

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

April 1, 2018

Easter Sunday

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Well, on this April Fool's Day, when every Christian preacher has been handed a homiletical gift to preach on the surprise of Resurrection – when the risen Jesus makes fools of those who would doubt the power of God – let's bend that gift a little and consider instead *our own* foolishness, rather than only the caricatured reactions of those long-ago players. Reflecting on our condition, let us seek a more *enduring* Easter: a Resurrection perhaps requiring we learn a few new vocabulary words before this morning's brunches, but one that promises to last longer than our Cadbury chocolates.

Let us begin in mid-November of 2016, when BuzzFeed's founding editor, Craig Silverman studied the top-performing Facebook stories in the weeks leading up to that presidential election (I trust that you will remember the one). Silverman writes: "During those critical[final] months of the campaign, 20 top-performing *false* election stories from hoax sites and hyperpartisan blogs generated [8.7 million] shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook. Within the same time period, the 20 best-performing election stories from 19 [*reputable*] news websites generated a total of [only 7.3 million Facebook engagements]."¹

In other words, as we Americans readied ourselves for the 2016 ballot box, we chose to read more sensationalist, *false* news, than we chose to read *factual* stories. While, occasionally, we might have been duped by an especially savvy post, most of the time we knowingly clicked the silly stories that agreed with us, rather than the real reporting that did not, and we then chose to believe only what confirmed our existing convictions. Psychologists identify such behavior as "confirmation bias:" our tendency to dismiss details that challenge our attitudes and perceptions, and to believe only what reinforces our worldview. Over time, confirmation bias hardens us, closes us to new or different ideas, and dulls our capacity to think critically. So-called "opinion programs" on radio stations and cable news networks have built financial and cultural empires based on these tendencies, making accuracy less profitable, and social media further exaggerates these effects, as we can so effortlessly self-select the voices we allow ourselves to hear.

So there's our first vocabulary term: *confirmation bias*.

For several generations, organizations have polled individuals on discrete preferences – in television research, for example, perhaps a preference between hospital dramas or family comedies – in order to craft the demographically-informed communications most likely to motivate a given population. Generally, we know how this works: we’ve answered the surveyors’ telephone calls, we’ve accepted that dollar bill in the mail and completed a Nielsen television diary, and, in turn, we understand why commercials during Saturday-morning cartoonsⁱⁱ pitch the newest toys, and why the evening news’ advertisers focus on cosmetic surgery and pest control.

However, media ecosystems have become exponentially more complicated, and we should realize that messaging no longer works only in this way. Rather than the interpretation of polls to make informed *generalizations*, advertisers and politicians now use “Psychographics” to make hyper-personalized appeals tailored to small groups and even to specific individuals.

That’s our second vocabulary term: *Psychographics*.

In a 1989 article for Marketing News, researcher Emanuel Demby explains, “In 1965...I was at a Detroit ad agency with...[the] then publisher of *Holiday* magazine and later publisher of *Travel & Leisure*, explaining [my] research...The vice-president we were visiting asked, “What do you call what you’re attempting to do?” [And m]y spontaneous reply was, ‘Psychographics!’ [which was,] as far as I knew then, a word I had made up[. Many years later, I found the word had a history and can be traced back to World War I, when it was used to describe people by their looks]. I would define psychographics as: ‘The use of psychological, sociological, and anthropological factors...to determine how [and why certain groups] make a particular decision about a product, person, ideology, or otherwise hold an attitude’”...*The use of psychological, sociological, and anthropological factors...to determine how [and why certain groups] make a particular decision...or otherwise hold an attitude*.

In 2014, a Cambridge University graduate student studying Psychographics compared the ability of a computer algorithm to the ability of peers to make accurate judgments about a common associate’s personality. Here’s the hook: the peers – friends, families, and spouses – could use all their years and experiences in relationship with these folks, while the computer program could use only one “signal:” *Facebook Likes*. The study found that the algorithm “could[, by analyzing just *ten* Likes,] more accurately predict the subject’s personality than a work colleague; [by analyzing 70 Likes, could better predict] than a friend or a roommate; [with 150 Likes, better] than a parent or a sibling; and [with 300 Likes, better] than a spouse. Given that an average Facebook user [in 2014] had...227 Likes, the researchers [suggest] that this kind of [Artificial Intelligence] has the potential to know us better than our closest companions.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So how do data scientists deploy confirmation bias and Psychographics now, and what in God’s heaven does it have to do with Holy Week and Easter?

The week-before-last, when the news of Cambridge Analytica's illegal data harvest from Facebook began to break, a whistleblower from that firm appeared on television, and this cat was an amalgam of appearances and persuasions that my grandparents taught me to dismiss on first sight: a high-school dropout with neon-pink hair, he wore an olive-green army jacket and a bull nose-ring so big it bumped his upper lip when he spoke. Nonetheless, he described how his company – founded on Cambridge's Psychographics research – built a business from the illicitly-received information on *50 million* Facebook users. Now, be clear: this wasn't just birthdates and *alma maters*, lists of "Friends" and summer vacation locales. Rather, this theft included all those users' "engagements," those personality-drenched Likes, shares, and comments.

So, understanding our tendencies toward *confirmation bias*, and equipped with these incredibly accurate user portraits, researchers created streams of *psychographically*-curated content to insulate millions of Americans in exactly the media environments that vendors and politicians believed worked to their best advantage. Even more insidious, we Americans so enjoyed what we were experiencing, we shared that content with our like-minded friends, creating echo chambers where we heard lies repeated so many times, we believed that they must be true. As one assessment of this situation's gravity, Vox columnist Matthew Yglesias compares the societal effects of Facebook to that of cigarette companies, suggesting Mark Zuckerberg should just "shut it down, salt the earth [behind him], and move on to doing something entirely new..."^{iv}

Despite the lilies in church this morning, this is some seriously Good Friday stuff, like we're witnessing the rise of the machines in *The Terminator*, and we can't figure out whether we're with John Connor or Skynet.^v I admitted this gloomy windup to my fourteen-year-old, Michael, explaining, "Son, we have to know we're dying before we can be resurrected." He replied, "Well, maybe...but that's pretty depressing for Easter Sunday."

Realizing he's right (of course!), I invite you, nonetheless, to recognize that Pilate still presides from his tower, and Calvary rises all around us. While the Roman authorities used violence and intimidation to consolidate and then expand their power, imperial forces now seduce us with comfortable lies, those nudges to scroll our newsfeed for only the headlines affirming what we already believe, to insulate ourselves with similarly agreeable relationships...but these confirmation-bias devotions leave us crucifying one another on cushioned loungers – we don't need principalities to nail us to a cross, we do it to ourselves! – imperiling our Easter not with immediate suffering, but with *ease*....and we so fatally blunt our capacity to engage our world critically – choosing that psychographically-generated chocolate bunny even though we *know* it's hollow – and, in so doing, *we* become the fools of this April day.

Brothers and sisters, believe instead that in the Resurrection of Jesus **God chooses truth over ease!** For as this morning reveals, the very moorings of the cosmos triumph life over death...and mercy over retribution...and love over fear...and always – *always* in the economy of salvation – the hard truth over the easy lies. These triumphs pillar our Christian Good News, and for us inheritors of that foundation, we enliven Resurrection as a posture, an orientation to the possibility that we can still be surprised – and not only surprised, but surprised *for good*.

Now, understand that those confirmation-bias machines? They pressure the Church to make Easter easy, to tame Resurrection until this morning only affirms the way things are...but God didn't raise Jesus from the dead – didn't bring a man back to life! – just to bless the paths of *least* interruption. Let us be clear: **in a Good Friday world, God calls for a Resurrection Church**, one that risks itself over and over again, because we as its community, we now know how the story ends. God calls for a Resurrection Church of active disciples and not passive members, willing to risk what is rowdy for the sake of what is righteous. The Resurrection Church labors *against* willful ignorance and seeks the reformation of our world: not only on Windsor and Woodland, but, more dangerously, at 12th and Congress, and Pennsylvania Avenue, too. Availing ourselves to ideas that challenge us, we nurture nothing less than Resurrection in our midst: rolling away stones to see what we might see, to uncover what they might hide, to rediscover what we and the world might have forgotten.

So, Good Shepherd, let us then covenant together that of *this* Church and of *this* congregation, we will not content ourselves only with what is comfortable...that we will not take our place in these pews expecting to hear only that with which we already agree...that in our daily lives we will not leave the prophetic ministries of justice to someone else, to some other congregation and community. Instead, Sunday after Sunday, and week after week, and day after day, let us covenant to that more *enduring* Easter –expecting surprise, orienting ourselves to Resurrection, and believing in the power of God to prevail.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

ⁱ Silverman, Craig. “[This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook](#).” *Buzzfeed*. November 16, 2016. Yglesias’ article first led me to Silverman’s, and down a rabbit hole.

ⁱⁱ Yes, I know Saturday-morning cartoons no longer exist, but I am picturing here those Masters of the Universe commercials by Mattel.

ⁱⁱⁱ “[Computers Using Digital Footprints Are Better Judges Of Personality Than Friends And Family](#).” University of Cambridge Research News. January 12, 2015. I found this article after hearing a reference to the study on the *New York Times* podcast, “The Daily” on March 21, 2018. The lead author’s name sounds like “Woo You,” adding to the incredibility of the research.

^{iv} Yglesias, Matthew. “[The Case Against Facebook](#).” *Vox*. March 21, 2018. After that comparison of Facebook to cigarette companies, Yglesias argues: “Rumors, misinformation, and bad reporting can and do exist in any medium. But Facebook created a medium that is *optimized* for fakeness...[it becomes] a confirmation bias machine – a machine that can best be fed through deliberate engineering. In reputable news rooms, that’s engineering that focuses on graphics, headlines, and story angles while maintaining a commitment to accuracy and basic integrity.”

But relaxing the constraint that the story has to be accurate is a big leg up – it lets you generate stories that are well-designed to be psychologically pleasing.”

^v *The Terminator*. James Cameron, Director. Orion Pictures. 1984. Specifically, I was thinking of colorful Easter bunnies carrying baskets of green, plastic grass being mixed up with the skulls and bones in that opening scene when the really bad special-effects tanks smush the dry remains of 2029 Los Angeles’ dead. I decided to leave the passing reference as an “Easter Egg” of sorts, maybe in honor of the release of *Ready, Player One*.