Algorithmic Politics

SUMMARY: The power of algorithms to influence politics—shaping the way information flows, manipulating individuals, and even participating as bots—is increasing. There is growing public concern that the same internet algorithms that customize content and personalize online interactions enable tech companies to imperceptibly filter information, alter and focus attention, and provide conduits for messaging micro-demographic niches.

Forecasts

- Concerns about algorithmic persuasion will combine with the growing concerns about the political impacts of information bubbles and "fake news." Ultimately, these issues revolve around a struggle for who will control the information context for society.
- Wider access to algorithmic tools could cause them to be used beyond marketing and politics to persuade the public on a variety of non-partisan social issues.
- People disconnected from social media tracking—through either non-use or cookie blocking—will become an increasingly important variable in politics and elections.
- Widespread use of algorithmic targeting will increase public interest in online privacy and drive adoption of anti-tracking technologies.

Key Uncertainties

Consumer willingness to trade privacy for free online services and content

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Balance of free speech rights versus the preservation of democratic discourse

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Continuing dominance of Google and Facebook in internet media and advertising

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Potential for government regulation of search and social media algorithms

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Supporting Trends

- **Algorithmic manipulation effects.** Researchers have found that subtle changes to the ranking of search engine results can have significant—and hard-to-detect—impacts on public political preferences.
- **Algorithmic microtargeting.** Social media platforms can increasingly deliver customized and personalized marketing appeals.
- **Big data and marketing.** More effective use of big data will support a wide variety of new marketing capabilities.
- **Predictive analytics.** Predictive analytics uses techniques from statistics, data mining, and machine learning to identify patterns in datasets.
- **Algorithmic discrimination.** Widespread use of data analytics may lead to data-based discrimination.
- **Regulators targeting big tech.** Regulators in the EU, Asia, and the United States are heightening regulation of the world's tech titans.
- **Big tech backlash.** A backlash is growing against the market dominance of major tech firms, including Google, Amazon, and Facebook.

Related Drivers of Change

- Dark Data Comes to Light
- Nichification
- Taming Big Tech Dependency
- Ethical Edge of Innovation

Notable Data Points

AD DISCLOSURE IMPACTS

Consumers informed that an ad was targeted through algorithmic profiling were **24% less likely to be interested in a product** than consumers who were not given the disclosure.

Source: The Intercept

SEARCH ENGINE MANIPULATION

Researchers found that **support for a candidate shifted by more than 20%** as a result of tweaks to rankings in search results and newsfeeds.

Source: American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology

NEGATIVE APPEAL

Search suggestions with **negative phrases can attract 10–15 times more clicks** than neutral or positive terms.

Source: American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology

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Strategic Insights

- Ubiquitous use of algorithmic targeting online may create a "persuasion ecosystem" through which everyone online—including associations—has to operate. Even associations that resist such technologies will have their messaging subjected to algorithmic scrutiny and analysis.
- Algorithmic tools could be used for persuasion in associations' internal politics and generate contention among members.
- Microtargeted messaging can be used to mobilize association members and persuade them on a wide variety of non-partisan issues. Despite the potential effectiveness of such techniques, their use may involve delicate ethical issues.
- Social media microtargeting could play a positive role in improving member recruitment, especially in targeting new members from underrepresented communities.
- Ubiquitous use of microtargeting could make association members more appreciative of content that is genuine and authentic rather than perfectly machined. Highlighting the individual voices of both members and leaders within an association could add personality to communications and provide differentiation from clickbait content.

Timing

- **Stage:** Emergence
- **Speed:** Medium

Potential Alternative Futures

- **Persuasion ecosystems:** Algorithmic tools become pervasive, and increasingly useful and effective, blurring the lines between helpfulness and manipulation.
- **Algorithms of discrimination:** Regulators escalate their crackdown on microtargeting practices on the grounds that such practices implicitly discriminate against minority groups.
- **The new authenticity:** Consumers increasingly reject clickbait attention strategies and gravitate to more authentic forms of content.
- **Algorithmic transparency:** Governments force internet and social media companies to disclose their proprietary search and content-promotion algorithms.

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Take Action

- **Engage in app-based activism.** With easy, mobile access to rapid-response apps, associations can transform their grassroots lobbying. This capability opens the doors for small associations that lack the budget for traditional lobbying to play big and engage members in government relations at the touch of their thumbs. Associations can use algorithmic microtargeting to mobilize and connect members with specific interests to their policy makers.

- **Incorporate sentiment analysis into policy decisions.** Public and member opinions can be analyzed in social media to inform policy positions. Social media also acts as an early warning system to alert association leaders to dissenters and complainers, although this awareness could encourage over-reacting to a few outspoken members.

- **Become the fact-checker for fast-moving issues.** With the profusion of multiple channels of information and misinformation, associations can claim a larger role as the nonpartisan interpreter of the implications and consequences of public policy decisions. To combat misinformation at the speed of algorithmic politics, associations need clear positions, solid research, and rapid communication channels.

- **Teach the power of authenticity in persuasion.** If the public and decision makers become numb to mass-generated feedback, people with personal relationships and powerful stories to share will still have the influence they have always enjoyed.

- **Explore social media microtargeting to get out the vote in association elections.** Most associations are dissatisfied with member participation in officer and board elections. Also recognize that candidates can use this same capability to shape election outcomes.

Keyword Search

To continue researching this change driver, use combinations of these search terms: ***microtargeting, cluster analysis, A/B testing, big data, big data analytics, data mining, predictive analytics, filter bubbles, search engine manipulation effect, psychographics, psychometrics, personal data, privacy, political polarization, search suggestion effect***

Who Will Be Affected

Any organization or business with a stake in public policy needs to understand the capabilities powering algorithmic politics and discover how these tools can be used to amplify their positions and disrupt public debates. The ease of app-based activism is increasing public participation in local, state, and national affairs.

About ASAE ForesightWorks

ASAE ForesightWorks is a deliberate, evidence-based research program and emerging line of products to provide association professionals with a continual stream of intelligence about the changes facing the association industry, including:

- regularly updated action briefs;
- tools for applying insights from the research in your association;
- guidance in performing environmental scans; and
- opportunities to engage with peers around the research.

Ultimately, the program's mission is to empower association leaders to create a culture of foresight.

Check **asaecenter.org/ForesightWorks** and follow **@ASAEfdn** on Twitter for updates on new findings and events.

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