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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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by ROB URIE
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Facebook and the Rise of Anti-Social Media

It was a bit over four years ago that journalist Glenn Greenwald reported that British ‘intelligence,’ GCHQ, had developed a program to spread politically targeted disinformation over the internet. The revelation came from a presentation made to the ‘Five Eyes alliance,’ which includes the NSA and was released by Edward Snowden. In the context of Federal and commercial data collection, revelations that Facebook data was used for ‘private’ political purposes is both more and less than meets the eye.

As was widely reported with less manufactured outrage at the time, the Obama administration used Facebook data in Mr. Obama’s 2012 presidential bid in approximately the same manner that Cambridge Analytica is now accused of doing. Thanks to Edward Snowden, it has been known since 2013 that the NSA was using Facebook data for political purposes. And prior still, in 2011 the CIA reported that it was ‘using’ social media, some of which it had funded, toward its own ends.

There is good reason for political pushback here. A wide variety of corporate and state actors have instantiated the internet into the fabric contemporary economic and political life. With a history of bad faith and bad acts, the fantasy that the CIA, NSA and FBI serve national interests begs the question of whose nation? Past targets including the Black Panther Party, Occupy Wall Street and antiwar protestors were as (more) capable of defining American interests as government technocrats.

The ‘innovation’ of Five Eyes, the consortium of Anglophone intelligence agencies, is to expand the realm of competitive Party politics to that of national agencies working toward their own ends in a hidden supranational realm. The alternative frame of competitive state

actors is undermined by the decision of GCHQ to reveal its methods to its ‘external’ partners. Precisely how do national governments ‘manage’ the methods and agendas of supranational agencies when they can evade national restrictions through ‘external’ relationships?

Following the Church Committee’s revelations in 1975 of U.S. intelligence agency’s illegal actions against U.S. and overseas citizens engaged in legitimate political dissent, the CIA, NSA and FBI moved to evade newly restrictive laws by ‘outsourcing’ political disruption to nominally private corporations. Facebook and Google were directly or indirectly funded by the CIA early on— to what ends? By evading the spirit of the law and hence the will of Congress, these agencies represent particular, not national, interests.

Most of what Cambridge Analytica is alleged to have done: acquire and analyze a large quantity of data in concert with psychologists who used the results to craft targeted, tactical and subliminal programs to sway large numbers of people into doing what it wants them to do, is standard practice for professional marketers. Outrage that psychological coercion is being used in the realm of the political begs the question of how using it to sell goods and services is any less ‘political?’

As Edward Bernays and Joseph Goebbels demonstrated in the first half of the twentieth century, whether or not propaganda— psychology in the service of commercial and / or political interests, ‘works’ is a function of who is using it and how it is used. The idea of ‘nation’ behind various incarnations of nationalism is a historical artifact, as are the social divisions of race, class and gender. Distinctions between psychological coercion and appeals to history— e.g. the current ‘Russian meddling’ hysteria, are less clear cut than commercial psychologists might suggest.

Micro-targeting can be conceived to augment mass appeals, to clean-up around the edges as in the battle for the votes of a few thousand suburban Republicans that has consumed national Democrats for the last three decades. But in terms of numbers, this strategy looks past the proverbial forest for the trees. Were U.S. voter participation rates to rise to those of other so-called developed nations, tens of millions of voters would be ‘in play.’ In this sense micro-targeting seems more an effort to avoid politics than an extension of it.

The GCHQ (British ‘intelligence’) presentation in Glenn Greenwald’s 2014 article served as the apparent template for Cambridge Analytica’s (CA) business model. Its starting position is of control of the internet, which CA doesn’t have. The follow-on is malevolent frat-boy 101— use every lever at one’s control to crush other actors. In this realm CA was

/ is but one actor among many. But it is control over the internet that gives the Five Eyes programs their political power, not brilliant insights into the human psyche.

For those who haven't thought about it, the internet is insidious because of the very capacity that Cambridge Analytica claims to be able to exploit: customization. Users have limited ability to confirm the authenticity of anything they see, read or hear on it. Print editions can be compared and contrasted— technology limits print media to large-scale deceptions. With the capacity to create entire realms of deception— identities, content, web pages and entire online publications, trust is made a function of gullibility.

Differences between commercial and political goals disappear when economic power drives political results. Cambridge Analytica is a business whose 'product' is political outcomes. The internet, its alleged realm, is a late-capitalist 'hive-mind' where degrees of control determine authority. In this sense CA is an intelligence agency wannabe, a commercial result of a system where commerce and politics revolve around power and control. Phrased differently, the Five Eyes (NSA, CIA) are Cambridge Analytica with actual power through their control positions.

Public outrage that Facebook had inadequate controls is misdirection in the context how much information is controlled by political interests including Five Eyes. Politically motivated business interests— the Koch Brothers for one, own and controllarger and more insidious databases than Facebook and regularly use them to enhance their own power. Facebook's value to Five Eyes is the façade of joint interests implied by voluntary contributions to it. This gives cover to more explicitly malevolent data collection entities like the NSA.

Any thought that Cambridge Analytica is a moral outlier must get past the history of marketing in the service of selling unnecessary wars and convincing six year old Indonesian children to smoke cigarettes. Facebook made Mark Zuckerberg stupendously rich through speculation that its platform could be 'monetized,' meaning that both the platform and its embedded data could be sold to commercial interests. Facebook's defense to date, that it didn't intentionally allow CA to download its data, could most probably be restated as: it didn't intend to let CA do so without direct payment to it. This is similar to the half-stated purposes the American intelligence agencies have given for their own data collection activities.

Social media exists atop computers developed by the Federal government, runs on the internet developed by the U.S. military (ARPA / DARPA), is transmitted through telecommunications channels controlled by companies acting in concert with the Federal

government and was partially funded by the CIA through venture capital funds. The fantasy of spontaneous generation comes from the generation of children too enamored with technology and ignorant of history to have known that they were entrusting their public's ideas to deeply malevolent forces.

More broadly, Americans have long had a paradoxical relationship with the idea of the 'social.' Social media is a claim about human being through the posture that the social is an aggregation of individual representations (postings). The architecture of social media reifies Reaganite / Thatcherite individualism complete with the paradox that deep and historical social contexts are needed to make individualism possible.

Social media is a logical extension of this tendency complete with the murky motives that drove Reaganism / Thatcherism. It is only superficially ironic that this 'individualism' was / is a strategy for social control. As freedom from political coercion, economic coercion was (1) de-politicized and (2) simply assumed away. The value of Facebook to the CIA, NSA and FBI is political and to Facebook stockholders it is economic. In both realms value is the measure of social control that can be garnered from it.

The potential disruption that the Cambridge Analytica fiasco poses is greater than has been publicly stated to date. Once it is popularly understood that nothing online is trustworthy, a tipping point if you will, regaining trust will mean plausibly exercising the methods of deceit. As the methods of deceit are the commercial backbone of the internet and more broadly, modern commerce, there would ultimately be less to recover than is likely currently being imagined.

This isn't to suggest more than a hiccup on the march toward capitalist Armageddon. As one who saw the promise in the early days of the internet— I suddenly had access to thousands of academic papers that I didn't know existed, the cynical farce of social media provided clear evidence that the scramble for social control was on. The serial public 'disappointments' that are sure to follow l'affaire Facebook are as certain as they are too long in coming.