

1. Do you believe the above actually occurred in the 2016 presidential elections? What other elections were cited as being influenced and/or decided using this approach?

I do believe that this was used in the 2016 presidential election. Anecdotal evidence shows that a large portion of citizens of a “moderate” political stance are users of Facebook. This is where the psychological targeted advertisement can play a huge role. Moderate citizens are likely to change views between election cycles, it is in the interest of larger political bodies to gain the moderate vote in things like primaries and the actual election itself. This can explain how Trump was able to win so many swing states filled with moderate citizens. Furthermore there are transactions showing that Facebook and other organizations actually did end up paying a fine. A company with as much dominance as Facebook would not pay a fine unless the government was hunting for them, and the government would not hunt for an organization like Facebook unless they were prospected to win that money.

Another election cited as taking advantage of this approach would be the Brexit campaign that kept Boris Johnson in office. The situation in the UK was very similar to the United States around this time, so they had just as much reason and means to take advantage of the massive data harvesting

2. How might COVID-19 impact the above strategy? Would individuals be susceptible to targeted algorithmic fear-mongering based on the current pandemic?

COVID-19 impacts the strategy by serving as another area for the algorithms to search for fear and develop adverts surrounding this global event. The fear that most adults tend to bend towards is fear of lack of security and safety, as in losing income, food, or other means of financial stability. COVID-19 is a disease that is putting many people out of jobs, causing

businesses to fail, and have major corporations ask for federal bail outs. For the general American there is no greater threat to normal livelihood. The candidate that has adverts that show how they can resolve the fears of the normal American will win a lot of voters. They are very susceptible.

3. Finally, do unethical algorithms or misuse of data have the ability to actually “break” democracy?

Unethical is a strong word to call this algorithm. Every single user who uses Facebook is under legal agreement to the acknowledgement of data gathering. It's easy to portray this as major corporations preying on the fear of citizens, but it's also easy to portray it as citizens not utilizing the greatest resource of the age of information, the internet and research. These adverts are not making anyone vote, they are not harboring the lifestyle of the viewers, they are using a simple persuasion tactic. If these adverts are making you change your mind immediately then you need to learn to do more research or at the very least, learn to hear the other side. Before making any decision it's important to do proper research, it's what we've been taught for ages. But for the media there are 2 things that sell, intercourse and fear.