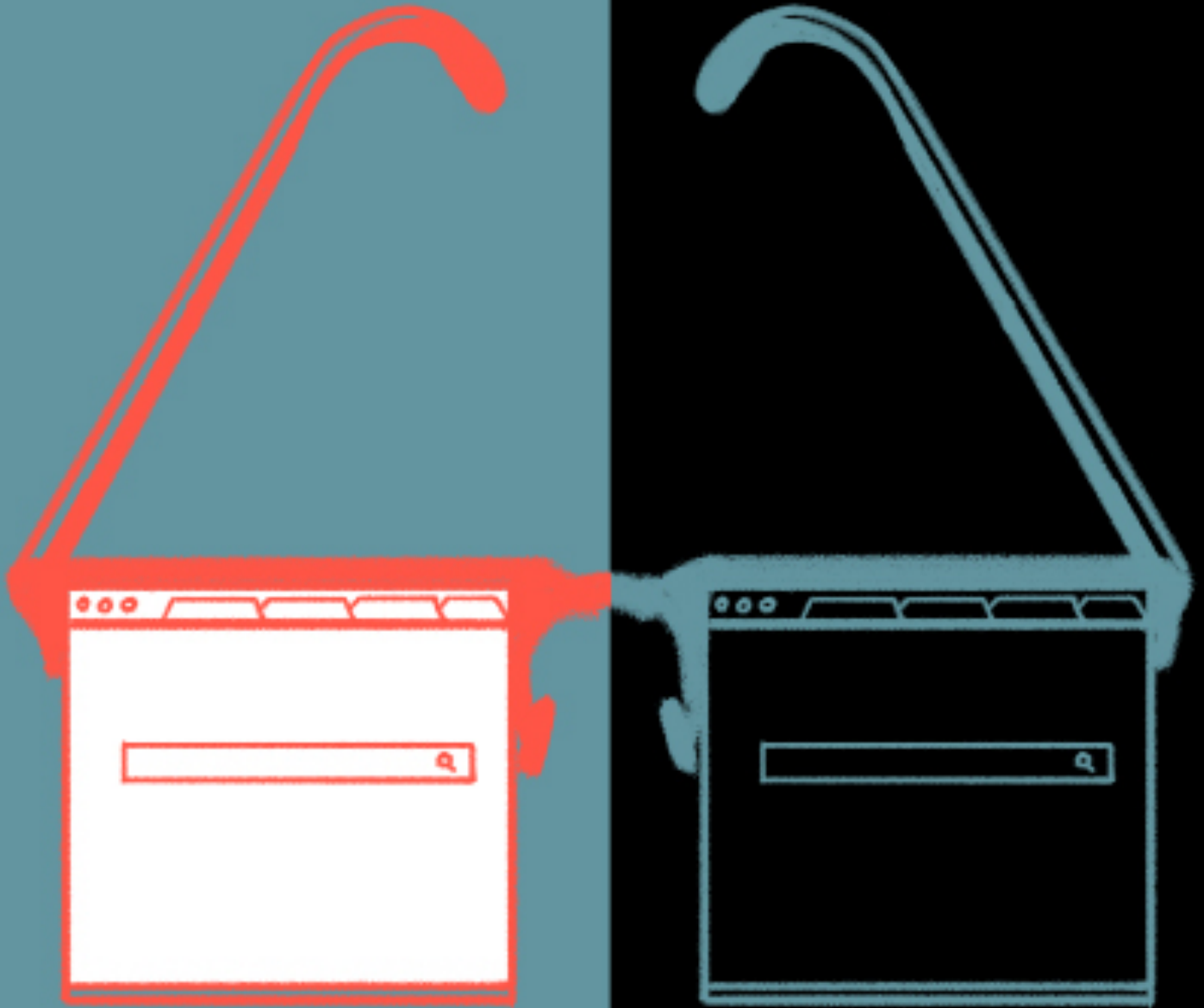




Searching for Alternative Facts:

Analyzing Scriptural Inference in
Conservative News Practices

Francesca Tripodi



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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.³⁷ 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

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.

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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."

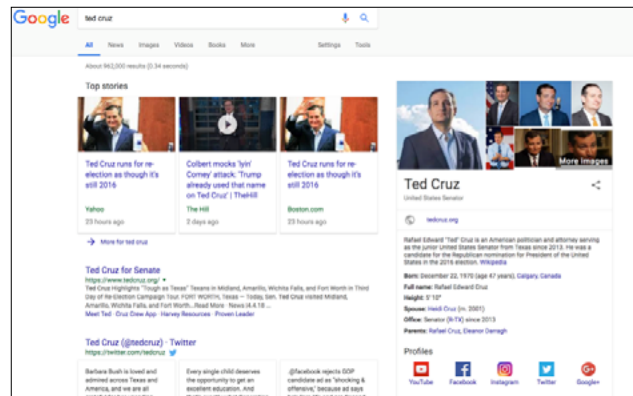


Figure 1. The “special bio” Silas is referring to is the Google Knowledge Panel

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.³⁸ 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*

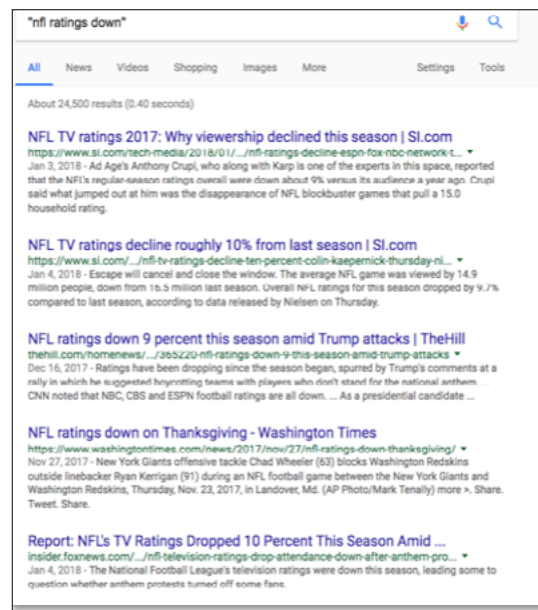


Figure 3. January 25, 2018 query results

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.

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*phrase someone Googles dramatically affects the information they receive.*³⁹

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

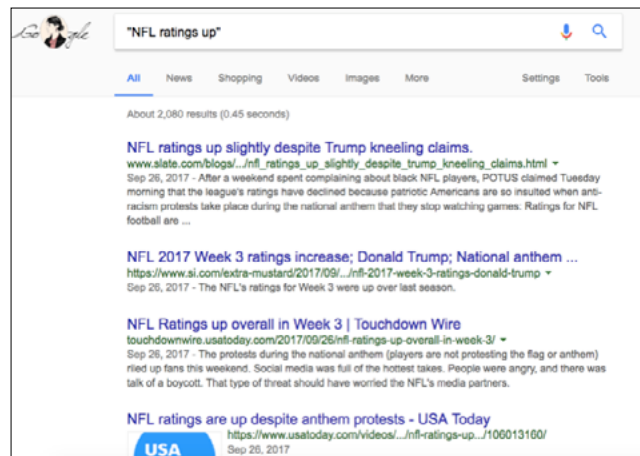


Figure 4. January 25, 2018 query results

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 24th 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.

³⁹ 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.

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In my interview with Sarah, she admitted that her Google searches rarely revealed alternative points of view.⁴⁰ 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."

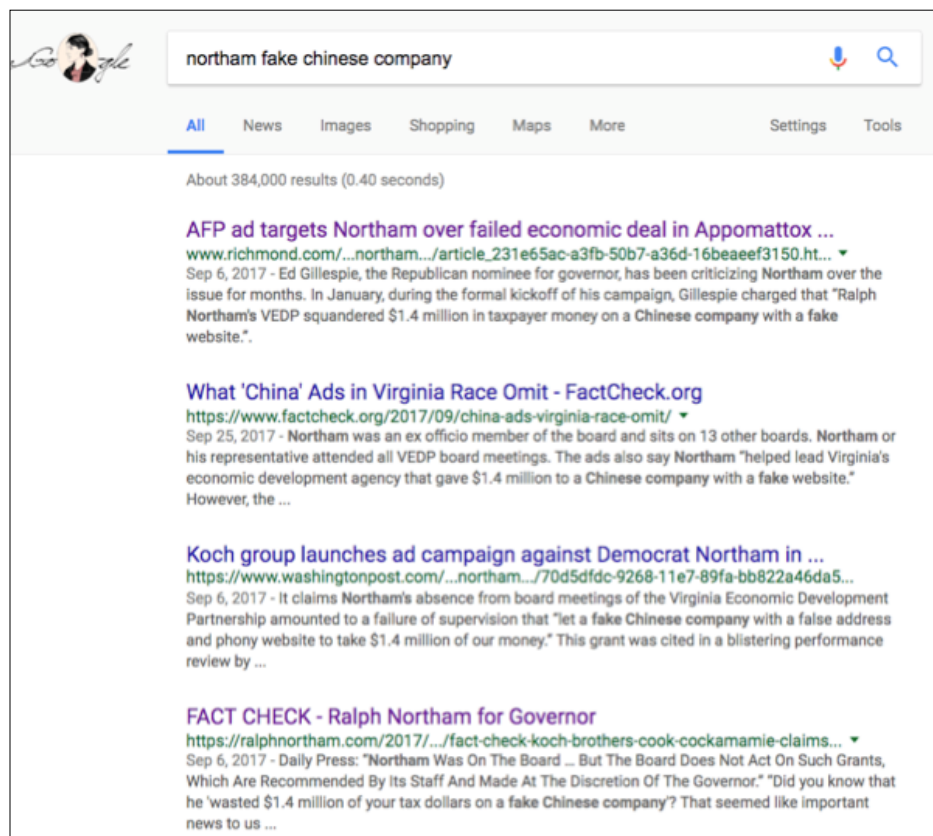


Figure 5. January 25, 2018 query results

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.

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“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

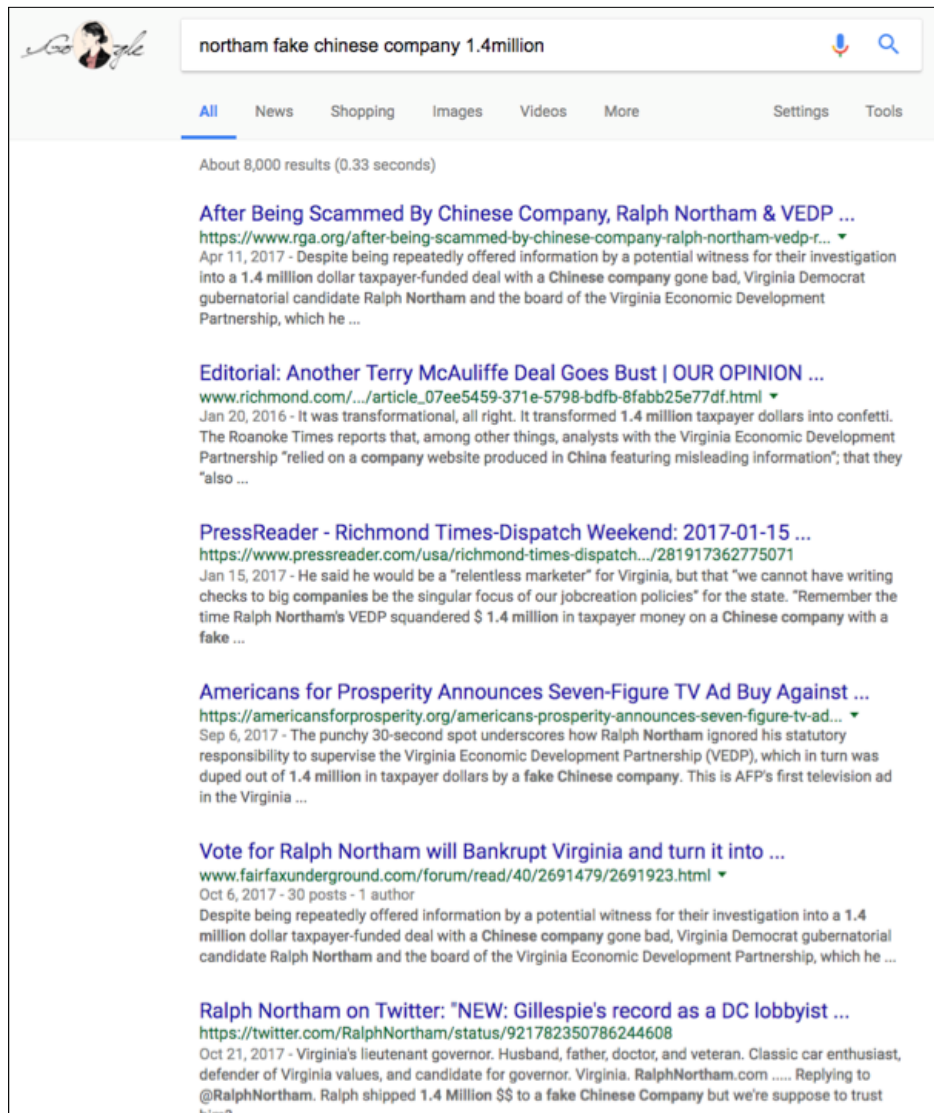


Figure 6. January 25, 2018 query results

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

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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 Prosperity⁴¹ 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

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

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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.

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.⁵²

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.⁵³ Following our interviews, I connected with these respondents on Facebook using an account created for this project.

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 12th. 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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