

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 2, Episode 7: Natalie Wynn
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NATALIE WYNN: So I woke up this morning at 4:00 AM. Oh, oh my God. I had iHop.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Oh yum.

NATALIE WYNN: I had iHop delivered to my house. This was 6:00 AM iHop.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Well what did you have from the beautiful iHop menu?

NATALIE WYNN: What did I have? I had two scrambled eggs with sausages and pancakes. It could have been way more decadent, but I decided to keep it at a reasonable level. I mean, I got the strawberry banana pancakes, if that makes it any better.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Oh yeah, that does.

NATALIE WYNN: Yeah, I thought so. I thought it would.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I'm Abigail Disney, welcome to All Ears, my Podcast where I get to go deep with some super smart people. This season I'm talking to good trouble makers. Artists, activists, politicians and others who aren't afraid to shake up the status quo. We'll talk about their work, how they came to do what they do, and why it's so important in hard times to think big. You can't think about solutions without being a little optimistic, and man oh man I think we need some optimism right now.

So, if you're an oldster like me, a lot has changed since your first AOL account. Much of it not at all good, especially in wide swaths of YouTube. Well, I am thrilled to tell you that my guest might just be the Aeneas to lead us into the underworld and guide us through spits and falls and help us understand what's going on down there. She's been called the Oscar Wilde of YouTube, which I really, really like. Natalie Wynn is the whip smart, very funny and deeply humane YouTube star behind Contrapoints, a YouTube channel offering up compelling smartly argued videos, primarily making counterarguments to the nihilist, misogynistic, and generally hateful notions that would otherwise go uncountered on the platform.

Contrapoints: *But if you really are sincere, really wondering about the answer to these troll questions and many people are, then you actually need fairly complicated and nuanced answers, which is why they make such good troll questions because they waste a lot of your time.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And somehow she's found a way to bend the algorithm in her own direction, making her arguments get heard and felt in the very corners of the internet that needed to hear them. Her channel now has over a million subscribers with videos racking up sometimes three times that many views. Natalie, welcome. And thank you for joining me.

NATALIE WYNN: Hello, thank you so much for having me and thank you for that very generous introduction.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Well, all respect, you go right into the mouth of the beast with your arguments. Do you get a lot of blow back when you do?

NATALIE WYNN: Yes. In short. There's been times when I've sort of been more or less willing to just go into the worst possible place and cause trouble. But yeah, it's been, it's been hard and predictably hard. So it's not like I complain because I have brought this on myself unlike a lot of other people online.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. So that leads me to the question: what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like that? How did you, how did you get to it?

NATALIE WYNN: Well, I had to hit some kind of rock bottom, I think before that ever seemed like a good idea. I mean, I think that honestly, if I, I don't think I would do this now, I don't think I would have started doing it now because I have too much to lose now. When I started, well, I was, I was 27. I had just dropped out of grad school.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You left a PhD program at Northwestern in philosophy, right? Because it was boring you to death.

NATALIE WYNN: That's right. I was doing odd jobs here and there. I was an Uber driver, I was a piano teacher, a legal assistant. I wanted to write fiction and that was going nowhere. So I guess I thought I saw an opportunity on YouTube for someone to be the person who decides to go in and engage with all this like awful troll stuff.

And I decided that I was qualified and able and you know, not afraid because I didn't have a lot going for me. So I just jumped at the chance and here we are.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And now your channel has over a million subscribers.

NATALIE WYNN: Yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: It's really amazing. It's just a really interesting and wonderful, the American dream kind of story.

NATALIE WYNN: It is. It's like a very weird internet fairytale.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So orient the old folks in the audience. You know, what is a YouTube, what is it for? Who spends time on it and why?

NATALIE WYNN: Who uses it? Well, increasingly everyone. You know, 10 years ago it was mostly young people I would say, but like my parents watch YouTube. They're in their sixties. With something as big as YouTube, it's like saying who watches television.

My section of YouTube has, you know, I would say it's a more specific subset. It's people who are interested in watching videos about internet politics, which is a smaller group of people than say the people who are watching, I don't know, makeup tutorials or watching people play video games, which for reasons I don't quite understand, turns out to be a really huge thing.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, what's intriguing to me is that the right wing has used YouTube for the most part as a, a recruiting tool. I mean, I don't know if it rises to that level of planfulness, but for some reason alt-right right-wing ideas have a way of thriving on YouTube. Why, why do you think that is?

NATALIE WYNN: Yeah, in effect it is a recruiting tool. I think that the reason that right wing, especially far right wing ideas have kind of found a home on YouTube-- well, it may be for similar reasons to the way that, you know, far right ideas kind of thrived on talk radio in the nineties and two thousands.

There's sort of less gatekeeping in a way than traditional media, where, you know, the editor of the New York times is making decisions or broadcasters on, on CNN or whatever, making decisions about what is fit to print, what is fit to broadcast. Whereas on YouTube, there's an alarming lack of any kind of gatekeeping. I mean, it's good and it's bad, right?

I've seen sort of, sort of beautiful things happen because people who would not get a chance to speak would not get a chance to broadcast and traditional media, they do have an opportunity on YouTube to do that. But of course there's a dark side to this too. You know, YouTube has terms of service saying you can't make Nazi propaganda, but, that turns out to be hard to enforce.

And, with YouTube, one of the reasons that the far right sort of recruitment stuff works so well, is that a lot of this was not overt about being essentially Nazi propaganda. A lot of it was kind of in the guise of like gaming content or otherwise, um, you know, just jokes. Just trolling, just memes. It's like part of this like jokey internet culture. I mean, I remember in 2016-- like these days, I don't really have trouble getting people to take seriously the idea of the alt-right or the idea that, that,

you know, there is like far-right activity online. But when I first started this in 2016, people did not take me seriously when I, when I told them what I was doing online, people said, like, those are just trolls. Like no one actually believes those things, they're just saying that to get a rise out of you. And I guess at the time, what I thought was that I believed what you're seeing online, like what you see in YouTube comments, even is actually kind of a lot of what people are really thinking and not saying maybe, uh, in polite company, but they're saying it on YouTube. And I think that that actually kind of explains a lot. It explains, you know, some of the way people vote. It explains, actually, a lot of things about this country.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: To some extent do you think that's part of what's driving this? Like, I don't feel in public I can say xyz, so anonymously, here on YouTube, I can leave a comment or a post that wouldn't otherwise be acceptable out there.

NATALIE WYNN: Well, I do think that, you know, you have a very real phenomenon where like, you know, what the right wing calls the elite, like the media, the sort of intelligentsia. I would say a level of moral evolution that surpasses, what maybe 40 or 50% of this country believes.

And so you get this kind of disconnect where a lot of people feel that their views are not represented by mainstream media. Right? I mean, there's also an increasing number of people on the left, who, who, who feel that way. But, um, I think that, you know, the, the big audience is people who feel that everything's too PC you know, these are people who sort of resonate with, with Donald Trump as well, because they see someone, who stands up to, elitists, coastal, you know, political, correctness.

They liked Trump because he's not politically correct. Which means that he's willing to say things that they think but which the people on the news do not say.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right. There's a lot of talk about the algorithm on YouTube. Tell me about it and how it's fed some of this division and you know, has YouTube made any kind of attempt to alter that?

NATALIE WYNN: Well no one knows. The algorithm is this deeply mysterious bit of programming. I do think that these, you know, YouTube and other social media companies have made some efforts to, um, you know, do something about the Nazi problem. I mean, there's been, I would say more you know, more straight up censorship on YouTube, like Alex Jones has been kicked off the platform. Richard Spencer has been kicked off the platform. Recently Steve Bannon was just kicked off YouTube. So, uh, yeah, they're, they're doing something. I would say that the, you know, what was called the alt right pipeline in 2016 or 17, I don't think it's as

much of an issue as it used to be. Um, But I do think that, you know, the thing about these platforms is they're so big, they're not moderated by human beings and you know, the automated moderation just can't detect right wing dog whistles or racist dog whistles, you know? So I don't really have a lot of hope that this is a problem that can be solved by increasing platform moderation.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: But what the algorithm had been doing for a long time in that pipeline was just, basically, if you asked for this, then I'll give you this plus three. I mean, it deepened the divisions, right? It didn't just get people who were on the right and then reinforce their rightness. It pushed them further out, right?

NATALIE WYNN: Well, I absolutely experienced this myself. You know, I remember YouTube recommending me a video that was, say, a take down of like Tumblr feminism. Right? So it will be some channel that didn't really have any kind of right wing agenda, but was just making fun of like, oh, these like ridiculous 17 year olds on Tumblr with their 76 genders or whatever it was. Right, like dunking on embarrassing teenagers. Okay.

But then you would get from that oh, someone who's complaining about SJWs, you know, these social justice warriors, these feminists, they're trying to take away our culture. They're trying to destroy the West. Oh, the West. That's going to trigger a new recommendation.

Well, you know, five videos into this, you're hearing about how, the races are real and there are IQ differences. And this is a very important to understand the civilization today and why, the West needs to protect itself against the migrant invasion and like, you're now watching Nazi content.

Like it happens. I remember this. It was frightening to watch actually, because so many people seem to sort of not be aware that this was happening, um, because the more extreme people were protected by the sort of big tent of hating SJWs, right. Which included everyone from people who basically had no real political opinions whatsoever, but just kind of thought it was entertaining to laugh at these angry feminists or whatever, to people who are straight up neo-Nazis using this, um, community to recruit.

In fact, I've often found that the platform's attempts to censor far, right content backfire, because they're sort of done very naively oftentimes where like, oh, you're worried about neo-Nazis on YouTube. Well, just ban any video with a swastika in it. Ban any video that says the word Hitler or whatever, but here's the thing: a video that is anti Nazi is much more likely to contain a swastika or the word Hitler than a pro Nazi video, because they're not stupid. I mean, some of them are stupid, but, but

the smart ones know that you shouldn't be using swastikas. You shouldn't be praising a Hitler because that's going to turn off most people.

But people who are trying to talk about Nazis or expose Nazis, they're going to be the ones who are, who are using, you know, putting a swastika on screen. And they're the ones who get banned. I had to figure this out in 2017, I was having videos deleted by YouTube for hate speech.

Because I had a swastika on screen while talking about Nazis. So I had to learn basically to do the same things the far right was doing and sort of learn their dog whistles and use them while criticizing them.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: The dog whistle is so interesting. They at least understand that it would be a bad thing to be seen as racist. And that's such an interesting twisted psychology. Do you, I mean, what can you tell me about the psychology of the people who go all the way there? Are they like anyone else and they just get sucked in or, is there something in the makeup of a person who really goes all the way down the rabbit hole?

NATALIE WYNN: I think that anyone and has the capacity and the potential to get drawn into a hate movement. I think that, you know, these prejudices that these movements tend to exploit, they're old prejudices, they go way back hundreds of years. And it's pretty easy to tap into them. You just have to produce content that essentially triggers the prejudice, um, encourages it.

And, often you can sort of do that with resentment against the leftist vanguard, right? You can like, cause oftentimes like leftists are not very well understood. Their proposals seem crazy or authoritarian. That's often a way to hook centrists in and also you can use, you know, just plain statements of fact, right?

So I would see them, I don't know, they would use like scientific data about race and IQ, for example, to be like, oh, you never were taught that in school. Interesting it's because the government doesn't want you to know about the truth about race or whatever, they kind of use this-- cause it seems plausible to a lot of people, I think that there is this like political correctness gone too far like what is it that, that, uh, you know, what is it the CNN doesn't want me to know? Right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Well, you have been critical of the left, and you've really talked about why the left is so bad at talking about their positions? When in fact they hold positions that most people hold before they get onto YouTube.

NATALIE WYNN: Yeah, well, I do think that, if you're not already kind of like on the left, you're already not sort of well-informed about these issues, it often is going to

seem like the left is dogmatic, is moralizing, is basically not interested in debate, not interested in conversation, is unable to defend their positions, and is simply calling anyone who disagrees with them a bigot, right. That's how it seems I think to a lot of people from the outside, so the right wing, um, you know, whether it's the center right, or the far right, they can kind of exploit that common frustration.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You did a video, right? That was like a debate between a fascist and an anti-fascist.

Contrapoints: *Ladies and gentlemen, a leftist.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: It's actually kind of funny because, the antifascist comes out and says, you know, fuck you all you're racists and flips the finger.

Contrapoints: *Oh, fuck you, you fucking racist. Death to capitalism! Hail satan!*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah! that's kind of what we do. Right?

NATALIE WYNN: Absolutely. Well, I mean, this was like chilling to watch back in 2016, 2017, where it really seemed like the fascists were very eloquent in terms of being able to like tap into sort of like primal fears of so many people in America or in Europe, like, this worry, oh, we're losing our country to immigrants.

Like, you know, you're gonna lose your job. You're gonna lose your family. There's Muslim rape gangs storming through the South of England or whatever. These were their talking points. And then, the left would just come out and say, fuck you. Like, this is racist. You're Nazi. Um, all of which is true.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

NATALIE WYNN: But the way it looks to me was that the average person who doesn't spend a whole lot of time on politics was finding the kind of right wing stuff more convincing.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right, because the people were taking the time to convince them.

NATALIE WYNN: Yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I mean, that's the thing that the left is constantly falling shorter and, and you kind of succeeded in bending the algorithm a little bit, or finding a way, uh, to use the algorithm, to get your videos in front of the people who really needed to hear them. I mean, how did, how did you do that? How did you know that you, you know, was that always part of the strategy?

NATALIE WYNN: Well, early on, I would say I hijacked the algorithm by making response videos or videos about other videos that were sort of already popular in these circles. I was able to attract some of the audience that was watching those videos. So today when people decide, oh, I want to be a leftist YouTuber, well, they, that's not what they do. They make videos that are responses to me. There's already this preexisting market essentially for leftist content on YouTube. But when I started there was a little bit of that, but it was much, much smaller than it is now.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: One of your best videos is the one on incels. Can you just tell people what an incel is and where this movement came from and what exactly...and why?

NATALIE WYNN: Sure. Yeah. The word incel, it's kind of a--almost a Sovietesque shortening of involuntary celibate. So people who, I guess they want to be sexually active, but they've, they're virgins. They can't find someone who will sleep with them. I guess the term was originally coined actually by a woman, a bisexual woman who coined the term incel to make this community for people online who were just having trouble finding love, basically.

But it got taken over by a certain sub genre of straight men who, not only were they, they frustrated virgins, they also, they would blame women and, over time it got uglier and uglier to the point where, it was like, I mean, I've seen a lot of bad stuff on internet, but some of the misogynistic stuff that you see in the incel forums is shocking even to me.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, I can imagine. And, and there's, and there's kind of this path, obviously not everybody takes it. Um, but there's a path to violence. I mean, why does it seem to be underlying so much of the mass violence we've been seeing in the last few years?

NATALIE WYNN: Well, it seems to come in part from this sort of sense of entitlement. It's, it's often, you know, white men who do this, often sort of middle-class white men. They feel that the world owes them sex with beautiful women. And when it doesn't you know, just fall into their hands, they get resentful and they get angry and they feel this horrible grave injustice has been done to them by society. And I think that, you know, a particularly nasty version of it kind of thrives online because--well, it's a couple of things. One is like, just sort of a nerdy type of masculinity that's both very interested in like the internet and in video games, for example, in chatting about those things on forums.

And it's also extremely, you know like very, very resentful of women, very misogynistic. And I think that those two things plus this, this expectation that it

seems to come from, I guess, media, that, you know, oh, they're going to be having sex with fashion models. Like, while bringing nothing to the table. Um, so it's like a really fabulous delusion that they get themselves into, but like, uh, yeah, it, it just explodes with this awful violence.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Elliot Roger, did he identify as an incel? The shooter in Santa Barbara?

NATALIE WYNN: I think that, I don't think he identified as an incel. I think that he was, um, sort of semi-active on some of those forums though.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And he, he--don't, they have a title for him?

NATALIE WYNN: Yes. The Supreme Gentlemen, which was a reference to one of his posts where he complained that, you know, women only want to be with these asshole men. And they ignore me, The Supreme Gentleman, right. The nice guy. That's the trope.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And what's interesting is it seems like women are the only thing they hate more than they hate themselves. The self-loathing on those sites is really extraordinary. But I was so struck when you said in your insel video that you want to just mommy, mommy, the shit out of them.

Contrapoints: *Now it's pretty tempting to just mom the shit out of these kids. You want to grab them by their black ops t-shirts, shake them a bit and tell them there are millions of men with small wrists and weak chins getting laid every day, that they're their own worst enemies. They need to get off the computer, go outside, make some friends, stop hating women, get some hobbies. And who knows, maybe they'll develop a disposition that women find a little more approachable.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That's honestly how I felt for a really long time about incels. They break my heart, even though I know that I can't stand them. It's interesting.

NATALIE WYNN: So it's tempting to empathize because like, I know what it's like to be lonely. And I know what it's like to, to hate myself and to hate my body and to feel like I'm inadequate and all these things, you know, but I don't go on crazy misogynistic tirades because of it. And I don't shoot up schools or drive vans into crowds, you know. That's where my sympathy runs out.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You approach some pretty, difficult people, people who have points of view that involve hate and bigotry. Is that hard for you to do, does that take a toll on you?

NATALIE WYNN: I mean, I would say that, the truth is I'm not actually doing it. Right. I do not have, I absolutely do not have the patience. I don't think anyone has the patience to go to an incel forum and start trying to talk to these people. But I can create this sort of illusion of a conversation within incels.

People ask me all the time, like, oh, how do, how do I be as good as you at talking to these extremists? Like, how do I de-radicalize my Trump supporting mom. And you know, I don't know. The best I've got is my videos.

if I would actually have a face-to-face conversation with an incel, I guarantee you, I will get offended, like, because they say incredibly offensive things.

But I am much more reflective about how I present an argument or how I present this whole subject when I'm on YouTube. And I take care not to go with the tone or the content of my first emotional reaction, but to calculate it more, um, sort of thoughtfully based on how I know people are likely to hear it.

And so I think I attracted a bigger audience to myself by drawing in a more centrist --or center right even-- audience.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Hmm. What do you think that the center right, let's say average Joe, maybe even a Trump voter, when they watch one of your videos, what's going through their head? Why do they stay with it?

NATALIE WYNN: Well it's, I would say that my videos have changed a lot over the last four years. Um, and I've changed a lot over the last four years. Uh, I guess I should explain to the podcast that I am a transgender woman. Um, I have transitioned in the last three and a half years. So when I started, I had not transitioned yet. Um, you know, people saw me as a man four years ago and, uh, you know, I was not a conventional man. I was not presenting like we expect a man to present. It was, it was a lot, but they saw me as a cross dressing man, basically a man in a dress. And I have, since I watched people totally changed the way that they treat me. And I think that a lot of, you know, for a lot of this time, I was very conscious that the first thing people were going to see and hear is like, Ew, what is this disgusting degenerate?

You know, like I'm just being realistic. Like that's how I was going to be perceived at first sight. It's such an uphill battle to win people over to take me seriously as a human being, as well as listening to what I have to say. So part of it was, you know, sort of navigating the way that I knew I was being perceived.

Like, I mean, particularly like how would, how does a male audience, for example, relate to a female creator, um, or transwoman creator, like it's--there's a dynamic

that is very different. So I'm sort of figuring out how to deal with that still. I dunno, I began my transition three, three or four years ago, you know, that's not really that long in the course of a human life.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: No.

NATALIE WYNN: And so I'm still kind of learning a lot about, uh, I still, I sort of don't quite feel like I know what I'm doing yet, but, um, I've made a certain number of mistakes and, um, you know, I think that I definitely went through a long stage of pandering, pandering to men. Because it seemed like the safest and best option, but I've kind of, you know, been doing this long enough now to understand that there's bad consequences to that, that build up over time.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right, The short term benefit is way outweighed by the long-term.

NATALIE WYNN: Yeah, because you're building a very contingent kind of acceptance that, you know, is going to go away as soon as you start pandering.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And you shared your transition publicly on your, in your videos?

NATALIE WYNN: Yeah. It's very like, uh, it's discussed quite a lot, especially in, in some of the earlier videos about it. Um, so yeah, it's, it's, uh, been very personal and that I almost kind of regret, honestly, because I think that honestly, the way to transition if you're a public figure is to just go vanish for a few years and then come back as a different person.

I think that your past never leaves your side on the internet, you know? And so I do feel I've kind of backed myself into a corner in some ways where I'm always going to co-exist alongside the person I used to be. And there's nothing I can do to change that now.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right, I can imagine it's very vulnerable to have so much of yourself out there in the world for people to see. So, let me ask you one last thing. You've said journalism about Youtube is usually about a year behind actual YouTube. So maybe you can have a go at telling us what we're going to be really upset with ourselves for not knowing a year from now. What's happening that we're going to find out about in a year?

NATALIE WYNN: Well, what I'm seeing right now is the kind of the emergence of a large leftist community. And I think that what we're in for on YouTube next with that is basically some vicious, classic leftist infighting. So I think that, you know, Everyone has kind of rallied now. Well, actually not everyone because a lot of

people actually, I've actually experienced a lot from young leftists who don't even didn't even vote for Biden because they felt that there's not any meaningful difference between Biden and Trump. Basically what I'm seeing is like there's a kind of schism forming between I guess what you call liberals and socialists.

And in leftist spaces online it's becoming an increasingly tense and hostile thing where it's, you know, what, what, what do you want to do?

Do you want to vote for Democrats? And do you want, um, to work towards universal health care and uh, you know, make sure that, gay marriage stays legal and, and try to get more women in office. Or do you want a much more revolutionary program of trying to overthrow capitalism somehow? Like there's an increasing number of young people who, who want that, um, or think they want that, um, and it's driven by, you know, a lot of understandable things, uh, you know, the increasing urgency of the climate crisis that seems to be being ignored and seems to have no solution in a capitalist world. Uh, you know, there's the just grim economic situation of so many young people now. The student debt piling up, the gig economy, the lack of like no pensions, no benefits, like it's, it's grim for people and it's going to lead to a much more kind of radical leftist politics.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Is the radicalism stronger among gen Z than millennials?

NATALIE WYNN: I think so, although there's plenty of millennials who are getting on board, but I do think it's stronger among Gen Z. Yes.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: What have you not talked about? Like, what is the thing you want to get to next?

NATALIE WYNN: I want to find some way to address the incredible discord and infighting among, uh, you know, progressive and leftists, because this is something that seems--I mean, it, it seems to happen in every space of, of progressivism or leftism right, I mean, it's, it's a historical thing too, right? There's always--the revolution always fractures. You know, Robespierre ends up on the guillotine, like how do we, uh, you know, how do we fight this? How do we try to build something a little more cohesive and productive?

I mean, I think that's probably a project that's way too big for me to do, but I'd like to contribute some kind of thought about it.

I'd like to work on it.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, I have confidence that you'll figure out some way to enlighten us because you're that good.

NATALIE WYNN: I'll do my best.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Natalie you're wonderful. Thank you so, so, so much for joining me.

NATALIE WYNN: Thank you so much for having me on. Nice talking to you.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You can find Natalie Wynn on her YouTube channel called Contrapoints and she is on Twitter at counterpoints points as well.

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Thanks for listening.