**Reading English Like This （VI）**

**Safety in numbers?**

**Cubs win the World Series.**

**Donald Trump wins the White House.**

**What do those two \*epochal events have in common? Both were considered highly unlikely. And both happened.**

**Many Americans therefore judge predictions, with more \*skepticism. They’ve learned an important, even comforting, lesson about the limits of polling and other measures: Big Data is not destiny.**

**\*Algorithms are formulas written by humans to take the guesswork out of what other human beings will do under certain circumstances.**

**Survey responses to pollsters, consumer buying habits, internet site visits, etc., can be plugged into computer models to suggest people’s future behavior. The understandable hope is always that if you start with knowable measurements and \*crunch them through well-constructed formulas, you’ll produce a reliable preview of what will happen.**

**Not necessarily.**

**Computers don’t read minds. Nor do pollsters. People don’t always say what they think. Or they change their minds. People can be convinced and unconvinced. Some people say one thing but do another. You will never write a program to take into account all those \*nuances and many others.**

**Big Data can lead to Big Mistakes. Google Flu Trends, for instance, sought to use data from internet searches to estimate when \*influenza season would peak and at what level. But it drastically overestimated peak flu levels in the 2012-13 season. That failure “doesn’t erase the value of big data,” wrote David Lazer of Northeastern University and Ryan Kennedy of the University of Houston in Wired magazine. “What it does do is highlight a number of problematic practices in its use–what we like to call ‘big data \*hubris.’”**

**Should we toss out data and rely only on experience, or on anecdotes, or on what we hear (true or false) from people with whom we agree?**

**That would be a dangerous overreaction to the election \*flub. If people believe the data cannot be trusted, they may turn instead to “trusting \*anecdotes from friends, family and tribe,” political blogger Erick Erickson writes in The New York Times. “Policies will be based on what people think are good ideas, not what data show. This will potentially … further segment an already divided nation,” he warns, aptly.**

**Humans embrace Big Data because we live in an unpredictable universe that is often \*capricious. People feel comforted when they think they know what is going to happen. They see patterns in random chance. They purge from their thoughts the reality that a 74 percent chance of victory is a 26 percent chance of defeat. \*Superstition endures.**

**Reality is elastic. Every moment brings new possibilities. That’s what makes life intriguing.**

**Words:**

**algorithm 算法 hubris 傲慢**

**anecdote 轶事、奇闻 influenza 流行性感冒**

**capricious 多变的 nuance 细微差别**

**crunch 处理 skepticism 怀疑态度**

**epochal 划时代的 superstition 迷信 flub 搞错**