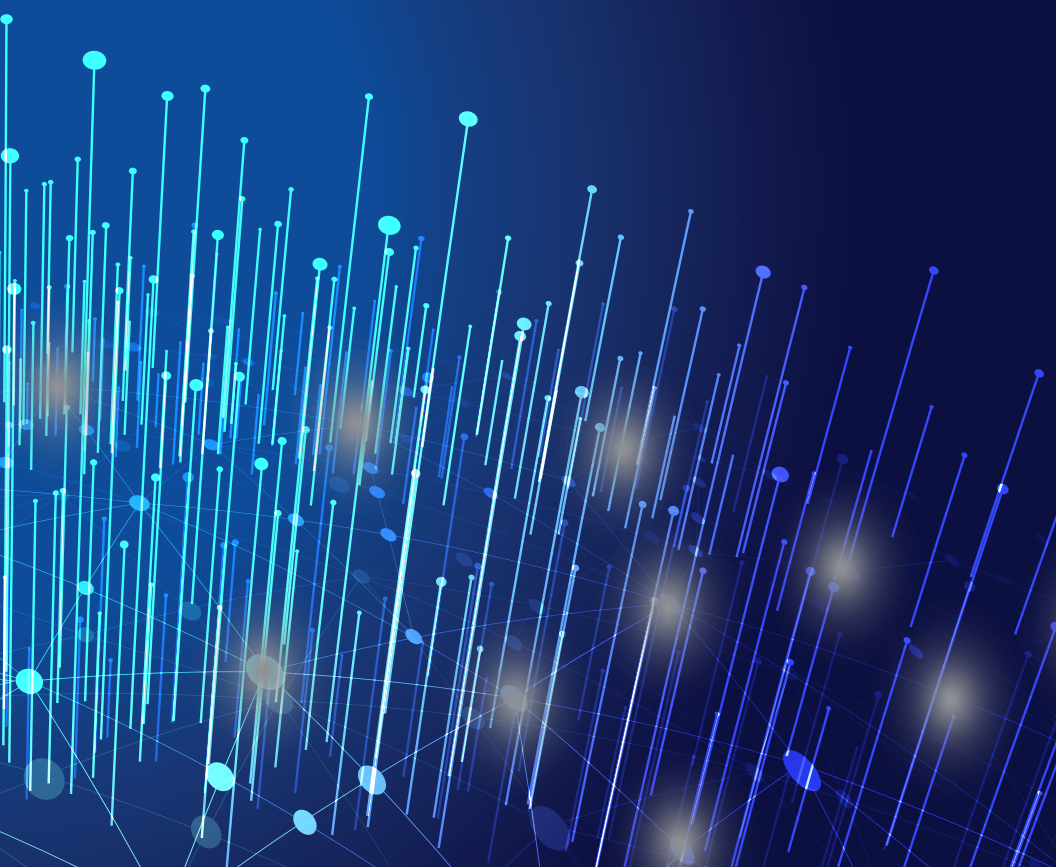




DREAM BIG REPORT **BIG DATA, BIG PROBLEMS**

A CONVERSATION WITH JILL LEPORE AND TRACIE D. HALL



INSIGHTS FROM THE PROGRAM
OCTOBER 20, 2020



DREAM BIG 2020 featured (L-R) author and professor **Jill Lepore** in conversation with Executive Director of the American Library Association **Tracie D. Hall**.

Long before the data and algorithms of Facebook took aim at our choices, Simulmatics set out to predict and manipulate our behavior.

The discovery of this “missing link” in the myth-making around Silicon Valley’s inventiveness inspired Harvard historian Jill Lepore to write *If Then: How the Simulmatics Corporation Invented the Future*. In the **DREAM BIG 2020** event sponsored by Cambridge Public Library Foundation, she joined Tracie D. Hall, Executive Director of the American Library Association, for a conversation about this overlooked history and its significance.

Intrigued by a mention of Simulmatics in her research, Lepore unearthed its initial stock offering which proposed “to engage in the use of computer technology to estimate probable human behavior.” Launched in 1959, and bankrupt by 1970, Simulmatics foreshadowed the predictive analytics wielded today by tech giants, marketers, and political operatives to sell products, shape discourse, and elect candidates.

Building the “People Machine”

The company’s liberal, white scientists first broke ground by counting Black voters and convincing the Democratic party that this electoral segment mattered. Hired to advise John F. Kennedy, they directed his campaign messaging—and shocked the public with their use of

the “People Machine.” “Now,” noted Lepore, “you couldn’t run for Cambridge City Council without hiring a consulting firm to run an election simulation.”



Tracie D. Hall
Executive Director
of the American
Library Association

Though dedicated to fully franchised democracy, these scientists revealed a “weird symptom of the limitations of mid-century liberalism” with their tech-obsessed efforts. As Blacks were protesting with sit-ins across the South, “they’re building this machine to predict the political views of black voters,” the author observed, “or you could turn on the TV.”

From a cache of letters written by one scientist’s wife, Lepore gleaned the insight that “some of these men seem to be attracted to the idea of creating an artificial intelligence that can understand people because they don’t understand people.” Their assumption that “we can solve the problem with a few more lines of code” is “hauntingly resonant with the arrogance and contempt of a certain kind of Silicon Valley entrepreneur.”

The Legacy of Simulatics

While acknowledging predictive analytics’ impact on our elections and consumer choices, Lepore warned that its most concerning use today is “predicting social outcomes for vulnerable populations,” e.g., using demographic data to determine whether a child should be removed from her family. “That kind of decision needs to be made individually...

[with] all kinds of safeguards and measures involving checks against possible error.”



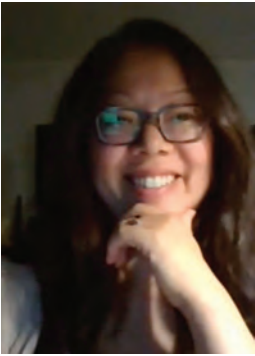
Author and professor
Jill Lepore

The author also pointed out the checkered history of government efforts to stay ahead of technology. As an engineer, Herbert Hoover grasped the implications of radio in the 1920s. He created regulations for broadcast journalism that set limits and supported balanced public discourse. In contrast, Congress defeated Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 proposal to create a national

center for all federal government data. Focused on the facility, politicians were oblivious to the real issue: “What are the rules for the extraction, storage, retention, and use of personal data?”

“What about a model that is based not on warfare, but on curiosity, free exchange, support, and genuine connection?”

Looking to the future, Hall observed that we see the use of “social media and other digital means to indoctrinate and proselytize every day,” and inquired how we might ensure that “information and digital access can yield greater equity and social mobility.” Can we “spread love, spread connection, spread community” digitally?



Director of Libraries
Maria McCauley

Perhaps, mused Lepore, if the underlying model—“psychological warfare”—is different. “What about a model that is based not on warfare, but on curiosity, free exchange, support, and genuine connection?...But that’s not a compelling IPO.”

Fortunately, the model Lepore posed thrives in our public libraries. Wrapping up the event, CPL Director Maria McCauley declared the Library’s commitment to “together dream about the possibilities of intimately connected and just community.”



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**A video recording of DREAM BIG 2020:
Big Data, Big Problems can be viewed at
<http://bit.ly/db20video>**

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