



# Searching for Alternative Facts:

Analyzing Scriptural Inference in  
Conservative News Practices

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is an ethnographic account of how two Republican groups search for truth in the contemporary news environment. Drawing from a conservative Christian worldview, these groups critically interrogate media messages in the same way they approach the Bible. This practice of *scriptural inference* bolsters their mistrust of mainstream media and supports their need to “fact check” the news. Since Google is seen as a neutral purveyor of information, it becomes a conduit for accessing “unbiased” information. And while this quest for truth may start in good faith, significant risks follow:

- First, searches meant to question political reality can reinforce existing ideological beliefs;
- Second, services like Google and YouTube can unintentionally expose individuals who consider themselves “mainline conservatives” to “far-right” and “alt-right” content through algorithmic recommendations; and
- Third, bad actors looking to exploit an audience disillusioned with mainstream media can take advantage of such intellectual exploration.

The phrase “conservatism” in this report is linked to the three most common tenets observed:

- An emphasized connection between faith and patriotism through repeated rituals: a Christian prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, and reciting the Virginia Republican Creed,
- A faith-first interpretation of the separation of church and state espoused by prominent politicians like Senator Ted Cruz and Vice President Mike Pence,
- A need to protect racial and religious identity with subsidized defense strategies (i.e., “Build the Wall”).

Given the importance of Christian faith in these central tenets, it became clear that conservatives in this study apply the same type of close reading that they were taught in Bible study to mainstream media. They consume many news sources but then juxtapose what they read, see, and hear with documents including presidential speeches and the Constitution. I call this compare and contrasting focus on “the Word” *scriptural inference*. Because this process prioritizes direct analysis of primary sources, respondents relied on Google to “do their own research.” However, few if any members expressed an accurate understanding of the algorithms Google uses to serve search results. Using sample search queries

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taken from interviews, I document the way in which simple syntax differences can create and reinforce ideological biases in newsgathering.

My account ends with a close examination of alternative media networks focusing on the strategies and impacts of *PragerU*. Founded in 2009, *PragerU* creates content specifically designed to satisfy and exploit the processes of scriptural inference I observed among conservatives. Even though *PragerU* content and videos do not directly feature Donald Trump or current controversies, they consistently amplify two central arguments that conservatives associate with Trump's public statements:

- that the mainstream media are dishonest and driven by emotion rather than intellect,
- and that “the Left” has become increasingly “radical” and is akin to hate groups like the “alt-right.”

By capturing these conservative media consumption practices in detail, alongside the alternative media production strategies designed to exploit them, this report provides a new foundation for understanding the relationship between so-called “fake news” and contemporary conservative political thought.

# INTRODUCTION

On any given morning, Sarah<sup>1</sup> likes to wake up slowly. A young grandmother who runs her own business, she enjoys an extra few minutes in her comfy bed with her longtime companion, *Fox and Friends*. As she continues her morning routine, taking a shower, getting dressed, eating breakfast, and helping her granddaughter off to school, *Fox News* stays on in the background. Although she mutes the TV, the headlines help Sarah feel informed before she starts her day. Elsewhere in Virginia, Pastor Tom starts his news day via email. Even though he's retired, he likes to stay ahead of the day's news and relies on *Morning Bell* to do so. Produced by the Heritage Foundation, this daily email arrives in his inbox by 7:00 am and contains a recap of yesterday's newsworthy events with links to the full stories in *The Daily Signal*. Two and a half hours northwest of Sarah and Pastor Tom, Tiffany, a college sophomore, gets her news in her dorm room through a series of alerts from apps she's downloaded on her phone, including both *The New York Times* and *Fox News*. One of her classmates, Ezekiel, favors podcasts. Through his earbuds, he stays up to date by listening to conservative shows like *The Ben Shapiro Show*, *The Michael Knowles Show*, and *The Glenn Beck Program*, but also *Pod Save America*—a left-wing show produced by four former aides to President Obama. Like many other college students, Ezekiel has also set up Apple News to send him notifications—of the options available to him, he's selected to receive updates from *MSNBC*, *Fox*, *CNN*, *Bloomberg*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Although their sources of news are eclectic, Sarah, Pastor Tom, Tiffany, and Ezekiel have some commonalities: they are “white,”<sup>2</sup> they are middle-class,<sup>3</sup> they actively practice their Christian faith, they identify as conservative, and they all voted for Trump.<sup>4</sup>

This report is a detailed account of how individuals who describe themselves like Vice President Mike Pence, “Christian, a conservative, and a Republican, in that order,” (Drabold 2016) conceptualize truth. It begins with an analysis of

1 The names and locations of people and places have all been changed to protect anonymity.

2 I use “white” in quotation marks like Feagin, Vera, and Batur (2001) to problematize the term and simultaneously acknowledge that the qualities associated with whiteness - “purity innocence, and privilege” - were actively constructed to exclude Americans of color from full participation in US society. By considering the “sociohistorical process” of race (Omi and Winant 1994, 55) this report is also standing on the shoulders of scholars like Charles W. Mills, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Patricia Hill-Collins, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Joe Feagin, Tressie McMillan Cottom, Jessie Daniels and others who illuminate the myriad ways racism is deep-seated, systemic, and institutionalized across many sectors of society (e.g. judicial, educational, political). Simultaneously, I wish to recognize Cornell West's profound statement that while race is a social construction it is also a lived reality “felt with human bodies” (1997).

3 I recognize that the phrase “middle class” is opaque and malleable. For the purposes of this study, I drew from Weber (1978) and classified those who participated in this study using class “markers.” These markers include level of education, familial income, and owning one's home or car. Nearly everyone I interviewed (except one) had completed or was in the process of finishing a college degree. Individuals aged 27 or higher were all homeowners, and none of the respondents enrolled in university were first-generation students. I observed other markers of middle and upper-class identity, including clothing brands, expensive jewelry, the make/model of cars driven, time for volunteerism, the ability to take on unpaid internships in expensive cities or study abroad, and the costs associated with attending events.

4 Only one respondent voted for Trump in the primary (Cruz was far more popular followed by Rubio). Nonetheless, most ended up stumping for Trump once he won the primary by making phone calls and knocking on doors.

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how this group's political rituals are connected to a Christian worldview (e.g. group prayers and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance). By examining these meaning making processes, I argue that practices learned in Bible study are applied to media interpretation.<sup>5</sup> The conservatives I observed all hold the belief that certain fundamental truths exist, and they critically interrogate media messages in the same way they approach the Bible, focusing on specific passages and comparing what they read, see, and hear to their lived experiences. I term this media interrogation process *scriptural inference*, whereby audiences apply the technique of closely reading “the Word” to other documents. I argue that these practices are a style of media literacy, whereby those who believe in the truth of the Bible

...this report also demonstrates that Google and YouTube can unintentionally expose individuals who consider themselves “mainline conservatives” to “far-right” and “alt-right” content.

approach secular political documents (e.g., a transcript of the president's speech or a copy of the Constitution) with the same interpretative scrutiny. Through this practice of unpacking<sup>6</sup> texts, inconsistencies between an interpretation of original documents and the stories produced by MSNBC, CNN, Fox News, The Wall Street Journal, The New York

Times, and The Washington Post are easy to find. Such findings further support their widely shared belief that mainstream media cannot be trusted.<sup>7</sup>

Since Google is seen as a neutral purveyor of information, it becomes a conduit for “unbiased” news. Given their low trust in mainstream media, members of the conservative groups I observed “fact check” the news by typing “exact phrases” into Google. Following the principles of scriptural inference, they feel the need to “do their own research” in order access information they can trust. While scriptural inference might be a sophisticated mechanism for media critique, the technological underpinnings that influence their query results receive little scrutiny. Not only can the slightest shift in language dramatically skew the ideological position of the returned texts, this report also demonstrates that Google and YouTube can unintentionally expose individuals who consider themselves “mainline conservatives” to “far-right” and “alt-right” content.

A quest for truth may start in good faith, but this report argues that bad actors looking to exploit an audience disillusioned with mainstream media are taking

5 Other scholars have also demonstrated the important role Biblical literalism plays in other aspects of life, particularly political activism in the form of social protests (Brandmeyer & Denisoff 1969, Clarke 1987, Sherkat 1998, Sherkat & Blocker 1994). Southern evangelicals defended slavery based on literal interpretation of scripture (Woodberry & Smith 1998), and also used theological reasoning to resist Northern evangelical social reform movements (Carwardine 1993, Smith 1957). In addition, Moreland (1958, 131) observed how fundamentalist groups use a literal acceptance of the Bible to help them “make decisions in political, education, and scientific” areas of life.

6 The phrase “unpack” was used directly by those I observed during Bible study, and by pastors during church services.

7 Conservative distrust in media is not a new phenomenon (see Goldberg 2006, Rohlinger 2006 & 2015, Rohlinger & Brown 2013). What I add to this conversation is how practices taught during Bible study are applied to a critical interpretation of mainstream media and provide a deeper understanding of what conservatives classify as “fake news.”

## INTRODUCTION

advantage of this intellectual exploration. Multimedia organizations like *PragerU*, *The Rubin Report*, *The Daily Wire*, and even *Fox News* are preying on the practice of scriptural inference to legitimize their messaging. As a way to maximize exposure, conservative media organizations also rely on a network of likeminded thinkers who regularly serve as guests on one another's shows to cross-promote their ideas and garner a large number of followers, views, likes, and shares. While media networks with more progressive politics also use this strategy, conservative programs (e.g. *PragerU* or *The Rubin Report*) regularly host guests who produce sensationalized content, thereby amplifying messages verging on radicalization (Lewis forthcoming, Tripodi 2018). By taking a deep-dive into the content of one of the largest producers of alternative news content, *PragerU*, I shed light on the role central nodes in alternative media networks play in opening the "Overton window" (Ranzini 2016) of acceptable conservative ideology.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Derived from its originator Joseph P. Overton, the "Overton Window" refers to the range of ideas tolerated in public discourse. This range, or window, of discourse includes policies that are considered politically acceptable or ideological positions that a politician can espouse/support without seeming too extreme to gain or keep public office. It is also the title of a political thriller written by Glenn Beck a novel centered around the idea that governmental outreach has become all-consuming. Beck frequently applies the concept of the Overton window to gun control, arguing that regulating gun access used to be a "radical" idea but is now normalized.

# CONTEXTUALIZING CONSERVATISM

Recent academic work argues that geographic location, socioeconomic status, and feelings of neglect helped Donald Trump win the 2016 presidential election (Cramer 2016, Hochschild 2016). Unpacking the “deep stories” in the bayous of Louisiana (Hochschild 2016) and analyzing political conversations taking place at “coffee klatches” in rural Wisconsin (Cramer 2016), these researchers illustrate the important role antipathy to urban liberalism played in galvanizing voter participation and (re)electing candidates like Scott Walker and President Trump. These studies open up the possibility to dig into ideas of conservatism more broadly as well as understand the extent to which media shape conservative identities (Polletta & Callahan 2017).

The phrase “conservatism” is complex and is often used interchangeably with “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” “born again,” “conservative Protestant,” and “religious right” with disregard of their differences (Kellstedt & Smidt 1996). There is also confusion between religious and political “conservatism”—for example, a political conservative might not identify as an “evangelical” (Woodberry & Smith 1998). This report’s deliberate use of the phrase “conservative” is rooted in the language used by those I observed.<sup>9</sup> Even though I was embedded in *Republican* organizations (a Republican women’s group and a college Republican group), one hundred percent of those I interviewed self-identified as “conservative” when I asked an open-ended question regarding their *political* affiliation.<sup>10</sup> They were also quick to claim that many Republicans are *not* conservative.<sup>11</sup> “Being conservative,” one woman clarified, “really goes back down to morals and beliefs, instead of political parties.” Through my interviews and observations a clear pattern emerged that comprised conservatism as “faith, family, the Constitution, and national security.”

By using “conservative” as a general identification, I am not arguing that *all* Christians are conservative, nor am I conflating conservatism with evangelicalism more broadly.<sup>12</sup> Rather, I demonstrate how the reading practices I observed in thriving churches (i.e., large evangelical megachurches) “trickles down” into

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9 A detailed account of my methods is available in the Appendix of this report.

10 The question I asked was “How do you politically identify?”

11 Referred to colloquially as RINOs “Republicans in name only.”

12 There are many Evangelicals who identify as liberal and there is a history of liberal evangelical activism—Evangelicals were intimately involved in the abolition of slavery, for instance (Gerson 2018). Many scholars have traced the division of Protestantism into conservative and liberal communities of faith to their response to modern change (e.g. the modernist beliefs in the perfectibility of society in the face of World War I). Evangelical liberals responded with progressive adaptation, while Evangelical conservatives responded with defense (Gerson 2018, Hunter 1983, Woodberry & Smith 1998).



## PRAYER & PLEDGE

**I demonstrate how the reading practices I observed in thriving churches (i.e., large evangelical megachurches) “trickles down” into Republican discourse and policies more broadly.**

Republican discourse and policies more broadly. Specifically, the pattern of Protestantism, patriotism, and protectionism I observed readily applies to practices of prominent politicians currently serving in all three branches of the US government.

Given this pattern, I argue that conservative values (both economic and social) become intertwined with political identification. Akin to Goldberg’s (2006) concept of “Christian nationalism,” these theological and political practices aimed at “preserving” the US as a Christian nation have come to dominate the Republican Party despite their relevantly minority position in the United States (Conger & Green 2002).

I argue that race – whiteness in particular – plays a central role in the “conservatism” I describe in this report.<sup>13</sup> The social spaces I observed were demographically homogenized and almost entirely white.<sup>14</sup> Even though I frequently asked group members their opinions on political issues connected to race (like the removal of the Confederate statues in Virginia), people I spoke with rarely, if ever, mentioned race directly. This pattern is not surprising<sup>15</sup> but by contextualizing acts those I observed would adamantly consider “not racist,”<sup>16</sup> this report sheds light on the complexity of these widely held beliefs. I hope that by critiquing the role whiteness plays in conservatism, those “*unable to understand the world they themselves have made*” might begin to challenge their existing epistemology (Mills 1997, 18; *emphasis his*).

## PRAYER & PLEDGE

The most common connection between faith and patriotism is displayed in the “Prayer & Pledge” ritual. Before the official beginning of any gathering, regardless of the context, there is a prayer. Silas, a college sophomore with dark brown hair parted on the left, frequently led the prayer for the College Republican group. Before a silent crowd on the Thursday before the 2017 November election election,

13 Whiteness in this context is not just about demographics; obviously people of color might identify with the practices of conservatism I describe. Nonetheless, this report demonstrates how conservatism is linked to Christian nationalism and subsequently the church practices of segregation (Bracey II and Moore 2017, Chaves 2011, Goldberg 2006). By maintaining connections to evangelical churches, conservatives like those I studied or Vice President Pence apply religio-cultural white norms (Bracey II and Moore 2017) to politics, reifying the US government as “white institutional space” (Moore 2008).

14 I identify as a white, straight, cis-gendered, woman and believe that my identity is part of what granted me access into these spaces.

15 Feagin argues that because the “white racial frame” (2013) is “structured into the rhythms of everyday life” (2000) it is largely invisible to whites. Stuart Hall (1981) refers to this same phenomenon as “inferential racism” and Tatum (1997) calls uses the analogy of “smog.”

16 For the purposes of this report white racism refers to the “*socially organized set of practices, attitudes, and ideas that deny African Americans and other people of color the privileges, dignity, opportunities, freedoms, and rewards that this nation offers to white Americans*” (Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2001, 17; *emphasis theirs*)

## PRAYER & PLEDGE

he hung his head in reverence asking “that God would help GOP people get in office so that they can help to serve his will.” Directly following the prayer, we would all rise and look to the American flag, placing our right hand over our hearts.

Over the course of 2017, I recited the Pledge of Allegiance seventeen times. Each time, it was with great fanfare. Most of the time, the American flag was brought in by a representative of the club or was a permanent part of the room, but on a few occasions, someone would grab a smaller flag they had in their backpack or purse just in case. In one instance, when no handheld flag was available, a member raised her smartphone with a flag-waving GIF playing on her screen. In another case, an entire group clustered around a small window of a restaurant to try and catch a glimpse of the large flag waving in the distance.

During one of the luncheons I attended, a heated discussion between two older couples broke out after the pledge, regarding how to properly say “under God.” Shaking his finger sternly, one man said that the other paused incorrectly. “It’s gotta flow,” he said “one nation under God.” The other couple shook their heads, responding that it was the saying of the phrase that mattered, not how you said it. Indeed, it was clear that for everyone in the room, the inclusion of the phrase “under God” was essential. In every circumstance, “under God” was recited louder than the rest of the pledge to emphasize its importance—despite the fact that it was not part of the original pledge (Jones 2003).

Following the Prayer & Pledge we would recite the Virginia Republican Creed, a statement that binds the ideas of Christianity, free-market enterprise, and limited government intervention together. Most recited the creed from memory, but wallet-sized copies were also circulated to members to “give to their friends.” As it reads from one flier given to me at a barbeque:

We believe: That the free enterprise system is the most productive supplier of human needs and economic justice. That all individuals are entitled to equal rights, justice, and opportunities and should assume their responsibilities as citizens in a free society. That fiscal responsibility and budgetary restraints must be exercised at all levels of government. That the Federal Government must preserve individual liberty by observing Constitutional limitations, that peace is best preserved through a strong national defense. That faith in God, as recognized by our Founding Fathers, is essential to the moral fiber of the Nation.<sup>17</sup>

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17 This is not exclusive to VA. As of 2004, the Texas Republican party platform said, “The Republican Party of Texas affirms that the United States of America is a Christian nation, and the public acknowledgement of God is undeniable in our history. Our nation was founded in the fundamental Judeo-Christian principles based on the Holy Bible” (Goldberg 2006, 27).

## THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

As the last line of the pledge indicates, Virginians who abide by the Republican Creed believe that faith in God “as recognized by our Founding Fathers” is part of the moral fabric of the United States—that righting the country’s “moral compass” is about a return to that faith. This was the central message of a guest speaker who addressed a group of conservatives that met on the second Saturday of the month in a large backroom of a buffet-style restaurant. Dressed in a business suit and pearls, Karen Miller – a high-ranking representative of the Republican National Committee – charmed the crowd. During her forty-minute lecture,<sup>18</sup> she stressed the importance of restraint both with regards to the self and the government. “When we have high government restraints and low self-restraints we have slavery” she says, “but when we have low government restraints and high self-restraints, we have liberty.” Karen flashed a large white smile and a man in the back murmured “Amen.” “That’s the problem,” Karen continued, “we have lost our moral restraint and our ability to restrain our own actions and so now we depend on the government to do it for us.” Karen’s moral egalitarianism, that we need to return to a moral foundation that was “brought over” by European colonizers, is rooted in a language of equality that fails to consider how the Founding Fathers vision of equality was restricted to white men (Feagin 2000, Feagin et al 2001, Mills 1997). In this way Prayer & Pledge binds Christianity and patriotism together. In doing so it simultaneously stresses the importance of *morality* in the United States while celebrating a peculiar *amorality* bound to the Declaration of Independence.

## THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Given the central role of Christian faith among conservatives I studied, it is unsurprising that my respondents were particularly concerned about what they referred to as the “sanctity of marriage” and “life.” Conversations regarding these topics often alluded to government intervention, specifically two Supreme Court decisions that evoked marriage equality and abortion: the recent Masterpiece Cake Shop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission (referred to as the “gay wedding cake” case of 2017), and the long-standing ruling of Roe v. Wade. Those interviewed vehemently disagreed with the Court’s decision in both cases based on their ethical stances on the underlying issues.

However, what became clear to me was that these two cases also illustrated a crucial juxtaposition on the issue of government regulation. My respondents desired an *increase* in the government regulation of abortion but a *decrease* in the government regulation of a baker’s right to refuse to make a wedding cake. This ambivalence is explained by how conservatives interpret the separation of church

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18 Before the lecture began we participated in the Prayer & Pledge exercise and read the creed aloud.

**This ambivalence is explained by how conservatives interpret the separation of church and state. While institutions of education emphasize a government-centered model of separation, preventing the church from unduly influencing policy, conservatives defend a church-centered version, where the separation is about *protecting* the church from the government.**

and state. While institutions of education emphasize a government-centered model of separation, preventing the church from unduly influencing policy, conservatives defend a church-centered version, where the separation is about *protecting* the church from the government. Applying this perspective to the examples above, the Masterpiece Cake Shop case regulates a conservative's ability to act according to their faith in God. *Roe v. Wade*, on the other hand, is a glaring example of politicians

enacting "Godless" legislation.

The perspective that separation of church and state is about protecting the church from government encroachment not exclusive to my respondents; it is a central belief for Senator Cruz,<sup>19</sup> Vice President Pence, and newly appointed Supreme Court Justice Gorsuch (Grossman 2015). It is their interpretation that the Constitution protects "religious freedom" that so many support them. Abraham, a college junior majoring in foreign affairs describes how his respect for Trump grew once he chose Mike Pence as his running mate, articulating that Pence could "restore the values bound to the principles of the Constitution" and in doing so "bring us back to some of these principles we've moved away from."

Vice President Pence often espouses his Christian faith, and recently did so when he introduced Trump to the 2018 March for Life. In this speech he references the Declaration of Independence, asserting "they [the founding fathers], declared these truths to be self-evident that we are each of us endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He went on to describe Donald Trump as "the most pro-life president in American history," a president who nominated "judges<sup>20</sup> that will uphold our God-given liberties enshrined in the Constitution of the United States" summing

19 During an interview, a respondent described "fake news" as the accusation that Cruz was a dominionist. After the interview I Googled "Cruz dominionist" and discovered a *Washington Post* editorial titled "Ted Cruz's campaign is fueled by a dominionist vision of America." In it, John Fea writes "When Cruz says he wants to 'reclaim' or 'restore' America, he does not only have the Obama administration in mind. This agenda takes him much deeper into the American past. Cruz wants to 'restore' the United States to what he believes is its original identity: a Christian nation." This article also ran in *Christianity Today*. To be clear – this report is not asserting that Cruz is a "dominionist" but is demonstrating that the observations in this report are not exclusive to those I studied. That *elected representatives currently in office* feel that the United States is a Christian nation, that America's founding fathers were guided by their faith in God, and that the separation of church and state was about keeping the state out of the church, not vice versa.

20 Recently-appointed Supreme Court Justice Gorsuch, an "originalist and textualist" (Toobin 2017), also makes explicit connections between the Constitution and upholding Christian religious freedoms (Epps 2017). As his opinion attests in the *Hobby Lobby* case that went before the Supreme Court, "it is not the place of courts of law to question the correctness or the consistency of tenets of religious faith, only to *protect the exercise of faith*," see page 5 of Gorsuch's separate opinion in the Tenth Circuit's opinion on *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores* <https://www.ca10.uscourts.gov/opinions/12/12-6294.pdf>.

## THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

the speech up with the lines, “We are with you. This president is with you and he who said ‘before I formed you in the womb, I knew you’ is with you as well ...with pro-life majorities in the Congress, and President Donald Trump in this White House, and with God’s help, we will restore the sanctity of life to the center of American law.” Pence also relied on similar rhetoric to justify decisions he made while head of the Republican Study Committee in 2006. During this time, he proposed a constitutional amendment that would have defined marriage as between a man and a woman, reasoning that the law was not discriminatory, but an enforcement of “God’s idea” (Drabold 2016).

Other conservatives’ connections between God and country were even more explicit. A dapper man with a full head of white hair, Pastor Tom still dresses professionally when attending events around town, even though he has been retired for years. Over a cup of coffee, he sat across from me in a white button-down shirt, a sweater vest, and pressed khakis, talking at length about his conservative faith and values. At one point he brought up the idea of constitutional conservatism, and became quickly animated, eyes wide, his arms up in the air arguing that the role of separation is one of the most ridiculous frauds. “You talk about ‘fake news!’” he erupted, “Jefferson was talking about keeping the state out of the church, that’s what the wall was about. It’s a *wall to keep the state from overreaching into the church or the community* [emphasis his].”

Beliefs like those of Pastor Tom, Abraham, and Vice President Pence, are reaffirmed by conservative multimedia organizations like *Wallbuilders*: “a national pro-family organization that presents America’s forgotten history and heroes, with an emphasis on our moral, religious, and constitutional heritage.”<sup>21</sup> Started by evangelical Christian activist and author David Barton,<sup>22</sup> *Wallbuilders* takes its name from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, referring to the movement to help rebuild the walls of Jerusalem to restore stability and safety to the city. Drawing on this concept of “rebuilding the walls” is meant to evoke citizens’ desires to “rebuild the nation’s foundations,” which Barton argues is linked to a faith in God. Believing that the separation of church and state is about *protecting* the church, combined with rituals like Prayer & Pledge, shed light on why Trump’s promise to “build the wall” continues to resonate with conservatives.<sup>23</sup> The phrase serves as a kind of “evangelical code” that “initiates a reference to biblical verses” and signifies that in America religious insiders are privileged (Goldberg 2006, 33). The literal

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21 <https://wallbuilders.com/about-us/> - Goldberg (2006) describe Barton as a “historical revisionist.”

22 David Barton also runs the Keep the Promise super PAC that publicly endorsed and financially supported Ted Cruz’s bid for presidency. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-evangelical-power-broker-behind-ted-cruz>

23 While polls suggest that only 35 percent of Americans support the wall, it’s important to recognize that the Pew poll had a Democrat-heavy sample: 38 percent of respondents were Republican/Republican-leaning and 52 percent were Democrat/Democrat-leaning.

23 <https://wallbuilders.com/about-us/> - Goldberg (2006) describe Barton as a “historical revisionist.” leaning. When you look at just the Republican/Republican-leaning respondents, support for the wall was 74% (up from last year). The same survey showed that 80% of self-identified conservatives supported the wall.

## PROTECTING “OUR” NATION

wall not only aligns with “law and order” (i.e., protecting Christianity), it also evokes a reference to protecting eroding ideals (i.e., a broken “moral compass”) and in doing so protect their religious interests (Hunter 1993).

## PROTECTING “OUR” NATION

For those I observed, Protestantism and patriotism are inextricably linked to protectionism. Rituals like the Prayer & Pledge, followed by reading the Republican Creed out loud as a group, reaffirm conservatives’ belief that the United States is a Christian nation. On a number of occasions, conservatives I spoke with explained to me that our very system of government—the balance of powers, checks and balances, and three branches—was taken from the Presbyterian Book of Order, written by John Knox.<sup>24</sup> For them, there is historical evidence that the US is fundamentally, rather than incidentally, Christian, and this belief spills over into how conservatives conceptualize the need to “protect” their nation.

Commitment to protecting the nation was discussed in terms of physical safety, but revolved around the protection of religious (i.e., Christian) and racial (i.e., white) identity. So while conservatives believe in fiscal responsibility and limited government spending, there was overwhelming support for subsidizing national security and local police departments, what was described as “defense.” Tiffany, a junior in college who sees Sarah Palin’s success as an inspiration for her own career ambitions, summed this point up best: “Because, you know, military defense really is the only thing the government has to do for us. The only real responsibility they have is to protect us, and that’s the military’s job.” Protecting the nation was repeatedly tied to immigration regulation and enforcement aligning with Trump’s rhetoric that “illegal” immigrants contributed to a rise in drug use and crime. As such, conservatives balked at the Virginia governor’s support of sanctuary cities.<sup>25</sup>

Ed Gillespie, the Republican nominee for governor, addressed this concern directly. In a large exposition center, hundreds of supporters lunched together on shredded pork on white buns with sesame seeds, baked beans, potato salad, and homemade pecan pie.<sup>26</sup> “Make America Great Again” hats sprinkled the crowd. They cheered when Gillespie asserted he would support our president and “stand up for him as he stands up for our country” promising to “respect the rule of law!”—a statement met with thunderous applause. “Now,” Gillespie continued, “we are all immigrants. Our country is a country of immigrants. But we are also

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24 The Book of Common Order first originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but was republished by the church in the 1940s, ‘70s and ‘90s and was an integral part of the reformation in Scotland and the spread of Protestant rituals to other countries (England, Switzerland, etc).

25 While I was conducting my fieldwork the governor was Terry McAuliffe (D)

26 As in nearly all of my fieldsites, the crowd was overwhelmingly white.



## PROTECTING “OUR” NATION

a nation of laws. We must defend our country and protect our borders!” At this, the crowd erupted and some in the group rose to their feet. “We cannot support sanctuary cities. If someone commits a crime and is here illegally we need to work with law enforcement. I will sign a bill that banishes the idea of sanctuary cities. We will also crack down on gang violence and MS-13!”<sup>27</sup>

Focusing on an international criminal gang (MS-13) as representative of why immigration is problematic exemplifies how conservatives’ concepts of safety are unequivocally tied to both whiteness and Christianity. Not unlike the image of a “welfare queen,” the use of MS-13 creates an allusive image of immigrant crime without having to tell the full story (Polletta 2006), providing a signal to conservatives that politicians like Gillespie or Trump are “in the know” about the “problems” of immigration. While many conservatives assert that they are “ok” with immigration done legally, they simultaneously stressed the importance of assimilation. Protecting American borders is about protecting American history and the role Christianity plays in creating that history. In the words of Pastor Tom, “immigrants need to assimilate into our culture and not change our culture into something that it wasn’t.” Pastor Tom explicitly categorizes the racialized differences between himself and “others” who he believes should change to be more like him. Such a perspective aligns with Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) argument that racism is both social (sustained through the expectation to conform)<sup>28</sup> and systemic (the cultural understanding that the US “has always” been white and Christian).<sup>29</sup> Not unlike religious orthodoxies, framing the United States as a “Christian nation” creates a space for adherence. Participating in the Prayer & Pledge reaffirms group participation and provides a cultural logic that binds them; those who do not *assimilate* are easy to reject (Hunter 1993).

Protestantism, patriotism, and protection represent racial rationality and symbolic practices that reify racism in American politics (Bonilla-Silva 2015, Bonilla-Silva and Lewis 1996, Daniels 1997, Pettigrew 1994, Wellman 1977). After all, Francis Bellamy created the Pledge of Allegiance in 1892 in an effort to define “true Americanism” against the rising tide of southern and eastern European immigrants “pouring over our country” (Petrella 2017). Through their clearly articulated desire to increase policing and military spending (“law and order”),

27 Gillespie’s use of MS-13 is significant and aligns with Trump’s anti-immigration platform. Despite *Fox News* coverage that MS-13 started in Central America and migrated into the United States (Schallhorn 2018), journalist inquiry indicates that MS-13 started inside Los Angeles and “migrated back” to Central America under Clinton’s criminal deportation policy (Paarlberg 2017). On many occasions Trump referenced the “danger” of immigrants. During the election he repeatedly referred to Mexicans as “drug dealers, criminals, and rapists” (BBC News 2016) and while in office Trump has continued the narrative that immigrants are “criminals” to justify spending more money on border security (Colvin 2018). A recent PBS documentary demonstrated how the threat of MS-13 has allowed law enforcement to partner with ICE and target minors who are perceived as threats, detaining and exporting them in ways that violate their right to due process (Taddonio 2018).

28 Recent work on racial segregation in churches has found that institutional actors work to maintain “semipermeable racial boundaries that serve white evangelicals’ racial interests” (Bracey II and Moore 2017, 297)

29 This is just one example of what Mills (1997, 2007) refers to as “white ignorance” because it implies that the Native American culture (which existed prior to colonization) was not “real.”

## PROTECTING “OUR” NATION

conservatives are rearticulating the belief in “white victims” routinely evoked in news broadcasts and political campaigns (Daniels 1997). As such, “protection” efforts disproportionally target non-white and non-Christian Americans.





# THE PRACTICE OF SCRIPTURAL INFERENCE

The influence of Christian beliefs on conservative rituals does not end with Prayer & Pledge. In fact, one of the most important and consistent findings of my research was how conservatives utilize theological teachings to unpack texts like the Constitution or other forms of media. I label these media literacy practices *scriptural inference*, and argue that understanding this conservative approach to Biblical interpretation can shed light on contemporary solutions to “fake news.” New work has demonstrated the complexity of “fake news” (Caplan, Hanson, and Donovan 2018, Wardle 2017). The increasingly blurred boundaries between our on- and offline worlds (Baym 2010, boyd 2014, Marwick and boyd 2010, Jenkins 1992 & 2006, Livingstone 2003, Marwick 2013, Tripodi 2017) also helps to

**...one of the most important and consistent findings of my research was how conservatives utilize theological teachings to unpack texts like the Constitution or other forms of media. I label these media literacy practices *scriptural inference*.**

explain why “fake news” and false rumors spread faster through social networks (Vosoughi et al 2018). We also know that Trump supporters are more likely to spread “junk news” on social media (Naryana et al. 2018), visit “fake news” websites in the months immediately leading up to Trump’s election (Guess et al. 2018), and that “fake news” content is more “pro-

Trump” (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, Faris et al. 2017). Given these findings, there is a rich understanding of how “media literacy” might combat this problem (Bulger & Davison 2018, Heath 2016, Hunt 2017, Chiara 2017, Tsukayam 2017). However, journalistic interpretations that “fake news” is why Donald Trump won the election calls for an increase in “media literacy” among conservatives (Bachai 2017, Dewey 2016, Parkinson 2016, Read 2016, Sullivan 2017). Such a perspective suggests that conservatives are passive receivers of the powerful media apparatus rather than active audiences with “deliberative intellectual exploration” (Peck forthcoming). Asserting that “fake news” is why Trump won the election assumes his supporters act as what Garfinkle (1967) would refer to as “cultural dopes.” They would have to read, watch, or listen to “fake news,” believe it entirely, and then vote for Trump based on that misinformation.

On the contrary, my findings demonstrate that the conservatives were not “tricked” into supporting Trump. Through my repeated interactions, I watched as conservatives carefully and meticulously constructed a political reality to support

Trump's presidency<sup>30</sup> by relying on media literacy practices taught to them in church. This was exemplified in Pastor Tom's spirited discussion regarding the "lie of separation." When asked to elaborate on why he does not believe in the "wall of separation," his eyes grew wide. In an effort to assert his point he repeatedly pressed down on the table in front of us with his extended index finger. "*I challenge you,*" he insisted "*find the language of the law of the separation of church and state in*

**Through my repeated interactions, I watched as conservatives carefully and meticulously constructed a political reality to support Trump's presidency by relying on media literacy practices taught to them in church.**

*the Constitution. The words are not there*"<sup>31</sup> [emphasis his]. His challenge to "find the language of the law" that requires a separation of church and state requires that one go back to the *words* of the Founding Fathers as written in the Constitution, but

it also requires reading Thomas Jefferson's letter addressed to the Danbury Baptist Association (Hutson & Jefferson 1999). Meaning making requires a reliance on exact phrases in original documents. Directly interpreting the phrase through the context of Jefferson's letter, rather than relying on the Constitutional amendment that does not specifically use the phrase "wall of separation," Pastor Tom is able to make arguments aligning with David Barton—that the wall was about *protecting the church*, not the other way around. Pastor Tom's use of the Constitution or Jefferson's letter to form his arguments is similar to the practices of "constitutional conservatives" (e.g., Cruz or Pence) who use literal interpretations of the document to make political decisions. This method of critical inquiry is intimately connected to the reading practices Pastor Tom imparts to his congregation during Bible study.

I experienced scriptural inference firsthand by accompanying a young woman in the College Republican group to her Bible study group. On a rain-soaked Virginia day, we gathered in a room inside her mega church to discuss what constituted about 20 lines of biblical text. Sipping on coffee from a percolator on the back table next to a crock-pot full of homemade egg and sausage muffins, the group of thirty "unpacked" the text for an hour, applying the lessons learned to their own lives. Such a central use of scripture is not particularly surprising: the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was centered on the idea that sacramental rituals and teaching of Catholic authorities were obscuring the centrality of scripture as the word of God. However, it was not until observing a "direct reading" of the Bible that I saw how it was used as a mechanism for other critical assessment that secular thinkers might be unfamiliar with.

30 This report is rooted in the theoretical work surrounding performativity, symbolic interactionism, and the social construction of reality. Sources that have been extremely influential include: Berger & Luckman 1966, Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003, Garfinkel 1967, Goffman 1959, Husserl 1999, Mead 1934, West & Zimmerman 1987, Westbrook & Schilt 2014.

31 Pastor Tom is correct – the phrase "separation of church and state" is not found in the Constitution <https://www.usconstitution.net/const.pdf>.

In other words, conservatives apply the same close reading to the Constitution that they do to the Bible<sup>32</sup> and transfer these reading practices to general media consumption. I saw this directly during Bible study, when the pastor leading the gathering encouraged the group to apply scriptural inference to the new tax reform bill—to go back to the language of the bill rather than trust mainstream media coverage. As a group, the pastor drew out a few lines from the bill and considered how these changes might benefit someone who works for a large organization but might hurt the local farmer. While we talked at length as a group, he was also adamant that we go home and read the text on our own and “do our own research” on the implications of these changes. Not unlike their Protestant precursors, doing so gives conservatives authority over “the Word.” Rather than relying on pundits’ (i.e., “the elites”)<sup>33</sup> potentially corrupt interpretation, they access, analyze, and evaluate a variety of media sources<sup>34</sup> and then compare what they read to Trump’s speeches or the original Constitutional text to find inconsistencies and apply their interpretations to their own lives.

Sam, a young man in his twenties whose family owns a Southern Heritage store that sells Confederate memorabilia, walked me through this process while we scrolled through his Facebook newsfeed. There, alongside each other were stories from *Al Jazeera* and *CNN*, with *Russian Television*, *Fox News*, and *Infowars*. Upon seeing *Infowars*, I stopped and asked him what he thought of the source. He reasoned that he followed *Infowars* “before they ever got publicized as being this ‘fake news’ network” but that they “source their stuff. They tell you where they got it from.” He reasoned, “a lot of the stuff is wacky. You have to kind of sift through it. That’s why I think it’s important to encourage people to think for themselves, and that’s why we have all these different news outlets. That’s why we have the internet and stuff. People are sick and tired of the same old narrative. These lies have become known. We know that the mainstream media is lying to people.” While Sam was quick to assert that *Infowars* could be wacky or fake, he reasoned that because he was able to think for himself he was able to see that the mainstream media was just as unreliable as Alex Jones’ notorious website.

Sam was not an outlier. Nearly all of those I interviewed, especially the younger respondents, consumed a wide variety of sources but were critical of the content,

32 As this report has already demonstrated, I argue that this finding is not exclusive to those who participated in this study and could be readily applied to powerful conservatives who currently hold positions of power in the United States including Senator Cruz, Vice President Pence, and Justice Gorsuch.

33 In his forthcoming book, Reece Peck describes the way in which *Fox News* was able to resonate with conservative audiences by stressing anchors’ “humble beginnings” and emulating a class-based style of identity. In doing so, they also repeatedly assert that *Fox* audiences are the “real Americans.” He also describes how *Fox*’s ability to “perform working class identity and populism” is tied to their racial identity, noting that Obama’s race denied him the same leeway and range of representation options available to white presidents and media figures.

34 The Center for Media Literacy describes these practices as “media literacy” <http://www.medialit.org/media-literacy-definition-and-more>

frequently referring to “original sources” in their analysis.<sup>35</sup> During our lunch together, Andrew, a congressional staffer, described how he reads the “*Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Policy Magazine*,” listens to *NPR* on his way to work, receives news alerts on his phone from “*Washington Post*, *Fox News*, *The New York Times*, *CNN*,” and checks Facebook for news that is important to his friends and family that he might have missed. He also consumes an extensive amount of international coverage, including that of *The Guardian*, *BBC*, *Russia Today*, and *Al Jazeera*. He explains that he consults a wide variety of information due to what he learned in college because he had professors who encouraged him and his peers to read a variety of newspapers as well as academic journals. “They very much encouraged us to get your news from varied sources, synthesize, and come to your own conclusions.” In an effort to do so, Andrew describes how he relies on scriptural inference to find the truth. “As much as possible, when I know things are happening, *I try to hear it or read it for myself first before reading any stories on it. I just stream it live online or if I happen to not be able to catch it, I’ll find somewhere that has an original transcript without any commentary and read it before I start digesting what everybody else thinks about it*” [emphasis mine]. Through these methodical reading practices, he comes to a fairly stark conclusion that he shares with me in between bites of his sandwich. “I mean,” he pauses as he takes a sip of sweet tea and wipes the corner of his mouth, “They all lie in one way or the other.”

Rather than isolate sources like *Infowars* or other debunked online sources as “fake news,” conservatives like Sam or Andrew use scriptural inference to equate “fake news” with sources like *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *The New York Times*, or *The Washington Post*. William, a tall college senior with dark brown hair and a broad smile, echoed this notion. An active member of the College Republican group on his campus, William was frustrated by the proliferation of “fake news” and considered the concept to have multiple meanings: “What it means to me is people pushing their personal bias. There’s two things. There is some, like *CNN* and other sources, sites, they have pushed out stories that are absolutely fake and are not true. I also think there’s a bias at the editor’s level, but to me, “fake news” is, in a nutshell, people pushing a personal bias as the news.” In a separate interview with Ezekiel, a college student in the same organization, the idea of “fake news” as “biased news” was raised again when he described a story *CNN* ran about Trump having two scoops of ice cream while everyone else had one.<sup>36</sup> “That’s an example of ‘fake news,’ I would say.”

35 It is possible that those I interviewed did not actually go back to listen to the original speeches or read original documents. Regardless of whether they did so, their description of the practice speaks to a larger phenomenon touched on by Kathy Cramer in her review of this report. Conservatives I studied, and I argue those outside of this study who identify with the same kind of conservatives I describe, seek out sources of truth they believe to be on “their side” when confronted with countervailing information. In this way, they put their trust in “the original” rather than the interpreters (i.e., the journalists).

36 The story he is referencing can be found here <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/11/politics/trump-time-magazine-ice-cream/index.html>

The way conservatives were able to detect media bias (i.e., “fake news”) was by going back to speeches given by Trump and other Republican politicians and comparing what they said in the speech to the media coverage. Relying on scriptural inference, they came to the conclusion that media outlets like CNN had “twisted his [Trump’s] words” or “amplified” *part* of what he had to say while hiding other parts of his speech. Olivia, a junior majoring in foreign affairs who was looking forward to studying abroad, summed this perspective up nicely: “There’s news that’s false. These facts are made up or it’s not fact checked or whatever, it’s false news. But I also think there’s a version of ‘fake news’ that’s different. Either news media or social media outlets *will amplify Trump* or his opinion at the expense of real news. It’s taking something like that and *using it to fit the anti-Trump narrative*...to me, that’s not news” [emphasis mine]. During a separate interview with Hannah, a thirty-something lawyer with large eyes and gesticulating hands, she opened her phone and scrolled through her news alerts to show the news sources she relies on, which included *The Daily Wire*, *PragerU*, *Conservative Tribune*, and *Breitbart*. As she scrolled, she described how scriptural inference guides her decisions regarding what news to trust. In doing so, she refers back to the “Charlottesville situation” when “All the left-wing media, all the mainstream media all of a sudden jumped on that and said, ‘Oh, he said there were fine white supremacists.’ No, he didn’t. *He never said that. Those words never came from his mouth. He never uttered those words.* And so it was a thing where again it’s I can’t take mainstream media seriously when they do that. *Because I hear what is being said, they take a snippet and completely twist it*” [emphasis hers]. While Hannah acknowledged that *Fox* was also guilty of having political bias, she reasoned that because they didn’t “twist the president’s words” they were a more trustworthy source. Hannah also argued “*Fox has to be so pro-Trump to a certain extent because all of them are so anti-Trump.*”

Tiffany, an energetic college sophomore who interned as a researcher for *Fox News* the previous summer, also relied on scriptural inference to make sense of the news. Like Hannah, Tiffany subscribed to and read a variety of news sources, but described how she trusted conservative sources more because they were less likely to take Trump’s quotes out of context. Interviewees also preferred when the news had “full” quotes from Trump (what they described as “the facts”) rather than stories that tried to explain what Trump meant, using what they referred to as journalistic subjectivity. Tiffany explained, “‘Fake news’ can also be just taking quotes from people. Let’s say Trump is doing a press conference. *People will take one sentence that he said and they’ll put it all over their show and they’re misinforming the people because it may sound bad what he said but a lot of times they’re just taking out of context. They don’t really look at what he actually meant by that*” [emphasis hers].

To my participants, twisting respondents' words was not exclusive to media coverage of the president. During a particularly lengthy interview, Juliette and I talked about what she described as a decline in journalistic integrity. As a former journalist and very wealthy donor to the area, she now almost exclusively consumes conservative perspectives like "Newt Gingrich, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingram, and Ben Carson" by following them on Facebook. She reasons that she used to read the news before "'fake news' [was] blatant." When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by "fake news" she described how "they" will report that an interviewee said something regardless if they said it or not. "[Take] Newt Gingrich. *He was interviewed somewhere, I think it was on CNN, and he did not say what they said. They just made it up, and I think the lack of integrity is rampant*" [emphasis mine].

Time and again, respondents described how they were drawing upon the same kinds of skills taught in Bible study to determine if the news they were reading was accurate. They used the inconsistencies between speeches they listened to or read directly and the mainstream media coverage of events to construct a broader argument that sources like *CNN*, *The New York Times* and *MSNBC* are "fake news." This notion that the news was fake leaked into larger accusations. Fed up with the "false narratives" conservatives believed were created to "attack Trump," it became clear that conservatives were beginning to distrust any kind of journalistic investigation into the Trump administration. Sitting out on a patio together on a warm summer day with Randy, a retired military consultant who advised both President Bush and President Obama, he bemoaned the "false narratives" people were coming up with to attack Trump that were not "genuine stories." When asked to elaborate Randy asserted, "I think the whole Russia thing is fake. It just can't be real." Henry, a retired investment banker in his late seventies, also used the Russia allegations as an example of "fake news." "That's [the Russian investigation] a straw man. It's totally, no, that is 'fake news.' Absolutely 'fake news' ... What they're doing right there, for the lack of a better word, they're trying to overthrow the government."

Trish, in her mid-fifties and a prominent figure in the Republican Women's Group, believed that the issues surrounding the sexual assault allegations against Trump were also "fake" because "nobody could really confirm that." She then juxtaposed those allegations with the Russian investigation—both distrusting both the press coverage of possible collusion as well as insinuating that "the Left" (the media included) had set up Donald Jr. to begin with, "I don't know whether it's Loretta Lynch or somehow through the Justice Department... There's rumor that that it [the CV of the woman who set up a meeting with Donald Trump Jr.] was actually written by somebody in Russia with a KGB connection.... Why would she have



all of this stuff and be asking Trump's son for a meeting about adoption, when he wasn't even the candidate yet?"

Articulating that issues like Russia or Trump's sexual assault allegations were examples of "fake news" wasn't exclusive to my older respondents. College students also mentioned Russian collusion as a quintessential example of "fake news" because there were no "original documents" by which they could make comparisons and "check the facts." Emily, a freshman who had just moved to Virginia from the Midwest where she served as the editor of her high school newspaper stressed the importance of being able to "substantiate a story." She, too, used Russia as an example, "I'm not up on my Russia/US relations. I'm not super into that, but from what I was getting, I am just like, I'm not seeing other than this

**Scriptural inference goes beyond a textual translation of the Bible, the Constitution, the president's speeches, or mainstream media coverage. It is rooted in an idea that to find truth one needs to dig in and, in the words of my respondents, "do their own research."**

one instance where he spoke to the Russian ambassador before he was inaugurated. I'm not seeing where this collusion is." During a focus group, four college students also described the investigation into Russian collusion as a "straw man" claim that was completely unsubstantiated. Like Emily, Abraham argued that until he could personally review material evidence Trump's

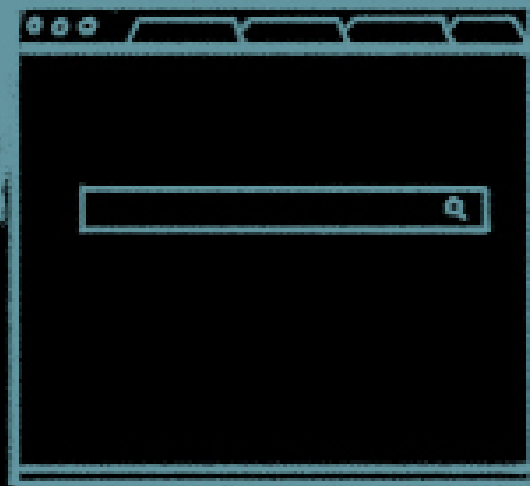
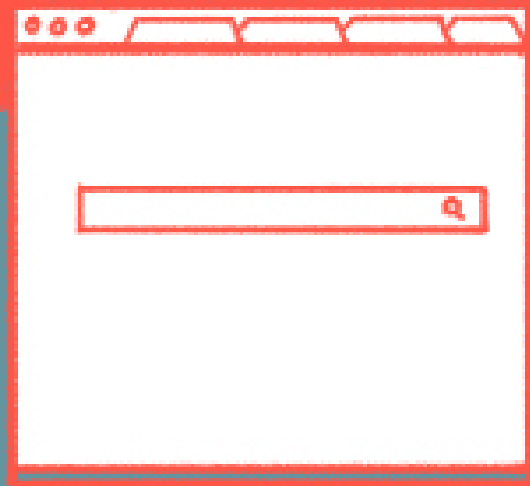
connections with Russia were irrelevant. "Unless they can show actual facts that they colluded with Russia, there's no real evidence presented.... There's no evidence that they actually, it affected anything, you know? So until they actually produce anything like that, I don't think there's any reason to believe them [the mainstream media]." One of the young women in the group, Delilah, also noted that many people were not taking the idea of Russian interference seriously enough because of "the whole 'fake news' thing."

Scriptural inference goes beyond a textual translation of the Bible, the Constitution, the president's speeches, or mainstream media coverage. It is rooted in an idea that to find truth one needs to dig in and, in the words of my respondents, "do their own research." Chrissy, a middle-aged woman with a daughter who had just started her first year at a highly competitive university, said, "I can't just take any source that I can go to and just read and take it for what it's worth. I take bits and pieces of it to further explore, but I have to explore every bit of information out in several different ways." In a separate interview, Phoebe describes how she skims *CNN*, *Fox News*, and *MSNBC* to "see what topics are trending" but then does her "own studying and research elsewhere." William, a college senior, also does his "own research," especially when it comes to breaking news. This was particularly important for him during the Russian investigation. In an effort to combat what he articulated as "an avalanche of information" he would



search for “calmer sources.” “What I would do is stop,” William said, making a gesture with his right hand like he was clicking a mouse, “new tab. Then I go over to a little more of a drier source that is just giving you a timeline. *NPR* is a good place but nobody’s sharing stuff from *NPR* on Facebook. Everybody’s posting *Buzzfeed* stuff and *CNN* stuff and clips of Tucker Carlson going off on, that’s what people are going to share, so that’s what you tend to see on Facebook.... Then *I evaluate the facts* [emphasis mine].”

Conservatives who practice scriptural inference are not blindly latching onto “fake news” stories. As William, Emily, Delilah, Chrissy, and Trish describe they “fact check” and “do their own research” by consulting multiple sources and comparing what they can find to determine if news coverage is “biased.” They take into consideration who is writing the article and if the source and the author can be trusted. Relying on scriptural inference they approach the media with a great deal of skepticism, however the platform through which they begin their intellectual inquiries rarely received the same level of scrutiny.



# GOOGLING FOR TRUTH

**This pattern indicates that Google users do not have a consistent or accurate understanding of the mechanisms by which the company returns search results.**

On June 13, 2017, Virginia held a tightly contested primary for the governor's race that would take place a few months later. Throughout the day, I traveled through towns in the Blue Ridge Mountains, speaking to hundreds of voters as

they exited the polls.<sup>37</sup> I started by asking a simple question: Where do you go for news that you trust? Often this phrase was met by laughter and shaking heads. Not unlike those I would observe in the following months, most people told me there were few sources they "trusted." Since they did

not have a regular source for news and information, I followed up by asking how they had learned about the candidate they just voted for. A few people mentioned that Facebook had *reminded* them to vote and provided a link to help them find out where their polling station was; but when it came to *learning* about the candidates one phrase came up over and over: "I Googled it."

After hearing this response five times in a row, I began digging further, "What do you mean you Googled it?" This question was frequently met with silence, confusion, or blank stares. One elderly woman looked me in the eyes pretending to type on an air keyboard. "Well," she spoke slowly and with concern as though I didn't know how to use Google, "I took the names of the candidates and put them into Google." Then she smiled. "But then what?" I asked. For most voters, this question did not resonate. What did I mean, then what?

Google also surfaced in my interviews as a starting point for political research. As the last section demonstrates, conservatives routinely described the need for people to "do their own research" in order to find "accurate" or "unbiased" news. When I asked them to explain to me what doing your own research looked like, one hundred percent of the people I spoke with began with a Google query. Phoebe, the journalist I referenced earlier, explained her process: "I literally type it in Google, and read the first three to five articles that pop up, because those are the ones that are obviously the most clicked and the most read, if they're at the top of the list, or the most popular news outlets. So, I want to get a good sense of what other people are reading. So, that's pretty much my go-to." I asked her to elaborate, questioning what her search results looked like. "It's usually your top news outlets," she replied, "but then you'll have an article pop up from a website

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37 Based on the questions I was asking I did not want to influence or sway voters' decisions in any way. By speaking to people after they left the polls I ensured that our conversation did not impact their vote.

## GOOGLING FOR TRUTH

that I have rarely heard of because it's maybe a controversial article that people are really clicking on, people are really interested in reading. So obviously, I will want to read that to see kind of, what's going on, what people are saying, maybe what some of the stretched pieces of truth are that I can figure out, how to take it from there."

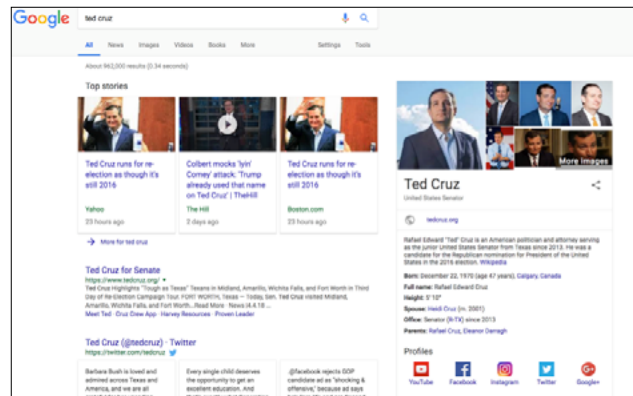


Figure 1. The “special bio” Silas is referring to is the Google Knowledge Panel

Phoebe's preoccupation with Google's top returns was common; not only were respondents less likely to keep scrolling past the first few hits, but they also weighted the content at the top as “more important.” Like Phoebe, other respondents also described top content as better because it was more popular, more relevant, or, according to some respondents, more accurate. Sean, a transfer student who organized a College Students for Trump group at his previous school, used Google to understand how other people felt about Trump. He felt that the information Google procured for him was “a consensus of what everybody else is trying to say about it.” I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by “consensus,” questioning if he thought that Google presented him with both sides of an issue. “I have no comment on that,” replied Sean. “I believe *basically it works as a fact checker*. I check a couple of those sites and see which ones, what similarities are they sharing together. I more click on the top ones because I know how Google works. *It takes stuff that's really new and relevant*, and tries to put it on the top thing” [emphasis mine].

Silas also commented on how people put more weight on Google's top returns. “There's a lot of influence on the first couple of results that show up when you type the words,” he explains, “because often times, for me and I know it's the same with a lot of other people, the *first information we see is what I'll remember and I'll keep with, and I'll assume it's true* [emphasis mine]. And oftentimes, specifically when you type in a certain phrase, sometimes a special bio (figure 1) will come up and sometimes that's the only source that I'll look at, or other people too. So, Google has a lot of influence on the role of information.”

This pattern indicates that Google users do not have a consistent or accurate understanding of the mechanisms by which the company returns search results. And in this, they are not alone. Most of us know very little about the technologies we have become so dependent on. Rich and extensive academic work finds that datasets, algorithms, search engines, models, artificial intelligence, and communication

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technologies more broadly are not neutral purveyors of information (Castells 2013, Crawford & Gillespie 2014, Gillespie 2010, 2012 and 2014, Introna and Nissenbaum 2000, Noble and Roberts 2015, Pasquale 2015, Vaidhyanathan 2011). Nonetheless, Google was repeatedly cited as the only way to get “unbiased” information, as though the search engine served as an object of faith (O’Neil 2016).



Figure 2

**In my interview with Sarah, she admitted that her Google searches rarely revealed alternative points of view. However, she did not consider how her returns were tied to her own search practices or Google’s algorithmic ordering of information. Rather, she used her Google returns to validate her claims.**

Recent work by Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) argues that Google is deliberately opaque about its algorithms to protect commercial interests. However, a basic misunderstanding of how Google curates results can fortify people’s existing ideological beliefs, even if they are using Google to “verify the facts” or challenge their convictions.<sup>38</sup> For example, Chrissy told me that she relies on Google when

she sees contradictory information on her Facebook newsfeed. “So,” she says, “if I find a post addressing whatever issue it is, I’m always reading both sides to see where they’re coming from, and then I Google it. When somebody makes a statement, then I’ll Google to see if it’s accurate.” While Chrissy feels that her Google queries provide information that might challenge her own ideological positions, this fails to consider how scriptural inference is in turn influencing Google’s results. Since those I interviewed describe how they type in phrases as they appear in “original” documents or speeches, I sought a way to determine how the text one queries matters—performing my own searches for controversial phrases. What my research demonstrates is that *the*

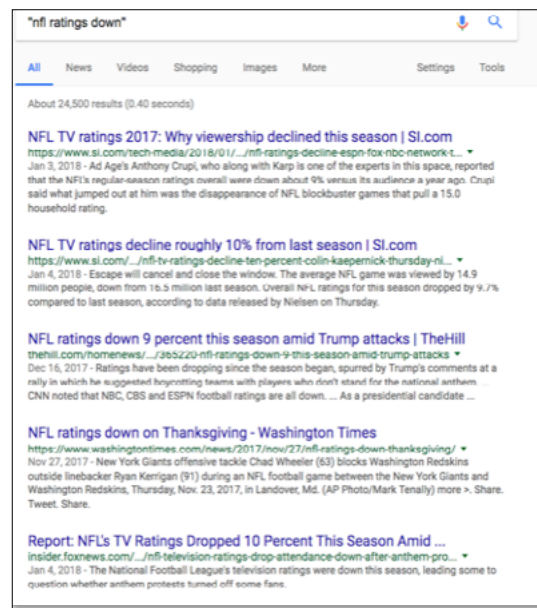


Figure 3. January 25, 2018 query results

38 Since I did not study liberals I cannot speak to the practices of those who do not identify as conservative. However, I would argue that this finding of how people use Google is not dependent on one’s ideological position.

## GOOGLING FOR TRUTH

*phrase someone Googles dramatically affects the information they receive.*<sup>39</sup>

Such a finding is not exclusive to my own research. After Dylann Roof murdered nine people in a Charleston church, Roof asserted that his Google search “black on white crime” shaped his racist hatred and beliefs (Noble 2018, 110). According to Roof’s manifesto, his query led him to Council of Conservative Citizens, a white supremacist website (Hersher 2017). It was, in Roof’s

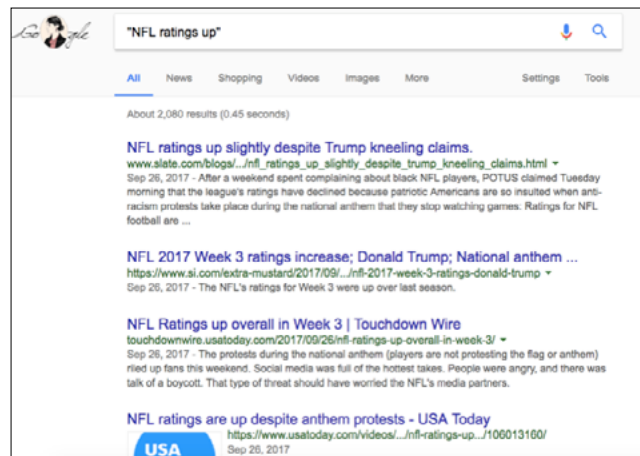


Figure 4. January 25, 2018 query results

words “the first website” in the results. That is, it held the same top position that those in this study believe indicates trustworthy and accurate information. This happened multiple times in my study when I relied on scriptural inference to Google exact phrases from contentious stories. Time and again, the information I received reflected the ideological position of the phrase I began with.

For example, one of the most prominent public discussions happening during my fieldwork was Trump’s call to fire NFL players who knelt during the national anthem. Following President Trump’s September 24<sup>th</sup> tweet (figure 2), conversations intensified and a series of news stories surfaced whether the NFL’s ratings had declined due to fans protesting the players’ actions.

In order to “fact check” President Trump, I used scriptural inference to Google “NFL Ratings Down.” In this search all of the top headlines indicated that NFL viewership had declined this season (figure 3). The *Fox News* headline and teaser explicitly insinuated a connection between a decline in NFL ratings and the anthem protests.

However, if I were more inclined to want to challenge Trump and did not privilege his words, I might be interested in Googling the opposite. When I did this, searching “NFL ratings up,” I received an entirely different (i.e., liberal) set of links (figure 4), with headlines claiming that despite Trump’s remarks, fans were still supporting the NFL.

<sup>39</sup> I acknowledge that this method for testing Google queries is limited. It does not account for my own personal search history and does not speak to how the Google results of my participants might differ. Nonetheless, experimenting with the role of scriptural inference in Google searches is an important first step in identifying the ways in which Google might unintentionally keep people inside of their filter bubbles even when they are searching out information that might contradict their existing beliefs.

## GOOGLING FOR TRUTH

In my interview with Sarah, she admitted that her Google searches rarely revealed alternative points of view.<sup>40</sup> However, she did not consider how her returns were tied to her own search practices or Google's algorithmic ordering of information. Rather, she used her Google returns to validate her claims, as though Google failing to return an alternative perspective meant that one did not exist. In her words, "I'll Google the key word, key phrase, a name, event, whatever, to try to see if there's anything out there. Sometimes all's I get is from the same things I read on Twitter." In a different interview, Kayla, a junior in college, described how she would use Google to see if things were true or if the media were deceiving her. However, she also told me that if her searches produce contradictory information, she questions if the returns are valid or are just media manipulation. "I'll click that and then read it and if it's still like, that seems plausible, then whatever hinge point or fact that might change my opinion, I'll go Google that. I'll look into that and then Google that phrase. Then see if there are any people on the opposite end of the spectrum saying, 'Oh, often people say this,' but really they're twisting the facts. To see if there's some way that I'm being deceived."

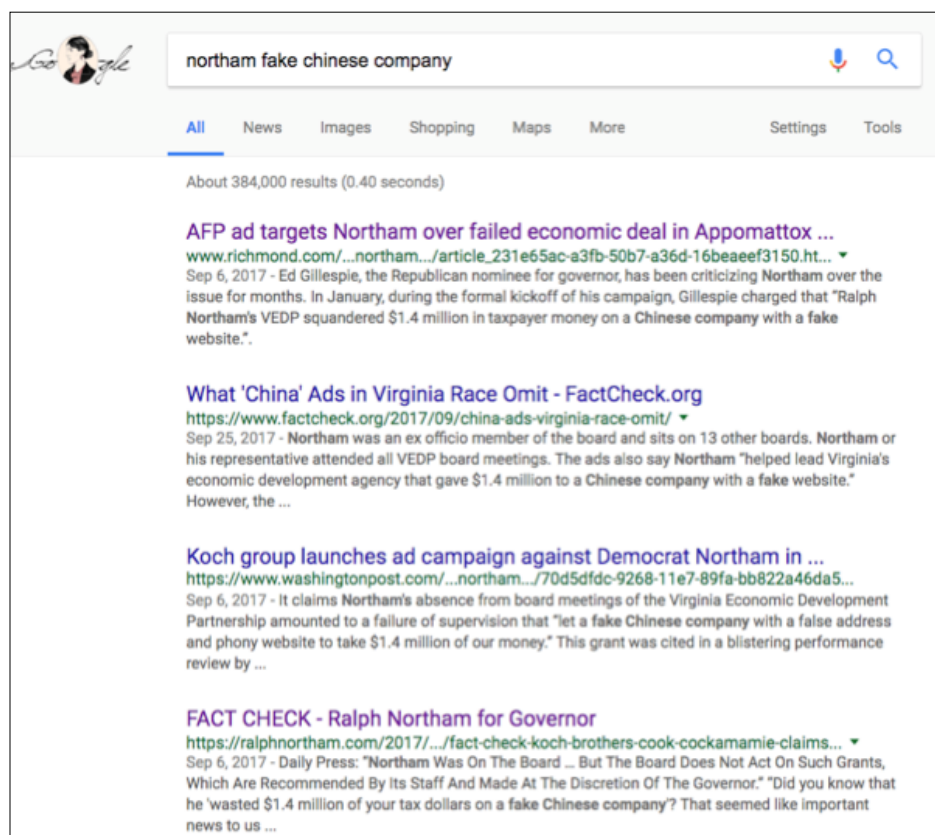


Figure 5. January 25, 2018 query results

40 A number of scholars emphasize the way content customization can emphasize fragmentation over social cohesion (Carr 2010, Pariser 2011, Putnam 2000, Thorson 2008, Sunstein 2001 and 2007). I see this as an amplified concept of the "filter bubble" (Pariser 2011) because they are attempting to break the echo chamber but do not see how their query is embedded with an ideological framework.



## GOOGLING FOR TRUTH

“Googling for Truth” is not just an individual phenomenon. Organizations are also putting their faith in Google to verify the facts used in statewide strategies to sway voter action. For example, while participating in a get-out-the-vote phone bank that many in the Women’s Republic Group participated in, I was given a call script that included information that Ralph Northam, the Democratic candidate for governor, had “approved the spending of \$1.4 million in taxpayer money to a

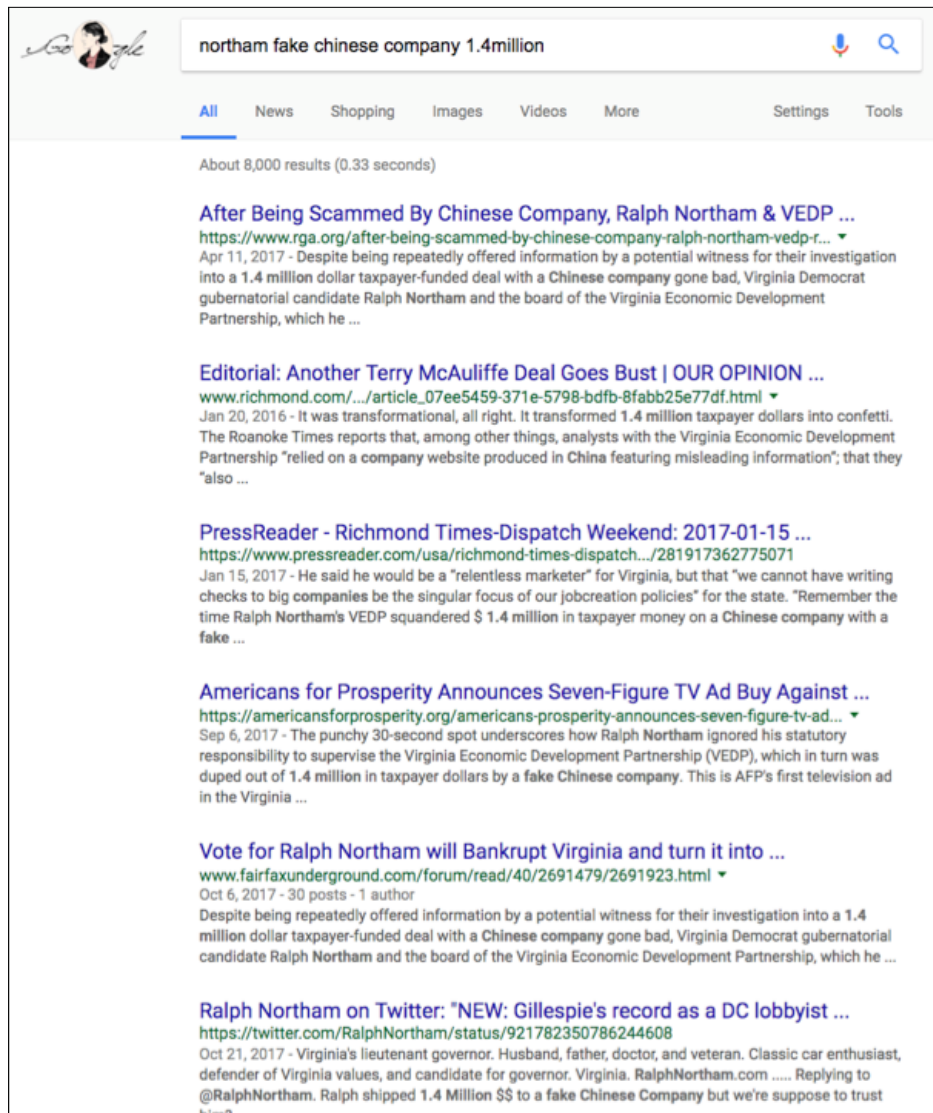


Figure 6. January 25, 2018 query results

fake Chinese company with a false address and a phony website.” When I asked the organizer if he had information about these facts that I could send to people who doubted the claims, he was surprised and flustered by my question. Quickly shaking his head, he told me that they could “Google it!” if anyone needed more



information about Northam. I did so, and not unlike the NFL ratings, the phrases I queried dramatically influenced the information I received.

When I Googled “Northam Fake Chinese Company,” (figure 5) I got an article from a local newspaper, but also articles detailing who was behind the advertisement, as well as a link to Factcheck.org with information regarding what the ad omits (i.e., more liberal information).

However, someone particularly interested in fiscal responsibility and attuned to the practices of scriptural inference might include “1.4 million” in their search

**Even in the face of research and due diligence, voters can walk away from Google armed with alternative news and alternative facts.**

because it appeared in an Americans for Prosperity<sup>41</sup> ad campaign. Gillespie himself uttered the same figure during a formal kickoff to his campaign, accusing Ralph Northam of squandering “\$1.4 million in taxpayers’ money on a Chinese company with a fake website” (Cain 2017). Relying

on the practice of scriptural inference, I added “1.4million” to the initial phrase. When I did so, I was provided dramatically different, Republican-leaning content (figure 6).

Applying scriptural inference (or not doing so) creates a dramatic difference in search results from otherwise similar queries, creating an opportunity for partial, partisan, narratives to persist. Even in the face of research and due diligence, voters can walk away from Google armed with alternative news and alternative facts. While this experimental work is minimal, it opens up the opportunity to further study the role Google plays in political polarization and the maintenance of separate partisan narratives. Clearly, Google queries can reaffirm one’s existing ideological beliefs or, as was the case with Dylann Roof, help mold an extremist (Noble 2018). Google queries can also promote disinformation and propaganda after mass shootings/terrorist attacks. For example, after the mass shooting in Las Vegas, the top search result linked Devin Kelly to ISIS and connected users to 4chan (McKay 2017). Google obviously has a vested interest in users spending more time on their platforms, so is likely to recommend stories or websites to users based on their previous browsing (Castells 2013). A recent study conducted by *The Guardian* using a methodological technique developed by ex-YouTube programmer Guillaume Chaslot demonstrated how YouTube recommendations quickly devolve into misinformation (Lewis 2018, Lewis & McCormick 2018). Through a reliance on scriptural inference, members of these groups have come to believe that the mainstream media are biased. However, it is that very distrust in

<sup>41</sup> Americans for Prosperity is a libertarian/conservative political advocacy group funded by the Koch brothers.

## GOOGLING FOR TRUTH

media organizations that make them particularly vulnerable to Google's promise to "further the interests" we already have (Shahani 2017). In an effort to find information they can trust, they are turning to a search engine with the belief that it is a neutral purveyor of information. As I demonstrate, the very process of using exact quotes from original texts ultimately ends up reaffirming conservatives' existing ideological positions.

# ALTERNATIVE MEDIA LANDSCAPES: MAINSTREAMING THE EXTREME

It is precisely by exploiting this market-driven process of content recommendation that alternative media organizations are able to reach conservative audiences who feel disenfranchised by mainstream media. Conservative content creators including Dennis Prager, Dave Rubin, Ben Shapiro, Candace Owens, Tammy Bruce, Dave Horowitz, and organizations like Fox Cable Networks Group and the Heritage Foundation are actively trying to reach these audiences and use practices of scriptural inference to do so. One of the most popular of these outlets is *Prager University*, a multimedia organization started by writer and talk show host Dennis Prager in 2009. Dennis Prager is a long-time conservative Jewish pundit. Born and raised by “modern orthodox parents,” Prager’s media productions, which include eight books, a nationally-syndicated radio talk show, weekly newspaper columns, five documentaries, and the *Prager University* website, regularly reference traditional Judeo-Christian principles. The mission of his non-profit organization, colloquially referred to as “*PragerU*,” is to spread “conservative Americanism through the Internet” with “5 Minute Ideas.”<sup>42</sup> Understanding Prager’s orthodox roots and strategies are important. Given his focus on faith, *PragerU*’s videos frequently call on the practice of scriptural inference, drilling down into documents, speeches, newspaper articles, and scientific claims, and providing direct textual evidence to support conservative ideals. What is fascinating about *PragerU* is that the conservative media outlet seems to blend together guests who embody what used to represent three separate conservative markets: “secular conservatives,” “the far right,” and the “theocratic right” (Bertlet 1998).

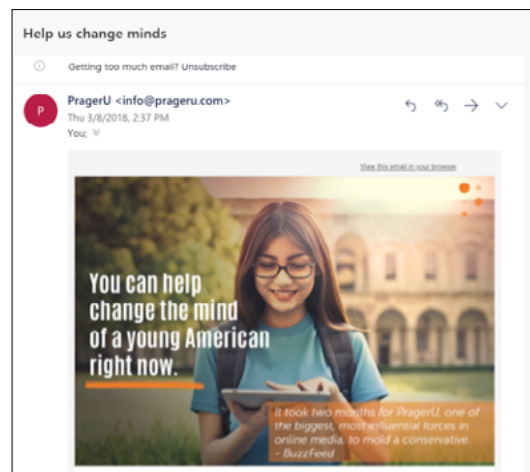


Figure 7

Part of *PragerU*’s immediate popularity is rooted in Dennis Prager himself, who was able to leverage his “celebrity status” and garner a mass audience by reaching

<sup>42</sup> These quotes came directly from the *PragerU* website (www.prageru.com). According to the website, the organization values “economic and religious freedom, a strong military that protects our allies and the religious values that inform Western civilization, also known as Judeo-Christian values.”

across different mediums, something conservative media outlets have been doing for decades (Rohlinger 2015). However, Prager does not focus exclusively on his celebrity status as Beverly LaHaye, founder of Christian Women of America, did (Rohlinger 2015). Rather, Prager leverages network effects to connect people who might otherwise not identify as “conservative” with content creators like Dave Rubin or Ben Shapiro, who subsequently feature Dennis Prager as a guest on their own shows. In order to broaden his appeal, Prager often laces his content with seemingly liberal language. At the same time, Prager’s amplification strategy also regularly promotes the ideas of white nationalist thinkers, such as Milo Yiannopoulos, Paul Joseph Watson, and Stefan Molyneux via the same networked strategies. As Tripodi (2018) and Lewis (forthcoming) describe, the implications of creating a dense network of extremist thinkers allows for those who identify as mainline conservatives to gain easy access to white supremacist logic. Leveraging the thoughts of someone like Stefan Molyneux can have disastrous consequences considering that Molyneux regularly promotes “alt-right” “scientific racism” on his own YouTube shows (Evans 2018).<sup>43</sup> The fact that such rhetoric is ultimately connected to the presenter of one of *PragerU*’s most widely circulated videos is alarming since Molyneux’s ideas of “natural law” were used by the founders of the US to justify the subordination of African slaves, Native Americans, and white women (Feagin 2000, 13).

*PragerU* also calls on practices of scriptural inference but does so in a way that, in the words of my respondents, “twists the original words” of the content creators. For example, on March 3, 2018, *BuzzFeed* released an in-depth report on *PragerU*, demonstrating how the organization’s proselytizing rhetoric is effective at swaying public opinion (Bernstein 2018). Five days after the *Buzzfeed* article was published, *PragerU* used excerpts from it in a promotional e-mail they sent to mailing list subscribers (figure 7). By lifting the text, “It took two months for *PragerU*, one of the biggest, most influential forces in online media, to mold a conservative,” the e-mail positions *PragerU* as a powerful player in the culture war, without acknowledging the original, critical context of the *Buzzfeed* article.

*PragerU* was very popular among my respondents. Regardless of age, everyone in this study has liked or shared *PragerU* videos on Facebook or brought up language from the videos in my interviews and observations. As one college student proclaimed when I asked if she had heard about *PragerU*, “I LOVE Prager! They are short and I can watch them between my classes.” During one of the monthly meetings I attended, Karen (the spokeswoman for the Republican Party mentioned

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43 When Molyneux was a guest on *The Rubin Report* (November 9, 2017) he asserted that black people have smaller brains. Interestingly “scientific racism” was pioneered by Darwin who described the racial category of “blacks” as something between whites and gorillas and actively opposed social programs for “the weak” as he felt that they intervened in “natural selection” (Feagin 2001, 85).

earlier) described how *PragerU* could educate youth so they could resist the “institutional indoctrination” found in schools (from Pre-K to University campuses). By using *PragerU* as a form of college preparedness, the “5 minute ideas” turned into a resource the group could rely on to ensure that their grandchildren did not turn into what one woman described as “stinking liberals.” My observations of *PragerU*’s popularity is confirmed in the organization’s 2017 annual report (titled “Restoring American Values Through the Power of the Internet”), which boasts over 650 million views in 2017—up 250% from 2016. The fact that I was frequently connected to their videos via Facebook is indicative of their sophisticated marketing strategy, which includes targeted social media campaigns using high school and college volunteers. According to *PragerU*’s Facebook analytics, their videos have reached nearly a third of Facebook’s 214 million users in the US (Bernstein 2018).



Figure 8

Over the last eight years, *PragerU* has produced and distributed over 250 “5 minute ideas,” but has regularly released two to three videos a month since 2016. When YouTube de-monetized some of *PragerU*’s videos in October 2017, the channel filed a legal case on the grounds of “ideological discrimination” (Gardner 2018). Citing prominent net neutrality thinkers like Timothy Wu, *PragerU* argued that Google has an “unprecedented concentration of power over speech” and “repeatedly silences conservative thought” (*PragerU* Press release). In addition to YouTube, *PragerU* distributes its videos through its own website ([prageru.com](http://prageru.com)) and now has a separate section devoted to content purportedly “Restricted by YouTube.”<sup>44</sup>

Some of *PragerU*’s most popular videos cover seemingly non-partisan political content, but does so in a way that consistently and comprehensively reaffirms conservative positions. For example, “Do You Understand the Electoral College” has over 2.2 million views on YouTube and over 53.7 million views on [prageru.com](http://prageru.com) (Figure 8). Evoking the Constitution,



Figure 9

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.prageru.com/playlists/restricted-youtube>

lawyer Tara Ross describes why it is important to elect the president using the “538 electors” rather than a “pure democracy.” She argues that the Electoral College protects against the tyranny of the majority, encourages coalition building, and discourages voter fraud. The video aligns with many conservative positions. In her detailed account of coalition building, she emphasizes how the electoral college defends the interests of rural states like Montana, Iowa, and West Virginia that would otherwise be “forgotten” in a popular vote—evoking the feelings of neglect documented by Hochschild (2016) and Cramer (2016). Framing the Electoral College as a safeguard from voter fraud speaks to claims frequently made by President Trump (Jacobson 2018, Tackett and Wines 2018) and like-minded politicians such as Republican Senatorial candidate Roy Moore (Taylor 2017, Weigel 2017). Interestingly, the video did not get much traffic when it was first released, but has become widely popular since the election of Donald Trump, who lost the popular vote (Bernstein 2018).

Dennis Prager and other wealthy donors who produce a number of *PragerU*s videos (the Wilks brothers) initially backed Ted Cruz (Garrett et al. 2018). However, once Trump won the primary, Prager publicly supported Trump via his website, encouraging constituents who referred to themselves as “Never Trumpers”<sup>45</sup> to do the same (Prager 2017). Prager’s position is similar to that of many conservatives I interviewed, who were willing to overlook Trump’s un-Christian behavior in the interest of defeating, in Prager’s words, “the Left and their party, the Democrats” (figure 9).

Some called Prager’s public endorsement of Trump hypocritical, considering Prager’s unapologetically public moral position (Friedersdorf 2016). Yet when Dennis Prager spoke at the 2018 National Religious Broadcast Annual Convention on March 1st, he rationalized that it is easy for anyone who “takes the Bible seriously” to continue to support Trump. He then slipped into a mode of scriptural inference and used the Biblical story of King David to reason that: “When the public’s good is concerned, the private sins of an individual are not the only thing to take into consideration...that the only question to be asked is—is this man good for America?”<sup>46</sup>

Not only does Prager himself rely on scriptural inference to rationalize his ambivalence with President Trump, *PragerU* also uses the practice to gain legitimacy. Even though *PragerU* content and videos do not directly feature Donald Trump or current controversies, they consistently amplify two central arguments

45 “Never Trumpers” is a colloquial phrase used to describe Republicans who vowed (typically via social media) that they would never vote for Trump using the hashtag #NeverTrump (Ponnuru 2017).

46 The 75<sup>th</sup> annual convention (Proclaim 18) featured other notable speakers including Vice President Mike Pence, Joel Rosenberg, Dennis Quaid, Larry Elder, Congresswoman Marsh Blackburn.

## DELEGITIMIZING MAINSTREAM MEDIA

that conservatives associate with Trump's public statements: The first is that the mainstream media is dishonest and driven by emotion rather than intellect. The second is that "the Left" has become increasingly "radical" and is akin to hate groups like the "alt-right."

## DELEGITIMIZING MAINSTREAM MEDIA

*PragerU* has released three videos aimed at discrediting mainstream media since October 2016. The first, "Can you Trust the Press" starring the former *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller, frames media distrust as a bipartisan issue and

**Based on my interviews and observations, *PragerU*'s messaging is working.**

blames it on the 24-hour news cycle and deteriorating journalistic standards. The video also focuses on the role that social media and the blogosphere has played in the "decline in reporting standards,

decline in revenue, and increase in bias." A second video, released in the summer of 2017, answers the question, "What is 'Fake News?'" Crime novelist and conservative podcaster Andrew Klavan asserts within the first minute that "mainstream American news is all fake" because it is controlled by biased liberals with political interests. In order to simplify his argument, Klavan creates a set of "rules" that "prove" how mainstream news is equivalent to leftist propaganda (e.g., mainstream media uses isolated incidents as evidence of trends but ignores events that challenge their argument). In another video, "Why No One Trusts the Mainstream Media," investigative reporter Sheryl Attkisson argues that the news has become increasingly editorialized. She claims that reporters cherry-pick stories that reconfirm liberal beliefs. These videos are incredibly effective at honing their central arguments: the news has become rife with opinion, and we can no longer separate "the facts" from "feelings."

This argument is also the central message of Ben Shapiro's widely popular video "Facts Don't Care About Your Feelings," which has nearly 2 million views on YouTube and over 5.6 million views on *PragerU*'s website. In this video, Shapiro argues that "the Left" is run by feelings rather than intellect, and that liberal concerns like white privilege, patriarchy, and homophobia are not real. He supports this argument by presenting facts. For example, Shapiro asserts that patriarchy isn't real because women make up the majority of college graduates and "young, single women without kids already earn more than their male counterparts," reiterating that "these are the facts, and facts don't care about your feelings."<sup>47</sup> Because these videos also stress the connection between mainstream media and liberal logic, the overall take away is that liberal ideology is formed by disputable claims and emotional appeals instead of fact-based evidence.

<sup>47</sup> While this statistic might be true, it hardly proves that patriarchy no longer exists. One could easily counter Shapiro's fact with the fact that having children disproportionately hurt women's earnings but not men's (Miller 2018).



Based on my interviews and observations, *PragerU*'s messaging is working. On multiple occasions, respondents described how “the Left” was prone to accepting sensationalized media and that liberal platforms are driven by emotion and opinion over intellect and facts—taking points directly taken from *PragerU*'s videos. Jared, a junior majoring in foreign affairs and political science, even likened the emotion used by media to an addiction, referring to media consumption as an “outrage fix” that people “get triggered” by. “We have this emotivist [sic] response,” he reasoned “[based on] very little information.” He argues that instead of going to the news for information people look at the news and think, “‘Oh, there’s this thing that someone did. I’m going to rant about it to somebody and that’s going to make me feel better.’ I do believe to some degree we have that outrage addiction here in the US where we’re just constantly mad at things. We’re always jonesing for that next fix that makes us go, ‘Oh, I feel morally superior to this person or these people.’” While initially framing emotional addiction as something that “we all” participate in, he described “the NFL thing” when I asked for an example implying that those who knelt in protest were the ones who were causing the drama. “There should be no issue over this. ‘Oh, you don’t want to stand for the flag. Well, sir, if you don’t believe in standing for the Pledge of Allegiance, people died for your right not to do so. You’re welcome.’”

Jared’s insinuation that people who “don’t believe in standing for the Pledge” were just arguing for argument’s sake was echoed in other interviews. Michael, a retired veteran who primarily watches *Fox News* to stay informed, also attributed emotional and illogical responses to Democratic pundits. “Juan Williams is on there [*Fox News*] and he’s very liberal. It don’t matter what’s happening in the world. It’s just he has such strong views to argue and not always with good reason behind it. It’s just for the point of arguing. It just seems like.” In my focus group with college conservatives, they described how Bernie Sanders’ success could be partially attributed to his emotional appeal to liberals rather than substantive policies, and that this was fueled by liberal news organizations that promote emotional perspectives. In a back-and-forth conversation between two college students (Abraham and Lee) they cite a particular example from a debate they watched where Bernie Sanders was asked about his perspective on social welfare. “And his answer,” recalled Lee smiling, “would just be something like ‘Kids shouldn’t go hungry,’ and the crowd would go wild!” But, interrupted Abraham, “we all agree with that!” The problem, they concurred was that Sanders would tweet out emotional appeals without any policy to back it up and the media would just run with the story without interrogating his position.

By the end of the study the positions of *PragerU* and those I interviewed became indistinguishable. Time and again, I was told that mainstream media are “fake” because coverage is based on feelings instead of fact-based evidence. This ties back



## CONNECTING THE “HYSTERICAL” LEFT TO THE “ALT-RIGHT”

to the larger use of scriptural inference to critique mainstream media to begin with. Frequently, *PragerU* videos would call on the same practices, drilling into the text of original documents and speeches in order to prove their arguments. These practices resonated with respondents who articulated that *PragerU* is a trustworthy source fueled by evidence opposed to emotion.

### CONNECTING THE “HYSTERICAL” LEFT TO THE “ALT-RIGHT”

Since many conservatives believe that the mainstream media are, in the words of Pastor Tom, “simply another wing of the Democratic party” the same logic was used to discredit liberal ideology as “hysteria.” An important consequence of framing liberal politics in this way is that it makes it easier to construe leftist positions as “extremist.” In the aftermath of the Charlottesville rally on August 12, 2017, President Trump was criticized by many media outlets for his delayed response as well as a set of comments that questioned journalists to ask about the “alt-left” and the “facts” surrounding their actions that day (Qiu 2017). Trump’s continued resolve to blame the violence on “both sides” is similar to *PragerU*’s vilification of “the Left” as the party of intolerance. This is also the central message of Dave Rubin’s *PragerU* video, “Why I Left the Left,” that has garnered nearly 4 million views on YouTube. In this video, Rubin begins with a fairly benign argument that people should be able to openly disagree. He describes that while he used to identify as a progressive,<sup>48</sup> he has grown tired of the party’s “identity politics” and feels that it had become “regressive instead of progressive.” By the end of the video, he describes phrases like “racism, bigotry, xenophobia, homophobia, and Islamophobia” as “meaningless buzzwords.” In a different *PragerU* video, “The Inconvenient Truth about the Democratic Party,” Professor Carol Swain draws on a historical narrative to demonstrate that the Democratic Party started the Civil War, founded the KKK, and fought against civil rights, including the abolition of slavery. However, Swain fails to demonstrate the context behind the “Democrat” and “Republican” party at the time, and does not explain how both party platforms have changed over time. Not unlike the openly white supremacist website Stormfront, these videos are “drawing on an epistemological tradition that stakes a claim on ‘truth’ with the intended goal of undermining the hard-won political value of racial equality” (Daniels 2009, 112).

Furthermore, *PragerU* connects the “radical left” to the “alt-right,” acting as a framing device for conservatives who wish to distance themselves from “far-right” extremists. In *PragerU*’s video “What is the Alt-Right?” actor and podcaster Michael Knowles uses a two-pronged approach to distance “the Right” from the “alt-right.” First, he describes how the use of the phrase “alternative” differentiates the group from mainstream American conservatism. He then uses this to demonstrate how

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48 Rubin was once a member of the Young Turks Network <<https://tytnetwork.com/>>

## CONNECTING THE “HYSTERICAL” LEFT TO THE “ALT-RIGHT”

the “alt-right” is actually more closely aligned to “the Left”—another alternative to conservatism—because they are both obsessed with identity politics, reject

**By creating and promoting similarly misleading content, *PragerU* becomes just one node in a growing network of content creators that advertise themselves as mainstream (*PragerU*, Dave Rubin, Ben Shapiro) but regularly dabble in alt-right content and ideas while simultaneously focusing on “the Left” as the problem.**

God, and emphasize the collective over the individual. He also plays down the power of the “alt-right,” by assuring audiences that the group is “really, really small” and that “the Left,” which is essentially the same as the “alt-right,” is “much, much bigger.” This video also emphasizes God and individual liberties in a near exact match of the language used in the Virginia Republican Creed. As a reminder, the creed repeatedly draws on the use of individualism (in the

form of free-market capitalism and free rights) as well as acknowledges that a faith in God is essential to protecting the moral fabric of the nation.

By evoking these central tenants, *PragerU* content resonates with viewers who regularly espoused the same rhetoric that “the Left” is more intolerant than the “alt-right.”

Pastor Tom was among the first who I spoke with to broach the subject. We had been sitting together drinking coffee for over an hour when he looked me straight in the eyes and said, “from my perspective, the Left has an agenda, and they’ll do anything to accomplish their agenda.” He continued as he looked down, shaking his head in disappointment, “One of the strategies is creating chaos. So [liberal billionaire George] Soros and other similar groups fund, it’s been proven and documented, that all of a sudden these people from out of town show up in Ferguson, they don’t live there. They’ve been paid to get on a bus to go and incite riot. There’ve been videos that show people in a crowd, start hitting somebody to create a riot. Those kind of activities, I think adds to the fakeness of the whole thing.”

Using similar language, Sarah blamed “far-left radicals” for the violence that transpired in Charlottesville on August 12<sup>th</sup>. “I think a lot of his [George Soros] activities are illegal. He supports a lot of ‘far-left’ radicals. He’s given money for protest. A lot of those people that were in Charlottesville... He’s funding a lot of these protests, and I agree everybody has a right to protest. But when you start to pay into protest, you’re instilling the violence in people, in my opinion... Out there in St. Louis, and he pays a lot of protestors, in a lot of different areas.” Both Sarah and Pastor Tom have college degrees, and Sarah is teaching a course on interior design at the local community college. Both are influencers in their respective groups. As this report demonstrated earlier, Sarah and Pastor Tom do not visit “fake news” sites like *Infowars*, but regularly read and watch *Fox News* and *The Daily Signal*. Both respondents describe *PragerU* as a purveyor of truthful information.

## CONNECTING THE “HYSTERICAL” LEFT TO THE “ALT-RIGHT”

Nonetheless, these quotes and *PragerU*'s messaging calls on conspiracy theories regularly espoused by the “alt-right.” Everyone from Alex Jones to the Nations of Islam's Louis Farrakhan has relied on anti-Semitic tropes to blame wealthy Jewish entrepreneurs (e.g., the Rothschild family or George Soros) for larger cultural ills. More frightening still are how these anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have become increasingly common place and not considered particularly outrageous (Rosenburg 2017). By creating and promoting similarly misleading content, *PragerU* becomes just one node in a growing network of content creators that advertise themselves as mainstream (*PragerU*, Dave Rubin, Ben Shapiro) but regularly dabble in “alt-right” content and ideas while simultaneously focusing on “the Left” as the problem.

Participants across the age spectrum discussed “the Left” as an agitator. Similar to Sarah, the college students in the focus group where Delilah professed her “LOVE” of *PragerU*, used the Charlottesville rally to make their point mimicking the language of President Trump that “both sides” were to blame that day. When asked to describe what they meant by both sides, they pitted white supremacists against “The Antifa.”<sup>49</sup> They reasoned that “white supremacy and Nazism should never be tolerated,” but they also agreed with Abraham and his belief “in the rule of law,” and the idea that there is “a process by which you react to things that you disagree with.” In this way, they all agreed that they did not “support inciting violence on either side of the issue.” Jake, a sophomore transfer student from a different state, also reasoned that the “alt-right” had come together to protest the removal of the Confederate statues—a position he believed in. Moreover, he felt that since the “alt-right” had received a permit, their constitutional right to free speech should have been honored since “the left-wing groups came together unconstitutionally without a permit and disrupted the ‘alt-right’ group who had a legal permit.” Trish, the member of the women's Republican group mentioned earlier, also articulated that while she did not believe in their cause they did it legally and that “these other groups, Black Lives Matter and the Antifa, whatever, *they are known to be agitators*, just as the white supremacists are known to



Figure 10

49 As a side note, I have observed in this study that you can tell where people get their news by how they pronounce the word ANTIFA. During participation observation and in every interview, those discussing the group pronounced it “AN-TEE-FA” which is how it is pronounced by Ben Shapiro, FOX News, and other conservative outlets. Outlets described by my respondents as liberal (CNN and MSNBC) frequently refer to the group as ANTI-FA. For those unfamiliar “Antifa” is a phrase short for “anti-fascist” and is used to describe a loose network of left-leaning anti-racist groups that tract the activities of neo-Nazis (Stanglin 2017).

## CONNECTING THE “HYSTERICAL” LEFT TO THE “ALT-RIGHT”

have a stance that probably doesn’t agree with 90% of the American people...but Black Lives Matter and Antifa, they’re known for burning down of these cities, and I’ll tell you what, as an American citizen, I’m really sick of this crap.” Trish then went on to circle back to her distrust of mainstream media. “I’m tired of hearing that anybody that’s white is considered a racist, or if somebody supports the statues remaining that we all must be racist...that’s ‘fake news.’”

Trish’s quote is significant because it demonstrates how those I’ve studied openly claim that specific acts of racism are “bad” but simultaneously associate “the Left” with actions *worse* than white supremacy. Such a position effectively stitches together the themes pushed out by *PragerU*—that “the Left” is increasingly intolerant and that “racism” is a buzzword akin to “fake news.” As my respondents’ descriptions of BLM as “agitators” demonstrate, *PragerU* is able to validate an “epistemology of ignorance” (Mills 1997) whereby those who watch their videos can “adopt the white racial frame” that hides the unequal world they have created and their privilege position within and “instead configure themselves as victims” (Daniels 2009, 20). *PragerU* does not just condemn white supremacy, but rather uses its platform to try and bring down organizations like Black Lives Matter, and also furthers the reach of conspiracy theories notoriously articulated by the “alt-right.” A prevalent example of this would be the narrative that “whiteness” and “conservatism” is under attack, a talking point linked to “alt-right” campaigns like “it’s okay to be white.”<sup>50</sup> During my research, The Red Elephants advertised “It’s OKAY To Be White” T-shirts to me on Facebook (figure 10).

Similar victimization was articulated by respondents who described how they “felt scared” to publicly announce their support for Trump during the 2016 presidential election. Few put a sign in their yard or a bumper sticker on their car. According to Trish, “I don’t have any political signs in my yard, and I don’t have any on my car. I do not want to put myself in danger.” Trish described how the group has also taken the precaution of removing identifiable information (names and emails) from the organization’s website because “conservatives are being targeted, and we’re more cautious now than we were before.” College students also iterated that teachers would grade them unfairly if they expressed their conservative positions in the classroom. Right-wing commenters reiterate the fear of being “under attack,” giving audiences “an experience of being in conversation” with others who they believe have been targeted for espousing their same political views (Polleta & Callahan 2017, 7 – emphasis theirs).

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50 The “It’s ok to be white” campaign was invented on 4chan but has quickly gained traction on college campuses (Sonnad 2017). Even though the propaganda has been espoused by former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke, it has also been used by Ben Shapiro on the *Daily Wire* and Tucker Carlson of *Fox News* as evidence of an anti-white agenda (Hayden 2017).

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The idea that conservatives were being targeted is repeatedly reiterated in conservative media. On Campus Reform, a website that bills itself as “America’s leading site for college news,” a reporter detailed how Trump stickers were defaced and removed and how students who supported Trump were harassed.<sup>51</sup> Reminiscent of right-wing dialogue that has long argued that colleges are liberal bastions strategically designed to influence youth, *Fox News* has reaffirmed the idea that students are “persecuted against” because of their conservative beliefs or penalized with lower grades when they espouse conservative positions (*Fox News* 2008, *Fox & Friends* February 9, 2018). This is also the central theme of two very popular *PragerU* videos, “The Least Free Place in America” and “The Dark Art of Political Intimidation.” In these, the speakers describe how conservatives are routinely intimidated, harassed, and blackmailed on college campuses and throughout the nation. Right-wing commenters reiterate the fear of being “under attack” giving audiences “an experience of being in conversation” with others who they believe have been targeted for espousing their same political views (Polleta & Callahan 2017, 7 – emphasis theirs). And the messaging is working. While none of my respondents had ever been personally harassed for their political opinions, it was clear in my observations that these groups were galvanized by the overarching notion that the intolerant “Left” was silencing conservative expression.

Such a position mirrored a Harvard Business School study that revealed the rising belief in “reverse racism” (Norton & Sommers 2011). The study argues that white people are feeling resentful of political correctness because they are not allowed to say what they are thinking or are not sure how to behave in interracial situations. “What we realized over time,” argues Norton, “is that people are mistaking that feeling of oppression in those situations for actual oppression in the world. As though not being able to say what you think is in some ways similar to being actually oppressed by some system” (*NPR Tell Me More*, July 13, 2011). Interestingly, if conservatives are facing discrimination in their everyday life it is having an adversarial effect. While some antiracist scholars suggest that Americans who experience discrimination might be more likely to *empathize* with African Americans (Feagin et al. 2001, 231) conservative reactions to “safe spaces” are producing a zero-sum gain effect, shaping and sharpening their discriminatory behavior.

As this analysis demonstrates, *PragerU* amplifies the idea that the mainstream media and the “radical left” are out to silence conservative thought and frame them as racists. While this position is taken in an effort to distance themselves from the “alt-right,” on a number of occasions they evoke “alt-right” rhetoric advancing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and campaigns like “It’s Okay to be White.”

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51 <https://www.campusreform.org>

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Moreover, *PragerU*’s power comes from its network of thinkers who are often celebrities in their own right. Leveraging the celebrity status of conservatives like Ben Shapiro or Dave Rubin is an important strategy that has been part of

**By referencing back to one another and creating a dense network of interlocutors, *PragerU* is able to evoke a constant narrative aimed at discrediting liberal positions.**

conservative media outlets since the 1980s. By referencing back to one another and creating a dense network of interlocutors, *PragerU* is able to evoke a constant narrative aimed at discrediting liberal positions. This strategy is extremely effective for reaching large audiences—the top 15 most-viewed

*PragerU* videos each have more than ten million viewers. However, researchers have also demonstrated that *PragerU*’s choice of guests connect their audience to “far-right” and “alt-right” personalities. For example, Tripodi (2018) uses Candace Owens and James Damore as case studies to demonstrate the algorithmic connections between *Fox News*, *PragerU*, and “alt-right” YouTube personalities. Lewis’ (forthcoming) work uses network mapping to argue that channels like Dave Rubin (a featured *PragerU* presenter) are linked to more extremist channels—such as Blaire White, Lauren Southern, and even Altright.com—because influencers regularly appear in, and sometimes co-host, each other’s content. Since Dennis Prager prominently promotes the use of scriptural inference, he is familiar with how conservatives driven to “do their own research” are hungry for the kind of facts his videos provide. *PragerU* facts do not lie, but by meticulously avoiding evidence that counters their claims, they also do not tell the whole truth. Moreover, *PragerU* strategically employs YouTube celebrities with liberal origins (Dave Rubin, Candace Owen, James Damore) and in doing so subtly reaffirms the position that “the Left” has lost touch with moderates and is losing political ground. By calling on practices of scriptural inference and meticulously using facts in a way to support their arguments, *PragerU*, like *Fox*, uses a “popular interface for conservative intellectual culture” relying on sophisticated marketing and content creation mechanisms capable of converting knowledge (Peck forthcoming – emphasis mine).



# CONCLUSION

What my study demonstrates is that faith in God and a rich adherence to Protestant values is deeply embedded in the way conservatives encounter and consume information. This report also elucidates the connection between Protestantism and Constitutional Conservatism, shedding light on the ways that rituals like Prayer & Pledge reify racialized systems of oppression in the United States. By demonstrating the important role Christianity plays in conservative rituals, this report sheds light on how scriptural inference is used to analyze and interpret documents like the Bible, the Constitution, and/or news media in a search for “the truth.” By clarifying the importance of scriptural inference, I also push back on the widespread solution of “media literacy” in response to the problem of “fake news.” While we must acknowledge the ever-growing threat of misinformation on-line, focusing on “fake news” as the reason why conservatives voted for Trump fails to acknowledge that many conservatives I observed regularly access, analyze, and evaluate an array of sources. Using this method of critical assessment, I saw how conservatives found inconsistencies in news coverage, supporting their convictions that the mainstream media is “fake news.”

By applying the practices of scriptural inference to Google searches, this report also implicates Google in reaffirming people’s existing beliefs. Conservatives in this study repeatedly describe the importance of “doing their own research” before believing any news coverage. In their effort to expand out from their ideological positions, they are unaware that their queries will simply return information that reaffirms their beliefs depending on what phrase they choose to type into the search engine. While the empirical evidence in this report only scratches the surface regarding Google’s role in maintaining our filter bubbles, it opens up the opportunity for future studies. It is also of utmost importance that more research investigates the relationship between alternative media networks and the radicalization/conspiracy content created by the “alt-right.”

Finally, this report indicates a need for more research regarding how YouTube, itself a subsidiary of Google, organizes the connections between different types of alternative media content. Content creators like *PragerU* are not only exploiting the practices of scriptural inference, but also relying on search engine optimization and suggested content to elevate their messaging. It is easy to see the pattern in *PragerU* videos. Presenters are often YouTube celebrities in their own right and regularly appear on one another’s shows. However, their choice of guests and underlying messaging demonstrates how this cross-promotion of ideas and influencers creates both an algorithmic and cultural connection between conservative ideology and “alt-right” terminology.



## CONCLUSION

Immersed in a sea of alternative facts and guided by the principles of scriptural inference, it is easy to see why conservatives believe that it is the “hysterical left” with the wool over their eyes in desperate need of media re-education. Despite their best attempts to challenge their existing beliefs, the way that information on the internet is organized inevitably leads them down a rabbit-hole of content that (at best) reaffirms their already existing beliefs and (at worst) opens them up to more extreme positions like “race science” (Evans 2018). What conservatives’ “independent research” ultimately confirms is that liberal ideology is as “fake” as the news that supports it. Not unlike the *Amazing Grace* hymn that regularly accompanied the services I attended, conservatives are deeply concerned for “the other side,” hoping they, too, shall one day see the light.

# APPENDIX: METHODS

The findings in this report are based on hundreds of hours of participant observation with two groups in the southeast United States: a chapter of the National Federation of Republic Women, and a college Republican group. These observations centered around the governor's race that took place in the state of Virginia, spanning eight months (May 2017–January 2018). During that time, I attended bimonthly meetings, fundraisers, rallies, tabling events, city council meetings, debate-watching parties, call centers devoted to bolstering voter turnout, backyard barbeques, Bible studies, church services, and an election night gathering. I also attended events that were not connected to the groups I observed, including a rally for a Republican candidate during the gubernatorial primary and a winner's breakfast hosted by the Republican Party of Virginia after the primary election. Given the prominent debates over Confederate statues during this election, I took a tour of the Confederate Memorial Chapel and conducted participant observation at three rallies that took place in Charlottesville, VA.<sup>52</sup>

I sought out city centers that were slightly larger than the towns Hochschild and Cramer observed, averaging between 50,000–100,000 residents, what the Census Bureau would classify as “urbanized.” These cities were growing at a rapid rate with a great deal of construction to accommodate growth: new roads, new schools, and new housing. While these cities were bustling, they were also isolated and homogeneous, surrounded by miles of rural roads winding through the Blue Ridge Mountains. Along the outskirts of each town were mostly rolling hills, peppered with fast-food restaurants and gas stations. So even though I conducted my ethnographic work in two different cities, much about both of them looked the same: a small downtown with walkable streets, mom and pop shops, and local restaurants; a few blocks out, larger roads lined with chains like Applebee's, Panera Bread, Barnes & Noble, and Walmart; after that, two-lane interstates and wide open space.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted interviews and focus groups with thirty individuals (fourteen men and sixteen women ranging in age from eighteen to seventy). These people were either members or affiliates of the groups I observed, or people I met at related events.<sup>53</sup> Following our interviews, I connected with these respondents on Facebook using an account created for this project.

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52 These rallies included the now infamous “United the Right Rally” on August 12, but also two less publicized events that took place in the months leading up to August 12<sup>th</sup>. These included a rally organized by Richard Spencer on May 13 that culminated in a torch-bearing rally around the Lee Statue, and a KKK rally organized around the Jackson statue on July 8.

53 Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were transcribed by Rev.com.

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Doing so allowed me to follow the news stories they liked, shared, or commented on, and document the kinds of news Facebook recommended to a profile connected to a conservative social group. I also immersed myself in the media identified by participants during observations and/or interviews. While the list was vast, primary sources drawn on for this report include *Fox and Friends*, *The Daily Wire*, *The Rubin Report*, *Prager University*, *Imprimus*, *The Daily Signal*, *Red Alert Politics*, *One American News*, *Tucker Carlson*, *The Drudge Report*, *Breitbart*, and *Rush Limbaugh*. I was also frequently emailed news stories from *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Roanoke Times*, and *The Daily Progress*, as well as more obscure websites like wallbuilders.com.

During this work, I relied on grounded theory and used comparative distinctions (Charmaz 2006) to code the data for similarities and differences. After flagging particularly salient “in vivo codes” (Charmaz 2006), I conducted a more focused coding, determining the accuracy of the identified threads. Using these “conceptual categories” (Charmaz 2006) I reexamined my field notes and analyzed those findings alongside the media content I was consuming as part of this project. Drawing on interviews, participant observation, and media immersion, I was able to triangulate my data and strengthen the validity of my findings.

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