

Cambridge Analytica used harvested data from 50 million Facebook profiles

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Facebook's chief information security officer Alex Stamos announced his resignation on Monday following revelations that Cambridge Analytica, a London-based data services company that offers products for commercial and political purposes that purport to "change audience behavior," harvested tens of millions of Facebook profiles without users' permission prior to the 2016 elections.

While the actions taken by Cambridge Analytica point to a substantial violation of democratic rights, they pale in comparison to the massive surveillance and content harvesting operation carried out by Facebook itself, with the assistance of the leading US intelligence agencies and Democratic Party. In the name of fighting "fake news" and extremist content, the aim is to review and censor everything posted on the social media platform.

In fact, Cambridge Analytica's connection to the Trump campaign has been used to accelerate the push for the subordination of the social media companies to the US intelligence agencies, and to further the Democratic Party's campaign against "fake news" and "Russian meddling."

Both the actions of Cambridge Analytica and the operations of the intelligence agencies on Facebook render absurd the argument that a few hundred thousand dollars of Facebook advertisements allegedly bought by "Russians" swayed the 2016 election. Both parties spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the types of data operations carried out by Cambridge Analytica, seeking to analyze, quantify, and affect the political viewpoints of the population.

According to its website, Cambridge Analytica's political arm has "redefined the relationship between data and campaigns. By knowing your electorate better, you can achieve greater influence while lowering

overall costs."

The 2016 presidential campaigns of President Donald Trump, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and current Housing and Urban Development secretary Dr. Ben Carson collectively paid more than \$10 million to Cambridge Analytica for their services. Notably the firm is partially owned by wealthy Republican donor Robert Mercer, who backed Cruz before switching to Trump, while former Trump advisor Stephen Bannon was once the company's vice president and White House counselor Kellyanne Conway is a former consultant.

Reports in the *New York Times* and the *Observer* over the weekend detailed how Cambridge Analytica used deceptive methods to exploit the lax security practices at Facebook to gather a trove of personal information on users including identities, friend networks and "likes."

The information was gathered by Cambridge Analytica by asking Facebook users to take a personality survey and download an app onto their mobile devices. Without telling users what they were doing, the data company scraped private information from users' Facebook profiles as well as those of their friends. According to published reports, this kind of data mining was a standard Facebook business practice at the time and proceeded without objection, oversight or review.

Cambridge Analytica then repackaged the information it collected and marketed it to political parties and election campaign consultants as "psychometrics" and "psychographics" that could predict the voting behavior of the public. In other words, the social media activity of millions of Americans was collected, profiled, categorized and sold based on the vulgar conceptions of bourgeois political hacks.

Cambridge Analytica's CEO, Alexander Nix, was suspended after he told undercover Channel 4 News reporters posing as potential clients from Sri Lanka that the company's efforts had played a key role in electing Trump. "We did all the research, all the data, all the analytics, all the targeting. We ran all the digital campaign, the television campaign and our data informed all the strategy," Nix boasted.

"We just put information into the bloodstream of the internet and then watch it grow, give it a little push every now and again over time to watch it take shape," the executive explained. "And so this stuff infiltrates the online community, but with no branding, so it's unattributable, untrackable."

According to interviews with Christopher Wylie, an information expert with Cambridge Analytica who was involved in the data harvesting operation, the profiles of 50 million Facebook users were gathered from about 270,000 individuals who participated in the personality survey. Those who took the survey were falsely told that the information was being collected for academic purposes.

Facebook initially responded to this week's reports by claiming that nothing was amiss since no passwords or "sensitive pieces of information" had been compromised. The social media corporation has insisted that the criminal activity of Cambridge Analytica and those associated with it was not a security breach because researchers are routinely permitted to access user data for academic purposes.

Meanwhile, Cambridge Analytica officials—after denying that they even had the Facebook data to begin with—have blamed the harvesting on Aleksandr Kogan, a Russian-American assistant professor at Cambridge University in England who built a personality app in 2014 and sold the Facebook data that he collected to the firm.

The deceptive harvesting and use of the Facebook profiles of tens of millions of people by Cambridge Analytica and other firms is a significant violation of democratic rights. Along with a series of similar data breaches in recent years, it points to the dangers facing the public in the era of big data, the Internet and social media under capitalism.

Combined with the degeneration of bourgeois politics internationally, the availability of the personal information of large numbers of people is being used

increasingly for manipulative and repressive purposes. As pointed out by many data experts, including the whistleblower Edward Snowden, the most popular and commonly used social media platforms, in coordination with governments around the world, have been transformed into a massive state surveillance operation.

The response of the corporate media to these developments is significant in that publications such as the *New York Times* have sought immediately to prove that Hillary Clinton and the Democrats lost the 2016 elections because of psychographics and similar manipulation of the public consciousness on social media. They have also moved rapidly to highlight the connection of Cambridge Analytica to Russia through Kogan as further "evidence" of efforts by the Kremlin to meddle in the 2016 elections in favor of Trump by encouraging the growth of social divisiveness in America.

As further details come to light about the arrangements between Facebook, Cambridge Analytica and other companies that use their personal information in efforts to manipulate social behavior, the merger of corporate criminality and the rot of capitalist politics will become ever more apparent.



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