleak indeed. There is no negotiation to be had. In the end, Arendt would likely argue, digital spheres such as YouTube are nothing more than an intensification of modern life. Arendt writes "… mass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well, deprives men not only of their place in the world but of their private home..." (1958, p. 59). But, of course, we do still appear to one another in some way, both physically and digitally, and something must hold that reality together. What remains is the social sphere, Arendt argues, in which the *private* collapses into the public, with our economic survival becoming a driving concern (1959, p. 42).

Persona appears in the mire of this collapse today and this is especially intense in digitality. All of the major digital social spaces—Twitter, Facebook/Instagram, TikTok, Reddit—market themselves as both public squares and private spaces, but it is nearly impossible to control either sphere completely. On top of that, users such as Null are beholden to the company's decisions about how the gathering will occur, what and who will appear, and how it will be sustained. Social media as we know it might be a relationship of *pluralities* at times, but ultimately it is built for an Arendtian *mass*. This is not a shared public sphere, but rather a platform. Burgess and Green (2018) specifically consider how YouTube has been framed as a platform, a metaphor that implies neutrality and flexibility to users' interests. But platforms are not neutral, the authors argue, they simply balance more interests than the traditional media channel. Compared to traditional media outlets, which balanced interests of advertisers and audience, YouTube coordinates and profits from "audiences; amateur, pro-amateur, and professional content creators; media partners; advertisers; new intermediaries like the multi-channel networks (MCNs); and third-party developers" (Burgess & Green 2018, p. 17). This collapse of interests onto a series of user interfaces prospers by tracking general trends and conditions, but cannot factor in the unique qualities of each individual. Burgess and Green ask: "... who gets to participate in the business? Under what conditions, with what impacts on culture and society, and in whose interest do they participate?" (2018, p. 20). All of the answers rest within the platform developers.

Platforms are not freely shared either, but rather operate as property. Not only in the sense that a company like Google profits from owning the channels, its code, its affordances, but also in the sense that all these texts and their corresponding data are archived not in an actual "cloud", but in connected servers firmly rooted in terra firma, owned by a company. This is important because Arendt argues that how we came to regard property is exactly what radically shifted the paradigm of human life, created the *social* sphere, and ushered us into the modern world (1958, p. 38). The ownership of property, Arendt argues, once was merely a means to an end: to own property meant to be free, and to be free, "to transcend his own life and enter the world all have in common" (1958, p. 65). In modern times, the ownership of property is the end goal of not only our sustenance and prosperity, but the fulfillment of our true nature. Arendt focuses on philosopher John Locke, so critical to the modern age mindset, who argues that ownership of property is the ownership of the self. The exigency to enter the world from a private to a public space, and to appear as unique and unrepeatable, is replaced by the exigency

to enter the economic space and command it, which means aligning with systems of gains and ownership. As Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, ByteDance, Tencent have proven, accumulation rather than distribution of ownership tends to be the result.

Null's ownership of her own persona, her most important asset as a social media professional, is precariously placed on property owned by others. This is true of all social media users. To prosper financially in these conditions, she must not only expose her speech and actions, but also her private concerns and needs. Arendt's theory offers trenchant insight into how and why the public-private divide becomes both complicated and commoditized by modern society when the *social* sphere emerges. Which is to say that in many parts of life, and especially in digitality, understanding the *social* sphere is essential to understanding persona.

What Arendt missed in her own time is not that inequality negatively impacts a Black woman living in American society in particularly pernicious ways. She appears to have known that. What she missed was how to apply her own distinctions of *public*, *private*, and *social* spheres in the most just ways. We can see this best seen in Arendt's application of her own theory to a hotly contested issue about race in America—the integration of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. Because her thinking about this issue is contemporaneous with *The Human Condition's* publication, and because Arendt stepped into the discussion in a way that was highly controversial even at the time, it serves as a useful lens for persona studies scholars to critique a key element of our scholarship.

ARENDT AND LITTLE ROCK

In this section, I will describe the controversy Arendt created when she addressed desegregation efforts in the 1950s American south, highlight key arguments against Arendt's application of her theory, and offer my own analysis. "Reflections on Little Rock," (Arendt 1959a) cannot be ignored when making a judgment about Arendt's idea about the public-private divide, and how that affects persona studies. What is critical to note here is how Arendt places *public* and *social* concerns on people's lives in a way that blatantly defends discrimination and not so subtlely supports racist ideologies. The essay was sparked when Arendt saw a photo of a Black child confronted by White adults and children, who were screaming at the child trying to enter a public school. Arendt believed that such a spectacle was unfair. Why? Her most pointed argument draws from the concept about *public* versus *private* sphere. Arendt argues, "For the crucial point to remember is that it is not the social custom of segregation that is unconstitutional, but its legal enforcement" (1959a, p. 49). In other words, she relegates segregation to the *social* realm, not the *public*, thus leaving it out of the sphere of our collective concern. She is also making a much bigger point—that the aspiration for equity in general is always a *public* concern, not a *social* one, as social life is built on discrimination. We discriminate along all kinds of lines, she argues, from profession, income, ethnic origin (more so in America), as well as class, education, and manners (more so in Europe): "At any rate, without discrimination of some sort, society would simply cease to exist and very important possibilities of free association and group formation would disappear" (1959a, p. 51). The point is not to wash society of its discrimination, *because discrimination in society is legitimate*, she argues, but to confine it there, and not let it drift into the legal-political realm. She argues, "If as a Jew I wish to spend my vacations only in the company of Jews, I cannot see how anyone can reasonably prevent my doing so; just as I see no reason why other resorts should not cater to a clientele that wishes not to see Jews while on a holiday" (1959a, p. 52). It is a different matter when someone wants to sit anywhere they like on a public bus or enter a restaurant that serves the public, she continues, but private life, the *oikos*, is guided neither by the discrimination of

society nor the equality of public life, but by exclusiveness, the choices we make about whom we wish to spend our lives: "The question is not how to abolish discrimination, but how to keep it confined to the social sphere, where it is legitimate, and prevent its trespassing on the political and personal sphere, where it is destructive" (1959a, p. 51). This argument stipulates, on its face, that there should be an unequal burden of persona-creation for anyone who is not readily willing to stay in their social strata. That Arendt thinks this line between *social* and *public* can be managed, based on her own theorization, appears to be wilful naivete. Political power, by her own examples, naturally collect into social power as well. It clearly has for generations. She also assumes that *social*, which is the result of a collapse, has organizing powers that are meaningful, and even helpful, for a society. But her organization of how it should work is chaotic to say the least.

A privately owned restaurant must face a public demand for integration, but taxpayer-funded public school systems must not. She writes that education is the point in which all three realms intersect in modern human life. The right of the family is to remain *private*, and this allows for parents to raise their children as they see fit. Yes, she agrees, the government has a right to demand all children attend school. But this demand hits its limit, she argues, at the content of the child's education, "not the context of association and social life which invariably develops out of his attendance at school" (1959a, p. 55). The rights of the family to choose to stay self-segregated, and the rights of the states to self-govern, is greater than the right for anyone to attend any school they choose. Not only is this mental acrobatics, Arendt essentially employs the concept of the *social* realm as a cudgel to batter the fight for equality in all realms of American life that do not fit her definition of *public*. And that appears to be the great majority of the lived experience.

The backlash from American thinkers, Black and White, was quick and blistering. In a subsequent edition of *Dissent*, which published some of the criticisms of her essay, Arendt doubled down on her argument, writing, "My first question was: what would I do if I were a Negro mother? The answer: under no circumstances would I expose my child to conditions which made it appear as though it wanted to push its way into a group where it was not wanted" (1959a, p. 179). The author Ralph Ellison later replied that Arendt had, "absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people" (via Warren 2003, p. 159). More recently, Kathryn T. Gines (2014) in a book titled *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* carefully deconstructed Arendt's assertions to understand its philosophical origins. In the critique, Gines takes issue with Arendt's private/social distinction and her prioritization of the *public* realm. Gines writes:

> *Perhaps this model is not problematic for a white, property-owning male whose women, children, and slaves in the private sphere create the conditions for the possibility of him entering the public sphere (as was the case in the model Arendt describes.) However this model, which renders invisible that which is done in the private space and celebrates that which is done in public space, poses numerous problems for women and people of color, especially those who are activists and intellectuals".* (2014, p. 12)

Gines is correct in saying Arendt imagines the pre-modern world through the experiences of powerful Greeks whose slaves did the *labour*, so that the citizens could do the work and action in the public sphere. In Arendt's "thinking about race, slavery, imperialism, totalitarianism, violence, and other dominant themes in her writings" (Gines 2014, p. 1), Gines argues that Arendt's decision-making is the core problem, meaning that it is possible to misapply the concept of private-public when blinded to a broader social reality. This is a critical point for

persona studies, as it means the core public-private concept could be either useful or dangerous, depending on how it is applied. For example, in one of her most controversial points, Arendt places the importance of the right to marry across races over the right to attend desegregated schools. She reasons while comparing the two issues, "… had the Court ruled the anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional, it would have hardly have felt compelled to encourage, let alone enforce, mixed marriages" (Arendt 1959b, p. 179-80). Even if Arendt were correct that public schools are not a *public* concern, the idea that inclusion is vital in public realms, but race-based discrimination is perfectly acceptable in *social* spheres accepts modernity for its more corrupting power: to separate. And to do this specifically based on race is simply racism.

It also places all burdens of separation on the public realm at a time when the *social* realm was becoming so vital to our identities and the way we see reality. What does this do to the persona? It quite obviously allows for tiered systems of freedom for different personae, so long as it never crosses the line of official political business, which apparently is sometimes legitimate even in publicly owned institutions. And who gets to decide what is *public* and what is *social*, especially given the fact that the *social* is defined by a collapse of realms in the first place? Even if we were to accept this, we still would have to ask each time which *social* realm we mean when we say a persona is being negotiated. We would have to consider whether realms have overlapped and, if so, why? Do the overlaps of *social* realms mean we have entered a public space? Where does to the *who* appear then?

This might all read like I am engaging in identity politics and not identity research. Maybe so, but Gines shows Arendt is also engaged in identity politics. Gines writes, "She has made herself a representative of white Americans, a negative image of Blackness that persists in the white imagination, an image that is at the foundation of the white problem" (2014, p. 129). As a white man, I know very well my history is filled with identity politicians, ones who did far more than hurt people's feelings. The die of identity is most easily cast in the *social* realm, and reinforced most easily in the *oikos*, both of which have a pernicious way of deciding who gets to appear in the *public* realm. Defending the *social* realm as a bastion of unapologetic discrimination is to argue that the inequalities forged through history, whether it be to Black people, Indigenous people, women, or the "outsiders" in any culture, can now remain frozen. It also means that the *oikos* is forever safe for power disparities to play out. And, thus, those who have been relegated to the household will never emerge into the *public* sphere. That conclusion extends from Gines' most critical point. At the end of her book, Gines addresses the way Arendt judged "the Negro Question." It should be required reading for all white scholars as Gines helpfully frames the point, which begins with a Kantian view on judgment that assumes one can absorb the many perspectives of a plural group. Gines writes:

> *While Arendt imagines that she has many standpoints present in her mind and that she thinks in the place of the absent others, instead she represents the views only of those allowed in the public realm while misrepresenting (or not making present at all) the views of those confined to the private or social realms.* (2014, p. 124)

This is the key danger for persona studies. To imagine that the trek from private to public is easily understood in generalized terms would be to undermine our research's validity. In a moment of pausing to rethink and expand persona studies, it is also useful to re-examine Arendt's core concept of the collapse of the public-private line and its application to the field. After all, the *social* sphere is conceptualized as a collapse, making the transition from public to private especially difficult. Because of this, the *social* sphere becomes a critical lens through which to see persona studies. Arendt's application of *social* in her reflections on segregation

undermine the very notion of plural space, because the *social* not only reflects the *public*, as I argued earlier, but also shapes the *public* by allowing for the reinforcement of stratifications to persist. To evolve the *social* realm is not a legal or political aim, it is an ethical and moral one, and it is also the far more likely place where reality is constructed. The table that Arendt says has vanished was not always in the public realm. As Gines argues, it existed most powerfully in the household (2014). Today, its most powerful pressures may very well exist in the social realm. To show this, I examined one very clear *social s*phere: *Britt's Space* on YouTube, a clear collapse of *oikos*. The questions that shaped my analysis were: When the labour of a *private* life becomes a *public* artefact, what pressures are placed on the persona that reveal cultural inequities? Examining a persona shift from one recognised role to a different, less privileged role, helped me see a path toward a more pluralistic approach to research in our field.

METHOD AND ETHICS

To analyse and compare the change of digital persona negotiation on the channel once known as *Nive Nulls*, and later, *Britt's Space*, I sampled videos from three years before and two years after the video "A NEW JOURNEY" (Null 2017a) was made, a date range of between July, 2014 and July, 2020. The analysis was guided by the methodology of Norman Fairclough, who examines texts as primarily social and "multi-functional," "ways of acting, ways of representing, ways of being" (2003, p. 27). In analysis, he guides researchers to think in terms of "types of meaning," and to focus on action, representation, and identification (2003, p. 30). Action implies a social relation, which in this data might be a relation between Null and another person in her offline life (such as her children, friends, and ex-husband), as well the audience she addresses and those who address her. Representation implies a relation between two entities that are apparent in the text, such as the titles of the videos and the video content itself. Identification notes the commitment of actors within the text about the representations being made and looks at the strength of the commitment, such as the commitment of advice that commenters make to Null in regards to her video titles, the topics she chooses, etc. Fairclough stresses that mediation of such events is the movement and networking of social practices, meaning the locus of power is both transferred, and potentially mutated, through actions in the texts (2003, pp. 30-31). In other words, what Null experiences in the texts represent the social realities in which her vlog is situated. Examining the vlogs from this perspective allows a researcher to view texts as "linking together social events in different social practices, different countries, and different times, facilitating the enhanced capacity for 'action at a distance' which has been taken to be a defining feature of contemporary 'globalization', and therefore facilitating the exercise of power" (2003, p. 31). To understand the YouTube family vlog culture in general, I examined several top channels to get a baseline around common practices and audience expectations.

From an ethical perspective, I have chosen to examine *Britt's Space* because the videos are not only public, but the situation that marked the shift in Null's life was mediated beyond her own channel. My university's Institutional Review Board guides the ethical acceptability of this project by ensuring that the data was neither collected through intervention or interaction with the subject nor by collecting identifiable private information. Because these videos have lived in public archives for several years now, their publicness has been well-established. In many instances, the next ethical step would be to anonymize the participants to the extent possible. Specifying *Britt's Space*, in this case however, allows for Null's unique, unrepeatable story to be "witnessed" for what it is. By all indications of her channel, she has mastery over what she does and does not share. Beyond the privacy considerations, my position as a White male in middle age lends me only so much insight into both the trauma, the work, and the resilience Null displays. Because of that, I have been very careful to only examine how the texts

relate to one another, and the society in which it is situated. I do not try to read Null's mind, or imagine her experiences and opportunities beyond her own descriptions and the very basic human empathies that loss can be emotionally hard, economic precarity can be frightening, and criticism in the midst of such a paradigm shift might sting. Finally, understanding the perspective of Crenshaw (1991), Gines (2014), and other theorists who have both studied and experienced the realities of Black women, I accept as fact the uneven burdens Black women experience. With that, I will describe three themes found in the videos that pertain to Null's persona negotiation, and compare those to pre-divorce realities as well as general learnings about family vlogs.

NULL'S *OIKOS*

With the posting of "A NEW JOURNEY," (Null 2017a), news of the divorce made the rounds of digital channels and gossip circles that focus on digital celebrity. The online news outlet Clevver (D'Aluisio 2017) reported on a video from Austin, Britt's ex-husband, that explained why the divorce was taking place:

> *Even in just the early days, I would hurt her with my own pride, or selfishness or something. And then that manifested into me doing other things and not being faithful, and I just can't keep hurting her anymore. And that's what recently happened again, is that I continued to hurt her in that way.*

If YouTube family vlogs are collapse of public and private in general terms, breakage within that family, and its vlog, constitutes an invasion. In analysing the early transition from *Nive Nulls* to *Britt's Space*, it was clear that her climb was uphill. This was despite the fact that the great majority of comments she received were positive. What was at work was YouTube's software, which elevated negative comments, thanks to large anonymous upvotes of those negative critiques. What differentiates the comments Null was getting in comparison to her old persona, as well as other users, was the sharpness, the tone of disrespect, and the threats of departure from the channel. The criticisms revolved around three consistent themes of critiques: the use of clickbait titles (titles that promised dramatic issues that turn out to be innocuous), her openness about YouTube vlogging being her business, and her general struggle with recovering from divorce. In all three cases, those critiques of her persona stand in sharp contrast to similar content from her old channel and others like it.

Clickbait use.

The strange thing about negative responses to clickbait is that headlines that promise one thing and deliver another are common on YouTube, including with many family vlogs, without nearly the pushback seen on Britt's channel. Here are examples:

- *Nive Nulls*: "THIS IS NOT WORKING OUT" (Null & Null 2016). (76,000+ views) was about a rainout of a planned outing rather than the implication that there were family problems. Top comment: "Story time lol: when me and my brother were little, we were scared of thunder, so my mom told us that the thunder was God and the angels bowling in Heaven and getting strikes and winning."

- *The Ace Family*: "The Ace Family Break Up" (August 15, 2021). (1+ million views) was about the mother in the family getting her own channel. Top comment: "Knew it was Clickbait but still clicked for some reason," a tacit acceptance of the video's message.

The consistent messaging about the headlines was complaints from the audience, which clearly held certain power over Null's decisions. A few days after one set of negative comments, she made a video apologizing for the clickbait and began posting headlines that were more accurate. Predictably, her video views went down, which impacted her revenue. When she later posted a video called, "QUITTING YOUTUBE???" (Null 2019), the top comment was: "If i had a dollar for every time you used this clickbate title , i would be rich." The video title is actually accurate, as she goes through the pluses and minuses of being on the platform, and what it costs her emotionally, and strategies for overcoming the pitfall. Even though the great majority of comments below praised Null for her openness, the most negative comment, because of its vote count, is highlighted as the first among "Top comments." Which is to say that non-verbal, anonymous, and powerful upvotes of harsh criticism was shaping the narrative for Null's channels in ways it never did for *Nive Nulls*.

YouTube as a business.

A year after *Britt's Space* emerged from the collapse of the *Nive Nulls*, Britt explained a dilemma about her content. In "DRAMA WITH MY EX" (Null 2018), Null addresses the tension directly:

> *I hope you watch this one, because yesterday's did not get watched and it's a little frustrating, because I'm killing myself putting content up. ... I'm going to be honest with you guys. I've struggled a lot with titles and stuff like that. And I know some people are like, "Oh you do clickbait," and things like that, which I try not to do. But yesterday's vlog was very straightforward, the title was very straightforward, it was totally accurate and I feel like unless I name the video something like "DRAMA WITH MY EX" or "Divorce Bla Bla Bla" or just something negative that people just don't click on it.* (Null 2018)

Many comments ranged from blatantly critical to trying to appear constructively critical. One of the most upvoted comments was defiant against Britt: "You legit just click baited this video. That's why I stopped watching your videos. I don't think you should try and trick people into watching your videos." In struggling publicly with this issue, Null was regularly opening herself to criticism. For example, a commenter wrote this:

> *Hi Britney, here's a tip, people love watching inspiring and motivating things. I don't like drama, and watch Youtubers who are real with life and show how they get on with it. Your situation doesn't define you, showing your strength and independence motivates others too, and keeps them engaged because there's something to look forward to. To boost channel engagement, try making day in the life, what i feed my kids, clean with me, diy furniture change, room tours, what I am working on. Be real and share your struggles (if you want to), dilemmas, decisions etc. Become RELATABLE.*

Largely missing in the commentary was any recognition that being left by an unfaithful spouse is hard as is being marginalized from the myth of perfect family life. Her content was relatable to anyone who knows that struggle or anyone who could imagine how awful it would be. When Null made a video that included a product placement, one comment that reflected several across multiple videos stated: "Britts can you just go back to way you use to vlog before. I miss seeing your day to day interactions with you children.....good or bad. They do not have to be 10 minutes long I understand you are busy." While this is not mean-spirited, it represented another kind of pressure—to erase the fact that Null's life had radically changed. Again, discussing the economic realities of being a YouTube influencer was not met with the same vitriol when *Nive Nulls* did it:

- "WE BOUGHT A NEW HOUSE" (Null & Null 2016) (90,000+ views) describes a sponsorship deal between the channel and Zillow, in which the family seeks and finds their first house to buy. Top comment: "Kailand is proof that there ARE actually landscapers out there who genuinely enjoy their job! So if your landscaper has a grumpy attitude, dump him and get yourself a Kai!"

Making the transition transparently

Performing the self during the recovery phase after a divorce would be difficult for anyone, but the new narrative also undermined the original one of a White man and Black woman who were happily married and rearing children. In expressing difficult times around race during the marriage, the *Nive Nulls* community was overwhelmingly supportive:

- "Interracial YouTubers Unite!!!" (Null & Null 2014). When *Nive Nulls* shared struggles of interracial life, the top response was: "U guys don't live for their approval. Keep doing u and keep doing your videos ..." (Null & Null 2014).

In fact, what stabilized the new iteration of the channel for *Britt's Space* was a shift toward ever increasing transparency about her personal pain. Videos such as, "BREAKING MY SILENCE" (Null 2017b), "Single Mom Life" (Null 2017c), "SO MANY EMOTIONS" (Null 2017d) showed Null in vulnerable emotional states and radically honest about her loss and internal struggles. This tactic revealed much more about Null's interior life than before, even if her *oikos* had been public for years. This strategy gathered a group of highly loyal audience members that supports her consistently, including defending her against critiques. But another trend accelerated at this point—video views stagnated and subscriptions declined, losing as many as 3,000 net subscribers one month and never having a net gain over the past two years (Social Blade 2021). So what is the cost of Null's transparency? If Arendt is correct that mass society invades our private lives, revealing her emotional life was exactly what Null had to do to deliver a persona that was not regularly pressured to change, but has also not proven proficient in gaining a larger audience. The invasion of her private life reflects modernity, but the depth of the invasion (what Null was forced to reveal versus her former persona) reflects the levels of privilege Arendt does not see as a concern, because it exists in the social realm.

Conclusion: Arendt and an equitable persona

A YouTube vlog is not as momentous as a child's education, nor are the ramifications as serious and certainly do fall in Arendt's category of *social*. Null is a talented mother and woman and could use those talents to do something other than YouTube. Why she chooses the entrepreneurial struggle of influencer entertainment is no one's concern. So why choose this example? Partially because persona is so important to the makeup of Null's life and, thus, reveals the inner workings of that negotiation between public and private through both repetition and change. I was studying family vlogs through the perspective of Arendt at the time of the *Nive Nulls*' break up. Later, when I learned about "Reflections on Little Rock," it became clear to me that Arendt would see Null's extra burdens as only a social issue, not one that weighs heavily on all of shared life in America. Arendt might have even placed herself in Null's shoes and determined what she must do to escape her dilemma.

As it turns out, Null has done that for herself. While her channel has not grown, it has remained consistent and her audience is now highly loyal and not overly critical. But extrapolate this to larger, and more dangerous, social structures and one can see the crack in Arendt's logic becoming highly alarming. While Arendt would certainly admit that police treatment of Black people in America is certainly a *public* concern, she would not be concerned

by the shared biases among police and citizens that underlie such disparities. To deny identity is an important part of the public sphere is to deny realism. Null's *what*, especially when it changed from wife to single mother, was a clear impediment to seeing her *who*. Only by opening herself to greater and greater exposure not of her *public* life, but her *private* life, does Null survive. That Arendt's concern for the *private* seems to have been contained to only those who might appear in the *public*, as Gines (2014) argues, is a tragic flaw in the theory of modernity. To put it another way, for the silent many, the public always invaded the private, even in ancient times. For slaves, for women, children, those who would have been considered corrupted by illnesses or simply differences, there never was a public life. Only until those cracks in the human condition have been repaired could Arendt's arguments be completely germane to life as we know it. So this reality must be applied to persona studies as well. Scholars in this vital field—and I emphasize the demand on White scholars such as myself—must consider a set of questions to help resist the assumptions Arendt made about the social realm's legitimate use of discrimination. To do this first is vital to better understand the debilitating role that social discrimination plays in equal opportunity for all who have been historically marginalized, most notably Black women and men in the Western world, but also all colonized and oppressed people around the globe. To start with the recognition that persona cannot easily flow evenly from such a history is a first step. If we reject Arendt's assertion about the *social*, and reflect on our previous acceptance, we could then derive a set of foundational questions to start our studies: What does this mask weigh? Meaning, how much socially constructed burden is placed on certain personas before they even get to act or speak? How much can this mask hide? Meaning, how much privilege to privacy does this mask afford, based on the what of the personas before us? How far can this mask go? Meaning, what limitations are placed on the mask to negotiate with the *public*? If we treat all personas as equally burdened, equally filled with potential, equally masking interiorities, we run the risk of obscuring the very phenomena we seek to understand.

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