



RESOURCES SHEET from the November 18, 2016 Teach-in at Wellesley College

## Bias and Beyond: The 2016 Election

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### What can this election teach us about prediction and grasping uncertainty?

(Cassandra Pattanayak)

[This \*New Yorker\* article](#) by Jill Lepore (November 16, 2015) describes the history of political polls.

[This \*New York Times\* Upshot blog post](#) by Nate Cohn (September 20, 2016) describes an experiment in which four sets of pollsters were given the same data set and generated four different sets of results. This experiment illustrates the ways that pollsters combine polling data with other information in their efforts to estimate voting outcomes.

[This \*Simply Statistics\* blog post](#) by Rafa Irizarry (November 9, 2016) compares the predictions from [538](#) to the election outcomes and describes some features of the 538 methods.

Debriefing discussions from media modelers:

538 - [post](#), [podcast](#)

[NYTimes](#)

[Princeton Election Consortium](#)

[Slate and VoteCastr](#) and Andrew Gelman ([Nov 9, 2016](#); [Nov 11, 2016](#))

### How does the way we get our news influence our perception of what is true?

(Eni Mustafaraj)

After the election, a lot of criticism was pointed at Facebook for two main reasons: first, it provided a platform for the massive spreading of clickbait links from fake news websites containing lies and conspiracy rumors, which often made it to Facebook's Trending News and were viewed from millions of users; and second, its algorithm that curates the News Feed created a false sense of reality by filtering out information with which one disagrees and only surfacing information from people one agrees with. This latter phenomenon is known as a **filter bubble**, a concept introduced by the Internet activist Eli Pariser in [his 2011 TED talk](#). While some scholars had warned ahead of the election about [this algorithmic bias built-in at Facebook](#), the majority of Facebook users aren't aware

of the role that algorithms are playing in shaping their reality, as [this open letter to Mark Zuckerberg](#) after the election indicates.

Investigative reporting about the unchecked spreading of hyperpartisan links across Facebook pages before and after the election was provided by Canadian [reporter Craig Silverman](#), for the online publication BuzzFeed, [in a series of articles](#). Among others he discovered [how young men in the town of Ceres, Macedonia](#) were operating more than one hundred pro-Trump fake news websites. Later, he also explained how [one spreads such links through use of fake Facebook accounts](#). The tactics for spreading damaging lies for political candidates through online means were uncovered as early as 2010 by research from Wellesley's CS professors Mustafaraj and Metaxas, as outlined in [this research paper](#).

Strong criticism about Facebook's role in the election has been expressed in different media articles. For example, Joshua Benton at NiemanLab calls Facebook "[a sewer of misinformation](#)". Other journalists focused on Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who for several days [denied any responsibility](#) about the role of Facebook in influencing the electorate, as exemplified by [this opinion by Brian Philips](#) writing for [mtv.com](#). This awakening of the public and media in the past days led to a first positive change, both Google and Facebook announced that [they will ban from their advertising networks](#) the fake news websites. Finally, while not still admitting any responsibility, Zuckerberg announced on November 19 [a list of projects that Facebook is working on](#) to deal with misinformation spreading.

If you want to help Facebook algorithms get better, whenever you see a story that looks fake, please report it by [using Facebook's reporting tools described in this article](#).

## **What can we do to stop acts of hatred and bigotry? (Angela Bahns)**

**Public expressions of prejudice closely follow social norms of acceptability.** People openly express prejudices that are acceptable and actively suppress prejudices that are unacceptable. To help stop acts of hatred and bigotry, one thing we can do is collectively change social norms.

[This Undark article](#) by Chris Crandall and Mark White (November 17, 2016) describes a recent study which shows that the election of Donald Trump has shifted the perceived social norm regarding the acceptability of prejudice toward the groups that Trump has disparaged.

[This research article](#) by Chris Crandall, Amy Eshleman, and Laurie O'Brien (2002) describes a social norms approach to public expressions of prejudice.

[This research article](#) by Angela Bahns and Nyla Branscombe (2011) describes an experiment in which comments on a blog post suggesting anti-gay discrimination is legitimate increased heterosexual men's participation in gay bashing.

[This research article](#) by Fletcher Blanchard and colleagues (1994) describes an experiment in which hearing a fellow student condemn or condone racism led college students to express more or less antiracist opinions, respectively.

**Changing social norms is most effectively done at the interpersonal level.** Here are some suggestions for how we can help to stop acts of hatred and bigotry by changing social norms of acceptability:

- Call people out – stand up against friends, neighbors, relatives, and strangers if you hear them saying racist or intolerant things
- Reach out to marginalized groups – tell them you support them, tell them you value their voices in our community, and ask what you can do to help
- Be proactive about inclusion in your daily life - invite people with diverse perspectives to join your club or organization; get to know people who are different, including people who have different opinions or beliefs than you

**How can art, media, and technology be used to confront systems of privilege and power?** (Nicholas Knouf)

- Think of how one can use art and media for the purposes of what Michel Foucault called *parrhesia*, or "fearless speech". For more on his concept, see Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).
- Think about how one can appeal to the dreams and fantasies of people, not just their rational intellect. On this, see Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press, 2007).
- On the relevance of poetry for the present moment and the near future, see <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/still-poetry-will-rise/507266/>
- Some artists and projects to consider. While these projects were responding to different contexts from today, we can still learn from what did and did not work, drawing upon them for inspiration rather than prescriptions of what to do.
  - Jenny Holzer, *Inflammatory Essays* (1979-1982)
  - Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Alien Staff* (1992–1996)
  - Electronic Disturbance Theater, *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (2010-present)
  - Bread and Puppet Theater
  - Institute for Applied Autonomy, *Little Brother* (1999)
  - The Yes Men (especially their actions against Dow Chemical in 2004 and their re-imagining of the *New York Times* in 2008)
  - The continued relevance of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, including both their use of the Internet to spread their message, as well as their integration of indigenous myths with contemporary theorizing
  - *Hologramas por la Libertad* (Holograms for Peace, Spain, 2015)