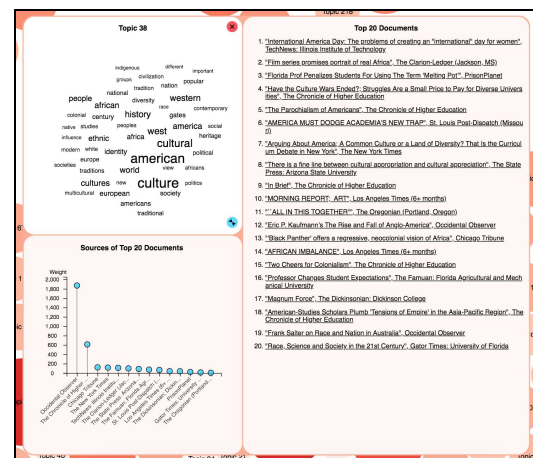# Methods Issues & Limitations: Models tend to elide political differences.

Topic models can make uneasy, if not hostile, bedfellows out of political opponents. While a topic may register shared discourse between those opponents, the very way a topic model groups them together also threatens to erase vital differences in the positions opponents take.

Consider topic #38 in Collection1: its top words range from *culture* and *heritage* to *identity*, *diversity*, and *multicultural*. These words show up frequently in the culture wars that began in the 1990s, and indeed many of the articles in topic #38 are about the culture wars. But while our model reproduces the broad outlines of this discourse, it does not indicate how authors use the same words to frame ideologically opposing positions. In a single topic, articles that attempt to nuance global feminism or advocate for the inclusion of curricular diversity neighbor articles that defend colonial history ("Two Cheers for Colonialism"), or ones published by white nationalist presses like *The Occidental Observer*.

Topics with articles about whether professors' political affiliations influence their teaching feature similar juxtapositions. For example, topic #162 contains top words like *intellectual*, *liberal*, *conservative*, *academia*, and *bias*. Its articles range from explanations of how "Cultural Marxists are Actually Pomofascists" to rejections of the "overwrought" worry that a professor's liberalism is "contagious" for students in their courses. As with topic #38 above, these articles share terms, but their viewpoints are diametrically opposed.

Thus, while topic modeling is useful for identifying points of tension in discourse, the fact that topics tend to elide differences of politics, identity, and positionality also poses a particular challenge to discussions of diversity and inclusion, a key part of our project. *Without context, the top words in topic #38 could read like a celebration of different cultures – in reality, however, it categorizes the work of advocacy, access, and social justice as structurally equal to the violences of colonialism and white supremacy.* This is at once an interpretive issue and an ethical one: reading topics solely in terms of word co-occurrence threatens to replicate the structural violence of equating social justice with hate speech.

Topic #38 viewed in TopicBubbles.

Resources Referred to in This Card

Document collection studied: Collection1: U.S. News Media, c. 1989-2019 (WE1S core collection of articles mentioning "humanities")

Topic model of this collection: 250 topics

Interesting sample topics in the model: #38, #162

Representative articles: a, b

Related documentation: WE1S report