Francesca Bolla Tripodi, **The Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy**, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022, 288 pp., $32.50 (hardcover).

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How do conservative voters seek out information they trust? How do they validate truth? How does search engine optimization play a part in their socialization? In **The Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy**, Francesca Bolla Tripodi shows that conservative voters exercise agency in their political choices as opposed to common misconceptions that they have been passively misled or duped. Based on her historiographic and ethnographic research on two conservative groups during the 2017 Virginia gubernatorial elections, the author's contribution to political communication and critical media studies offers both a theoretical advancement of how disinformation operations persist and empirical findings that urge us to consider searching itself as an overlooked aspect of information wars.
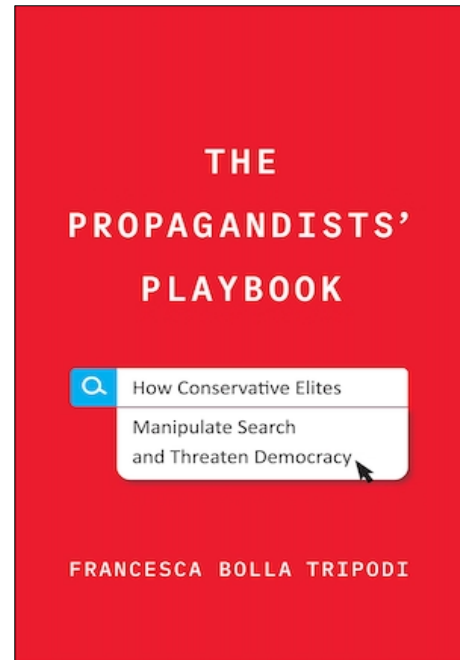
Tripodi argues that "conservative elites are leveraging cultural ideologies in order to reframe our understanding of the world around us" (p. xvi). She posits that these are made possible by scriptural inference, strategic signaling, and what she calls the rightwing information ecosystem—an evolution of the concept of rightwing media ecosystem (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Conservative propaganda—deliberate, systematic information campaigns leveraging the power of multiple mass media—is successfully mediated as they appeal to what Tripodi calls the five F's: faith, family, firearms, (armed) forces, and free market. These campaigns are meticulously crafted to nudge conservative voters into more radical ideas by inviting them to "do their own research" (p. 80). Tripodi thus focuses on how search as a process and a media practice has been central in their ideological conversion and mobilization.

The book is structured around the seven steps of the propagandists' playbook. The first three steps focus on the audience. The first chapter, "Knowing Your Audience," discusses how conservative politicians and pundits can unite otherwise disconnected individuals in a common conversation by homing in on the five F's in their online and offline gatherings and produce resonant propaganda. The second chapter, "Build a Network," updates previous work on conservative media by showing that networked disinformation operations do not solely operate inside media ecosystems but also thrive in offline gatherings—in churches, in schools, or in community meetings—by promoting or even initiating conservative information-seeking online. In the third chapter, titled "Engage in Their Form of Media Literacy," Tripodi argues that decontextualization and scriptural inference, the practice of "critically interrogat[ing] media messages in the

same way they approach the Bible" (Tripodi, 2018, p. 3), are key features of conservative media literacy: They align with authority-averse American Protestantism; they make things obvious, easy, "factual," and not emotional. Whereas nuanced and contextualized readings are seen as likely to be misguided by human intentions, decontextualization and scriptural inference foster inerrancy, thereby strengthening the conservative worldview. That is how conservatism becomes both a worldview and a media practice, or a way of experiencing and interpreting information.

While the previous sections foreground crucial factors on the audience side, the next four chapters focus on conservative tactics of manipulating media itself. Chapter four, "Understand How Information Flows," talks about the centrality of Google searches in conservatives' information verification process. Conservative voters falsely view Google as a neutral information arbiter, unaware that both their socialization and the implicitly-coded biases in algorithms affect query results. Tripodi explains how conservative elites exploit this in the next chapter, "Set the Traps." Since conservative voters tend to do their own research and think that the higher a search result is in the list, the more trustworthy it is, conservative elites game the search by appropriating, manipulating, and monopolizing keywords in their propaganda. Thus, when conservatives encounter primed conservative keywords from either their own community gatherings or their scriptural inference, their search leads to rightwing content appearing first. This practice also leads to higher outgroup discovery from more neutral audiences since the hits from conservative searches nudge algorithms to display conservative content first rather than progressive ones. As conservative elites game the search process, the conservative information ecosystem becomes more persistent.

As for the last two chapters, "Make Old Ideas Seem New" and "Close the Loop," Tripodi explains how the rightwing information ecosystem self-references in-group content when they amplify conservative tropes, by rehashing old conservative discriminatory ideas with new labels and by urging conservative pundits to cross-promote across their own channels. This makes "doing your own research" more effective since it appears that the audiences arrive at the truth on their own and without interference from biased outsiders, even though their entire information ecosystem has already been tainted.

Tripodi concludes the book by reminding us that conservative voters have agency when they navigate their information ecosystem, but conservative pundits and politicians have manipulated conservative media practices through gaming search engine optimization and dictating the terms of partisan information processing. By establishing this argument and asserting that there is no neutral Internet search, Tripodi's work lucidly explains and enlightens the audience on the otherwise nebulous process of conservative meaning making with her detailed analysis of the mediation of conservative worldviews, buttressed by historical precedents and ethnographic accounts.

Ultimately this book offers three crucial theoretical contributions. First, her ethnography shows that rightwing media ecosystems do not suffice in capturing networked propaganda; instead, the author argues for a rightwing *information* ecosystem to account for how offline groups legitimize online propaganda and shepherd conservatives toward it. Second, her focus on search provides a convincing account of why polarization occurs and persists on the ground, by focusing on how trust is negotiated in conservative media consumption. Third, and most important, while Tripodi does not explicitly argue this point, her work demonstrates that there is a deliberate denial of better information and media literacy at the level of the industry and the community.

Conservative elites are not only deliberately disinforming but also deliberately denying alternative information and bounding conservative voters' agency in their media experience. This provides a palpable example of how disinformation *harms*. This important contribution is somewhat dampened by the lack of detail over *who* are the actual conservative elites being discussed in this book. Are we talking about conservative billionaires only? Do rich rightwing propagandists count as conservative elite? Are the conservative elites at the forefront of narrative creation, or do they just amplify propagandists' media content? This deserves clarification but does not diminish the overall value of Tripodi's intelligent work.

Scholars interested in critical media studies, science and technology studies, political communication, and conservative identity and politics will resonate with this book. Through this book, the reader is treated to a courtside view of how ideological conversion is meticulously arranged across various media as it touches on salient personal values while at the same time empowering the individual through a more intimate process of self-education. Tripodi's observations are also generally applicable to many conservative, nationalist, or hyperpartisan movements outside the United States. *The Propagandists' Playbook* gives us a sorely needed deep dive into the epistemological practices of conservatives, fostering the kind of grounded understanding necessary if we are ever able to find a solution to hyperpartisan disinformation.

## References

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Tripodi, F. (2018). *Searching for alternative acts: Analyzing scriptural inference in conservative news practices.* Data & Society. Retrieved from https://datasociety.net/library/searching-for-alternative-facts/