

Francesca Bolla Tripodi, *The Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2022

As explicitly stated in the Prologue, the research project that led to *The Propagandists' Playbook* was carried out in the shadow of the Charlottesville Neo-Nazi rally of August 2017. On the one hand, the march provided a stark empirical reminder that disinformation ecosystems have real-world violent consequences; on the other, its political fallout demonstrated that a systemic, structural apparatus must be in place to allow rank-and-file US conservatives to obfuscate their objective collusion with the violence of the extreme Right. Such a pre-analytical impulse benefits the book's vigor and timeliness, whilst suggesting some methodological concerns.

The author, who currently teaches at CITAP, the center for technology and society at the University of North Carolina, is a former collaborator of the Data & Society collective: although she self-identifies as a sociologist, it is helpful to consider her work in the context of the science and technology studies field. *The Propagandists' Playbook* describes the ethnographic research Tripodi undertook in several Republican grassroots organizations in 2017-2018: while her proximate concern was to understand how conservatives make sense of political news, her broader research question was to investigate how the seemingly separate factual universes of the Right and Left in America are sustained. Part of Tripodi's immersive ethnography consisted in sharing her informants' media diet, restricting over many months her news sources exclusively to a list of content producers trusted in the right-wing ecosystem (54-7): more traditional platforms such as Fox & Friends or the *Wall Street Journal*, YouTube influencers like Joe Rogan, Candace Owens, or Jordan Peterson, and also more avowedly fringe ideological outlets (OANN, PragerU).

Formally, the book is organized as a seven-step how-to model, detailing the process of setting up and profiting from a disinformation ecosystem, with each chapter corresponding to a step. Drawing from her field research, Tripodi constructs an idealtype of contemporary conservative ideology based on five core values (the "5 Fs"): faith, family, firearms, (armed) forces, and the free market (31-47). Conservative elites attempt to shape the beliefs of their followers by producing a media ecosystem that parses reality through the lens of the 5 Fs, reinforcing their worldview.

Where Tripodi's account departs from traditional portrayals of propaganda, moving beyond debates over filter bubbles and echo chambers, is in the active participation individuals contribute to the closing of the disinformation loop that envelops them. What emerges is a portrait of conservatism as "both a worldview and a media practice" (99), whose adherents do not lack general media literacy. Specifically, this captive participation is achieved by encouraging conservatives to apply scriptural inference hermeneutic techniques to political and journalistic texts. This distrust in translation and hermeneutic authority, rooted according to Tripodi in Protestant religiosity and traditional individualistic ethos, achieves a decontextualization of political reality into a series of cases whose simplistic interpretation is seen as self-evident and factual, a sort of endless morality play. These dynamics can be seen at play in extreme cases such as the QAnon cult (182), with its emphasis on confirmatory fact-checking or "doing your own research". The outcome is a set of beliefs that are more rooted and resilient because its holders feel a sense of authorship—as Tripodi incisively puts it, an "IKEA effect of misinformation" (207), undergirding a faux autonomy in the media sphere. Such autonomy is illusory, because political elites manipulate this epistemic activism, steering individuals toward predetermined conclusions. How they do so forms the heart of the study.

Tripodi proposes a "sociology of search" (102), to understand how individuals co-create their alternative information environment by fact checking through Google queries. Two elements of trust are involved: in the reliability of sources, and in the relevance of search results (109). However, deep stories and ideological dialects contribute to making this trust in unbiased queries problematic: while search gives the illusion of impartiality, "search engines are not designed to [...] challenge existing beliefs" (117), and the conservative media ecosystem has already comprehensively provided the means

for verification of this alternative worldview. The most creative part of the research is the technical description of these practices (chap. 5): seeding misinformation narratives, filling “data voids”, keyword curation, appropriation, and “squatting”, data exploitation, and so forth.

Here, however, we touch on one of the main questions that Tripodi’s ethnography leaves open, perhaps as a reflection of her own informants’ cognitive dissonance: it remains unclear how conservatives consider Big Tech products such as Google to be both part of the biased mainstream media, and merely neutral tools for individual search. It must be said that some of the respondents quoted in the text sound more generically suspicious of any and all information than Tripodi’s interpretation would seem to allow (98). More broadly, it may be asked whether the author is giving the subculture she is studying the benefit of the doubt, as the openly evaluative stance she holds towards its processes of sense-making and interpretation would appear at odds with the research principles of ethnography. Conversely, it may also be wondered whether grassroots conservatives are indeed honestly captive within the disinformation machine, or whether their reported belief in the factual accuracy of the various conspiracy theories Tripodi describes is tongue-in-cheek ideological posturing, side-taking rather than intimate conviction. Indeed, at times Tripodi finds that bias is openly recognized by the conservative media ecosystem, and, in a context of generalized distrust of the public sphere, fundamentally accepted by its audience as a way to rebalance mainstream media’s perceived antagonism to conservatives: accuracy is sacrificed in the name of ideological consistency, and objectivity is redefined in terms of equal coverage, or “both-sideism” (70-72).

Regardless, Tripodi offers a keen portrayal of an intimately riven public sphere. Politics less blessed than the US was in the past century with a strong centrist consensus will see this type of conflictual public discourse as not too unfamiliar. Perhaps the broader query the study raises is under what circumstances ideological polarization produces a form of debate where fundamentally incompatible value positions are defended and litigated as if the underlying disagreement were a factual one.

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