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## THINKING FOR THEMSELVES: EXAMINING THE REACTIONARY RIGHT'S *BOOTSTRAPS EPISTEMOLOGY*

Cindy Ma  
Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

### Introduction

In recent years, popular interest in disinformation has coalesced around a series of high-profile events: the Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump, and more recently, the protests against vaccine mandates. Even as “hypodermic needle” theory has been widely discredited within the social sciences, journalistic and scholarly investigations into these events have favoured simplistic models of media effects wherein conservative audiences are framed as passive recipients of propaganda, influenced by foreign agents and opportunistic tricksters to act against their own interests. This model of disinformation has been increasingly challenged by qualitative scholarship showing that conservatives are active agents in their media consumption who, at least in the US context, are *more likely* than liberals to visit diverse sources of news and information (Schradié, 2019; Tripodi, 2017). This paper offers a new way of conceptualizing right-wing approaches to truth and knowledge, based on over two years of online fieldwork (2019-2021) into reactionary<sup>1</sup> YouTube channels and their audiences. I use qualitative content analysis to examine over 100 hours of YouTube videos, 1050 YouTube comments, and online interviews with 18 current and former fans of these channels. Drawing on these data sources, I introduce the concept of *bootstraps epistemology* to capture how reactionary influencers and their audiences speak about their political beliefs.

### Bootstraps Epistemology

In this paper, I argue that the reactionary right’s emphasis on “rugged individualism” forms the basis not just of their political project but also of their imagined epistemology. Throughout my fieldwork, I found that reactionary YouTubers and their viewers described arriving at their political beliefs as a highly idiosyncratic process of personal

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<sup>1</sup> I use “reactionary” as the primary descriptor of my study’s subjects as it captures how popular right-wing YouTubers are typically reactive: that is, working against the “woke” mob, social justice warriors, and the liberal establishment (including the mainstream media, Democrats, and academia).

research and rational deliberation. I call this narrative of political formation *bootstraps epistemology*. Just as the bootstraps narrative in politics argues that individuals have the duty to reject government “handouts” and improve their circumstances through hard work and thrift, bootstraps epistemology encourages people to reject dogma and instead pursue knowledge through solitary study and intellectual combat with opponents. I propose that the bootstraps narrative of personal responsibility and bootstraps epistemology are mutually-enforcing discourses that advance individualistic solutions to social problems. I find that the latter has gained currency in recent years, with the widespread loss of trust in mainstream media (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014) and the proliferation of “alternative” sources of online news and information.

The concept of bootstraps epistemology builds upon the work of critical race scholars who have complicated our understanding of Enlightenment values, such as rationality, objectivity, and neutrality. In *Toward a global idea of race*, Ferreira da Silva (2007) argues that racial logics are inextricable from early modern Western philosophy, which centred “reason” as the locus of human endeavours. This worldview elevated the white European subject as *transparent*—possessing agency, interiority, and reason—while Europe’s various “others” are always *affectable*—subject to the forces of nature. In my research, I find that reactionary YouTubers embrace the legacy of the transparent subject, painting themselves as eminently rational while disparaging their political opponents as emotional, hyper-sensitive, and hysterical. Thus, bootstraps epistemology cannot be separated from broader social hierarchies that mediate whose voices are imbued with “reason,” and whose are not.

### **Reactionary YouTubers & their audiences**

Within the current media landscape, there are no louder advocates for bootstraps epistemology than political influencers who create content for online platforms (Lewis, 2018). These influencers benefit from the popularization of bootstraps epistemology because it engenders distrust of institutional voices while pushing people to “do their own research” on sites like YouTube. My interview respondents closely echoed the language of reactionary influencers in expressing their wariness of mainstream media, while invoking the independent, non-institutional status of YouTubers as a sign of integrity and trustworthiness. While this skeptical orientation towards mainstream media echoes Tripodi’s (2017) concept of *scriptural inference*<sup>2</sup>, I found this approach to information-seeking across a wide range of respondents, not just Christians. In fact, many of my respondents identified proudly as atheists, which suggests the widespread adoption of these practices beyond US-based evangelicals.

Just as reactionary YouTubers place themselves outside of institutions, many also place themselves outside of ideology. This framing was eagerly taken up by interview respondents—across age groups and geographies—who eschewed political labels, parties, and movements in favour of the rational self as the purest, least corruptible,

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<sup>2</sup> Tripodi’s (2017) ethnographic work with conservatives in the US southeast found that right-wing news readers and viewers engage in the practice of *scriptural inference*: that is, using Christian “theological teachings to unpack texts like the Constitution or other forms of media” (p.18). Tools of scriptural inference include close reading, re-visiting founding documents, and tracing news stories back to primary sources.

source of political belief. This finding was particularly striking given that almost all of these individuals held the same set of “idiosyncratic” (libertarian) political beliefs: rejection of progressive orthodoxy, reverence for individual freedoms and freedom of speech in particular, and a self-avowed openness to “different ways of life<sup>3</sup>.”

Although my respondents and the YouTubers they admire may take pride in their open-mindedness, only certain kinds of “evidence” are considered legitimate under bootstraps epistemology. For right-wing influencers, Reason comes with a particular *brand aesthetic* that involves “destroying” liberals in debate settings, a confident and aggressive disposition, and the rapid-fire deployment of supporting evidence such as statistics and news headlines (Hong, 2020). Within this discursive community, the lived experiences of marginalized people are routinely dismissed as biased and self-serving, whereas pseudoscience and conspiracy theories peddled by white men hold sway if delivered in the correct manner.

## Implications

Ultimately, bootstraps epistemology is highly compatible with white supremacist ideology, which hinges upon the figure of the transparent white subject who alone can employ reason to order, explain, and rank his various “others,” human and non-human (Ferreira da Silva, 2007). Under this epistemology, harmful reactionary narratives quickly calcify, as individuals interpret progressive arguments as ill-informed dogma while insisting that their own views stem not from outside influence but from their own unimpeachable reasoning. I believe the concept of bootstraps epistemology—and increased attention to the epistemological underpinnings of white supremacist beliefs more generally—can help scholars and activists to better understand the problem of disinformation and better target their interventions.

## References

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<sup>3</sup> My respondents ranged in their outlook on social issues, but many emphasized an openness to drug legalization or same-sex marriage as a sign of their tolerant attitudes.

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