

CEP Magazine – June 2018 Cambridge Analytica, Facebook, and the future of personal data farming and exploitation

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Much of the web-surfing world is now aware of Cambridge Analytica (CA), the UK-based data firm that helped influence global politics by leveraging data contained within the virtual profiles of real human beings. The company is currently implicated in a major data privacy breach involving millions of Facebook users. In the weeks following *The Guardian*'s bombshell report,^[1] published on March 18 and featuring former CA employee and whistleblower, Christopher Wylie,^[2] Cambridge Analytica suspended their CEO, Alexander Nix; UK and US regulators launched investigations; and Facebook's stock price dropped by as much as \$70 billion.

The data in question came primarily from Facebook profiles — an estimated 87 million of them — slurped up via a third-party app created by Cambridge professor Aleksandr Kogan. Kogan used the Amazon Mechanical Turk service to pay people who took his survey, which also extracted their Facebook profiles, as well as the profiles of all their Facebook friends. Kogan then allegedly sold this data to CA for \$800,000 through his company, Global Science Research (GSR). That data, as well as the profiling techniques developed by young coders like Christopher Wylie and his team, allegedly helped CA develop solutions and target messaging for Brexit, Kenya's presidential election,^[3] and Donald Trump's presidential campaign, among others.

For Facebook users and casual observers of the Internet, this may come as a surprise. The truth, however, is that selling access to data is Facebook's business model, and they've been selling access to the highest bidder for many years. The CA scandal is only the tip of the iceberg. The Facebook family of companies includes WhatsApp and Instagram, as well as several others, and all of those platforms collect and store data; Facebook's Messenger has been storing SMS data for years. Google and Apple collect and analyze virtual mountains of data. These major companies, as well as countless websites, profit from the sale of personal data to third parties similar to CA, such as NationBuilder, i360, The Data Trust, Palantir, and thousands of smaller data brokers and digital advertisers.

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