

Transcript:

Jill Lepore Discusses "If Then" With danah boyd

Co-presented with Brooklyn Public Library

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In this talk co-presented by Data & Society and Brooklyn Public Library, historian Jill Lepore discusses her new book *If Then* in conversation with danah boyd, founder and president of Data & Society.

JOEL WHITNEY: My name is Joel Whitney. Today's book *If Then* has been described as a revelatory account of the Cold War origins of the data-mad, algorithmic twentieth century, about Jill Lepore herself, Susan Orleans has written, "Everything Jill Lepore writes is distinguished by intelligence, eloquence, and fresh insight." Hannah Murphy writing in the *Financial Times* today said, "In her book *If Then* Harvard professor and *New Yorker* writer meticulous chronicles how simulmatics," and she's going to teach us how to pronounce that word, "laid some of the earliest foundations for the field of predictive analytics today wielded by internet platforms, advertisers, and political strategies just to help consumers, consumer products, or election candidates. The cacophonous band of scientists, psychologists, and slick Madison Avenue advertising prophets have been until now the unknown grandfathers of Facebook and Google and all of their whizzy algorithms. Commentators accused the Trump campaign of using, quote "weaponized AI propaganda machine" describing new and nearly impenetrable voter manipulation machine," writes Lepore, "New? Hardly. Simulmatics invented that machine in 1959 and so history repeats itself. The book could not be more prescient as Facebook continues its soul searching in the wake of the Cambridge analytical scandal and ahead of a highly polarized November U.S. Presidential election." And what you're hearing there is what great historians do they un-erase things for us and they remind us again and again of the cliché that something is unprecedented in our time is almost never true. Jill Lepore is the David Woods Kemper Professor of American History and an affiliate professor of law at Harvard University. She's also a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and host of the podcast The Last Archive. Her many

books include *These Truths: a history of the United States*, and international best seller which is named one of *Time Magazine's* top ten nonfiction books of the decade.

And she'll be in conversation with danah boyd who is the founder and president of Data & Society, a partner researcher at Microsoft Research, and a visiting professor at New York University. Her research is focused on making certain that society has a nuanced understanding of the relationship between technology and society especially as issues of inequity and bias emerge. She is the author of *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* and has authored and co-authored numerous books, articles, and essays. She is a trustee of the National Museum of the American Indian, a director of the social science research council, and a director of Crisis Textline. She has been recognized by numerous organizations including receiving the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Pioneer Barlow Award and being selected as a 2011 Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum. Originally trained in computer science before retraining under anthropologists. danah has a PhD from the University of California at Berkley School of Information. Will you please snap and clap and give emoticons for danah and Jill?

JILL: Thanks, so much, Joel, it's great to be with you all. I dearly, dearly wish that I was in Brooklyn this evening going out for a really nice dinner after hanging out in this beautiful library and getting a chance to meet all of you, but this will have to do. And I couldn't be more excited to be in conversation with this amazing [unintelligible 0:05:09.0a]. So we decided that I would just begin by telling you a little bit about the Simulmatics Corporation, Joel, it's Simulmatics as in simple and because no one has heard of it. It's an extraordinarily obscure story that I fell into when I opened an archival box at the MIT Library and found a story that answered a lot of questions that I didn't even know I had. And so I felt really obligated to write a book and to do that work. So Simulmatics Corporation was founded in 1959 by its president, a guy named Ed Greenfield who was a dazzlingly charismatic Madison Avenue ad guy, a devoted liberal philanthropist, a very devout supporter of Civil Rights causes who had worked on Democratic Party campaigns throughout the 1950s. Was also a really smart guy. He was very drawn to the kids of guys that David Halverson wrote about as the Best and the Brightest in a very kind of dry and ironic way. He was very really interested in the research being done in the behavioral sciences and in the emerging field of

computer science in the 1950s. And he was kind of like the Danny Ocean of the project. He put together this incredible team of people to design an election simulator. We, you know, we rely on election simulators all the time now if you follow you know 538 or you go to the *Washington Post* website you're gonna see election simulators all the time but this was a brand new thing in the 1950s and when you think about it it makes a lot of sense. If you were interested in trying to undertake the creation of a predictive model for human behavior in the 1950s voting would be the thing that you'd most likely want to work on because we have a tremendous amount of data. We have census data, we have public opinion measurement, and then we have elections. So democracy generates its own election data and so people who are working in the quantitative social sciences were really drawn to the study of voting behavior. Simulmatics felt that that model could be used to predict all kinds of behavior including consumer behavior but especially political opinions and attitudes.

So the company was founded in 1959, was hired by the DNC and later by the John F. Kennedy campaign to provide election advice for how to defeat Richard Nixon in 1960 and we could talk more about that. but I want to just kind of briefly sketch out that after that project Simulmatics worked in really every realm that predictive analytics is now deployed in in a quite commonplace and ubiquitous way they provided advertising advice for companies like Colgate-Palmolive and Ralston Purina and they did a simulation of consumer choice, they provided media advice for television stations. They did a big project for the *New York Times* on data analysis on election night. They did then a number of projects for the federal government. But the company was suffering by the middle of the 1960s there just wasn't enough data for most of the projects they wanted to do and computers weren't really fast enough to make this economically feasible so although they had the idea that they could use computer technology to predict human behavior and sell that as a business product it was a hard sell. So the company turned to a new kind of work in 1965 and set up an office in Saigon and did work and did work for the U.S. Department of Defense collecting and analyzing public opinion data among the peasants of South Vietnam. That work was extraordinarily controversial as you can imagine and led in many ways to the company's decline and eventual bankruptcy in 1970s. I'm really interested in the degree to which everything the company did has since been done well. The company did

most of these things badly but since then they've been done very effectively. And to me when I came across the story it was a little bit like uncovering an unexploded landmine like here is this thing that was buried a long time ago that is now exploding in our day, like we see the implications of what it means to accept as a business proposition the computer prediction of human behavior as a commodity that can be bought and sold.

So that's just my brief sketch out. Maybe you can get us started so because I realize people haven't read the book. I promise it's a more complicated story but in brief, company's founded in 1959, went bankrupt in 1970, tried almost everything and mostly failed but also set in motion a lot that we now take for granted and also many of us find very troubling.

DANAH: Thank you so much, Joel. And I know it's hard to realize that a book was launched two days ago so I'm sure many of you have not read it. but at the same time this is a book launch and a book celebration and so I'm going to put this up here for everybody to see because it is a brilliant and beautiful book and so one of the things for anybody who has ever been at a book launch with me you will know that I will also engage in the sales pitch that has to happen at these things which is that we should all celebrate Jill not just from being here and not just from borrowing the book from the library but also from buying the book from wherever you feel fit but I have put in the chat a place where you can go and buy the book.

But let's kind of dive in and have a fun time talking about some of the different pieces of the book. So the place where I want to start is a sort of question for you, Joel, which is that the book is the story of a corporation and its people and its tentacles but it's also the story of American democracy's very complicated relationship with data and technology which as I've seen from a lot of your other books it goes way back but this moment of being able to dive deep really looks at a period of time where our politicians were very willing to embrace not just data but the mirage of the technology. They didn't necessarily want to look under the hood and understand the details of it, they didn't want to understand the limitations, they very much were interested in the performance of data, what data could say if it could speak if you will. And that's a really interesting place for data to be especially at such high stakes context as you describe in your book. And so I'm curious what is it about the

American psyche and the political structures that make that obsession with having data speak come so alive repeatedly over time especially in this period?

JILL: Yeah, that's a fascinating question. I mean American democracy depends on demography, right? The nature of our political system is mathematical we count, we have to count the people, right, we're the first nation state to require a [unintelligible 0:12:08.6] census like we could talk a lot about the census this evening, I'm sure. but that's how a democracy works like it's a math problem even down to this problem of slavery is solved you know with a fraction, it's not solved at all, obviously, but what happens over the course of American history the pattern that I see is that anytime there's a new technology of communication which you could include the computer in or the mainframe computer in becomes, it's first a storage device and a calculating machine but it becomes a communications device there's political disequilibrium, like suddenly communication is faster, more people can communicate, information is freer with the emergency of the printing press in the 1830s, say. And the people kind of rise up because they have this new power. And then they kinda get kinda [unintelligible 0:12:56.4] you know, but meanwhile the different franchises expanded. But generally it's not like the technologies of communication are inscrutable or difficult to understand. Like we understand – anybody can understand how a telegraph machine operates, right? Even a telephone, it's like well it is a little spooky it's kind of invisible but it's not hard. The radio seems kind of just like a telephone call. People, they're not self mystifying technologies. The thing that's really interesting is by the time you get to the Univac in 1951 that's built to count the census in 1950 the culture has really wrapped itself around men of science. It is kind of part of the Cold War mandate. It's necessary to worship at the altar of engineers from MIT. So much so that it is a joke when you make fun of them. Like if people have seen *Desk Set* from 1957 when Spencer Tracy plays an MIT systems engineer and Kathrine Hepburn pokes fun at him it's like, oh, my gosh, she gets to like say that to him even though he's a man of science? I mean it's the age of the Space Race and the federal government is investing an enormous amount of money in the pursuit of science for the aims of national security.

So I think t here's a contortion that happens there with those technologies that's quite different from other technologies that do have democratizing effects. But they're not

inscrutable and they don't present themselves as revelation. There's something that happens in the 1950s and it also has to do with the sexual politics of the era but these guys take themselves unbelievably seriously. Like if you think about the guys in 1956 that go to the Dartmouth Summer Seminar and found the field of artificial intelligence and it's like guy, I'm sorry, like it's exciting I recognize it's exciting work but you think you're going to create an artificial [unintelligible 0:15:01.1] and one of the things that still fascinates me about Simulmatics is these guys are trying to build a machine to predict human behavior but they're generally using it to predict the behavior of two groups. One is black voters because their first study is a study of black voters. So something about the mysteriousness of the black – like these white liberals cannot imagine without a machine. And the other is the female housewife who is a consumer, right? They're trying to predict a model [unintelligible 0:15:30.7] they go to Vietnam where they're trying to come up with like a mathematical model ultimately of the Vietnamese peasant mind. And to me as a humanist I – really? Like you're gonna build a machine to do these things? Like 1960 they're constructing a mathematical model and writing a computer program in FORTRAN to understand black voters. Well, I mean you could watch the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins on television or you could do that. Like I find that the hubris is born of midcentury white liberalism in part in that kind of technocratic moment that is put in place by the national security states mandate for scientific research at universities.

DANAH: Right. No, I think that's super important. I think early on in the book you quote from Eugen Burdick and the quote makes me think of what you're saying right now because what he said, and I'm going to read is, "The new underworld is made up of innocent and well-intentioned people who work with slide rules and calculating machines and computers. Most of these people are highly educated, many of them are PhDs and none that I have met have malignant political designs on the American public. They may however radically reconstruct the American political system, build new politics, and even modify revered and venerated American institutions. Facts of which they are blissfully ignorant." And I think about that because in so many ways as you're pointing out it's the story of technocrats and in this particular context the story of how white supremacy, the culture of white supremacy gets upheld through these bureaucratic systems. And many of the people that are here care a lot about how to do good with technology. So how should they, the

people who are listening tonight how should they take from this context of what was happening there and technology that was quote/unquote “designed for good” but in fact upheld so many systems of repression, how should they learn from that in the present?

JILL: Well, I think for me that Burdick, passage which was written in 1964, Eugene Burdick a University of California Berkeley political theorist who had worked for Greenfield in 1956 and who was asked to work for Simulmatics instead wrote a novel indicting it. That’s the kind of thing I study history for. Like I read that passage in the library and I think wow like somebody figured this out in 1964 like he did predict that American politics as we know it would be destroyed by the prediction of human behavior and that other venerable institutions for instance the local newspaper might be destroyed as well. that you could foresee that is important to remember the reason Burdick could foresee that I would suggest is because he was a political theorist and a writer, he was a novelist, he was a humanist, he was a theorist and he had studied the math behind this prediction and he thought it was really compelling research but his study of the American political order led him to think it would be inconsistent with doing this and that’s where I think these unnamed people who might be here this evening maybe could listen to that shockingly to me when I hear about the development and the distribution of a technological product like an app say I never hear in the course of that development a consultation with a political philosopher or an historian or a poet about what do you think this might mean because actually people whose lives are devoted to building that thing because it’s cool to build can generally not answer those questions but we have so wholly locked ourselves in the machine wherein we think the building is the important thing and the other kinds of knowing are just like, you know, it’s like being able to know how to tie a bowtie or something these little luxury tricks that you might have if you know how to read a poem rather than that these things are the elemental things of the human condition. It’s the dismissal of all that other kind of knowledge that’s a problem. And Burdick was kind of quietly trying to say that like he – one of the things I love about this story is like these guys, these scientists they aren’t bad guys they’re actually trying to get the Democratic Party to take a stronger position on Civil Rights like they’re very assertive in that claim. And they’re trying to fix something. They’re idealists. And but they don’t think about what the implications would be in what they’re doing and Burdick does and refuses to participate in it. And we don’t have enough of

that in the culture of Silicon Valley, say, or at least – well, what do I know, I’ve driven through it. But that’s my perception.

DANA: Yeah. And I think that’s where – this is also such a fascinating time period because there’s a rearrangement of political parties during this period and on page 57 you note that conservatives damn the godlessness and moral idiocy of behavioral science citing as technocratic postures a species of socialism, the control of the people, even their very minds by the states. And – or the state. And I’m fascinated by the different political attitudes towards scientific and social scientific methods during this period and how this is getting structured and Erica Robles [ph. sp.] I understand actually wrote to me before this talk with a question of wanting to know how given this, given the attitudes towards social science how do we understand that in light of the realignments happening in the 1960s as Southern Democrats and black voters switch parties. And so did these pieces all come together in that realignment?

JILL: Yeah, that’s a quite interesting question. I mean politics was fundamentally changed by the modern public opinion polling industry which really emerges in the 1930s which is itself a major realignment, right? So when FDR runs for office in 1932 and is elected in 1933 he wins on the back of what is called the New Deal Coalition. And fundamentally what that means is he’s able to pull in for instance who can vote in the North, blacks can’t though vote in the Jim Crow South due to vigilantes and terrorism. But black voters in the North – black voters had voted Republican where they could vote. Republicans were the party of emancipation, the party of Lincoln. Roosevelt pulls together a whole new coalition that includes black voters and is a dramatic realignment. It’s unusual in other ways as well but modern polling which starts in 1935 with George Gallup tends to do weird things, weird distorting things to the electorate. So Gallup for instance refused to ask people questions about Civil Rights. There were sit-ins throughout the 1930s, there were anti-lynching bills in Congress every year. Gallup didn’t ask people questions about Civil Rights he’s a nationally syndicated newspaper columnist and Southern newspapers didn’t want to run columns about Civil Rights and he didn’t poll black voters because most places in the country where there were the largest numbers of blacks, blacks couldn’t vote and he also didn’t want to piss off his Southern subscribers. So all that polling industry is doing is

segmenting the electorate in meaningful ways if reflects census divisions but the census divisions as we know are all crispockety [ph. sp.] right, like who is Mexican and are Mexicans white like is this weird freakish debate in the 1930s an era of forced deportation of Mexicans and Mexicans who aren't Mexican Americans.

So there's the modern sort of bureaucracy of the New Deal and the expanded administrative state of that era does collect a lot of data. Social Security Administration beginning in 1935 we have a lot more information that sorts people into demographic piles because of the New Deal. By the 1950s that's not working well for the Democrats because Eisenhower has taken a stronger position on Civil Rights. Those black voters leave the New Deal Coalition and vote for Eisenhower in huge numbers. And Democrats are having a big fight with themselves between Dixiecrats and non Dixiecrats. So it's not to say that the – which is the long way to say that we think of that realignment as a 1960s things with kind of a mix in in the Southern strategy. But it really is that sorting begins to take place in the 1930s because of the new technologies of counting people. And there are a lot of counting machines before we get to a Univac.

So what I think among the things that happens with Simulmatics then it's kind of work in the late 1950s and 1960s is the increasing sophistication at pitting demographic groups against one another. Simulmatics code divided American – sorted American voters into 480 possible voter types and then used that. Those are the different categories that used for its simulations. And Burdick when he wrote his novel warning about this called the book *The 480* because among the things he was complaining about is as a political theorist if you divide the population into voter types and custom make political messages by type like this is a message for you, you live in Brooklyn, you're upper class, you're Asian American and you voted for Obama twice, like that's a voter type. Then you are actually dividing Americans against themselves and you are defeating the philosophy behind our form of representative government because I am not supposed to go to the polls and vote as a middle aged Catholic New England woman who voted for Obama twice, I am – and what is in my own interest. I am supposed to go to the polls and think about who on the ballot can best represent everyone's interests, who's policy positions are in the public interest and for the common good and I can't do that if I've never received a message that says here is

my vision for everyone. If all the messages coming to me are coming to me as a voter type not as a person who lives in a republic with, you know, lower case “R” and that’s what he meant by saying you know, these people don’t actually understand our political system because if you understood our political system you wouldn’t do this because it will destroy it.

DANAH: Right. no I think that’s such a powerful comment because I think part of what becomes so painful in the story is that you referenced earlier on the way in which the Simulmatics Corporation worked hard to model black voters and then later in the book you of course go in to talk about their role in Vietnam and the campaign, the propaganda that was used as a campaign against the Viet Cong. Charlton Mcllwain who is a provost over at NYU and the author of *Black Software* he wrote to me ahead of time sort of fascinated by these different components. And he was wondering how transparent internally or externally was Simulmatics about its active role in shaping and even fomenting the anti-black racial politic of the 60s. So how would you characterize Simulmatics long term impact on Civil Rights beyond the particular period in which we’re talking about?

JILL: So I think any of the people who worked for the corporation in the 1960s would be shocked to imagine that anyone could think of it as a company that was opposed to Civil Rights. These were some of the most progressive liberals in the country working in the social sciences. Most of the scientists who had helped to found the company refused to go to Vietnam because they disagreed with the one scientist who really supported that effort. They tended to be people who were opposed to the war, who marched against the war, who urged their universities to withdraw support for research related to the war. So and in the meantime, I mean Greenfield himself really had a very passionate Civil Rights advocate as had been his wife Patty. It was a big part of their lives. They lived in Chelsea, she was deeply involved in Civil Rights activism. So were a number of the other women who were married to Simulmatics scientists. They also the company also had an educational division that was run by James Coleman who goes on to write *The Coleman Report* which is kind of like the Moynihan Report which is about school segregation. And we might look back on that and I think many people do and disagree with the approach that someone like Coleman took in thinking about educational opportunity. But these people were trying to fix inequality.

That's what they saw themselves as doing. And for the purpose of doing work studying, attempting to predict race riots they were trying to forestall violence and they were also trying to amplify the voices of people who were protesting on the streets because they were protesting police brutality. So I think it's a complicated story. I think what emerges from that is something super creepy but it's largely unintended. So would any of these people have thought of themselves as advancing an anti-Civil Rights cause or advancing some kind of federal race – they wouldn't have understood themselves that way at all.

DANAH: That's super fascinating. You alluded earlier to the fact that the census, right, which as you know I spent the last couple of years living and breathing all aspects of the census. And one of things we're struggling with right now as we think about the census is what it means that the sausage is made so public during the current conversations which is to say there's a lot of making of data around the census that long predates the 2020 census. But between the dynamics of the pandemic, between the issues of partisan interventions, et cetera, all of a sudden we're starting to talk about every detail about it. And one of the things I think about is as you're going through the history of Simulmatics is is it possible to even talk about the sausage of large data projects without delegitimizing the institutions that produce them? And obviously there are times where they should be delegitimized but what are the consequences there? And I think about this in light of you make a reference to Barrington Moore's notion of being blinded by the illusion of technical omnipotence and I think that that doesn't just apply to computers that sometimes technical omnipotence is also what allows us to just make certain that that data is infrastructure. And so how do we balance these moments of being able to see and understanding the place of data and technology within a broader set of contexts?

JILL: Yeah. I mean I just think no one gets a right to be a priest just become you know a lot about something. You don't get to say, oh, you little people you can't possibly understand what we're doing you just have to worship it. I just don't --- I'm a Catholic but I'm too much of a protestant with a lower case "p" to believe that. I was recently reading two different things that kind of speak to this question now that I think about it. One is an essay a long --- maybe from the 60s one of my colleagues sent me called *The Political Consequences of Science* and the other is an essay by Daniel Allen my colleague at Harvard

who is a political philosopher called “The Road from Serfdom” and they make kind of the same point which is that our constitutional system in the United States was devised by lawyers. So the technic crats you know in 1787 were lawyers who had trained themselves in the study of history. I would argue they were also historians, right? So when they set about drafting the Constitution instead of coming up with some secret document that they hid away and said here are the rules from on high, they published it. They sent it to the people for ratification. And they encouraged people to convene and have conversations and then they had formal conventions where people debated it and then it went through a ratification process. And I’m sorry but if you’ve read the Constitution lately it is extremely complicated. It’s only 4,000 words but it embraces a lot of ideas. These guys really did have faith. Now their notion of who the People were is a very small, from our vantage very small. From their vantage unbelievably democratic. And they believed that the people could decide whether this was a way like that and so for much of American history this set of rules, the machinery, and they called the Constitution a machine and they thought that it was an engineered device was legible and transparent to everybody, right? And that’s why it could be amended because the people can decide this isn’t even working any more like I understand this so well that I can decide women should have the right to vote, goddamnit, or whatever.

But at some point in the 20th Century the people who became the kind of engineers of society became economists and economists don’t generally think that the people should understand economics. I mean they do, I’m sorry, many people teach economics they would like people to understand economics, but the posture of an economist is not let me explain to you the supply and demand theory, like the posture of the economist is here is my prediction about the stock market, right, like it’s just a different world. But the economist was then replaced really with the scientist and what do you do when you get to something like, well we could go into examples but there’s a problem when people are doing very complicated scientific work are making decisions about how the government should work let’s say with preventing a pandemic. Which is something that has come up many times in American history. I would suggest that now we’re in a completely different era where the people who are like making those big decisions we certainly didn’t choose them to be but the people like at Facebook and Google and they really are the grandchildren of

Simulmatics in the sense that they love the self mystification. If people can't understand how to code all the better because I just want them to buy my app. Like we're making so much money for our stockholders right now it's incredible you can't even believe it. And so when these guys go like this summer to the hearings before Congress and Bezos sits there like they like that the members of Congress don't understand what they're doing. Like that's the whole weird contortion. This was a long-winded answer to your question. But if we have systems technologically sophisticated systems that are driving our politics that the people can't understand then we no longer have a democracy.

DANAH: I think that's totally fair. You know, legal scholar Kate Klonick refers to a lot of the CEOs of the tech companies as the new governors as a way of capturing some of their struggle. But at the same time I think one of the things that's sort of fascinating is that they themselves don't know what to make of their own role in all of this. And one of the questions that we got in advance of the talk tonight was from Satya Nadaella the CEO of Microsoft. And he wants to know how should he be thinking about the role of industry to build systems to support democracy rather than break it. And what are the points of light from your own work for those who are in these positions as the executives of major tech companies overseeing a lot of their future and so what would you tell him about how he should be thinking about his responsibilities?

JILL: I appreciate the question and I by no means dispute its earnestness but I think it rests on the supposition that CEOs of tech companies should be fixing our democracy. They shouldn't be. The people need to fix the democracy and the people elected to office need to fix the democracy. I think the CEOs of tech companies should try to do less harm to our democracy but I didn't elect them to fix it. And I also think the question at least indirectly rests on the assumption that more code will fix it that we just need to have better code. We just need to do some debugging. Like there is a kind of troubleshooting debugging mentality behind the way the question is framed and I think that misses the much deeper critique that many people are making which is we don't want the program at all. We don't want a program that works better. We don't want the program. And the anecdote that came to mind when you asked this question is I remember going out to give a talk at Stanford a few years ago. It was like 2011 or something like that. A while back. And someone at dinner

was telling me how her neighbor works at a startup and her neighbor, you know, she has lived in this house for like 50 years and like a townhouse and her neighbor bought like three townhouses 'cause like he had all this money and like leveled the insides and made like a giant like triple sized mansion or whatever. And was out walking the dog and they were talking about – she was trying to draw him out on the real estate problem in San Francisco. And the problem of homelessness. And he said, you know, young guy with the sneakers and his hoodie kind of thing, this was a moment in time and I'm hoping this moment is over. He said, it's okay because my company has a really great program we're teaching the homeless to code. And she told the story and everyone at the dinner table was like that's like that's the problem like no one disputes the earnestness of this young man and his desire to not be part of the problem but his home is among the problems and teaching the homeless to code is not a solution to homelessness. Like it reflects no actual curiosity about the conditions of eviction, the conditions of economic inequality that contribute to homelessness like it's all the things that we would study in other realms of inquiry aside from writing code you would need to study those things in order to think about what would be a good set of things to do. That you kind of helicopter in and say if only they knew how to code. Like that. I probably don't need to gloss that story I'm hoping that everybody listening to that story was like that must be apocryphal that never happened. And maybe it is apocryphal, maybe that's just a story that makes the rounds among humanities professors at Stanford. But it spoke volumes to me.

DANAH: That's fantastic. There have been a bunch of different really valuable questions coming in the chat and I'm going to start to turn to them. But before I have to do the info break where we're like check out the book, make sure you check out the book. This is the opportunity where you can go and buy the book.

So I'm going to turn to one of the questions from Eileen Clancy. And Eileen wants to know how does a lot of the early advertising demographic segmenting how much of that was built on frameworks created within the census data and if so, what are the decades like how do those things intersect over time?

JILL: Yeah. You know, I don't know all that much about the history of the advertising industry's use of census data. I think they have a lot of other market data that the big

agencies like a J. Walter Thompson have been collecting for decades. Food companies that have been around since the 19-teens are doing a pretty good job of holding onto market research that they do for each of their clients. It actually is a pretty big problem for Simulmatics which is to say that like most consumer data is proprietary in the area that Simulmatics is working. So what they want to provide advertising campaign advice to a company like Ralston Purina they're kind of in a bind because they don't know anything about the market for dog food. And like J. Walter Thompson, you know, bigger ad agency does they have reams and reams and reams of research. They haven't computerized it but they know the industry really well. and Simulmatics can't compile that data on their own it would be too expensive so they try to buy it and team up with different organizations or with the advertising research agencies and things like that or they at one point are going to merge with an advertising company just to get its data. And all their internal memos are like we just don't actually have the data to do this.

It's also true though that a lot of industries don't actually collect – this is one of the things that I learned that I thought was kind of fascinating because a bunch of the Simulmatics sales guys go out to California and they meet with like movie production companies like MGM. They also meet with record companies like Columbia Records. And they're trying to do basically like it really is a little bit like Amazon Prime video or Spotify or something like they're trying to figure out how to help these film and recording industry companies do targeted advertising and they wrote back these guys in Hollywood Records and you can't even believe this, MGM has no idea who sees their movies they have no idea. They don't even track ticket sales by state like they have no – they just send out guys with the reels and they go to the local vaudeville house and they say do you want to show this movie and they show the movie and they take the money and it's not proportionate they know not – like we have no data about who watches movies. Like you'd think that you could take the census data and work it against the sales, you know, by district or they would have a map of movie houses and like there would be some – we can't sell them a predictive analytics tool they have no data and like it would take us years of study to create a dataset of movie goers in the U.S. so it's kind of interesting like a lot of industries are really playing catchup because they've just been eyeballing stuff for years and they have, you know, it's a little bit like the precinct worker for your party who knows everybody at the bar and so has a pretty good

idea how the vote's gonna go like they have these on the road sales guys who know how to sell the latest Errol Flynn movie and which movie houses to sell it to and how much to charge because they just kinda know.

DANAH: So it's fun to think about all of these layers especially because I can't help but think about your earlier work on the *Secret History of Wonder Woman* and the beginning of a lot of that attempts to try to figure out those pieces. And so I'm going to take a question from Chris Peterson who says you mentioned in some of your opening comments the relationship between Simulmatics and the sexual politics of the age. And Chris notes that a few chapters in you attend closely to the sexual aspects of the characters including news articles about the tight sweated women in Burdick's class, Greenfield's sexy cigars, the turn to Freud and the effects on their marriages. What made you decide to pull these dynamics to the fore of your narrative?

JILL: It's fun to have someone who has actually read the book, that's very cool. Thanks for the question, Chris. I think I didn't pull them to the fore enough honestly like I really wanted to be able to do a lot more with the wives and I didn't have quite enough – with the exception of [unintelligible 0:43:27.3] is married to mathematical sociologist Phil McPhee I just didn't have that much. [Unintelligible] wrote to her mother as far as I can tell every day if not more than once a day and the family was incredibly generous to share her letters with me. So I had this very rich one female character who could reflect on everyone around her she's the one who writes to her sister-in-law "these men treat their wives like dirt." She's really interested in the sexual politics of the day and chronicling them. So but I didn't have enough about the other women to do as fully balanced an account as I would have liked to have done. So I'm glad if it seems like I brought these women to the fore. It's a regret of mine that I didn't have more especially about Ed Greenfield's wife Patty who was a very tragic figure and I really admired in many ways and was very compelled by.

DANAH: Thank you. So Alec Resnick points out that given that corporate scientism was already a part of social [unintelligible 0:44:34.0] Simulmatics was founded like White's organizational man Alec's curious, could you comment on how the gap between the epistemology of data and the rhetorical qualities of data as in objectivity, opacity, et cetera,

played out within the corporation of Simulmatics like what were the axis's of disagreement political, epistemological, otherwise within the corporation and how were they negotiated?

JILL: Yeah. So it's a really small – I mean it sounds like it's this huge [unintelligible 0:45:03.3] with that with some giant megacorporation it's a handful of people at any given time and they have offices in New York, and Cambridge and Washington and Saigon like at the biggest but they're small offices. It's not a lot of people. There's a lot of dissent and dispute about what would be the best realm to see clients in. Some of the people just really want to do political campaigns. Some of the people really want to do market -- what we would think of as market research. And then there's the guy who really wants to do defense work. So there's that. With regard to evidentiary status of what they're generating the real skeptic is a polite, sophisticated guy from Yale Bob Abelson who was one of the founders of the company and walks away pretty early on. He doesn't give up his stock like he doesn't protest but when the Simulmatics Corporation takes credit for Kennedy's election Abelson – and then there's like all this national theory over it Abelson writes a memo that says like here's a press release that I want issued if this doesn't die down right away. “We did not win the election for Kennedy we just don't have evidence of that.” Like we gave Kennedy's campaign some advice. They did those things and they won but that's not causal. Like he's a social scientists who objects to the PR machine that Greenfield is running. So there's a little bit of that. And there is, I don't think that any of these guys really questioned the value of doing quantified behavioral science like that's what they came of age doing and really care about.

The one person who makes a kind of really interesting epistemological argument in print is Ithiel de Sola Pool who is an MIT political scientist who was the chairman of the research board of Simulmatics. He writes an essay in the middle of the 1960s in which he claims that the quantitative behavioral sciences are the new humanities of the 20th Century that is to say in previous eras statesmen in preparing themselves to lead their people or wage a war it was required of them that they study history and religion and language and philosophy to wage the Peloponnesian War, whatever. That they be sophisticated about art and music and theater. That this what would make you a full human being and therefore a good leader and that that era had passed. And that now what a statesman needed was the predictions

offered up by economists and political scientists and other quantitative behavioral scientists who could tell you exactly what to expect and therefore give you the best advice to act. And that's a really interesting epistemological claim. Like just a sort of very explicit denigration of the humanities and the elevation of not -- interesting not of the real revolutionary sciences of the 20th Century, the biomedical and biological sciences, the environmental sciences, the physical sciences like there are a lot of really measurable, incredible, astronomical work done in the 20th Century somehow I think of these sciences, the science that these guys are working is the fuzziest of things. But that those were like at the top of the hierarchy of knowledge was a claim that he -- from a defensive having been attacked he decides to make in print.

DANAH: Thanks. As we think about all these different methodological components of all of this Judd Miller is asking if technologies like polls or hashtag data keep getting embraced narrowly, clumsily with too little consideration are there any examples from this period where data is taken with a much more considered approach with less hype, with more context, more awareness of power as part of decision making or is it all gone to this sort of hyped craziness?

JILL: No, I think there is absolutely very measured and important research in many realms in the 1950s and 1960s where people are doing very careful, methodical work that's making possible and incredible revolutionary discoveries in laboratories all over the world. So I think that the mystique of mainframe computers partly because so much of what's being done in this era is trying to convince businesses to buy computers because computers aren't being sold to people yet, right, they're being sold to corporations. So the corporate manufacturers of computers have to do a lot of razzle dazzle to get people to buy these enormous and expensive machines that are going to be difficult to maintain, they're going to take up a lot of space, they're gonna require a technical staff to use. So the way they do that is elevating them to some kind of alter. But that doesn't mean that people who use them aren't capable of doing incredibly careful work. There is also a big hesitation, a big kind of pulling back from the kind of cult of data in the middle of the decade when the Johnson Administration proposes the establishment of a national datacenter as the third repository for the federal government which as in the Library of Congress which holds

books and the National Archives which holds manuscripts, the Johnson [unintelligible 0:50:17.5] Data Center that holds data, you know, computer data to pool together from Social Security Administration, the Veterans Affairs, you know, Housing and Unemployment like all of it would be together in one place and we'd be able to use it, you know, commensurate. And there's enormous pushback against that and a backlash against it because people say that if the federal government had all of our data in one place that would violate our privacy. And there's this really interesting moment with the congressional hearings and this guy from Rand, Paul Beran who is involved in developing packet switching he's asked to come in and say whether he thinks it's a good idea to proceed with a national data center. And he's very respectful but it's almost like he's laughing at the member of congress because he says, "So you guys think you need to build a building to hold data?" Because we're building the Arkanet [ph. sp.] right now in a few years all the computers are going to be connected and talking to each other it will be almost like their data is in a cloud so your question is not like should we build this building, your question is what protections should we enact through legislation for the ownership and exchange of data like this is your opportunity to do that like you're having a big debate about building a national datacenter it happens to be the wrong debate. You guys don't understand what we're doing let me try to explain it to you. Like he's not about the self mystification, he wants congress to understand and congress is kind of like that's too complicated we just want to build a national datacenter. But from an historian's vantage that seemed kind of inevitable because they didn't really understand. But you look back at them and you're oh, if only they'd come up with some rules about data in 1966 like then there would be a precedent and maybe those would have been applied to corporations and maybe we wouldn't be where we are now. *If Then* they had done it. Yeah.

DANA: *If Then*. It's such a perfect title. So Tasatar, a handle whose name I don't know beyond that asks if tech companies should not be getting involved with democracy they could at least start a culture not to touch democracy, some rules, you know, [unintelligible 0:52:27.0] and so given where you just left off I'm curious how do you think about what kinds of governance of the data collection processes things like the blow up around the national data center, you know, we're in the middle of a whole conversation of modernizing data infrastructure again. And most of it at this time and place is about trying to dismantle

the role of the governments in data production and try to think about it in other places. So given all of this what role should, you know, different kinds of data processes be put in place? How should we be thinking about the role of the different tech actors but also the role of policy around data and tech to deal with all of this given that it wasn't dealt with after '65?

JILL: Yeah. That's what you do. What I do so I don't really have an answer for that. I mean I would say that like in my mind the tech companies are kinda like fossil fuel companies like I wouldn't ask them to run the EPA. We need the EPA. I don't trust the fossil fuel companies and I don't trust the tech companies for the same reason. I also don't buy that I just don't understand what they do. And what effect it's having on all of us. I just – I think the metaphor works pretty well for me so I do think that what's required are legislators who get themselves better educated on these issues and get better advice and try to remember the way the democracy was meant to work.

DANAH: Jill, one of the things that I fell in love with your writing is the way that you – there's something beautiful about your craft. I often think of it as a chocolate truffle because the writing just melts in your mouth and you show these different perspectives. And there's something powerful –

JILL: That's because I eat chocolate truffles the whole time that I'm writing, yeah.

DANAH: I don't know, it doesn't show. But there's something about that way of speaking to the past and the present simultaneously in your writing. And some people are asking about this both about craft and also – beyond chocolate truffles – but also how should we be thinking of this moment about reintegrating different forms of history into our educational processes? How should we be engaging people with history so that they can learn through the complex narratives that you do such a phenomenal job of building for us?

JILL: You know, I think that actually history education is mostly great. I think K through 12 teachers do an incredible job trying to get kids excited about history. I think there are many obstacles in their way. One is that they don't have enough funding for the kinds of

things that would make history most fun, the kinds of field trips and adventures and going to an archive kind of things, or having archival document facsimilia in your school room. But I spent a lot of time visiting K-12 classes and I think there is tremendous, tremendous work going on there. I think that, you know, in the United States American history doubles as civics instruction because we no longer have civics instruction. I think if we had civics instructions American history could have a little bit more ambit to be training in the humanistic method of historical inquiry which is what I think of what I do. But the President I think gave an address today promising to establish a new commission on the teaching of American history because all the way in which it's taught needs to be thrown out because we need to teach patriotic history. History is not a catechism it's a branch of the humanities. And I think school teachers know that. And I think we just need to give them more resources and a whole lot more respect.

DANAH: Luckily one of those resources is all of your phenomenal writing and for those who haven't listened to Jill's podcast, The Last Archive, even in this moment where we're at home but we can actually follow her all the way into all of these different archives it's the field trip of virtual age, if you will, which I appreciate.

We are closing out on time. I'm going to once do the infomercial. This is the book *If Then* I strongly encourage everyone to take a moment of reading it. Before we close out, Jill, is there anything else you want to leave the audience with, sort of final words here?

JILL: You know, thanks for coming and caring about books and libraries. Those are our best holders and stewards of data and this is my chance to thank the library for hosting the event as well as you for an incredibly stimulating conversation and all the questioners as well, thank you.

DANAH: Thank you. Joel, over to you.

JOEL: Yeah, I just want to echo that and thank you both. Thank you, Jill, for writing this book and congratulations again on being long listed for the National Book Award and, danah, thank you so much for these terrific questions and for your own questions and the preloaded questions you had and then fielding so many of these wonderful audience

members' questions. And to the audience, thanks again. Please follow Data & Society, BPL Presents and the library and of course get a copy of Jill Lepore's *If Then*. Hope to see you all back soon and thanks again, Jill and danah.

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