

Social Science in the 21st Century: Social Media and Politics

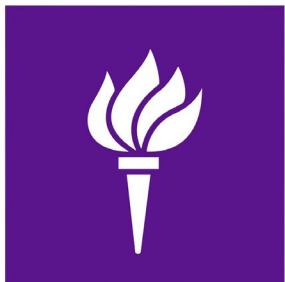
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CSMaP
CENTER FOR SOCIAL
MEDIA AND POLITICS

New Questions: **Social Media and Politics**

- Political polarization
- Political participation
- Confidence in democratic institutions
- Echo chambers/filter bubbles
- Foreign influence campaigns
- Online harms
- Identifying the veracity of news
- Algorithms & political extremism (“rabbit holes”)

New Data, New Methods

- Driven by **massive increases in computing power**
- Data
 - Enormous datasets from **digital trace data**
 - Linked data: surveys, digital trace data, administrative data
- Methods
 - Text/Images as data
 - **Machine learning**
 - AI – Large language models (LLMs) – Chatbots

Conventional Wisdom vs. Social Science Research

What We Think We Know is Not Always the Case I: Hate Speech and the 2016 Election

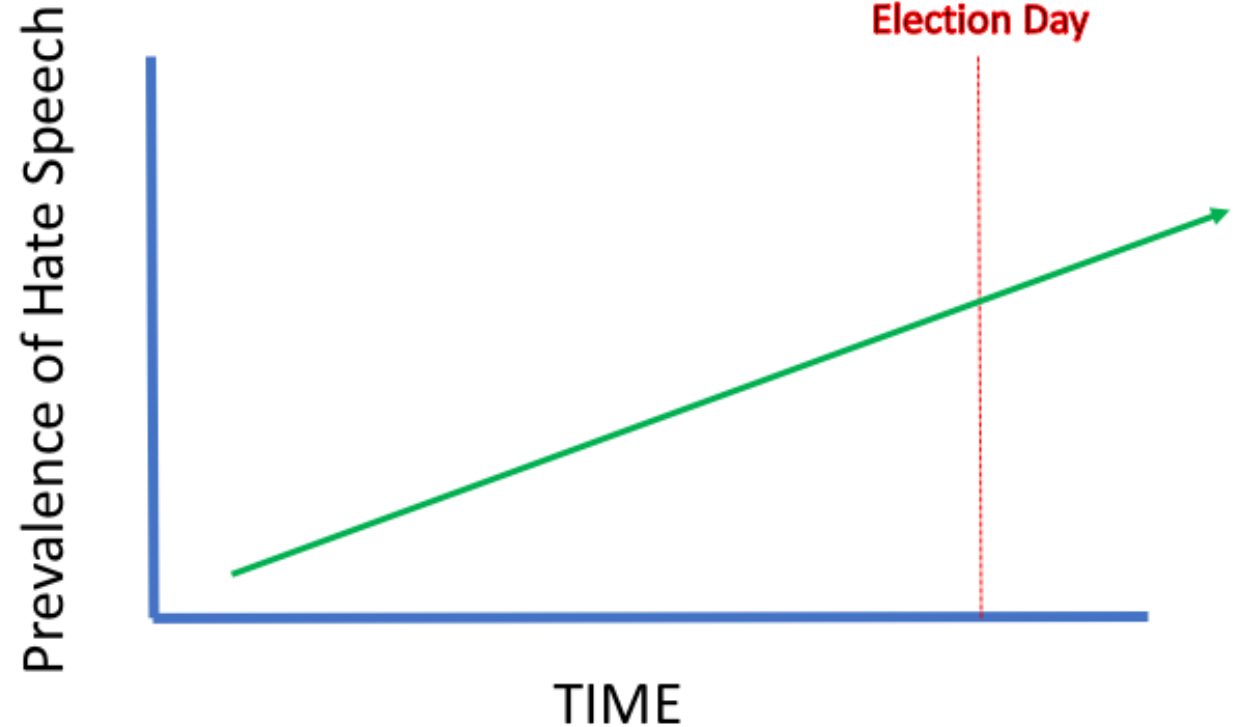
Conventional Wisdom

POLITICS SPECIAL REPORTS | Mon Nov 7, 2016 | 10:46pm EST

**Hate speech seeps into U.S. mainstream
amid bitter campaign**

**'Massive rise' in hate speech on Twitter during
presidential election**

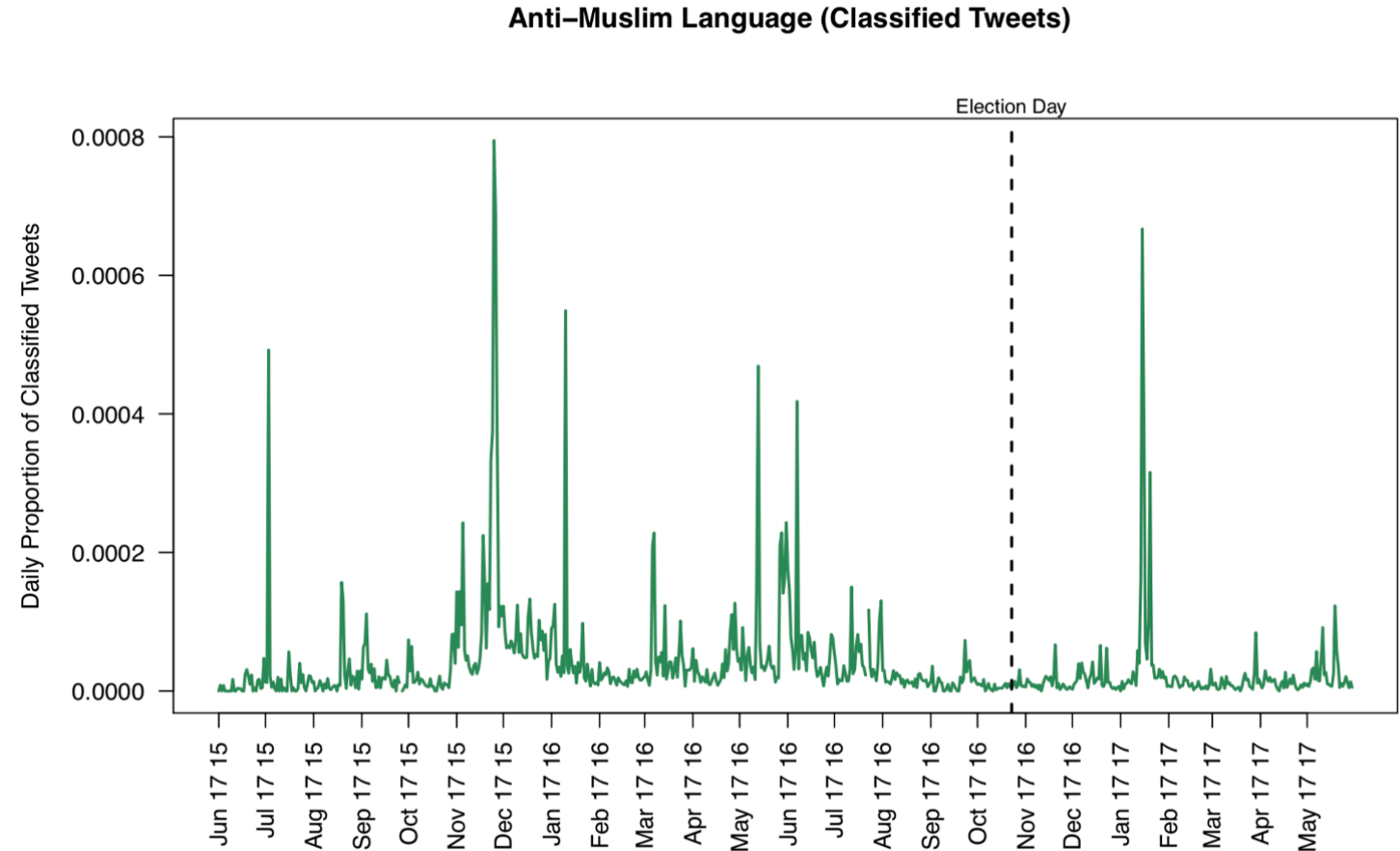
Jessica Guynn , USA TODAY | Published 5:00 p.m. ET Oct. 21, 2016 | Updated 7:00 p.m. ET Oct. 23, 2016



What We Think We Know is Not Always the Case I: Hate Speech and the 2016 Election

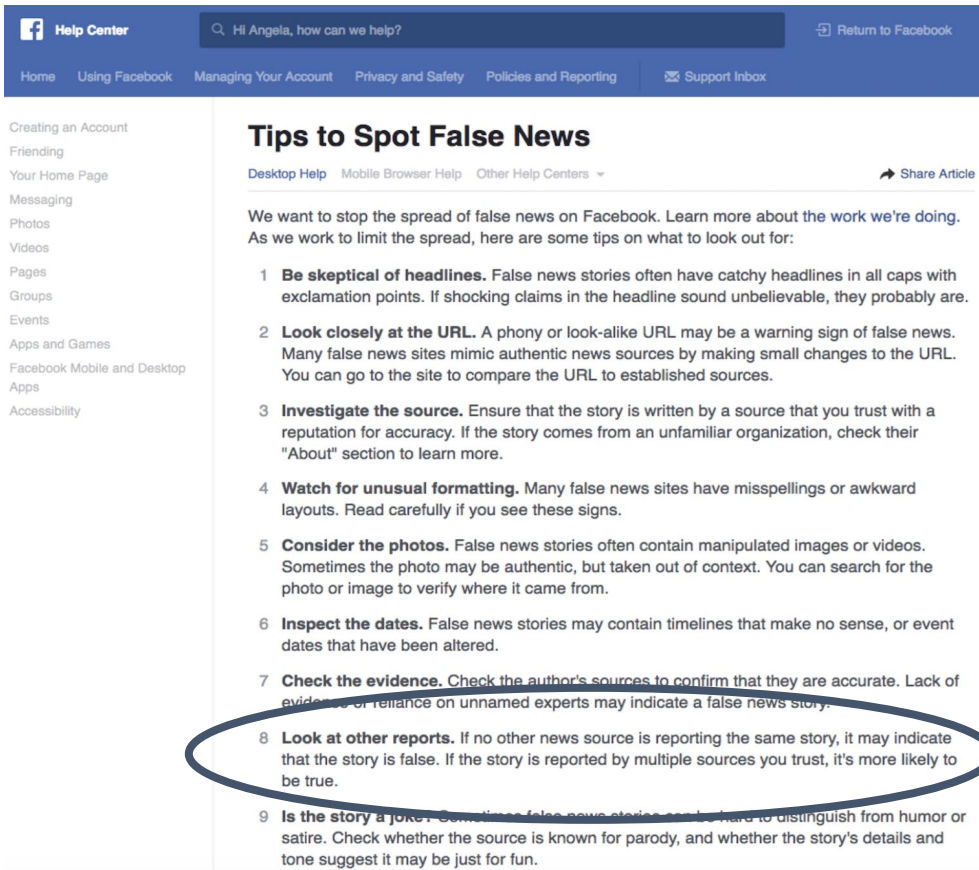
**Social Science Research
on 1.2 Billion Tweets
over two years:**

**Hate speech is bursty,
but was not increasing
over time from 2015-17**



What We Think We Know is Not Always the Case II: Do Your Own Research

- Conventional Wisdom: **Search for more information**



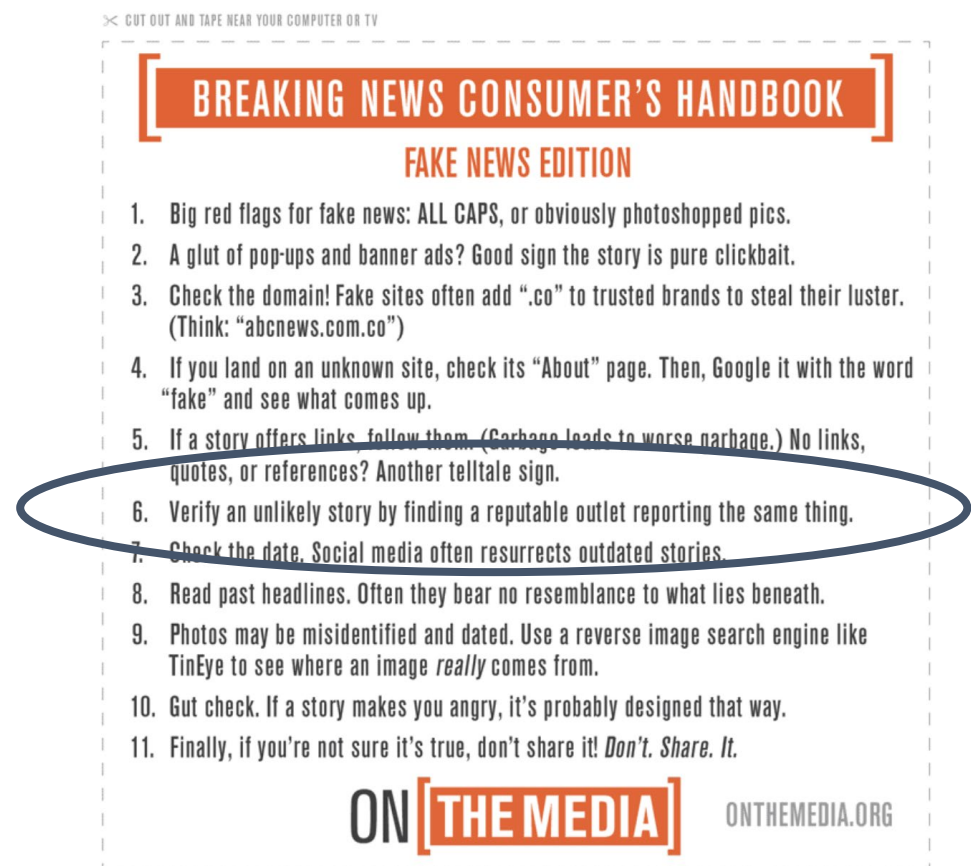
The screenshot shows the Facebook Help Center interface. The main article is titled "Tips to Spot False News" and lists eight points for identifying false news. The eighth point, "Look at other reports," is circled in blue. The text of the article is as follows:

Tips to Spot False News

Desktop Help Mobile Browser Help Other Help Centers ▾ Share Article

We want to stop the spread of false news on Facebook. Learn more about the work we're doing. As we work to limit the spread, here are some tips on what to look out for:

- 1 **Be skeptical of headlines.** False news stories often have catchy headlines in all caps with exclamation points. If shocking claims in the headline sound unbelievable, they probably are.
- 2 **Look closely at the URL.** A phony or look-alike URL may be a warning sign of false news. Many false news sites mimic authentic news sources by making small changes to the URL. You can go to the site to compare the URL to established sources.
- 3 **Investigate the source.** Ensure that the story is written by a source that you trust with a reputation for accuracy. If the story comes from an unfamiliar organization, check their "About" section to learn more.
- 4 **Watch for unusual formatting.** Many false news sites have misspellings or awkward layouts. Read carefully if you see these signs.
- 5 **Consider the photos.** False news stories often contain manipulated images or videos. Sometimes the photo may be authentic, but taken out of context. You can search for the photo or image to verify where it came from.
- 6 **Inspect the dates.** False news stories may contain timelines that make no sense, or event dates that have been altered.
- 7 **Check the evidence.** Check the author's sources to confirm that they are accurate. Lack of evidence or reliance on unnamed experts may indicate a false news story.
- 8 **Look at other reports.** If no other news source is reporting the same story, it may indicate that the story is false. If the story is reported by multiple sources you trust, it's more likely to be true.
- 9 **Is the story a joke?** Sometimes false news stories can be hard to distinguish from humor or satire. Check whether the source is known for parody, and whether the story's details and tone suggest it may be just for fun.



The screenshot shows a document titled "BREAKING NEWS CONSUMER'S HANDBOOK FAKE NEWS EDITION" with a list of 10 tips for identifying fake news. The sixth tip, "Verify an unlikely story by finding a reputable outlet reporting the same thing," is circled in blue. The text of the document is as follows:

CUT OUT AND TAPE NEAR YOUR COMPUTER OR TV

BREAKING NEWS CONSUMER'S HANDBOOK

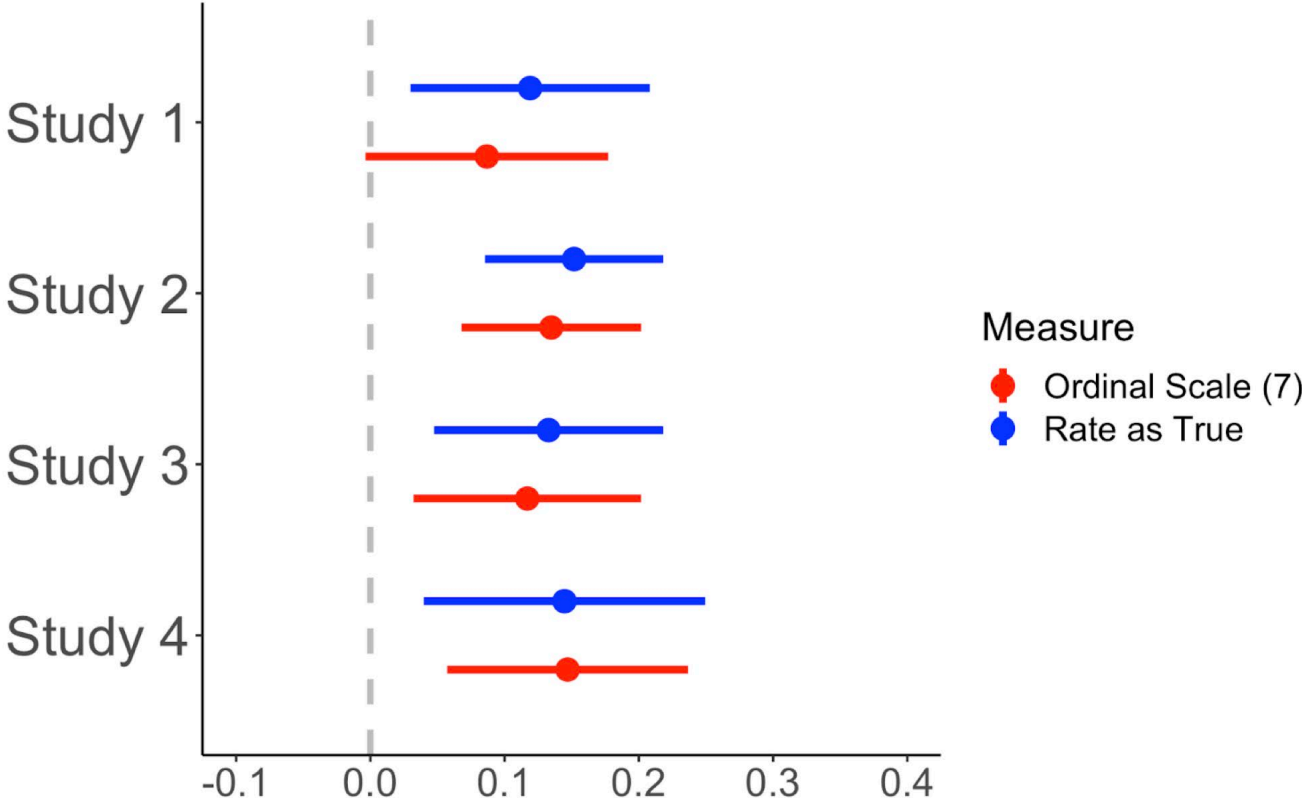
FAKE NEWS EDITION

1. Big red flags for fake news: ALL CAPS, or obviously photoshopped pics.
2. A glut of pop-ups and banner ads? Good sign the story is pure clickbait.
3. Check the domain! Fake sites often add ".co" to trusted brands to steal their luster. (Think: "abcnews.com.co")
4. If you land on an unknown site, check its "About" page. Then, Google it with the word "fake" and see what comes up.
5. If a story offers links, follow them. (Garbage leads to worse garbage.) No links, quotes, or references? Another telltale sign.
6. Verify an unlikely story by finding a reputable outlet reporting the same thing.
7. Check the date. Social media often resurrects outdated stories.
8. Read past headlines. Often they bear no resemblance to what lies beneath.
9. Photos may be misidentified and dated. Use a reverse image search engine like TinEye to see where an image *really* comes from.
10. Gut check. If a story makes you angry, it's probably designed that way.
11. Finally, if you're not sure it's true, don't share it! *Don't. Share. It.*

ON **THE MEDIA** ONTHEMEDIA.ORG

What We Think We Know is Not Always the Case II: Do Your Own Research

Social Science Research:
**Searching for information
online makes people
more likely to believe
false news is true**

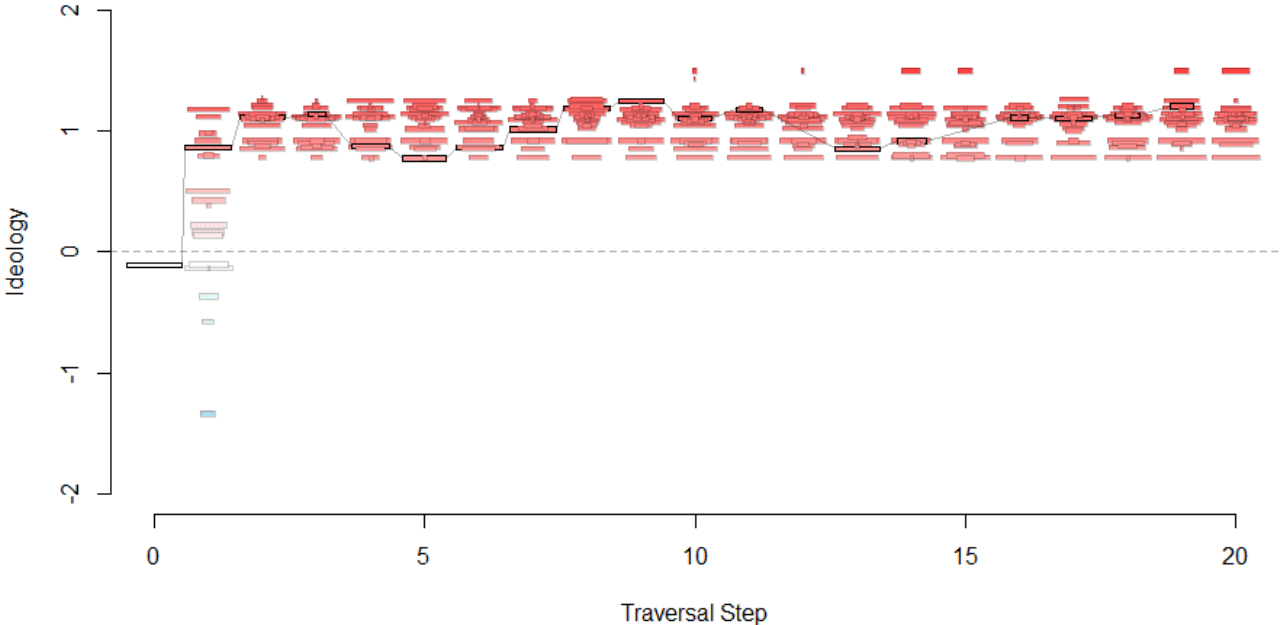


Effect of Searching for Information on Perceived Veracity of Misinformation (1 unit is 1 standard deviation of that measure in the control group)

Aslett, Sanderson, Goedel, Persily, Nagler, and Tucker (under review at Nature)

What We Think We Know is Not Always the Case III: YouTube's Algorithm

Conventional wisdom: **Algorithm leads to extremist content**



TECH How YouTube Drives People to the Internet's Darkest Corners

Google's video site often recommends divisive content designed to fix the problem



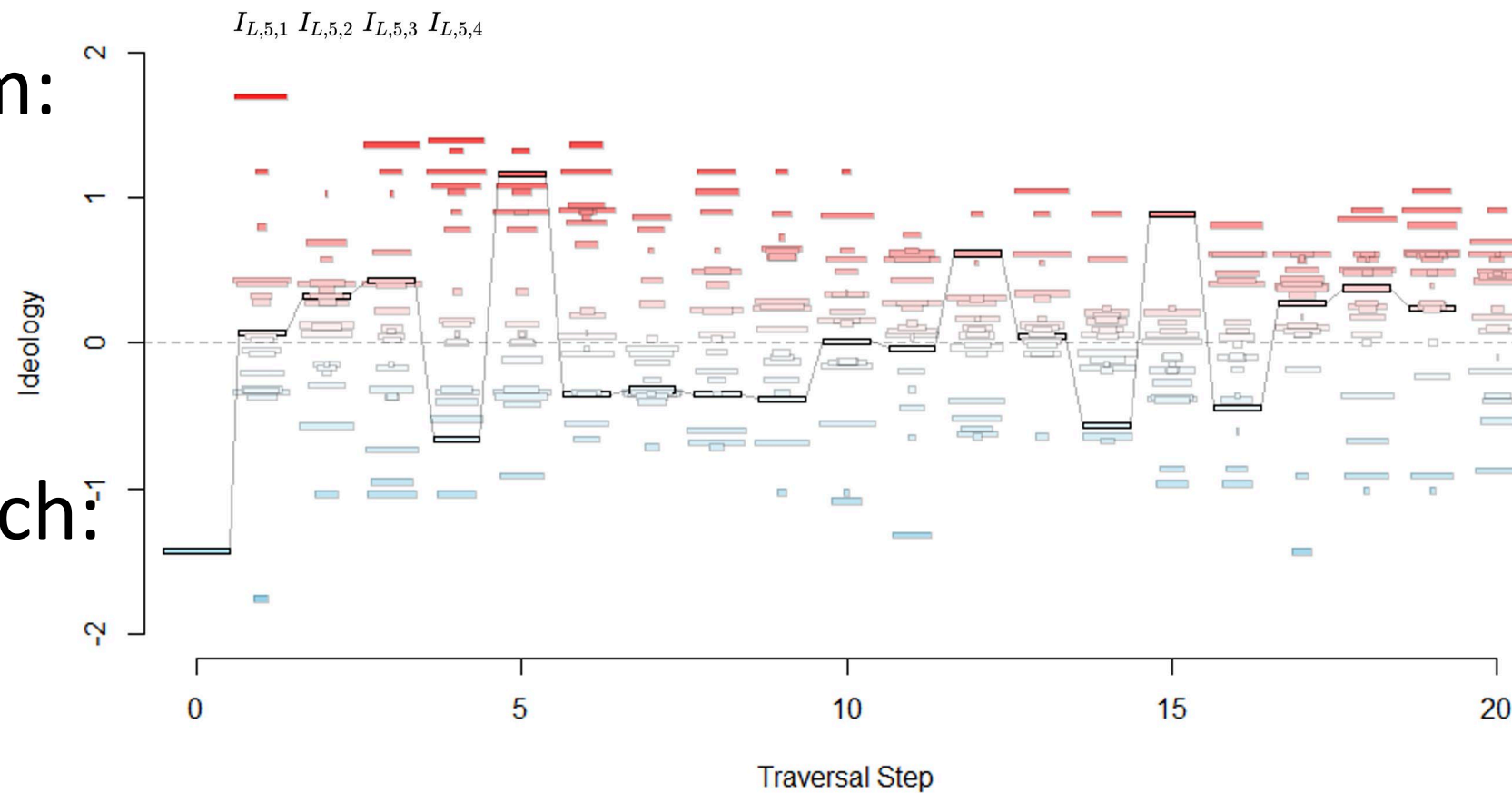
My husband and I poured everything we had into nurturing an empathetic child. Then, at age 13, he became infatuated with the alt-right. Photo-illustration by C.J. Burton.

What Happened After My 13-Year-Old Son Joined the Alt-Right

What We Think We Know is Not Always the Case III: YouTube's Algorithm

Conventional wisdom:
**Algorithm leads to
extremist content**

Social science research:
**"Rabbit holes" are
quite rare**



Social Media and Politics: The Challenges

- 21st Century Social Science → Lab Based Social Science
 - But the funding structures are not there
- Data
 - “Owned” by private actors → very different from previous generations of social science research
 - Social media research → data access ultimately at the whim of the platforms