

This is how Facebook rigs elections

The below excerpt is from Sarah Wynn-Williams' new book, *Careless People*, which delves into her experiences working at Facebook as a high ranking executive in global policy. I always knew that social media was involved in pushing agendas and manipulating facts, but I thought the below did a pretty good job at explaining it in a way that was easy to understand.

I'm about two thirds through the book and highly recommend it. Mark Zuckerberg, Sheryl Sandberg and the rest of Facebook's (now Meta's) executives are disgusting, and they built a powerful and dangerous tool that I think many people still don't fully grasp.

Beyond that, the book also does a great job capturing the relentless grind of working at Facebook during that era—the long hours, the intense pressure, and how women were often forced to choose work over their personal lives, including caring for their newborns. It also dives into the internal politics that shaped the company's decisions, Mark Zuckerberg's countless meetings with politicians. This is how Facebook won Donald Trump the 2016 election.

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Beyond that, the book also does a great job capturing the relentless grind of working at Facebook during that era—the long hours, the intense pressure, and how women were often forced to choose work over their personal lives, including caring for their newborns. It also dives into the internal politics that shaped the company's decisions, Mark Zuckerberg's countless meetings with politicians and leading officials, and the general hardships that Wynn-Williams faced while working there (including several instances of sexual harassment by high ranking officials (*cough* Sandberg *cough* Kaplan)).

It's worth noting that this is a memoir told from Wynn-Williams' perspective, and it doesn't aim for objectivity. There's a reason Meta tried to block any further promotion and publication of it (they succeeded in the former but not the latter). The arbitrator for this arbitration stated that without emergency relief (in the form of a halt on promoting the book), Meta would suffer "immediate and

irreparable loss." Still, it offers a compelling and insightful window into the inner workings of one of the world's most powerful companies.

I manually transcribed the below excerpt from the book and added full names in square brackets. Any spelling or grammatical errors are my own, not from the original text.

Over the course of the ten-hour flight to Lima, Elliot [Schrage] patiently explains to Mark [Zuckerberg] all the ways that Facebook basically handed the election to Donald Trump. It's pretty fucking convincing and pretty fucking concerning. Facebook embedded staff in Trump's campaign team in San Antonio for months, alongside Trump campaign programmers, ad copywriters, media buyers, network engineers, and data scientists. A Trump operative named Brad Parscale ran the operation together with the embedded Facebook staff, and he basically invented a new way for a political campaign to shitpost its way to the White House, targeting voters with misinformation, inflammatory posts, and fundraising messages. [Andrew] Boz [Bosworth], who led the ads team, described it as the "single best digital ad campaign I've ever seen from any advertiser. Period."

Elliot walks Mark through all the ways that Facebook and Parscale's combined team microtargeted users and tweaked ads for maximum engagement, using data tools we designed for commercial advertisers. The way I understand it, Trump's campaign had amassed a database, named Project Alamo, with profiles of over 220 million people in America. It charted all sorts of online and offline behavior, including gun registration, voter registration, credit card and shopping histories, what websites they visit, what car they drive, where they live, and the last time they voted. The campaign used Facebook's "Custom Audiences from Custom Lists" to match people in that database with their Facebook profiles. Then Facebook's "Lookalike Audiences" algorithm found people on Facebook with "common qualities" that "look like" those of known Trump supporters. So if Trump supporters liked, for example, a certain kind of pickup truck, the tool would find other people who liked pickup trucks but were not yet committed voters to show the ads to.

Then they'd pair their targeting strategy with data from their message testing. People likely to respond to "build a wall" got that sort of message. Moms worried about childcare got ads explaining that Trump wanted "100% Tax Deductible Childcare." Then there was a whole operation to constantly tweak the copy and the images and the color of the buttons that say "donate," since slightly different messages resonate with different audiences. At any given moment, the campaign had tens of thousands of ads in play, millions of different ad variations by the time they were done. These ads were tested using Facebook's Brand Lift surveys, which measure whether users have absorbed the messages in the ads, and tweaked accordingly. Many of these ads contained inflammatory misinformation that drove up

engagement and drove down the price of advertising. The more people engage with an ad, the less it costs. Facebook's tools and in-house white-glove service created incredibly accurate targeting of both message and audience, which is the holy grail of advertising.

Trump heavily outspent Clinton on Facebook ads. In the weeks before the election, the Trump campaign was regularly one of the top advertisers on Facebook globally. His campaign could afford to do this because the data targeting enabled it to raise millions each month in campaign contributions through Facebook. In fact, Facebook was the Trump campaign's largest source of cash.

Parscale's team also ran voter suppression campaigns. They were targeted at three different groups of Democrats: young women, white liberals who might like Bernie Sanders, and Black voters. These voters got so-called dark posts - nonpublic posts that only they would see. They'd be invisible to researchers or anyone else looking at their feed. The idea was: feed them stuff that'll discourage them from voting for Hillary. One made from Black audiences was a cartoon built around her 1996 sound bite that "African Americans are super predators." In the end, Black voters didn't turn out in the numbers that Democrats expected. In an election that came down to a small number of votes in key swing states, these things mattered.ans and leading officials, and the general hardships that Wynn-Williams faced while working there (including several instances of sexual harassment by high ranking officials (*cough* Sandberg *cough* Kaplan)).

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