



Electionland

CASE STUDY

2016

Introducing Electionland

[Electionland](#) was a collaborative journalism project that covered voting during the 2016 United States presidential election, across the country and in real time. It employed technology and data to track problems at the polls.

It was both the largest single-day collaborative journalism project in history and the largest real-time, comprehensive look at voting issues in U.S. history. Electionland brought together dozens of media organizations, technology companies, and journalism schools, marrying the best of traditional journalistic acumen with new data, tools, and technologies.

Watch a short video documentary about Electionland [here](#).

Purpose of this guide

This case study has been created to document the Electionland project and to provide a playbook for organizations looking to create collaborative reporting projects of their own.

While no two projects are alike and many of the elements that made Electionland successful won't be replicable, there is value in understanding how Electionland worked for organizations thinking of approaching a similar project. Throughout this guide, key tips and lessons learned have been highlighted with the

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Electronland

What was Electionland about?

On Election Day, many newsrooms report on who is winning, but there is less focus on how voting actually happens around the country. There may be stories about voting problems, but these are rarely published in time for them to be fixed while polls are still open. Stories about problems like broken voting machines, lines so long people abandon their chance to vote, etc., usually come out in the days after the election, when it's too late to have impact.

Electionland was about ensuring all Americans could freely exercise their right to vote by shining a light on problems that might get in their way. The hope was that Electionland reporting would have immediate impact, helping people who might otherwise have been turned away to cast their ballots while the polls were open and to have their votes counted.

THE NEED TO COVER THE VOTE

The need to cover the vote was particularly urgent during the 2016 election, as more than a dozen states were implementing new laws that could affect citizens' access to the ballot box. "We were trying to do a large accountability journalism project, around the impact of changes to the Voting Rights Act and state-level voting laws," says Celeste LeCompte of ProPublica.

In the weeks leading up to the election, the idea of covering the polls picked up even more momentum. Republican nominee Donald Trump repeatedly cast doubt on the validity of the results, claiming the election would be "rigged" and telling his supporters to show up to the polls on Election Day to "watch" the vote.

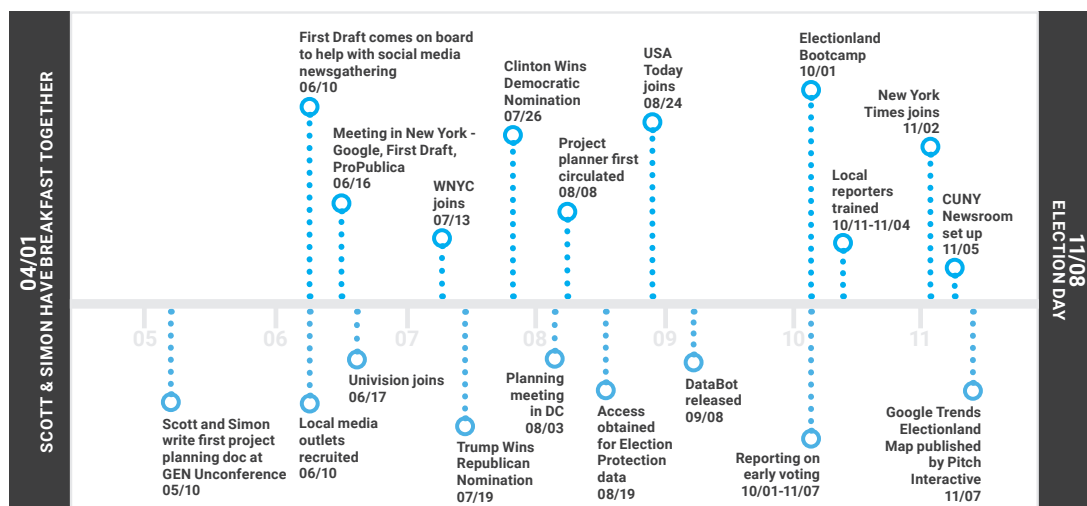
THE CHALLENGE OF ELECTION DAY REPORTING

“It is notoriously hard to cover election problems on Election Day, usually because we don’t generally know about problems until late in the day at best, and more often days later,” says John Keefe of WNYC. “The possibility that we could detect trouble early in the day — and have time to report on it *that day* — was immensely compelling.”

The project aimed to achieve this by finding and distributing story leads about voting problems to local journalists who could follow up on them. The increased speed and amount of local coverage would draw immediate attention to voting problems, as they happened, so that they could be addressed.

Achieving this goal presented a huge challenge. Real-time reporting about highly distributed events, without a single data source or consistent data context, had never been done before at this scale.

“Looking at this problem required a new approach to data journalism,” says Celeste. “How could we collect real-time data and turn it into meaningful signals that would allow us to report on any issues that emerged, as they happened?”



How the project came together

HOW THE
PROJECT CAME
TOGETHER

SCOTT AND SIMON SIT DOWN TO BREAKFAST

Electionland started to take shape when Scott Klein of ProPublica and Simon Rogers of the Google News Lab had breakfast together in the spring before the election. As data journalists, Simon and Scott are both interested in the same problem: there are a lot of situations where data may be available to tell an interesting story, but it's rare that journalists have the access to the data, or the skills and time required to create a meaningful analysis of it.

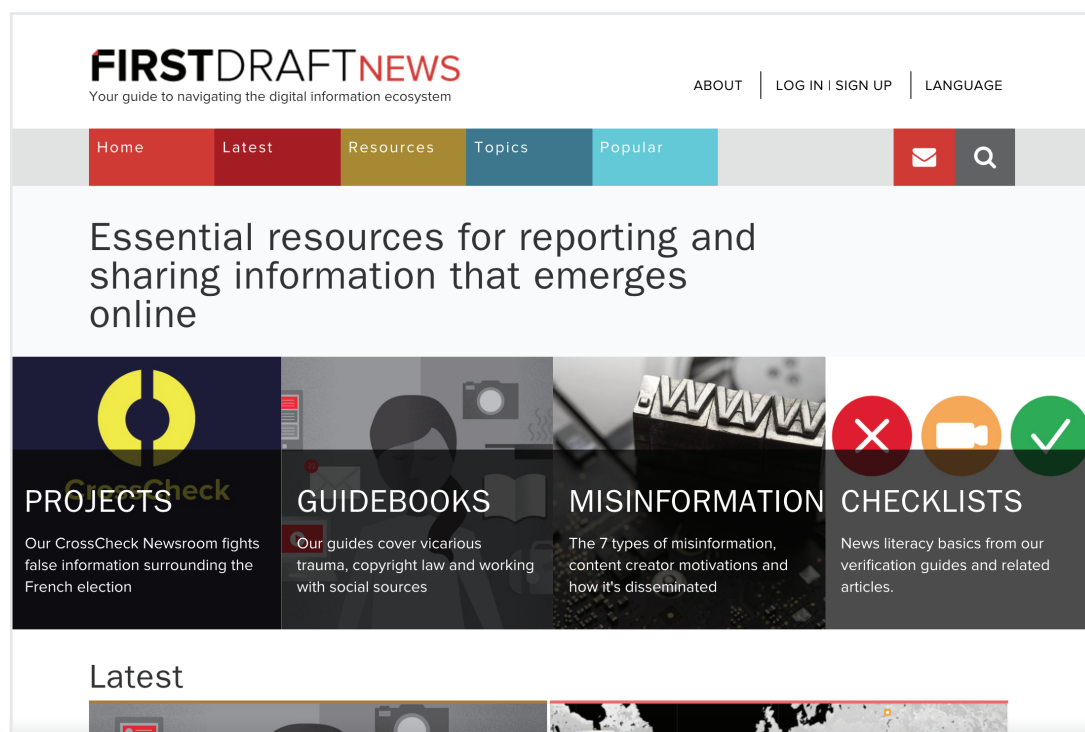
"We realized that my department at ProPublica and the Google News Lab shared a mission: to help journalists do great journalism using data and technology," says Scott. "So we wondered, could we help local reporters tell better election stories using technology and data?"

Their original idea was to provide real-time predictions of long lines at the polls using [Google Trends](#) and other Google data as the central data element. Trends data reveals what people are searching for on Google, allowing measurement of interest in a particular topic down to city-level geography.

“There are lots of situations in which there is great data but it’s hard to get or hard to understand, and there are lots of reporters who have great sources and local knowledge. But the two rarely coincide. Local reporters with great contacts usually don’t have access to data, and even if they had it, they don’t have time to create an analysis.”

— Scott Klein, ProPublica

HOW THE PROJECT CAME TOGETHER



First Draft Website

SOCIAL MEDIA COMES ONLINE

In parallel to Simon and Scott's discussions, Fergus Bell of Dig Deeper Media, who is a member of the First Draft Coalition, had also been thinking about the upcoming election. [First Draft](#) is a nonprofit coalition dedicated to improving skills and standards in the reporting and sharing of information that emerges online, and they provide guidance in how to find, verify, and publish content sourced from the social web. Fergus and First Draft had earlier pitched the idea of monitoring social media to crowdsource reports about the election.

As the team started thinking more about how social media could inform Election Day reporting, Olivia Ma at Google saw an opportunity to join forces with First Draft, who had the expertise and skills necessary to take on the task of gathering and verifying the social media data.

Meedan, a member organization of the First Draft coalition, was also involved from the beginning. Meedan developed an online platform called Check which helps journalists collaborate on verification. Coincidentally, Meedan was in the middle of a large scale upgrade to the Check application, so they agreed to speed up their project and work closely with the Electionland team to ensure the platform was fit for purpose.

BRINGING ON THE CORE PARTNERS

As the idea gained momentum, expertise from ProPublica helped the team build out their network of partners. ProPublica is a pioneer in journalistic collaboration, and they had deep experience collaborating on projects like Electionland, where every outlet does their own story using a shared data set.



There were a few characteristics the team agreed were helpful to look for when deciding who to add as core partners — the organizations that would help build Electionland itself:

- News organizations with broad reach in communities likely to be affected by voting problems.
- Organizations with a mindset of being open and collaborative, who may have a history of working or partnering with other groups.
- People with a reputation for doing experimental and innovative things — especially ones with technical resources, coders, etc.
- Groups with experience crowdsourcing or working with data.






THE ELECTIONLAND COALITION

Along with Google News Lab, ProPublica and First Draft, a few major media outlets joined as core partners.

New York public radio station WNYC, which had frequently partnered with ProPublica, took on a lead role organizing public radio station participation across the country. WNYC has a long history of doing community-outreach projects that use audience and listener feedback, and John Keefe, WNYC's data news editor, had coordinated multi-station collaborations around political coverage in the past.

The team also approached Univision to get involved, since early reporting showed that voting problems disproportionately affect Hispanic voters. The USA Today Network was another core media partner to join early on. The New York Times joined the coalition as a national news partner closer to the election.

The CUNY Graduate School of Journalism was another essential partner organization. Along with participating in the social media monitoring, the CUNY newsroom on West 40th Street in Manhattan was the heart of Electionland on Election Day.

| Electionland Coalition | |
|---|--|
|  PROPUBLICA | FIRSTDRAFT |
|  Google News Lab |  UNIVISION |
|  WNYC |  USA TODAY NETWORK |
| <small>The City University of New York</small> CUNY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM | |

In addition to the overarching goals of Electionland, some of the core partners also had linked objectives. Electionland was a big bet for ProPublica and central to their mission of producing journalism that has impact in the real world. The project was also an opportunity to show journalists how data and technology could help them produce great journalism, an objective shared by ProPublica and Google News Lab.

For the First Draft Coalition, Electionland represented an opportunity to educate journalism schools and media organizations on how to tap into social media to find and tell great stories, and how to verify social media sources. As the largest-scale application of social media news gathering and verification ever attempted, Electionland would be an important proving ground for their work.

IMPORTANCE OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Danielle Bowers from the Google News Lab acted as the Project Manager for Electionland. She took responsibility for planning and documenting each of the project workstreams, organizing meetings, tracking deadlines, and holding partners accountable. With so many moving pieces, good project management was absolutely crucial to the project's success.



Photo credit: Olivia Ma / Google

HOW THE PROJECT CAME TOGETHER

The process kicked off at an initial meeting in Washington, D.C., in August, at which each of the partners defined their goals. Then they brainstormed approaches to meeting these goals, grouped the approaches into major themes, prioritized, and assigned owners. As the project manager, Danielle moderated the discussion, ensuring everyone was heard and that the discussion progressed productively.



Some key elements of the project management process included:

- The project was managed through a detailed list of action items, owners and deadlines, which lived in a Google Sheet(s). All key stakeholders had access to view and update the living, breathing document.
- The larger project was broken down into project teams and workstreams. Each workstream had a clear owner with visible accountability for delivering their tasks.
- Within each workstream, every task was documented with a clear deadline and owner.
- Representatives from each of the core partners joined meetings via Google Hangout weekly for the first several months and then bi-weekly in the final six weeks leading up to Election Day. Danielle circulated an agenda prior to every meeting so that project owners would be ready to give updates and make a special effort to attend.
- The team had a fairly constant dialogue going on [Slack](#), a cloudbased team communication and collaboration tool, meaning all the communications were in one place and visible to everyone.

Before Election Day: Reporting and media onboarding



A huge amount of reporting went into knowing what kind of signals to look for on Election Day, and where problems were most likely to crop up.

KNOWING WHAT TO LOOK FOR, AND WHERE

“Journalism was the absolute core of everything we did,” says Scott Klein of ProPublica. “Every part of the planning involved calling experts and reading academic papers. We all read a book called [The Measure of American Elections](#). Journalism was a critical outcome of Electionland, but Electionland itself was informed by journalism.”

Starting from the summer, ProPublica had four journalists working full time on Electionland. They talked to voting experts and academics who study election administration, looking into questions like:

- How does voting administration work (and not work)?
- What makes an election go smoothly?
- Why might people encounter long lines at the polls?
- What are the problems that could prevent people from voting?
- How can these problems be detected using technology?

BEFORE ELECTION DAY

Their sources helped them decide what kind of events to look out for, and suggested that the main signal of voting problems on Election Day was likely to be long lines. Lines often form because people need extra help, and the poll workers might not be able to keep up. A long line might mean something else has gone wrong, such as:

- Voter ID challenges
- Registration problems
- Broken voting machines
- Provisional ballot use.

Find out more about the problems Electionland was looking for in this [ProPublica article](#).

They also got clued in as to where these problems were most likely to happen:

- States with new voting laws
- Counties with a history of voting problems
- Districts that have a lot of students, since students are often living away from home and might have complicated registration situations
- Places where there are a lot of people who don't speak English
- Places with mobile populations, where people tend to move around a lot.

“

We mashed up these datasets to look for the primary places we wanted to make sure we could look at on Election Day for what was happening on the ground.”

— Celeste LeCompte, ProPublica

Using census data and information about past elections, the team was able to identify specific states and cities most likely to have problems. With this knowledge, they used Google search and their contacts to find the local reporters covering these areas and build out the reporting network.

RECRUITING LOCAL MEDIA OUTLETS

The core partners tapped into their contacts to recruit a wide network of media outlets and newsrooms who would agree to report on local issues found in the data coming in on Election Day. Univision, WNYC, and USA Today were all early media partners, and having these big names on board helped to convince other newsrooms to participate.

All told, more than 450 journalists signed on to receive story leads and tips around voting issues at the polls on Election Day. Local partners were targeted in locations where reporting suggested that problems were likely to occur. New voting laws, a history of long lines — a proxy for deeper problems — and other factors were taken into account. Partners in key locations were recruited directly through phone calls or emails from the core partners, and others joined after hearing about Electionland through word of mouth or the project website.



The team targeted local newspapers and radio stations, and found the best way to approach them was through reporters directly, rather than through editors or the head offices of media conglomerates.

“The right way to recruit media partners was through reporters. They could make stuff happen without a lot of bureaucracy,” says Scott. “The easiest way was to find the specific reporters who would find the data useful.”

Although Electionland didn’t promise to provide exclusive access to stories, what it offered was a source of information that journalists couldn’t get from anywhere else. This shared resource gave the network of partners a focus and meant it was about the information, not about the relationships.

TRAINING AND RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS

Another important pre-Election Day job was to train all the reporters who would be receiving tips from Electionland. Every newsroom that signed on to take part in Electionland got training from ProPublica on how to use the tools (like [Slack](#), [Check](#), and [Landslide](#)) they would need to access the data coming through on Election Day.



We tried to make the project accessible to deadline-focused reporters with limited bandwidth for participation. How could we, as core partners, provide resources, information, and tools to make the project easier for those who were constrained by conventional news cycles?”

— Celeste LeCompte, ProPublica

ProPublica held a number of sessions to brief journalists, providing contextual training around voting rights issues and what they should be looking out for.

“Something that might not seem like a big deal locally might actually be part of a much larger phenomenon,” explains Celeste.



Providing a baseline knowledge of national issues helped reporters to put local events into context and resulted in better Election Day reporting.

Journalists could also get context from a voting [app](#) created by Derek Willis and Ken Schwencke at ProPublica. The app let them look up their county to find information about how the previous presidential election had been run, and what problems might be likely to pop up again.

The journalism schools that had signed on to help with social media monitoring were also trained through an Electionland Bootcamp, which will be covered in more detail [below](#).

THE ELECTION DATABOT

Another resource for journalists working on stories in the lead-up to the election was the [Election DataBot](#). The Google News Lab team and Ken Schwencke and Derek Willis at ProPublica worked together to create this tool to help journalists report on the campaign. It aggregated data from a number of sources into a searchable database.

“The idea was to produce an open-source data explorer that would allow reporters who were reporting on elections on very small levels across the U.S. to have all the data they wanted,” explains Simon Rogers of Google News Lab.

The DataBot aggregated campaign information from a number of sources:

- Campaign finance filings from the FEC
- Google search trends – allowing users to see which candidates were trending at any particular time
- Vote activity from sitting members of Congress
- New poll data using Huffington Post’s polling API
- State-by-state forecasts from fivethirtyeight.com
- Cook Political Report race ratings.

The DataBot also featured a notification system. Reporters could sign up to receive near real-time email alerts for events they were interested in, e.g. when a candidate or committee filed or when a poll came out for a specific candidate.

Combining real-time Google Trends with data from other sources was something that had never been done before. The work that went into creating the DataBot meant the teams were familiar with the datasets and used to working together.



The DataBot was also helpful in getting reporters to agree to participate in Electionland, as it helped to open the door to conversations about election data. “Election DataBot got reporters into our orbit that we could hit up to join the Election Day effort,” explains Scott.

Electionland data sources

As the election approached, the team worked to nail down processes for each of the data sources that would feed into the project. These took shape as four distinct data streams:

1. Electionland Google Trends Map
2. Election Protection Commission call center database
3. Social Media
4. Direct voter reports through SMS and WhatsApp

1. ELECTIONLAND GOOGLE TRENDS MAP

The [Electionland Google Trends Map](#) on Election Day visualized the voting issues people were searching for on Google as they happened around the country.

To ensure the map included the most relevant trends, the team compiled a list of ways English- and Spanish-speaking voters might indicate voting issues through their search queries on Election Day, by looking at historical data from the 2012 Election, Super Tuesday 2016, and early voting 2016. They combined hundreds of the most relevant search terms around the following voting issues:

- Provisional ballots status (where your vote is accepted but only counted in certain circumstances)
- Long wait times at polling stations
- Inactive voter status (searches for voters were considered “inactive” if there were issues delivering their ballot paper)
- Voting machine issues
- Voter intimidation at polling places, centered around searches for “how to report” possible intimidation.

Read more about how Google Trends data fed into the map [here](#).

2. ELECTION PROTECTION COMMISSION CALL CENTER DATABASE

The nonpartisan election monitoring group [Election Protection](#), a project of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, ran a national hotline (866-OUR-VOTE) on Election Day which voters could call to report voting issues. Early on, ProPublica reached out to the Election Protection Commission, and they agreed to give Electionland access to their database where they logged calls, provided the sensitive data was handled appropriately. The hotline data proved invaluable, providing high-quality tips about voting problems as soon as a call was logged. The Lawyers' Committee even sent a voting expert to sit on the [Expert Desk](#).

3. SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media posts accounted for a large proportion of the reports tracked and investigated by Electionland journalists on November 8. Electionland monitored Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Reddit for user-generated reports of problems at the polls. Read more below about the work that went into making social media a meaningful journalistic source.

4. DIRECT VOTER REPORTS THROUGH TEXT AND WHATSAPP

Citizen journalists were invited to share their experience of voting by sending text messages to Electionland. WNYC's data team built a text bot which sent automated messages to voters asking them to respond with details of their voting experience and how long they spent in line.

Members of the public could sign up to receive these reminders on Election Day, and users of [HelloVote](#), a service that facilitates registering to vote by SMS, were also on the list. Thousands of voters responded, and their text messages fed into an interactive database created by WNYC developer Alan Palazzolo that the team named [Landslide](#). Voters could also send reports to Electionland directly through the mobile chat app WhatsApp and via direct messages on Twitter.

Setting up the social media inputs

SOCIAL MEDIA APPROACH

It seems self-evident that Twitter, Facebook and other social media would be a rich source of user-generated reports about the experience of voting. But the task of monitoring the firehose of social media streams is a huge one. How do you look? How do you make sure you don't miss something? What are you actually looking for? And when you find something, how do you make sure it's true?



Claire Wardle and Fergus Bell from the First Draft coalition led a massive effort to plan the workflows to accomplish this. Because there is no single technology which can do this kind of work yet, they knew they needed a large number of people with journalists' instincts who could be trained to methodically search for and reliably authenticate social media data in real time on Election Day. Very early on, they engaged with journalism schools at universities across the country to get students involved.

"There is no single tool out there for monitoring social media which can work as quickly, accurately and thoroughly as a set of human eyes," says Fergus.

These teams needed to work systematically to ensure they saw every single relevant post, and it was important they could do so without any bias from algorithms which might promote or demote posts based on popularity.

The workflows required a combination of technological tools, searches and scrapers, along with lots of trained people with good journalistic instincts. The structured approach had to ensure:

- Relevant posts were coming into each Feeder (the name used to describe the journalists and journalism students who were collecting information primarily from social media and inputting it into Electionland, more on this on page 26) at the right speed – the searches
- were broken out among many people to ensure no individual Feeder had too much to look through and nothing was missed.
- Feeders could scroll back to look at posts from earlier in the day in case they had missed something.
- The workflows were flexible enough that they could be updated throughout the day, and standardized so that communicating updates was simple.
- The whole system was supported with reliable communication channels.

J-SCHOOL TRAINING

Everyone involved had to be trained on each of the tools and workflows. The First Draft Coalition held an Electionland Bootcamp event on October 1 which was attended by a professor from each of the 14 participating journalism schools. These professors were then responsible for cascading the training to the participating students back at their universities.

Derek Willis from ProPublica was there to provide the wider context of the project and to talk through election specifics. Representatives from Google News Lab, Facebook, Dataminr, and the Check team at Meedan also presented training sessions on the tools that would be used.

First Draft created a website to house all the training materials, which included workflow diagrams, search string lists, screenshots, and videos detailing every workflow and every step of the process. Housing all the materials on a living, breathing website meant everyone always had the latest information to hand.

SETTING UP THE SOCIAL MEDIA INPUTS

Face-to-face training was vital. With so many different tools to master and so many detailed workflows, everyone had a lot to learn. Fergus says that if they'd had more time to prepare, he would have prioritized training each of the social media feeders face-to-face.

"This is such a new area in J-schools, with very few having set social newsgathering curriculums," Fergus explains. "It would have been better to provide direct training. We could have answered all questions in real-time."



At Electionland Bootcamp on October 1, professors from each of the participating J-schools received training on all the tools and workflows. Photo: Andy Mendelson for CUNY.

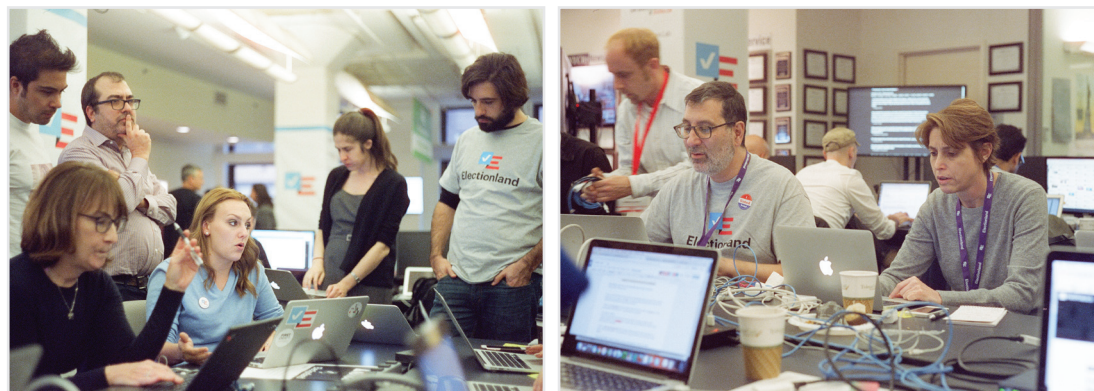


Photo Credit: Mike Tigas, ProPublica

CROWDSOURCING SEARCH TERMS

One of the key questions in the lead up to Election Day was, “What do we need to look for on social media?” Based on ProPublica’s reporting, the team knew what kind of events to look out for — long lines, voter intimidation, provisional ballots, etc. But how might people describe these events in a Tweet? What words would someone type into Facebook if something had prevented them from casting their ballot?

To answer this question, the team crowdsourced search terms. They asked everyone to contribute ideas on what words and phrases (in both English and Spanish) to keep an eye out for on social media during early voting and on Election Day. Everyone from the project team was asked to contribute, and it was one of the activities at the Electionland Bootcamp.

These became lists of search terms which the Feeders used to set up their monitoring on Election Day.

| Long Lines | Intimidation | ID requested | Machines Issues | Polling location |
|-------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| | | | | Don't know where to |
| Queue | Nervous | Asked for ID | Sticky Buttons | vote |
| Line | Scared | ID requested | Machine Broken | polling station moved |
| In Line | Shouting | Identification | Error | Polling moved |
| On Line | Signs | Driver's Licence | Wrong vote | Polling move |
| | | | | couldn't find my polling |
| Waiting | Placards | ID Card | Rejected | place |
| | | | my polling place | |
| Waiting Time | Protests | voter ID | broken machine | had to leave |
| | | | my polling place | |
| Long Line | Prevent | drivers license | broken machines | tried to vote |
| long time line | Blocked | driver's license | Voting site/sight | voting place |
| waiting long time | Stopped | student photo id | not enough | denied |
| voting wait time | Harassed | student id | rejected | turned away |
| | | | | |
| not registered | Yelling | confused | ballot marker | hidden |
| stuck in line | yell | confusing | accessible AND vote | lost |

A small sample of crowdsourced search terms

Reporting on early voting

Reporting on voting kicked off well before Election Day — about 37 states and the District of Columbia have early voting programs, and it's estimated that one-third of the country had already cast ballots by the time polls opened on November 8.

Jessica Huseman was one of the ProPublica reporters who worked on early voting. She had responsibility for looking through reports from the Election Protection call center starting in early October, and she shared leads about voting problems with local reporters, as in [this story](#) in the *Houston Chronicle*.



The team found that one-off voting problems were harder to spot during early voting, because the volume of reports was lower and there generally wasn't as much attention being paid to voting.

"We were able to spot big problems — like very long lines in North Carolina, voter ID issues in Texas, and particularly rowdy Trump supporters in West Palm," says Jessica. "But we didn't have as much reporting of one-off problems, like voters being asked to sign provisional ballots when they shouldn't have or disabled voters facing issues at individual polling places."

Election Day: How reporting worked

ELECTION DAY:
HOW REPORTING
WORKED

“ So, we took all this background knowledge, we took our network of reporting partners and we took all of our social media trained students, and we put them into a giant Rube Goldberg machine...”

— Celeste LeCompte, ProPublica

THE CUNY NEWSROOM

On November 8, the Electionland team convened at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism in a large newsroom. John Keefe of WNYC had the insight to create a live newsroom on Election Day, and CUNY Graduate School of Journalism provided the space for it on 41st Street in Manhattan. The newsroom was designed to accommodate a large group of journalists, with an open floor plan, ample electricity and Internet connectivity which was enhanced with extra bandwidth and a failover connection in case the newsroom overwhelmed the system, as well as fully equipped radio and social video studios.

Having a physical location where everyone gathered was key to solving the issue of sharing proprietary data. Instead of having to build digital systems that would filter out data that couldn't be shared between organizations, a physical space allowed people to walk over and talk to each other. So, for example, Google engineers could see their proprietary data without sharing it with other groups, but anyone could go ask them a question and get a “filtered” answer right away. Likewise, people working on the sensitive Election Protection call logs could see their data and share it appropriately in real time. Experts and journalists could talk to everyone, but without having direct access to proprietary material.

ELECTION DAY:
HOW REPORTING
WORKED



Top Photo Credit: John Brecher for ProPublica

Bottom Photo(s) Credit: Andy Mendelson



Lots of visible branding helped make the project feel like a unified effort. Part of the newsroom planning included color-coded lanyards for staff, free t-shirts for everyone involved, and lots of branding everywhere, which helped make things feel official and like a unified effort.

NEWSROOM DESKS

ELECTION DAY:
HOW REPORTING
WORKED

The newsroom teams were organized into these 'Desks':

- The many [Feeder Desks](#) (including the student teams at J-schools around the country) input information into Electionland, largely collected from social media.
 - The [Elite Feeder Desk](#) was staffed by professional journalists experienced in social media newsgathering who supported with more complex tasks.
 - At the [Google Trends Desk](#) (technically a specialist Feeder desk), Google staff monitored the Trends data coming in and watched for search spikes which could indicate an issue.
- At the [Catcher Desk](#), professional journalists parsed all the inputs coming in, synthesized information and pushed out leads and tips to reporters.
 - One special Catcher Desk staffed by **Columbia** students looked at the data coming in from the Election Protection hotline.
- The [Expert Desk](#) was staffed by election experts who provided context and deep knowledge to help journalists understand voting problems as they arose.
- The [National Desk](#) was staffed with journalists reporting on the Election on a national level.
- The [Outreach Desk](#) manned the Electionland social media channels.
- The **Managers Table**, staffed by Scott Klein, John Keefe, Andy Mendelson from CUNY, and Danielle Bowers and Olivia Ma from Google News Lab, had overall responsibility. They made sure tasks flowed properly and that stories were being written, and changed tactics as needed during the day.
- At the **Tech Desk**, people helped publish stories and addressed technical problems.
- Each of the key Desks is explained in more detail in the following sections.

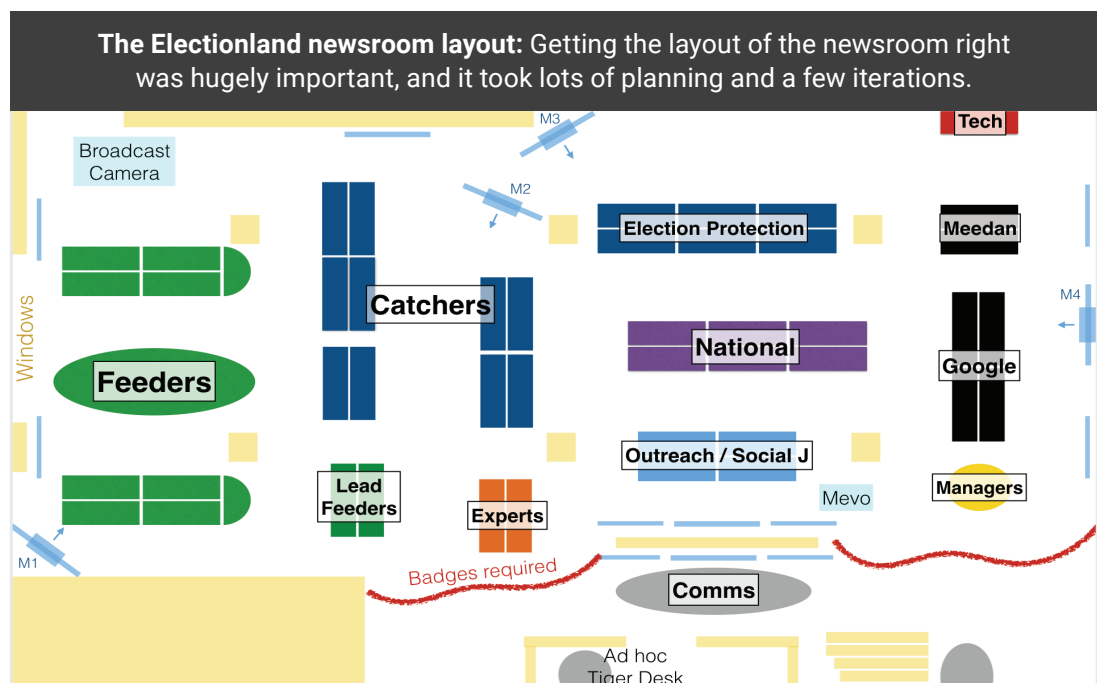
Each team was overseen by a Desk lead. Desk leads and the overall managers did stand-up meetings every two hours to ensure the workflows were going smoothly and to troubleshoot problems. "These meetings were crucial and awesome for identifying and solving problems in real time," says John Keefe of WNYC.

NEWSROOM LAYOUT

Getting the layout of the newsroom right was hugely important, and it took lots of planning and a few iterations. The final configuration of the desks, designed by John, facilitated quick conversations and collaboration among the Desks. Notably, Catchers had easy direct access to the Feeder groups, as well as the Experts who could provide context and troubleshoot immediate issues.

The National Desk grew in prominence as election administration became a key part of the conversation and after Donald Trump implied the election would be rigged. “It was not originally conceived that they would be in the center of the newsroom, but in the days leading up to Election Day it became obvious they would be a key part of the action,” says Scott Klein from ProPublica.

Most of the student feeders were based at their journalism schools around the country, and they were connected to the CUNY newsroom via video conferencing.



INFORMATION FLOW AND 'REVERSE TASKING'

ELECTION DAY:
HOW REPORTING
WORKED

Information flowed through the newsroom desks following a predetermined structure and carefully designed communications channels and workflows. The Feeder > Catcher > National/Local structure is based on a common breaking news scenario and was created by ProPublica and WNYC.

Data flowed IN from all the sources:

- J-school Feeders found and verified tips from social media and fed them into [Check](#).
- Elite Feeders provided cover for social media monitoring at peak times and helped with complex verification tasks in [Check](#).
- The special Columbia Catchers sifted through call logs from the Election Protection call center and fed notable reports into [Landslide](#).
- Text message reports shared by voters fed in through [Landslide](#).
- Google Trends data fed into the Electionland Map.
- There was also one person fielding WhatsApp messages in Spanish and a few people on the Outreach desk feeding in reports received via Twitter direct messages.

Data was 'caught' and interpreted:

- Catchers 'caught' all these inputs and interpreted the data. They looked for trends and patterns.
- Catchers could consult with Experts to get more context; e.g. they could find out whether a problem they spotted was really something newsworthy, or whether it was a routine issue that tended to come up during every election.

Leads flowed OUT:

- Catchers shared leads and information with the local reporters who had signed on to receive tips.
- Local reporters could then investigate reported incidents — go to polling places with issues, find specific people who had reported on issues, and where appropriate publish stories.
- Reporters on the National Desk also received leads and information from the Catchers. They blogged and wrote stories on events of national interest.

On Election Day, there also ended up being a lot of ‘reverse tasking.’ Instead of information only flowing in from Feeders and out to reporters, there was communication both up and down the chain.

For example, at one point a journalist noticed there had been multiple sightings in Texas of posters showing incorrect information, and she wanted to find out how widely these posters were being seen. So the journalist ‘reverse tasked’ her Catcher, asking him to look for any other reports about the inaccurate posters. The Catcher then searched back through his data sources, and also asked a Feeder to look for more mentions of the posters on social media.

INFORMATION FLOW THROUGH SLACK CHANNELS

[Slack](#), the cloud-based team collaboration app, was the communications platform which facilitated these information flows.



Within the Electionland Slack community there were dozens of different channels set up, using standardized naming conventions, to help keep information streams targeted and organized.

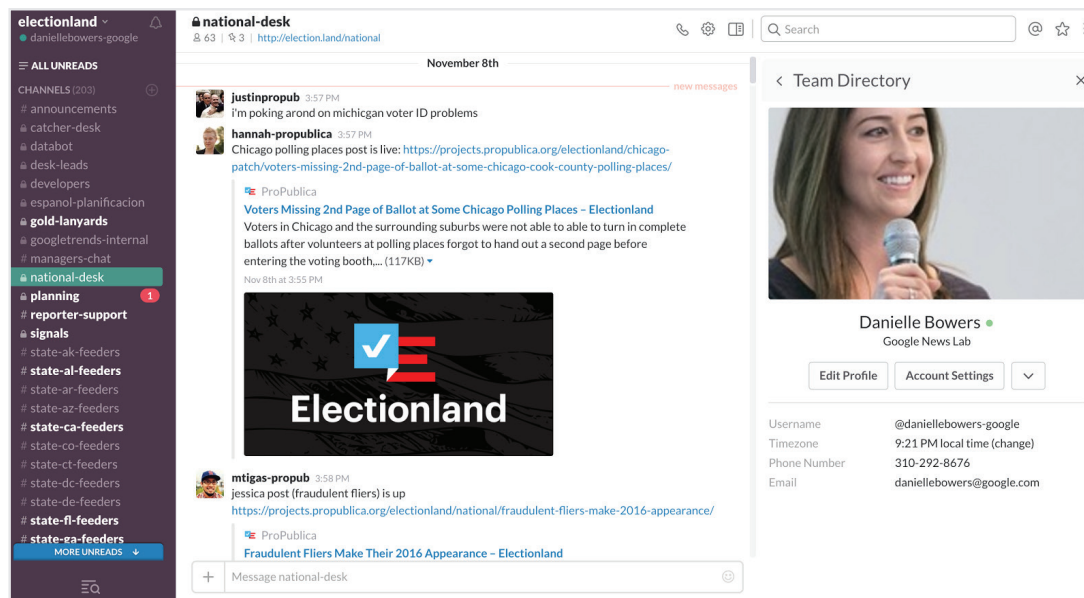
There were three channels for each state:

- One for comms between Feeders and Catchers
- One for comms between Catchers and reporters
- One which showed all activity in the corresponding Check channel

Additionally there were Slack channels for each desk team, where team members could ask questions and share ideas and best practices, a channels for managers to stay in touch, and a channel where debunked hoaxes were discussed.

ELECTION DAY: HOW REPORTING WORKED

Participating reporters received information and leads to investigate from Catchers through their dedicated Slack channel, or they could choose to keep an eye on the Check activity channel to watch for interesting reports from their area.



The Electionland community on Slack

FEEDER DESKS

The various Feeder groups fed information into Electionland. Most of the Feeders were stationed at partner journalism schools around the country monitoring social media. There was also an Elite Feeder Desk staffed by professional journalists experienced in social media newsgathering. Fergus Bell oversaw the whole social media Feeder operation from the CUNY newsroom.

The Google Trends team was also on site to provide Trends data and look out for regional spikes in voting issue related terms.

All told, social media data proved most useful for surfacing small issues happening in large volumes. “A small number of provisional ballots or one long line isn’t a big deal, but when you start to see it in volume it becomes something you want to investigate,” explains Celeste LeCompte of ProPublica. The Google Trends data and map was a useful source of context and an additional dataset to cross-check when a problem surfaced, but this data on its own didn’t generally lead to discovering problems.



Feeder Desk in the CUNY newsroom. Photo Credit: John Brecher for ProPublica

J-SCHOOL FEEDER DESKS

The role of the student Feeders was to find people talking about voting problems on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, YouTube or other social media, verify these reports, and pass them on to the Catchers by entering them into [Check](#).

More than 650 students, working in shifts, were involved in Electionland. Each of the 14 participating journalism schools was assigned a cluster of states to monitor. Feeder supervisors (mostly professors) oversaw the Feeders' work at a local level in each satellite newsroom and made sure resources and workload were being handled.

PARTICIPATING JOURNALISM SCHOOLS

Arizona State University
Columbia University
CUNY
Louisiana State University
University of Memphis
University of Missouri
Ohio University
Texas State University
University of North Carolina
University of Oregon
University of Florida
University of Georgia
University of Alabama
Howard University

ELECTION DAY: HOW REPORTING WORKED

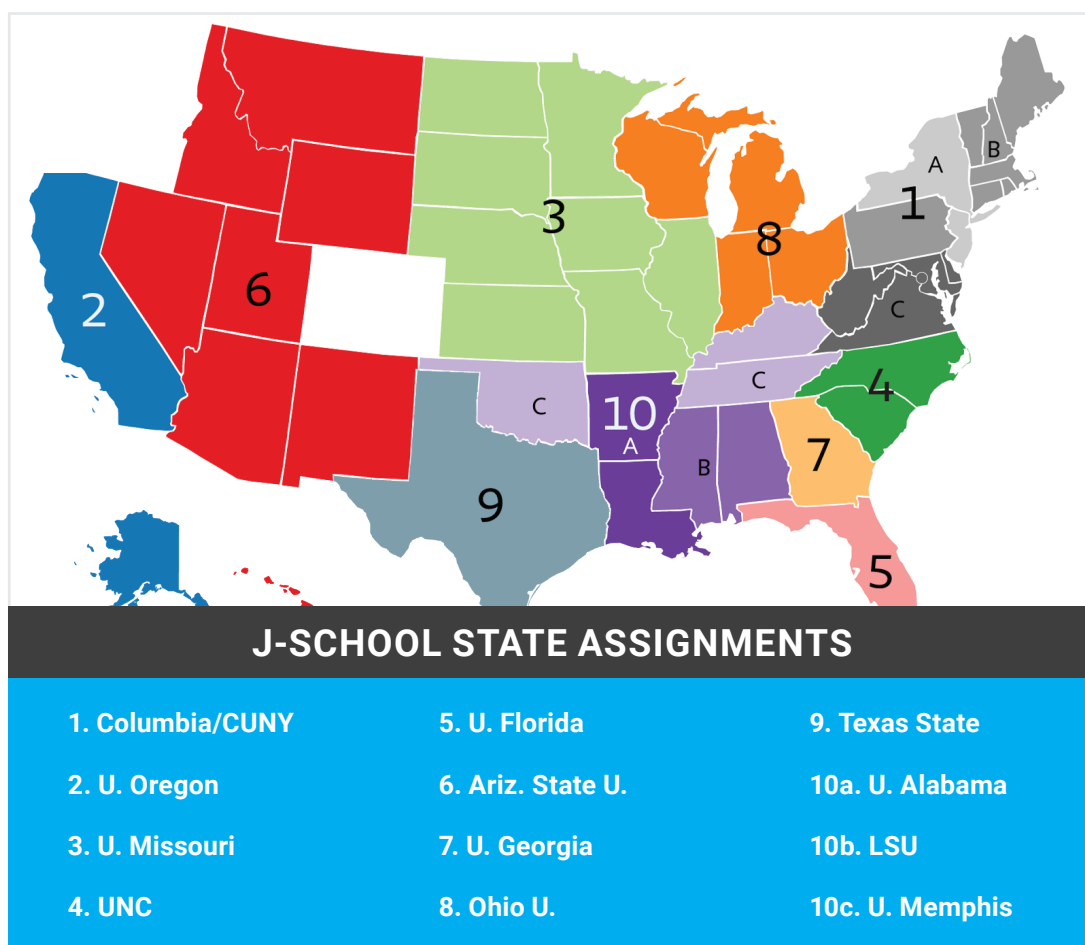
The supervisors were all in touch with each other throughout the day on a Google Hangout (group video chat) led from the CUNY newsroom by Jenni Sargent of First Draft.



The video conference meant updates could be communicated to everyone right away, and that the J-school groups could feel like a part of the buzz that was happening in the CUNY newsroom.

Fergus kept an eye on the big picture of the social newsgathering operation and communicated any changes that needed to be made — for example, if there were new search terms to add or tweaks to the verification workflow.

They also held meetings every two hours to communicate changes and to monitor capacity as report volumes ebbed and flowed throughout the day, and to reallocate teams to work on different states as necessary.



SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING WORKSTATIONS & TOOLS

To ensure a systematic approach to monitoring social media, each J-school Feeder group was asked to set up their workstations in the same way. This meant that people could come and go from the workstations without losing momentum, and that if changes to the workflow needed to be made, they were easy to communicate and roll out.

Each Feeder was assigned to monitor a specific state or cluster of states. They set up their workstations in advance to search for relevant reports coming from their state(s) across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and (optionally) Reddit.

Each Feeder workstation used the Google Chrome browser and had the same browser tabs open to the same apps in the same order, and on Election Day they cycled through the tabs methodically to ensure nothing was missed.

On top of using the native search functions on Twitter and Facebook, they used a number of social media monitoring apps including [Tweetdeck](#), [Dataminr](#), [Banjo](#), [Krzana](#), and [Acusense](#). These tools worked in the background and surfaced posts from within their state which were relevant to the crowdsourced search terms.

Within Tweetdeck they set up multiple columns to display designated sets of search results. They linked their Dataminr accounts into Tweetdeck so that Dataminr alerts displayed within a column. They used [CrowdTangle](#) to search for people who would be likely to Tweet about local elections and followed these accounts within their Tweetdeck columns.

The Feeders were also trained to use further search tools to dig for more details once an issue surfaced on Twitter, particularly [Facebook Signal](#) and geo-targeted searches on YouTube. They could also choose to reference Google Search Trends and/or the Electionland Map to check whether a particular voting problem report might be part of a larger pattern.



Louisiana State University students working in Electionland's Baton Rouge, LA campus satellite newsroom.
Photo credit: Louisiana State University

VERIFYING SOCIAL MEDIA TIPS

When a Feeder spotted a relevant post on social media, the next step was to enter it into [Check](#) and verify it. Feeders followed a detailed process to find out as much information as possible about a social post, aiming to verify it as an authentic claim from someone who was actually there.



Feeders had responsibility for authenticating each tip they found. Discovering relevant posts was the easy part, but, as Fergus notes, “putting content through the full verification process was naturally a more difficult and slower task. We had to ensure that if you found something you claimed it—and did so straight away—owning the piece from start to finish, from discovery to verification.”



Photo Credit: Andy Mendelson

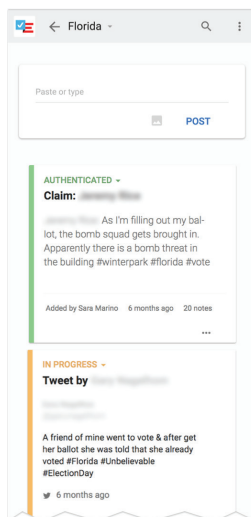
The Feeders followed a detailed step-by-step verification workflow to answer as many of these questions as possible for every relevant post they found:

- **Is it original?**
 - Checked with reverse image or video searches
- **Who is the source?**
 - Checked using a handful of people search engines like Peekyou and Pipl
 - Reviewed poster's previous social media activity
- **What time was the report posted?**
 - All times were converted into Eastern time to avoid confusion
- **Where was the footage taken?**
 - Check for location tags on the post
 - Cross-check posted data using Google Streetview

ENTERING SOCIAL MEDIA TIPS INTO CHECK

Once verified, the post would be entered as a new report in Check, starting by pasting in the post's URL. One particularly useful feature of Check is that once a url for a particular tip has been added into the system, no one else can add this url as a new entry — but other users

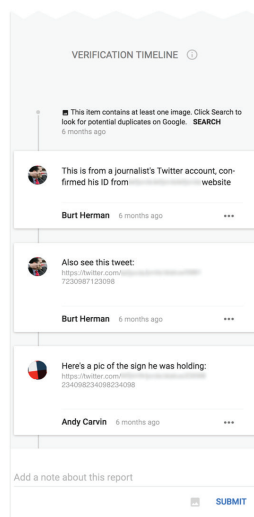
could add comments or more information onto an existing entry. This helped to avoid duplication of effort.



Check project overview



Check report detail view



Every record in Check was categorized by state and tagged with the appropriate voting issue, e.g. long lines or intimidation. In the notes section, the Feeders entered the verification information they'd found using a standard template for consistency, and Check provided a reminder checklist.

TEMPLATE FOR ADDING VERIFICATION DETAILS TO A RECORD IN CHECK

ISSUE: [lines] or [intimidation] or [ID] or [ballot] or [location]

ORIGINAL: [Yes] or [No] or [Not Sure]

LOCATION: [#stateabbreviation-city-polling location]* e.g. #ma-boston-cityhall

DATE: [11/08/2016 - xx.xxpm timezone] e.g. 11/08/2016 12.06pm EST

CONTACT: [Twitter or Facebook username or Email or Phone number]

DETAILS: [Add any additional info here, including any exchanges you may have had with the user]

Records in Check could be assigned one or more status tags, e.g. 'authenticated,' 'false,' or 'in progress.' Feeders could always go back to a record in Check to change its status or add more information as it became available.

Through the Slack-based 'Checkbot' all activity in Check was logged in Slack, so anyone could watch the Slack channel for emerging patterns.

ELITE FEEDERS DESK

The Elite Feeders Desk was staffed by professional journalists from the First Draft Coalition, who were experienced in social media newsgathering. The desk was also the point of contact for the J-school Feeder groups, running the all-day Hangout.

Elite Feeders received their assignments from Fergus Bell based on the overall picture of the J-school Feeders. They picked up any backlog when J-schools were struggling to keep

up during peak voting hours in their states. They also took over anything added to Check that required more complex verification work.

Elite Feeders helped when a Catcher or National reporter needed a specific investigation which was outside of the standard monitoring workflow. They also performed some more bespoke monitoring based on their own experiences in order to find events happening outside of the structured search and discovery set-ups used by the J-schools.

FEEDERS FOR NON-ENGLISH CONTENT

The team anticipated that there would be important reports about voting problems in languages other than English. After some reporting to determine which languages they would most likely encounter, the team prioritized Spanish and Chinese.

They made an early decision to have a “no translation” workflow — reports wouldn’t be translated from their original language until they were used in a story. This would avoid slowing down verification and analysis for non-English leads. However, it also meant there would be a need for bilingual staff.

English and Spanish ended up being the critical languages for Electionland, but the team were prepared to handle reports in other languages if they had come in. They created a database of all the languages spoken by the Feeders and Catchers, in case the need arose for fluency in a given language.

On Election Day, Claudia Báez, an ICFJ fellow at ProPublica, handled Spanish-language reports sent in via WhatsApp or direct messages on Twitter. She corresponded directly with people in Spanish and then manually added relevant reports to Check. The majority of Spanish language reports came via WhatsApp, reflecting how important this channel was.

The Spanish language teams from CUNY’s bilingual journalism program and the University of Florida handled these reports, as well as any Spanish posts on social media. To assist Catchers who might not speak Spanish, they also edited the titles for some reports in Check so that they appeared in English, and added a basic summary of the issue in English.

For Chinese, Sisi Wei from ProPublica and Jenny Ye from WNYC set up an account on WeChat (a Chinese social network) to receive tips. It was monitored passively by Feeders who could read Chinese characters. They also created ways for the public to text Mandarin to Electionland and receive automated prompts that logged their reports. No substantial Chinese-language reports came in, but if they had, the workflow would have been similar to the one for Spanish.



Photo Credit: Mike Tigas, ProPublica



Photo Credit: Andy Mendelson

GOOGLE TRENDS DESK

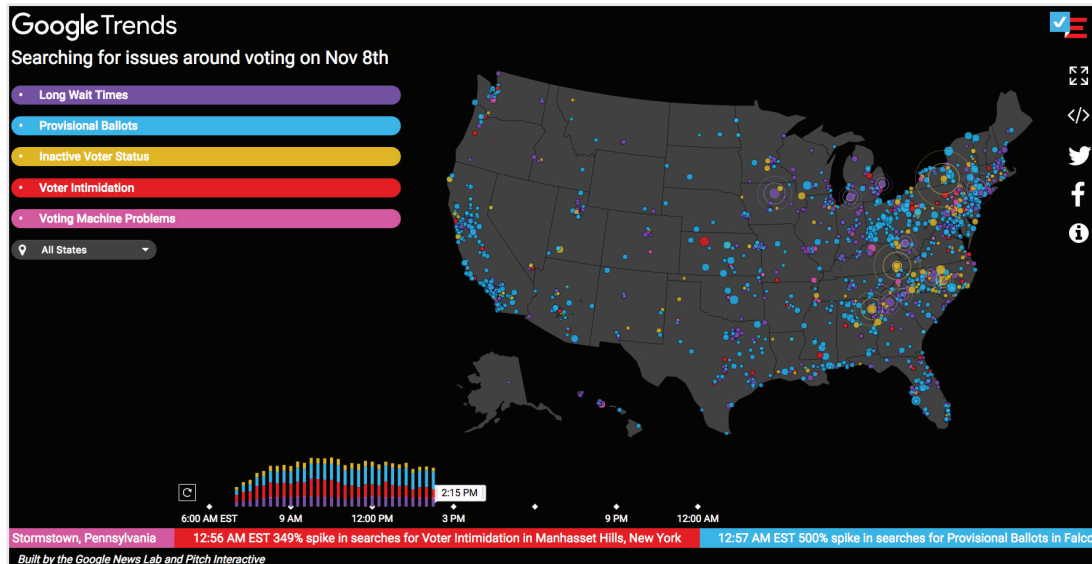
On Election Day, the entire Google Trends team set up camp in the newsroom. They played two main roles: first, ensuring the data feeding into the Google Trends Electionland Map was accurate, and second, monitoring the map for spikes and feeding reports into the Slack stream for the Catchers.

The Electionland map had been set up to show when and where there were spikes in people searching on Google using terms that might indicate they were experiencing a voting problem. Google engineers on the desk made sure that the Trends data feeding into this was interpreted accurately.

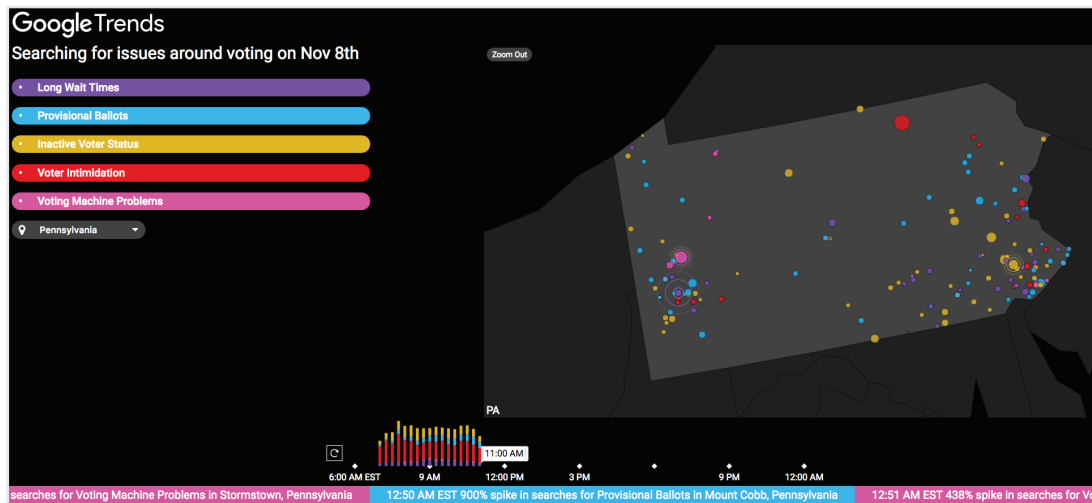
Additionally there were teams dedicated to monitoring specific regions. If they spotted a spike in search activity, they would paste a special state-specific url into the relevant state's Slack channel. This spike could then be mapped against any of the other data sources coming in as a way to judge how widespread a particular issue might be.

“Trends data formed part of a cluster of signals that indicated if something was worth looking into,” explains Simon Rogers of the Google News Lab. “The volume of signals we had coming in was challenging, and everyone was flat out all day.”

ELECTION DAY: HOW REPORTING WORKED



The Google Trends Electionland Map



The Google Trends Electionland Map

CATCHER DESKS

Catchers ‘caught’ all the different data streams coming into Electionland and interpreted it for the network of participating journalists, essentially performing the role of the newsroom editor. Managed by Celeste LeCompte and Ken Schwencke of ProPublica, the Catchers monitored all the Electionland data inputs to look for widespread, serious or otherwise newsworthy voting problems and decided when to pass these on to reporters as story leads.

The Catcher Desk was staffed by 19 professional journalists, from ProPublica and other New York media outlets, with each assigned to cover a region of the country. Electionland didn’t meaningfully cover Oregon, Washington, or Colorado on Election Day since these are vote-by-mail states and do not generally see the same voting issues.

Catchers had extra-large monitor displays and kept an eye on the various data streams coming in for each of their states. They fielded Slack messages from the various Feeder Desks, watched their state Check pages for clusters of social media reports, and kept an eye on Landslide for everything else — call center reports, text message data, etc.



Catchers interpreted incoming data and passed leads to reporters.

Photo Credit: John Brecher for ProPublica

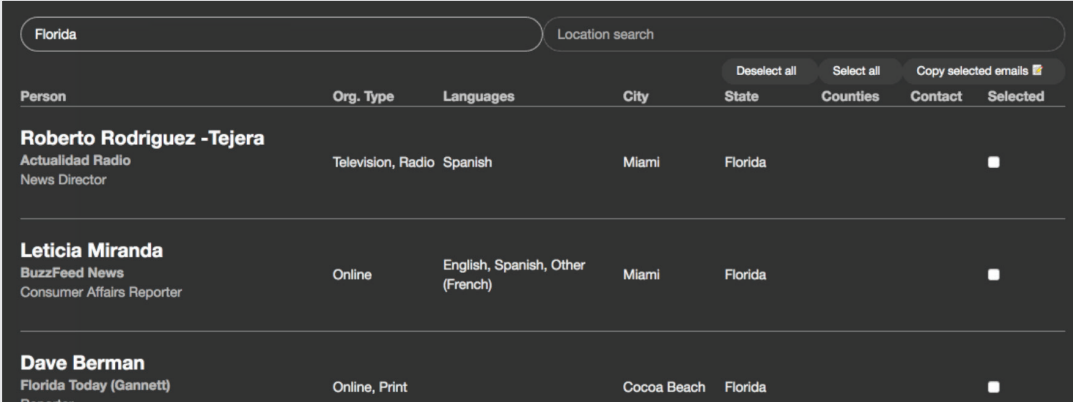
When they spotted an issue, they did a bit of preliminary digging of their own to find out if it was worth investigating further. For example, if a Catcher spotted that several people had Tweeted about long lines in Indianapolis over the past hour, she might:

- Check the Google Trends Map to see if the issue was spiking on Google searches, and if so, whether it was local to just one county, or affecting a larger area.
- Turn to someone at the Expert Desk to ask, “Is this serious? Or is it just one of those routine problems we always expect to see in Indiana?”
- Ask the Indiana Feeders (via Slack) to do some more digging, looking specifically for reports on long lines in Indianapolis.
- Get in touch with someone who had posted on Twitter to ask for more details.

Applying editorial judgement, the Catcher would decide whether the issue was worth pursuing. If yes, they could choose to:

- Post a Slack message on the channel for local reporters alerting them to the issue.
- If the story seemed important enough, directly call a local reporter with the lead.
- If the story seemed important on a national level, pass the lead on to one of the reporters on the Electionland National Desk.

Catchers also used a tool called [Assign](#), built by Ken Schwencke at ProPublica, which was a lightning-quick shared address book that made it easy to find local journalists who might be interested in a story.



The screenshot shows the 'Assign' tool interface with a search bar set to 'Florida'. Below the search bar are buttons for 'Deselect all', 'Select all', and 'Copy selected emails'. The main table lists three journalists with columns for Person, Org. Type, Languages, City, State, Counties, Contact, and Selected.

| Person | Org. Type | Languages | City | State | Counties | Contact | Selected |
|---|-------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|---------|----------|---------|--------------------------|
| Roberto Rodriguez -Tejera Actualidad Radio News Director | Television, Radio | Spanish | Miami | Florida | | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Leticia Miranda BuzzFeed News Consumer Affairs Reporter | Online | English, Spanish, Other (French) | Miami | Florida | | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Dave Berman Florida Today (Gannett) Reporter | Online, Print | | Cocoa Beach | Florida | | | <input type="checkbox"/> |

The Assign tool built by Ken Schwencke at ProPublica helped catchers sort through hundreds of contacts to know quickly who to call in case of breaking news in a particular place.

COLUMBIA CATCHERS - ELECTION PROTECTION DATABASE

There was also a special group of Catchers in the CUNY newsroom staffed by 16 journalism graduate students from Columbia University. This group was tasked with going through the data coming in from the Election Protection Coalition call center (866-OUR-VOTE). This information was more sensitive since the callers had not publicly posted their reports, so it wasn't made available directly to Feeder groups.

Ken Schwencke created a system called [Protection](#) which pulled call logs from the 866-OUR-VOTE database. The Columbia students reviewed each call, removed any personally identifying information which wasn't approved to be shared, and published anonymized claims directly to [Landslide](#), as well as to a special display on a TV in the newsroom.

The Columbia Catchers were paired with the professional journalist catchers covering the same regions. They could discuss the tips they were seeing, and the journalists could task students with researching problems or trends using keyword searches across the whole Election Protection dataset.



Photo Credit: Andy Mendelson

EXPERT DESKS

ELECTION DAY: HOW REPORTING WORKED

The Expert Desk, overseen and recruited by Scott Klein of ProPublica, was staffed by four national experts on voting, including election attorneys and former election officials.

The Experts were available as resources for the Catchers, Elite Feeders, and reporters on the National Desk, providing context, answering questions, and troubleshooting voting problems as they happened. As journalistic sources, they were not paid for their participation, although their lodging, travel, and food expenses were covered.

The Experts were able to provide context around voting issues spotted by Catchers and help ensure that only useful leads were passed on to the partner reporters.

“We could check patterns and problems with the Experts,” says Celeste LeCompte of ProPublica, who served as a Catcher Desk manager. “We could say, ‘Here’s a pattern, but is it a meaningful pattern?’ and the Experts might say, ‘Oh that’s normal — it’s not great, but don’t waste your time there.’”

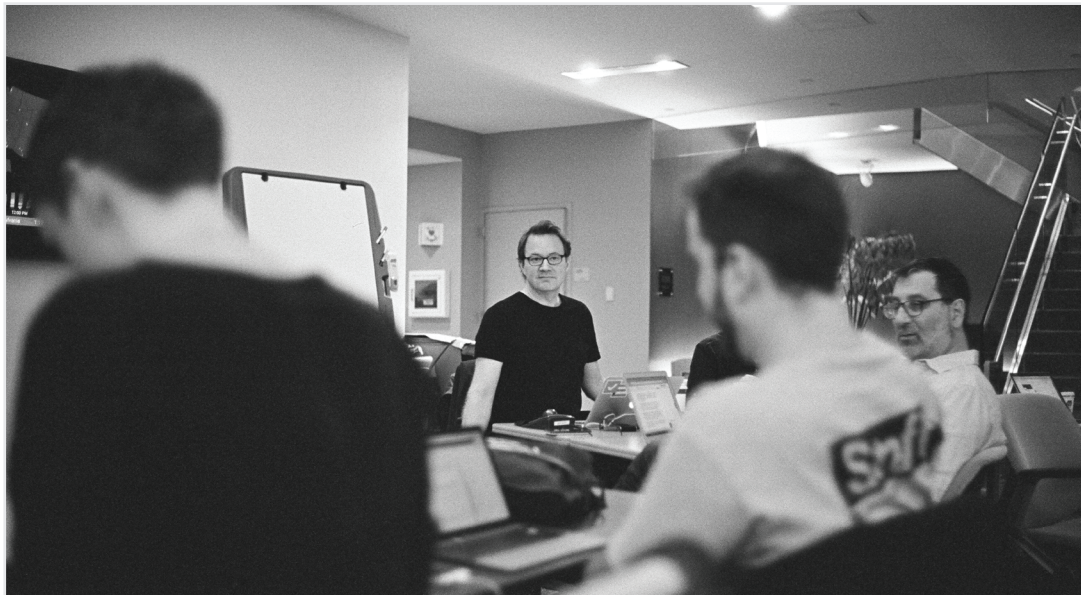


Photo Credit: Mike Tigas, ProPublica

THE ELECTIONLAND EXPERT DESK TEAM

AMY COHEN is the Director of Operations and Co-Founder of the Center for Election Innovation and Research. Previously, she was an officer with the elections program at The Pew Charitable Trusts where she managed the Voting Information Project (VIP). She oversaw the technical assistance provided to states to standardize and publish their election data, and she worked with Google and other technology partners to make information available online. Under her leadership, VIP provided data for 63 elections on 24 individual election days in 2016 alone, resulting in millions of look-ups of VIP data, more elections than ever before, and an additional 50 elections on 20 individual election days in 2015.

DAVID BECKER is the Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Center for Election Innovation and Research (CEIR), which works to improve election administration through research, data, and technology. Prior to founding CEIR, he was Director of the elections program at The Pew Charitable Trusts, driving reforms in election administration, including using technology to provide voters with information they need to cast a ballot; assessing election performance through better data; and upgrading voter registration systems. Before joining Pew, David served for seven years as a senior trial attorney in the Voting Section of the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division, where he led numerous investigations into violations of federal voting laws regarding redistricting, minority voting rights, voter intimidation, and vote dilution.

JOHN POWERS is an Associate Counsel in the Voting Rights Project at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. Before joining the Lawyers' Committee in 2015, John worked for eight years in the Voting Section at the U.S. Department of Justice. Prior to the Shelby County decision, he reviewed submissions for preclearance under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. More recently, he was part of litigation teams challenging the Texas voter ID and North Carolina omnibus election laws in federal district court. While at DOJ, he received the AAG Distinguished Service Award and other awards for his work.

TAMMY PATRICK is a Democracy Project Fellow with the Bipartisan Policy Center, focusing on furthering the recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration, to which she was appointed a Commissioner by President Obama in 2013. Prior to this, during her eleven years as a Federal Compliance Officer for Maricopa County Elections Department, Ms. Patrick served more than 1.9 million registered voters in the greater Phoenix Valley. Ms. Patrick has been active in election administration modernization and reform for many years and has provided testimony to both state and federal legislatures. Her areas of expertise cover a wide spectrum: from serving on the United States Postal Service Mailer's Technical Advisory Committee on election mail, to providing language assistance in unwritten languages or common data formats for election results reporting. Ms. Patrick has a reputation of finding pragmatic solutions based on sound data collection and analysis to improve the American voting experience.

Profiles assembled and excerpted from official bios.

NATIONAL DESK

ELECTION DAY: HOW REPORTING WORKED

Twelve professional journalists, from The New York Times, USA Today, Univision, and ProPublica, covered the election on a national level from the Electionland National Desk, publishing about 70 stories by the end of the day.

Scott Klein from ProPublica explains, “We initially thought there would be a small National Desk that would do the blog, but after Trump said the election was going to be rigged, it became a much larger thing ... election administration quickly turned into a hot national story.”

National Desk reporters from ProPublica and the New York Times wrote a live blog throughout the day, surfacing verified voting issues found across the country in near real time.

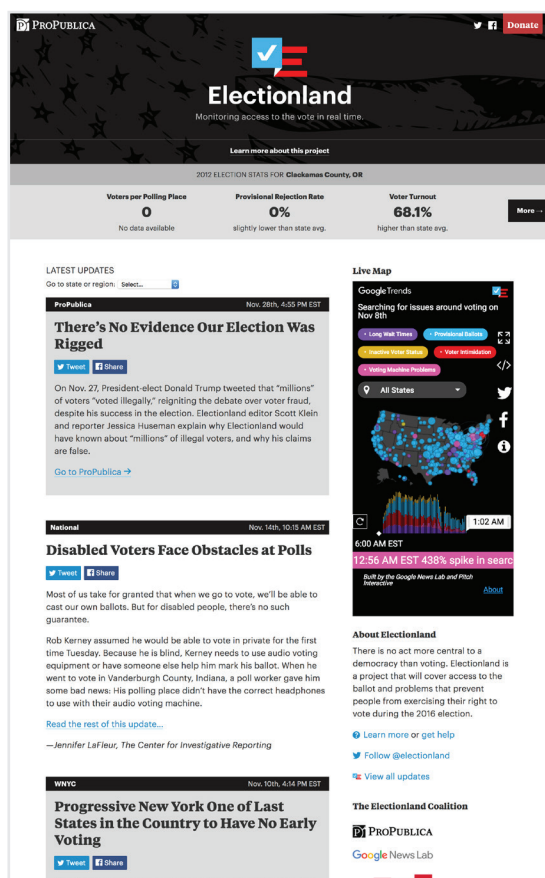
“ We weren’t a hype machine all day —
we could always put things in context.”

— Scott Klein, ProPublica



Photo Credit: Andy Mendelson

ELECTION DAY: HOW REPORTING WORKED



ElectionLand Live Blog



Twelve national journalists covered the election from the Electionland National Desk.

Photo Credit: John Brecher, ProPublica

National Desk reporters, led by ProPublica Deputy Managing Editor Eric Umansky, also wrote stories for their home newsrooms based on leads and information bubbling up from the Catchers. They could see everything going on and decide for themselves what would make a good story.

These reporters were also prepared to appear on national broadcast media, and there was a camera and fiber connection ready for action in the newsroom which was used for live interviews on PBS and Univision. A radio studio down the hall also allowed for live and recorded interviews on a handful of public radio stations.

OUTREACH DESK

ELECTION DAY: HOW REPORTING WORKED

The Outreach Desk managed the Electionland social media channels, including the Facebook Live and Periscope features on the live blog, and highlighted videos people were making of their voting experience. They fielded questions coming in from voters on social media, too, often turning to the Experts at the next Desk for quick responses.

The Outreach Desk team also took care of press and media appearances throughout the day, and they handled visitors to protect the newsroom from distractions.

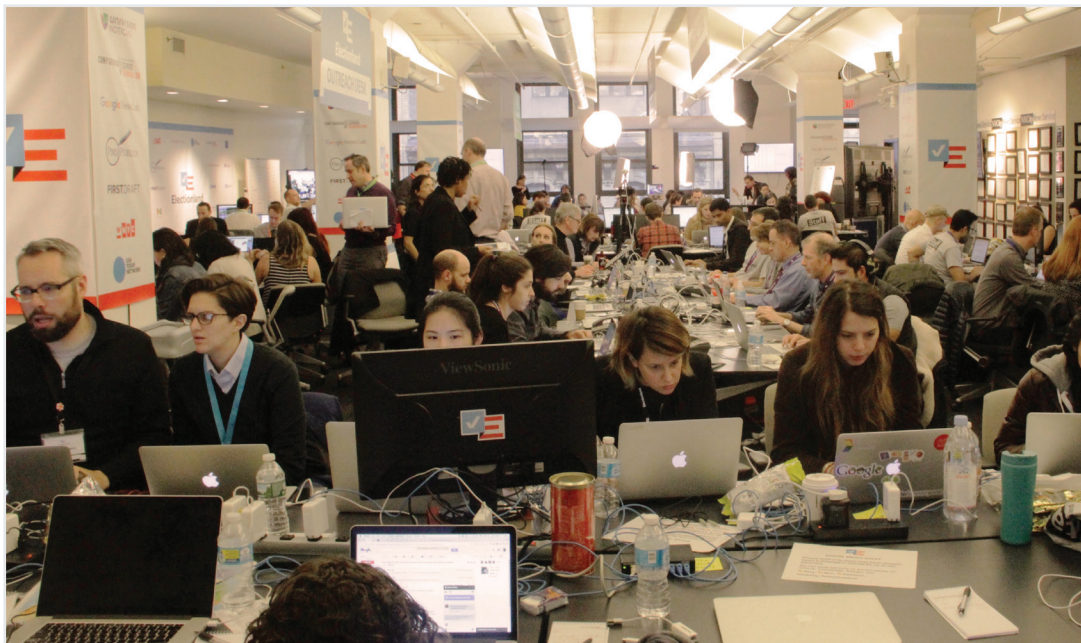


Photo Credit: Olivia Ma / Google

PARTNER REPORTERS

The final link in the information flow was the network of 250 local media outlets that had signed on as Electionland partners.

ELECTION DAY: HOW REPORTING WORKED

Traditionally, local reporters covering voting on Election Day would look at a map of polling stations and drive around looking for a good story, relying on serendipity to be in the right place at the right time. With Electionland they got much better visibility into everything that was happening in their area, and a head start on investigating and reporting on any issues that came up.

Partner reporters had access to all the Electionland data and received training on how to use the tools. They could see live data streams on the Slack channels, Check, and Landslide. Additionally, they could receive phone calls from a Catcher if a big story bubbled up in their area. ProPublica provided further resources, like reporting recipes and tip sheets.

From there, it was up to each reporter to decide how to use these information sources and whether or not to follow up on a lead. They were asked to share any stories they published back with the Electionland team.



This loop ended up not being closed, and the team had to do a lot of digging to find all the related stories that were published. This was a key lesson learned: make it someone's job to keep track of everything being published in real time.

What did Electionland accomplish?

WHAT DID
ELECTIONLAND
ACCOMPLISH?

ASSESSING THE OBJECTIVES

The core goals at the outset of the Electionland project were to:

- Track and cover voting problems during the election, across the country and in real time.
- Distribute solid leads to local reporters which resulted in stories about voting problems.
- Bring voting problems to light so that people in power could solve them, before the polls closed.

Electionland achieved each of these objectives. By joining forces to collaboratively monitor situations at the polls on November 8, local newsrooms were able to cover voting issues in real time that they might not otherwise have discovered until much later, and national newsrooms could track what was happening on the local level.

All told, Electionland processed more than 5,000 reports about voting from social media and other data sources and led to more than 400 news stories about voting across the country, including 45 from ProPublica. Additionally, in many cases, the real-time nature of Election Day reporting meant voting problems were able to be solved immediately.

“Talking about the problem, in context, at the moment it’s happening, is what’s unique here and meaningful to the future.”

— Celeste LeCompte, ProPublica

Voting Problem Claims Captured by Electionland

| DATA SOURCE | NUMBER OF TIPS |
|--|----------------|
| 866-OUR-VOTE (Tips which were filtered and published to Landslide) | 990 |
| Text messages from HelloVote users | 267 |
| Text messages from voters who signed up to Electionland | 3,111 |
| *Twitter | 775 |
| *Facebook | 65 |
| *Instagram | 20 |



The team did not have a data cleanup process in place for tips added to Check following Election Day, thus the number of tips reported above are provisional estimates and subject to change as clean up work continues. Also, more precise numbers of news stories are not available, because Electionland lacked robust tracking around media coverage resulting from the project. The team has taken these lessons on board for future projects.

DEBUNKING HOAXES

WHAT DID ELECTIONLAND ACCOMPLISH?

Another important role Electionland played was in debunking hoaxes. Throughout the day several falsified images and videos popped up and made the rounds on social media. Through the Feeders' verification process, these fakes were easily spotted and reported through the Slack channel dedicated to hoaxes. In one example, a doctored image posted on Twitter showed an immigration raid happening at a polling place. The team was able to find the stock photos which had been used to create this fake — read the full story [here](#).

TWITTER POST (HOAX COMPILED BY TWO SEPARATE IMAGES)



Once a hoax had been posted on Twitter or Facebook there was no way to stop more people from sharing it, but Electionland did stop reporters from wasting their time on chasing false leads.

PHOTO ONE



PHOTO TWO



FILE - In this March 22, 2016 file photo, voters wait in line to cast their ballot in Arizona's presidential primary election in Gilbert, Ariz. New ID requirements. Unfamiliar or distant polling places. Names missing from the voter rolls. Those are just some of the challenges that could disrupt voting across the country through Election Day. While most elections have their share of glitches, experts worry conditions are ripe this year for trouble at the nation's polling places.

This photo is freely available on Wikimedia as an example of an arrest by an immigration officer. It was photoshopped onto the image of voters standing in line in Arizona during the primary.

WHAT DID ELECTIONLAND REVEAL ABOUT THE STATE OF VOTING?

Electionland provided journalists across the country with unprecedented visibility into what was happening at the polls on Election Day. With so many new voting laws, fears of voter intimidation, and claims of fraud in the run up to the election, the team was ready for anything. But Electionland showed that the election ran about as smoothly as it ever does. A handful of isolated issues, long lines, and voting machine problems prevented some people from voting, but there was no indication of any widespread voter suppression or vote rigging that called into question the legitimacy of the vote.

Electionland turned up isolated incidents of voter intimidation, but the data overall showed no evidence of an organized campaign to intimidate voters. Further, Electionland did not uncover mass voter fraud of any kind — especially of the sort Donald Trump alleged. As ProPublica [reported](#), “We had more than 1,000 people watching the vote on Election Day. If millions of people voted illegally, we would have seen some sign of it.”

That said, Electionland did highlight systemic problems with the election process, particularly problems with electronic registration systems and malfunctioning voting machines, which led to long lines and frustration for voters.

“We’re left with a voting system that works but needs help. Whatever the number is, and whether or not it changes the outcome of the race, rightful voters denied the chance to vote should never happen. If you can’t vote because of some bad excuse, you have lost a fundamental right.”

— Scott Klein, ProPublica

Collaborative reporting lessons from Electionland

COLLABORATIVE
REPORTING
LESSONS FROM
ELECTIONLAND



Electionland was the largest collaborative reporting initiative for a single day event in history, and there were several valuable takeaways which can guide future efforts at collaborative journalism.

A shared, exclusive data source makes for good partnerships:

The Electionland partners united around a single, shared source of information which couldn't have been created or accessed in any other way. This was key to bringing partners to the table and ensuring incentives were aligned. Scott Klein says, "When you're all working around a central nugget of information, it sharpens everyone's focus and encourages partnerships."

Social media as an important data source:

Social media, particularly Twitter, ended up being an incredibly fruitful data source on Election Day. Celeste LeCompte from ProPublica explains, "With social media you could see issues in volume rather than individual big events. A small number of provisional ballots or one long line isn't a huge deal, but when you start to see it in volume it becomes something you want to investigate."

Technology can't replace people:

When it comes to monitoring and verifying social media reports, you still need good editorial judgement. "Nothing replaces our intuition or the ability of a journalist to identify the smallest but most relevant detail," says Fergus Bell of Dig Deeper Media. "New technologies for social newsgathering are incredible, but they can't run the show yet."

Robust, flexible workflows are non-optional:

Planning the flow of information and standardizing processes in a way that allowed for on-the-fly changes was absolutely essential to making Electionland work. “Having the right workflows was key — from standardizing verification and communication channels, to implementing a process for real time troubleshooting,” says Fergus.

A tight deadline is a powerful motivator:

With Electionland, there was a hard and fast deadline to get everything ready in time for Election Day on November 8. All the partners agree they wished they had started planning earlier. That said, having a tight deadline gave everyone a singular focus. With longer term projects like Documenting Hate, there is less urgency and therefore results and stories are slower to materialize.

Technology and data provide powerful tools for telling meaningful stories:

“There’s a disconnect between large datasets about a problem in the world and the people who are those data points,” says Celeste. “When you’re looking at tons of localized datapoints around the country, those things are happening to people in individual moments. Being able to put them in context when they’re happening is something that technology and journalism are finally at a place to do much more effectively than we have in the past. That’s where I’d like to see this kind of project go in the future. When somebody has a painful experience, it’s being able to instantly say, ‘this is a local manifestation of a much larger pattern of problems that we need to do something about.’”

What's next: Documenting Hate

WHAT'S NEXT:
DOCUMENTING
HATE

[Documenting Hate](#) is a new collaborative journalism project that aims to create a database of reported hate crimes and bias incidents in the US for one year. Hate crimes and bias incidents are a national problem, but there's no reliable data on the nature or prevalence of the violence. The Documenting Hate coalition is working to collect and verify reports to create a national database for use by journalists, researchers and civil rights organizations, and will allow the first rigorous look at hate crimes in America — combining data analysis, social media newsgathering, and ambitious investigative storytelling.



BUILDING ON THE ELECTIONLAND MODEL

Documenting Hate is modeled on Electionland. As with Electionland, ProPublica has marshaled a national coalition to contribute to the project, including news organizations, civil rights groups and technology companies. These groups are uniting around a shared trove of data, which is coming in from a number of sources — law enforcement, community groups, local jurisdictions, news reports, Google search trends, social media and other nonprofit organizations. Just as on Election Day, volunteers, including journalism students, will follow up to fill in data and authenticate social media reports.

Documenting Hate differs from Electionland in some key respects. First, there's no national event driving a hard deadline. This gives the benefit of more time for in-depth analysis and reporting, but it also means there's not the same urgency to complete trainings and dedicate full attention to the project.

Also, with Documenting Hate, direct user reports are playing a more prominent role. Each of the media partners is hosting an online form where victims or witnesses can report hate crime or bias incidents. These reports, along with all the other data sources (including social media reports fed into Check, where they are researched, verified and annotated with structured metadata), are being aggregated in a new version of the Landslide tool.

This Landslide database is available to journalists, with appropriate privacy and security restrictions. Landslide offers a sophisticated search interface that can return targeted results — for example, attacks on Muslim people in Texas.

LEARNING FROM ELECTIONLAND

WHAT'S NEXT:
DOCUMENTING
HATE



One key lesson from Electionland is the benefit of deep relationships with media partners.

With such tight timelines on the election project, ProPublica didn't have the time to provide in-depth background education and context on voting issues to every reporter, even though doing so resulted in better coverage. The hands-off relationships also meant they didn't have full feedback loops as well — a lot of times they didn't hear back from a local newsroom after sending them a lead, so they had no way to know how many stories resulted.

With Documenting Hate, ProPublica has hired a dedicated partner manager, Rachel Glickhouse, whose job is to understand what each partner is doing and to keep records of it. She is forming deep relationships with all the partners, calling them frequently both to make sure they're getting the right training and resources to make the most of the data, and to ensure there's feedback about what they're doing with it.

What's next: CrossCheck

[CrossCheck](#) is another collaborative journalism project aimed at helping people make sense of what and who to trust in their social media feeds, in their search results and on news websites during the French Presidential election. Spearheaded by the First Draft Coalition and Google News Lab, CrossCheck brings together dozens of news and technology organizations to collaboratively fact-check and verify information and to ensure hoaxes, rumors and false claims are swiftly debunked.

The project benefits from the collective learning and experience gained by First Draft and Google News Lab through their partnership on Electionland.



BUILDING ON ELECTIONLAND WITH MORE PUBLIC INPUTS AND OUTPUT

WHAT'S
NEXT:
CROSSCHECK

Because CrossCheck focuses on reporting activity happening online rather than in the real world, the monitoring process is working a little differently than with Electionland. CrossCheck uses a feed curated by Google Trends data, CrowdTangle and other technologies to identify content and storylines that are spiking.

CrossCheck also asks the public to get involved in a different way. Citizens are invited to fill in a form to submit social media posts, online news articles, videos, promotional images, and campaign statements for [CrossCheck](#) to verify.

“Strength really comes in numbers and by working together and opening the project up to the public for their questions, I’m confident we will be able help to stem the flow of misinformation”

— Jenni Sargent, Managing Director of First Draft

From there, the familiar Electionland model sets in: Participating newsrooms pool their experience, resources and regional knowledge to investigate, annotate, and verify claims using [Check](#). Students and volunteers from journalism schools have also been trained to assist in the efforts.

Another difference is how the data is reported out. Like with Electionland, partner newsrooms are encouraged to report on stories and claims surfaced by CrossCheck, but there’s also a publicly visible database of claims. Editors summarize and add context to each claim, creating a live feed of shareable report cards on the CrossCheck site. Reports are only published when at least two news partners have agreed and ‘CrossChecked’ each other’s work.

Software and tools used

ACUSENSE

[Acusense](#) is an AI-powered tool which searches the actual content of photos and videos posted to social media platforms, without relying on keywords or tags. Electionland Feeders used Acusense to monitor social media for photos and videos related to voting problems.

ASSIGN

Assign is a proprietary tool built by Ken Schwencke at ProPublica. Catchers used it as a lightning-quick shared address book that made it easy to find local journalists who might be interested in a story lead.

BANJO

[Banjo](#) is a tool which can surface social media posts relevant to certain topics or search terms, or alert users to emerging trends within a specific geographic area. It's free for journalists. During Electionland, Feeders who were already familiar with Banjo were encouraged to use it as an additional way to monitor for social media posts about voting problems, but Banjo was not one of the mandated Feeder tools.

CHECK

[Check](#) is an open source web-based platform built by Meedan to help journalists collaborate on verification and annotation of digital media, with a particular focus on social media. For the Electionland project, Check was used to manage voting problem reports. All social media reports deemed worthy of investigation were added to state-level projects on Check, where the assigned teams would work to verify and contextualize the reports. Some reports from other channels (SMS, direct messages on Twitter, WhatsApp) were also added to Check for further investigation and verification.

Check statuses allowed any team member to see the status of a given report, and allowed media partners to view only the verified or debunked reports for their state. A Slack-based 'Checkbot' was written to message any report changes to state-level channels on the Slack.

Check is open to a limited number of early partners, and you can [request access](#) for your own verification project.

CROWDTANGLE

[CrowdTangle](#) is a free tool that allows social media publishers to track how their accounts and posts are performing, and how posts are shared. Prior to Election Day, Electionland partners used CrowdTangle to search for pages on Facebook that might post relevant content.

DATAMINR

[Datamnr](#) is an algorithmic tool which monitors Twitter and other public data streams for search terms you designate and alerts you when relevant results emerge. Electionland Feeders had access to Datamnr and pre-loaded their accounts with search terms related to voting problems. The Feeders linked their Datamnr accounts into Tweetdeck so that Datamnr alerts displayed in a Tweetdeck column.

FACEBOOK SIGNAL

[Signal](#) is tool which can surface trends, photos, videos, and posts from Facebook and Instagram relevant to certain topics, search terms, or geographic areas. It's free for journalists. During Electionland, Feeders used Signal to look for Facebook and Instagram posts related to a specific voting problem once the issue had been noticed on other platforms like Tweetdeck.

GOOGLE TRENDS

[Google Trends](#) data reveals what people are searching for on Google, allowing measurement of interest in a particular topic down to city-level geography. Trends data is an unbiased sample of Google search data. It's anonymized (no one is personally identified), categorized (determining the topic for a search query), and aggregated (grouped together). The vast number of searches—trillions every year—make Google Trends one of the world's largest real time datasets. Examining what people search for provides a unique perspective on what they are currently interested in and curious about. Anyone can access the free data explorer on [Google Trends](#).

KRZANA

[Krzana](#) is a tool which mines data sources to deliver real-time news. Some Feeders in the Electionland team set up Krzana to run searches for posts about voting problems in the background and deliver alerts when issues popped up.

LANDSLIDE

Landslide is a proprietary web-based application created by WNYC for Electionland. The app aggregated data from various sources, including the Election Protection database and text message reports sent in by voters, and made these records accessible to journalists in a searchable, geo-coded format.

PROTECTION

Protection is the proprietary tool created by Ken Schwencke which acted as an intermediate database between the Election Protection hotline call logs and Landslide. On Election Day, a special team of Catchers, journalism graduate students from Columbia, monitored Protection, then scrubbed tips of personally identifying data and published them to Landslide.

SLACK

[Slack](#) is a cloud-based team communication and collaboration tool. For Electionland, Slack was used to track and share reported issues among the project team and partner newsroom network. The team set up dozens of Slack channels to keep communications targeted and organized. Slack was also linked to Check and Landslide, so that when reports were added or updated, the activity was logged in Slack.

TWEETDECK

[Tweetdeck](#) is an app which displays multiple Twitter streams or search results within multiple columns on one browser tab. For Electionland, Feeders set up Tweetdeck columns with pre-determined search terms to display relevant Tweets for the geographic areas they were responsible for monitoring.

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Appendices

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