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Searching for Alternative Facts: Analyzing Scriptural Inference in Conservative News Practises

ABSTRACT

In her report Francesca Tripodi analyses the attitudes and behaviour of individuals spread around the United States and who consider themselves as Christians, conservatives and Republicans. The conservatism in the account is characterised by several observed principles: an emphasized connection between faith and patriotism through repeated rituals like Christian prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, and reciting the Virginia Republican Creed; the problem of separation of church and state and a need to protect racial and religious identity with subsidized defence strategies. In this ethnographic work, the author presents how two Republican groups are searching for the truth in the contemporary media environment. The author conducted several individuals who describe themselves as Christians, conservatives and Republicans and she analysed how they conceptualize truth. The findings of the work provide a new foundation for understanding the relationship between so-called „fake news“ and contemporary conservative political thought.

KEY WORDS

Alternative Facts. Fake News. Christians. Conservatism. Republicans. Scriptural Inference.

Using „conservative“ in general identification does not necessarily means all Christians are conservative, but the author demonstrates how reading practises „trickle down“ into Republican discourse. For analysing and comparing the attitudes of individuals, it was necessary to start with an analysis of how their political rituals are connected to a Christian worldview. In the research, the respondents desired communication about the separation of church-state. While institutions of education emphasize a government centred model of separation, preventing the church from unduly influencing policy, conservatives defend a church-centred version, where the separation is about protecting the church from the government. Protecting the church not only aligns with „law and order“, but it also evokes a reference to protecting eroding ideals and their religious interests. For the respondents, Protestantism and patriotism are inextricably linked to protectionism. Conservatives believe that the United States is a Christian nation. 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. Protestantism, patriotism, and protection represent racial rationality and symbolic practices that reify racism in American politics. Conservatives are rearticulating the belief in „white victims“ routinely evoked in news broadcasts and political campaigns. As such, „protection“ efforts disproportionately target non-white and non-Christian Americans.

In fact, one of the most important findings of the research was how conservatives utilize theological teachings to unpack texts like the Constitution or other forms of media. The author labels these media literacy practices scriptural inference, and argues that understanding this conservative approach to Biblical interpretation can shed light on contemporary solutions to „fake news“. The increase in spreading „fake news“ through social networks was, according to journalistic interpretation, the reason why Donald Trump won the election. This is why experts call for an increase in media literacy among conservatives because they are passive receivers, not the active audience. On the contrary, the author introduces the lives of several conservatives around the country and their behaviour in politics, gathering information and their evaluation. She states the respondents consume a wide variety of sources of information and they are critical of the content. They were encouraged at schools, by family and friends, to read a variety of different newspapers and journals. Conservatives frequently refer to the original source, where they can find information without any commentary and they read information before they start digesting what everybody else thinks about it. It is revealed that conservatives rely on scriptural inference to find the truth, but they do not trust anyone.

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. The author finally argues that scriptural inference goes beyond 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 do one’s own research. Considering respondents’ behaviour, conservatives who practice scriptural inference are not blindly latching onto „fake news“ stories.

The second part of the research was focussed on searching for information on Google in order to find the truth. The author asked where respondents go for news they trust and most of them answered they do not have a regular source for news and information. However she followed up by asking how they had learned about the candidates they voted for and their answer was interesting. Few people mentioned Facebook but most of the respondents said: „I Googled it.“ Conservatives routinely described the need for people to „do their own research“ in order to find „accurate“ or „unbiased“ news. Yet when the author asked them to explain what doing their own research looked like, one hundred percent began with a Google query. People hardly understand Google searches rarely revealed alternative points of view. However, they did not consider how their returns were tied to their own search practices or Google’s algorithmic ordering 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.

Finally, this report indicates a need for more research regarding how Google organizes the connections between different types of alternative media content. In the work, the author highlights the work of journals like PragerU which are not only exploiting the practises of scriptural inference, but also relying on search engine optimization and suggested content to elevate their messaging.

Bibliography and sources

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