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Facebook, Cambridge Analytica and Surveillance Capitalism

Whether it creeps into politics, marketing, or simple profiling, the nature of surveillance as totality has been affirmed by certain events this decade. The Edward Snowden disclosures of 2013 demonstrated the complicity and collusion between Silicon Valley and the technological stewards of the national security state.

It took the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 to move the issue of social media profiling, sharing and targeting of information, to another level. Not only could companies such as Facebook monetise their user base; those details could, in turn, be plundered, mined and exploited for political purpose.

As a social phenomenon, Facebook could not help but become a juggernaut inimical to the private sphere it has so comprehensively colonised. “Facebook in particular,” claimed WikiLeaks’ [Julian Assange](#) in May 2011, “is the most appalling spy machine that has ever been invented.” It furnished “the world’s most comprehensive database about people, their relationships, their names, their addresses, their locations, their communications with each other, and their relatives, all sitting within the United States, all accessible to US intelligence.”

Now, the unsurprising role played by Cambridge Analytica with its Facebook accessory to politicise and monetise data reveals the tenuous ground notions of privacy rest upon. Outrage and uproar has been registered, much of it to do with a simple fact: data was used to manipulate, massage and deliver a result to Trump – or so goes the presumption. An

instructive lesson here would be to run the counter-factual: had Hillary Clinton won, would this seething discontent be quite so enthusiastic?

Be that as it may, the spoliations of Cambridge Analytica are embedded in a broader undertaking: the evisceration of privacy, and the generation of user profiles gathered through modern humanity's most remarkable surveillance machine. The clincher here is the link with Facebook, though the [company insists](#) that it “received data from a contractor, which we deleted after Facebook told us the contractor had breached their terms of service.”

Both Facebook and Cambridge Analytica have attempted to isolate and distance that particular contractor, a certain Aleksandr Kogan, the Cambridge University researcher whose personality quiz app “thisisyourdigitallife” farmed the personal data of some 50 million users who were then micro-targeted for reasons of political advertising.

The sinister genius behind this was the ballooning from the initial downloads – [some 270,000 people](#) – who exchanged personal data on their friends including their “likes” for personality predictions. A broader data set of profiles were thereby created and quarried.

[Kogan claims](#) to have been approached by Cambridge Analytica, rather than the other way around, regarding “terms of usage of Facebook data”. He was also reassured that the scheme was legal, being “commercial” in nature and typical of the way “tens of thousands of apps” were using social media data. But it took Cambridge Analytica's whistleblower, [Christopher Wylie](#), to reveal that data obtained via Kogan's app was, in fact, used for micro-targeting the US electorate in breach of privacy protocols.

Mark Zuckerberg's response has entailed vigorous hand washing. In 2015, he claims that Facebook had learned that Cambridge Analytica shared data from Kogan's app. “It is against our policies for developers to share data without other people's consent, so we immediately banned Kogan's app from our platform”. Certifications were duly provided that such data had been deleted, though the crew at Facebook evidently took these at unverified face value. Not so, as matters transpired, leading to the claim that trust had not only been breached between Facebook, Kogan and Cambridge Analytica, but with the users themselves.

Facebook, for its part, has been modestly contrite. “We have a responsibility to protect your data,” went Zuckerberg [in a statement](#), “and if we can't then we don't deserve to serve you.” His posted statement attempts to water down the fuss. Data protections – most of them, at least – were already being put in place. He described the limitations placed on the accessing of user information by data apps connected to Facebook friends.

The networked sphere, as it is termed in with jargon-heavy fondness by some academics, has seen the accumulation of data all set and readied for the [“information civilisation”](#). Google’s chief economist Hal Varian has been singled out for special interest, keen on what he terms, in truly benign fashion, [“computer-mediated transactions”](#). These entail “data extraction and analysis,” various “new contractual forms” arising from “better monitoring”, “personalisation and customisation” and “continuous experiments”.

Such are the vagaries of the information age. As a user of such freely provided services, users are before a naked confessional, conceding and surrendering identities to third parties with Faustian ease. This surrender has its invidious by products, supplying intelligence and security services accessible data.

[Cambridge Analytica](#), for its part, sets itself up as an apotheosis of the information civilisation, a benevolent, professionally driven information hitman. “Data drives all we do,” it boldly states to potential clients. “Cambridge Analytica uses data to change audience behaviour.”

This sounds rather different to the company’s stance on Saturday, when [it claimed](#) that, “Advertising is not coercive; people are smarter than that.” With cold show insistence, it insisted that, “This isn’t a spy movie.”

Two services are provided suggesting that people are not, in the minds of its bewitchers, that intelligent: the arm of data-driven marketing designed to “improve your brand’s marketing effectiveness by changing consumer behaviour” and that of “data-driven campaigns” where “greater influence” is attained through “knowing your electorate better”.

On the latter, it is boastful, [claiming to have supported](#) over 100 campaigns across five continents. “Within the United States alone, we have played a pivotal role in winning presidential races as well as congressional and state elections.”

CA has donned its combat fatigues to battle critics. Its [Board of Directors](#) has suspended CEO Alexander Nix, claiming that “recent comments secretly recorded by Channel 4 and other allegations do not represent the values or operations of the firm and his suspension reflects the seriousness with which we view this violation.”

The comments in question, caught in an undercover video, show Nix [offering a range of services](#) to the Channel 4 undercover reporter: Ukrainian sex workers posing as “honey-traps”; a video evidencing corruption that might be uploaded to the Internet; and operations with former spies. “We can set up fake IDs and Web sites, we can be students doing research projects attached to a university; we can be tourists.”

The company has also attempted to debunk a set of what it sees as flourishing myths. It has not, for instance, been uncooperative with the UK's data regulator, the Information Commissioner's Office, having engaged it since February 2017. It rejects notions that it peddles fake news. "Fake news is a serious concern for all of us in the marketing industry." (Nix's cavalier advertising to prospective clients suggests otherwise.)

In other respects, Cambridge Analytica also rejected using Facebook data in its political models, despite having obtained that same data. "We ran a standard political data science program with the same kind of political preference models used by other presidential campaigns." Nor did it use personality profiles for the 2016 US Presidential election. Having only hopped on board in June, "we focused on the core elements of a core political data science program."

The company's weasel wording has certainly been extensive. Nix has done much to meander, dodge and contradict. On the one hand, he would like to take credit for the company's product – the swaying of a US election. But in doing so, it did not use "psychographic" profiles.

Surveillance capitalism is the rope which binds the actors of this latest drama in the annals of privacy's demise. There are discussions that political data mining designed to manipulate and sway elections be considered in the same way political donations are. But in the US, where money and political information are oft confused as matters of freedom, movement on this will be slow. The likes of Cambridge Analytica and similar information mercenaries will continue thriving.