

September 6, 2016 | By Nancy Murphy

Social media is changing how candidates campaign and voters engage with the issues and each other, a Stanford expert says.



This is an installment of **Wide Angle: Election 2016**, a Stanford media series that offers scholarly, non-partisan perspectives on the forces shaping the election.

An interview with Stanford communications professor **Jeff Hancock**

Social media is transforming the election landscape. Jeff Hancock, a professor of communication at Stanford, examines its impact on candidate communications, public perceptions of trust and authenticity, and the contagion of emotions and ideas.

In just a decade, social media has changed the political process. To find out how, Worldview Stanford interviewed Jeff Hancock, a professor of communication at Stanford University and the director of the Center for Computational Social Science. Hancock studies how people behave online, how they lie, how they love, how they trust, and how they feel. This interview is part of Wide Angle: Election 2016, a Stanford media series that offers scholarly, non-partisan perspectives on the forces shaping the election. The following piece has been lightly edited for clarity.

How is social media having an impact on this election, both in terms of how the candidates campaign and how the voters perceive them?

One of the biggest changes in this election is the role of social media. Even though it feels like it's been with us for a long time, social media's only been around for ten years in terms of affecting elections. We can see it having an impact on this election in at least three ways.

First, the candidates are responding very fast to each other in public—within a day, maybe less. Second, social media is very direct. We see candidates interacting with one another through social media whereas before they'd only interact via surrogates, or directly in a debate. The third change is that social media is us—individuals and peers communicating with one another about what they think is going on with the election. There are good and bad dimensions to all three of these developments.

Now, it's easy to think that social media is changing everything,



but it's not. Despite the wall-to-wall social media coverage and exposure, the candidates are still flying around, driving around, meeting with voters. They're going to rallies in every nook and cranny of many states. The physical still matters a lot. It's not going away; it's just being augmented by social media.

Much of your research focuses on trust and deception, especially online. How should we be thinking of trust in this election?

I think trust is a really important topic for this election since both candidates have really low levels of trustworthiness. One thing that's important to understand is that we don't trust people just based on their past actions or on what they say. It's a very intuitive thing.

For important decisions, we tend to rely on our instincts. If you go to buy a toaster, you're going to spend some time reading reviews and what other people have to say. But when you go to, say, buy a house, you might just—boom!—jump into that decision. You never look at a review for a house.

It's the same with political campaigns and picking a leader. A lot of people just have a feeling: I trust this person. That intuition is really important. We can see it in other kinds of social media. With Match.com or eHarmony you'd fill out lots of information about how you fall in love and who might be a good match. That was disrupted by Tinder—all it showed was photos. Tinder intuited that people make judgments based on what they can see. That's an important part of the election this year – the visual component.

It could be, though, that we will see some real changes in the way we trust each other. Right now we're seeing big decreases in trust for institutions like government, police, and politicians. But we're seeing high rates of trust in each other. For example, a young woman has some drinks with her friends in San Francisco, calls an Uber, a guy in a black car pulls up that she's never met before and will never meet again, and she gets in. And 99.999 percent of the time, it works out great. We see high trust of each other and lower trust of institutions. Future elections may have to rely much more on the individual-level trust.

What determines whether people trust a candidate—on social media and even on traditional media or in the physical world?

One of the main things that people judge a candidate on is their authenticity. We're learning how to do that now for the first time in social media, but we've seen it before. When the TV came, candidates had to figure out how to look trustworthy on TV. If you were sweating too much, like Nixon, that's bad news. Now we're trying to figure out, and the candidates are trying to figure out, how to come across as authentic in social media.

This need to feel that the person you're voting for is authentic goes way back, probably back to our evolutionary roots. We make these very quick snap judgments of whether someone looks trustworthy or not. We take that same cognitive and affective machinery, and we use it to judge candidates. There's that feeling, and there's also what the candidate has to say. We can't ignore one over the other.

It looks like one of the key signals for authenticity in social media is how quickly candidates respond. Donald Trump, for example, responds really quickly, sometimes as somebody else

is speaking via Twitter, and he's perceived as a very authentic guy who says what he feels and what he means. The campaigns are working on speed—let's be part of the conversation fast. Let's react, so it feels authentic rather than manufactured.

How do you see social media evolving and shaping the political landscape for the next presidential campaign in 2020?

Looking into the future is a little bit scary in one way, and exciting in another. Is communication just speeding up – or is there something really different happening?

Some research suggests, for example, that we are getting more partisan. I think social media gets blamed a lot for the increasing partisanship. It's certainly not to blame for the beginning of the change, which took place in the sixties and seventies, but it could be intensifying it. There's a lot of talk about echo chambers and filtering out our news, and those are real concerns. They may be interacting together to make us more partisan. We all have our own worlds.

On the positive side, we're already seeing more peer-to-peer trust. People love seeing Facebook Live or Twitter Periscope because it feels like unfiltered information from a friend or a peer in a network, and can be trusted more than mainstream media, which we often think is biased. I think we're going to see more and more individual C-SPANs because we trust our peers more than we trust institutions.

Social media has the potential to amplify emotion—both positive and negative. How might this be playing out in election 2016?

We've had a lot of emotional, upsetting, disturbing events around the world in the last year. And we're seeing very emotional reactions to them. One factor is emotional contagion, which is when you feel an emotion because you have seen or heard somebody else experiencing that emotion. It's a very human thing to feel what others feel.

Emotional contagion can happen via social media: somebody reading about or seeing the attacks in Nice or Orlando, for example, can actually feel the fear and the anxiety that the people in that local area are feeling. I think that's playing a big role in this election. The candidates' talk about law and order, the rhetoric about fear and anxiety—it's because these emotions are palpable.

These emotions are not to be discounted. Sometimes we think we should just logically look at what's happening in the world. If you look at the statistics, you see that violent crime and crime in general are decreasing. But if you ask people how they feel, they say they're more anxious, more nervous. To discount those feelings and the way that emotional contagion can spread through a culture is to really miss an important part of how people make decisions about their world.

I think the more we try and talk with each other about why we believe what we believe, the better. That's really important for democracy. ✨



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