

Poisoning Democracies: A Dossier on Cambridge Analytica's Complicit Involvement in the World's Most Politically Controversial Data Scandal

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Abstract: *Cambridge Analytica, an affiliate of the SCL Group, which combines data mining and data analysis with strategic communication for electoral processes, was recently found to be at the center of a massive data scandal involving Facebook users' personal data. The British data analytics firm was involved in the digital campaign efforts of Trump's Project Alamo, which was effectively the reason for Trump winning the 2016 US Presidential election. In March 2018, almost a year and a half after the election, whistleblower Christopher Wylie, a former employee who help set-up the data analytics firm, went public with interesting revelations about the data breach involving the social media platform Facebook. The data breach was a collection of personal Facebook information of about 50 million people for psychographic profiling, to influence voters' opinion in favour of the Trump campaign. Meanwhile, Cambridge Analytica was also found to have complicit involvement in the Leave.EU campaign and the Kenyan elections. All of this makes this data scandal significant in the foray of business ethics and consumers' data protection in today's digital age. This paper aims at exploring the data scandal both politically and as a case for business ethics; leading to a discussion on ethical business standards and consumer data-protection issues for social media platforms, consultancy & data analytics firms like Cambridge Analytica that are involved in elections and other democratic processes.*

Key Words: *Business Ethics, Consumer Data Protection, Data Breach, Psychographic Profiling.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Voting decisions are not purely based on how well the ideologies of the politicians align with the voters' beliefs and values; than it is likely that the ballots are cast based on the outcomes of carefully targeted and optimized political campaigns. Sometimes our actions are the results of a calculated promotional effort by an external source or entity. The marketing of any product, service or idea influences many of our decisions in everyday life – from what foodstuffs to buy to eat, to what clothes to wear. Thus, politicians are promoting themselves and their ideologies to voters through modern and advanced means of communications, mainly aimed at the vote bank, raising awareness and informing members of the public about critical issues and leadership choices, effectively spreading the message of the campaign and informing the public of the choice that the politician's rhetoric resonates. This promotional effort is 'Political Marketing'. Political marketing is a fusion of three important sciences. It derives its knowledge about the political scenario from political science to build a platform or a message, and uses marketing methods and communication techniques to reach out to the masses. Thus, political marketing has today developed into a field of its own from three of its parent disciplines: marketing, political science, and communication. The implementation of marketing methods makes it more and more commercial and transactional in nature. However, its fusion with political science and the singularity or authenticity of the candidate or the political party has seen it move away from the transactional perspective of commercial marketing to exchange models based on the propagation of ideas, which are better adapted to the political environment. Even more, as the forefront of the information world expands; political marketing now also has several ways of outreach, with various communication techniques and contrivances to interact with the voters or the public. Elections of the kind that are held today have never been more voter-centric. Voters can participate in political campaigns online, and interact with the candidates via the same. The success of any politician or political party today largely depends on political marketing.

Twenty years from today, if historians ever refer to a psychometric revolution from the past, Dr Michal Kosinski's name would be almost inseparable with its inception. His research focusing on the study of human behavioural choices from their digital footprints left behind by their virtual self (data) is the basis for the world's most politically controversial data scandal. Cambridge Analytica approached Dr Michal Kosinski and Dr David Stillwell of Cambridge University, who worked together on this project, along with Dr Aleksandr Kogan, a fellow academic, to work for the British data analytics firm. Dr Michal Kosinski and Dr David Stillwell did not pursue the offer on ethical grounds, but Cambridge Analytica somehow managed to get Facebook users personal data and the software and methodology the academicians at Cambridge University had implemented. Dr Aleksandr Kogan allegedly leaked this controversial technique from Dr Kosinski and Cambridge University to Strategic Communications Laboratories, whose subsidiary is Cambridge Analytica. This technique was so advanced that in the year 2012, Dr Michal Kosinski

proved that based on the Facebook “likes” of an individual, it was possible to predict the individual’s sexual orientation, skin colour, political and religious affiliations, intelligence, alcohol, cigarette and drug use... and much more. This was nothing but the inception of the use of big data analytics, by which they could understand the personality traits of millions of individuals. It all began in 70s and 80s. Two teams of psychologists conducted extensive surveys from individuals to determine their psychographic profiles that exhibited their personality traits. It was laboriously tough for accumulating data from millions of people at that time. Dr Kosinski joined Cambridge University in 2008 to pursue his doctorate studies, a time when there was a huge development in the use of social media sites like Facebook across the world, which made it easy for Kosinski to develop a method to analyse individuals in minute detail based on their Facebook activity.

Cambridge Analytica had a lot to contribute to Donald Trump’s 2016 Electoral College victory in the United States. It was at the centre of Trump’s digital marketing front of his political marketing campaign, Project Alamo. Now, since March 2018, Cambridge Analytica and Facebook have been involved in this massive scandal that is being investigated for in the United States. Cambridge Analytica also has been found to have complicit involvement in the Leave.EU Brexit Campaign and the Kenyan elections, effectively overturning these democratic processes in favour of their clients. Cambridge Analytica has mastered the use of these aforementioned techniques with Facebook users’ data as basis or input for their data mining and analytics activities, which seems unethical in Cambridge Analytica’s perspective and faulty in terms of consumer data protection in Facebook’s perspective. These developments, thus have contributed a case for business ethics and consumer-data protection standards. Therefore, this article aims at exploring the data scandal both politically and as a case for business ethics; leading to a discussion on ethical business standards and consumer data-protection issues for social media platforms, consultancy & data analytics firms like Cambridge Analytica that are involved in elections and other democratic processes.

This research article is the outcome of a well-analysed and informed perspective based on numerous secondary data sources such as acclaimed books, well-established international journals, government reports, reliable web sources and reputed media sources. The following are the objectives of this research article:

- To assess Cambridge Analytica’s consultancy services offered to political campaigns across the world, especially in lieu with Trump campaign.
- To explore Trump’s 2016 Campaign in association with Cambridge Analytica’s involvement in the campaign’s digital marketing activities.
- To discuss the aforementioned predicament as a case for ethical business standards for consultancy & data analytics firms and the pertinence of data protection for social media platforms.

2. CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA: THE POLITICAL CONSULTANCY FIRM:

Cambridge Analytica is an offshoot of the SCL Group. Interestingly, both Cambridge Analytica and the SCL Group are into promoting data-driven behavioural change by understanding what motivates and engages their audience and stimulating them into action accordingly. The SCL Group provides strategic and analytical services to governments and military organizations, while Cambridge Analytica involves itself with commercial and political clients. The mission statements of both the firms sound controversial as they contain the words ‘data-driven behavioural change,’ which makes them sound more like agencies that spread propaganda. As a political consultancy firm, inputs given by Alexander Nix, Cambridge Analytica’s CEO, at a Concordia Summit in 2016, explain the services they specialized in for various political campaigns. In the words of Nix, “it is personality that drives behaviour, and it is behaviour that obviously influences how people vote.” Cambridge Analytica is maybe the only data analytics firm that employs psychographic profiling techniques to understand the personality of the individual voter.

Behavioural communication based on psychographic profiling, data analytics and addressable advertising technology were the three technologies that Cambridge Analytica specialised in for most political campaigns, but most importantly for the Trump Campaign.

In a series of firsts, Cambridge Analytica segmented the vote bank using psychographic profiling and data analytics. For this, they used a long form quantitative instrument to probe the underlying traits that inform personality, known as the OCEAN five-factor personality model. OCEAN stands for Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. Each of these factors help them understand about the personality of the voter.

O – Openness – How open a voter is to new experiences?

C – Conscientiousness – Whether a voter prefers order, habits and planning in their life?

E – Extroversion – How social the voter is?

A – Agreeableness – Whether the voters put the nation’s needs ahead of themselves?

N – Neuroticism – How worried the voter is on pertinent issues that may determine that course of the race?

This data helped them market their candidate better by nuancing their message by segmenting the audience based on psychographics. For instance, for an audience that is more neurotic and conscientious, a message that is rational and fear-based or emotionally based will work. This is in short is the use of psychographic profiling.

Data Analytics is use of Big Data in marketing by segmenting audience groups. Big Data is the aggregation of as many individual data points that you can possibly get your hands on, which are then synthesized in one database or record, cleaned, and then used to inform or create insight on your target audience. These data points could include demographic and geographic factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, education, income etc. or psychographic or attitudinal factors such as consumer and lifestyle habits. Moreover, personality or behavioural data, on how the voter sees the world and what actually drives them. For instance, the data can help the campaign know about the number of persuadable voters who need a bit of motivation to join their camp. Alongside with their personality traits from the OCEAN model, the campaign's digital team can directly market to them with a receptive or impulsive message based on their personality.

Addressable Advertising Technology is the ability to drive targeted campaign communications with individuals. As communication is becoming ever-increasingly targeted, it is being individualized for every single person. People will stop receiving adverts from products and services that do not concern them. They will be getting adverts about products and services that concern them, or in the case of elections, issues they care about most, nuanced in a way that they (target audience) see the world. For instance, campaigns can match offline data with cookies to drive digital advertising, or be able to send direct mails to the voters based on their psychographics. They could also take this data and match it with set-top box data, television or cable data. Campaigns can then advertise on programs that have the highest density of the target audience in this way. This drastically reduces the cost of advertising and improves the return on investment.

However, the bigger question is where did they get all the data for running their models? This is where their campaign efforts for Donald Trump connects with the data scandal at Facebook. Cambridge Analytica required a whole lot of data to run their data-driven models. They could not possibly have people take extensive surveys as in the 70s and 80s. Only way they could have pulled out something like this was by collecting data online from users directly or indirectly through apps and social media platforms like Facebook. In the aftermath of the scandal unravelling, the assumption is that, Cambridge Analytica may have somehow gained access to large chunks of personal information of Facebook users' (maybe to the tune of over 100 million users) so that they could test their models and run them for political campaigns in the United States and abroad, effectively sabotaging the opposition and tilting the election in their clientele's favour. All of this data could have been harvested from various apps on Facebook. For instance, Dr Aleksandr Kogan, a psychology researcher and a fellow academic of Dr Michal Kosinski, who was collecting data from Facebook users with their permission strictly for research purposes, sold that data to Cambridge Analytica, a clear-cut violation of Facebook's API rules.

3. U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: THE TRUMP CAMPAIGN & CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA

The controversially sardonic republican Donald Trump dominating the stage with immoderate statements on immigration and foreign policy, winning him a presidential election in the world's most powerful and influential country is rather stranger than fiction. Trump's remarkable rise from a mere political perspective to a trend, as seen in other Western countries, where outspoken outsiders have challenged and even defeated the political elite is simply unbelievable. His opposition, the democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, was someone with a high political pedigree as a former Secretary of State and US senator, and the then incumbent president Barack Obama's backing. Trump's rise to power cannot be solely attributed to his dynamic showmanship. Cambridge Analytica along with his well-armed and equipped digital campaign has played a crucial role in his Electoral College success. There are clearly two reasons for Trump's success in the elections: his blatant populism and his data-driven campaign led by his digital team and Cambridge Analytica.

Populism can be often related to democracy, as a means for politicians to couple the will of the majority with a pristine democratic process in place. Nevertheless, Populism— a belief in the inalienable rights of the commoners— often requires an exploiter to star in the role of a populist, be it an incumbent government, celebrities, the elite, the media, or other socio-cultural and religious groups.

According to statistics from media Quant, a firm that tracks media coverage of each candidate and computes a dollar value based on advertising rates. The big difference between Trump and other candidates is that he is far better than any other candidate — maybe than any candidate ever — at earning media. Earned media is news and commentary about his campaign on television, in newspapers and magazines, and on social media. In earned media, he got almost \$2 billion in free media coverage, almost 2.5 times more than Hilary Clinton who was second in terms of earned media. Moreover, by the end of the election, according to data from tracking firm media Quant, Trump got \$4.96 billion in free earned media in the year leading up to the presidential election and received \$5.6 billion throughout the entirety of his campaign, more than Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio combined. He beat Hilary Clinton also on Twitter. The platform delivered \$402 million in free attention for Trump and \$166 million for Clinton. He outdid her by 150%. The way \$2 billion of free media coverage grew to over \$5 billion right to the end of the election is enough evidence that he continued his streak earning himself media coverage and thus having a stable and continuous presence in people's drawing rooms without spending too much on

advertisements like those that his opponents did. However, the real question is how did Trump end up attracting so much media attention? This can be lucidly explained by the prisoner’s dilemma in game theory.

The prisoner’s dilemma here assumes the existence of a bipartisan media, liberal and conservative media outlets, in the country as in the case of the United States. Zero (0) is for no benefits, while one (1) is for benefits in the form of viewership and ratings.

Conservative Media		
	Optimum Coverage	Exclusive Coverage
Optimum Coverage	0,0	0,1
Liberal Media	1,0	1,1
Exclusive Coverage	0 – No benefits. 1 – Benefits in the form of increased viewership and improved ratings.	

When both the liberal and conservative media outlets cover the controversy involving the populist optimally, neither of them is at a benefit. While, when one of them double-crosses or pre-empts the other, one of them is at a benefit while the other ends up at the losing end, resulting in combinations of either (1,0) or (0,1). If the populist is conservative, conservative media outlets would cover the controversy with all exclusivity at all costs, and then the liberal media would be at a disadvantage, and similarly the vice versa. Thus, to avoid this from happening both of them try to pre-empt each other and cover the controversy involving the populist with all exclusivity at the same time, resulting in the bi-beneficial combination of (1,1). Thus, the media is primarily incentivized for having an obsession over the populist.

For instance, when Trump holds a rally, all channels cover it live simultaneously. The channels do not necessarily want to do it, but no channel can afford to be left out and be at a disadvantage. Throughout his campaign, Trump has made many controversial statements. If Trump says something outrageous, every news channel wants to be on the scene to cover it first. As each channel wants to pre-empt others, the result is that all channels broadcast live coverage of Trump’s rallies.

Moreover, Trump very well knew that this was the media’s weak point right from the beginning of his business career. In his signature best seller, *The Art of the Deal*, Trump makes mentions of how he did it; how he made controversial statements, generated the buzz of excitement among the people in his target group and then capitalized on the media’s weakness with the obsession of controversy. He did not care whether the media wrote or spoke about him positively. The only thing that mattered for him was coverage and constantly being on-air all through the election.

Project Alamo & Cambridge Analytica

Just days before the election ‘Bloomberg Businessweek’ was granted exclusive access into the workings of Trump’s San Antonio based digital team, code named ‘Project Alamo’. Bloomberg Businessweek journalists Joshua Green and Sasha Issenberg later published a well-detailed article on the workings of his digital team. Trump after winning the Indiana Primary, and becoming the republican nominee, his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, along with Brad Parscale, who previously used to build websites for the Trump organization and charities, began an ambitious digital operation, fashioned around a database they codenamed Project Alamo. Steve Bannon joined the campaign later, which was a bigger plus for them, as he was somebody who knew the power of social media well, and knew how to harness it. Steve Bannon was then a member of Cambridge Analytica’s board and the one who introduced the Trump Campaign to them. Cambridge Analytica guided Trump’s digital forefront in the following ways:

- Cambridge Analytica guided locations for Trump rallies in states where there were the largest cluster of persuadable voters. Their statistical models isolated likely Trump supporters whom Parscale targeted with Trump-themed ads. Cambridge Analytica also worked on the “Leave side” of the Brexit initiative, so they identified a similar small fluctuating group of people who are reluctant to admit their support for Trump and may be throwing off public polls, just as in the case of Brexit.
- Trump’s database of information about people could be classified into two: likely Trump supporters and persuadable voters. Cambridge Analytica focussed its efforts on persuadable voters by providing valuable information to the Trump campaign’s activities in getting them to vote for him. This was how they identified swing states in the election and got Trump to hold rallies there.
- Cambridge Analytica produced heat maps of persuadable voters, voters who had not made the decision yet. For instance, the state of Wisconsin. Wisconsin is a state that is traditionally a very safe democrat seat. So much so that the Clinton campaign never visited the state of Wisconsin in the entire election. Nevertheless, they were able

to use data to identify that there were very large quantities of persuadable voters there that could be influenced to vote for the Trump campaign, and had five rallies there.

- An Electoral College is not an easy one for any candidate in the race. The candidate could lose the popular vote and still be the president because of Electoral College votes. This is what happened in the case of Trump's election. The digital team built a model, the "Battleground Optimizer Path to Victory"; to weigh and rank the states that the data team (Cambridge Analytica) believed were most critical to amassing the 270 electoral votes Trump needed to win the race. On Oct. 18 2016, Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Georgia were top on the list, all of which Trump went on to win.
- Trump's digital team spent \$100,000 a week on surveys and sophisticated models that ran daily simulations of the election, which matched with results of other reliable forecasters and poll-predictors. Cambridge Analytica was undertaking 3000-4000 thousand polls a month in order to inform reporting dashboards to help the campaign understand its resource allocation and to inform their predictive models about the audiences they needed to engage. The weekly polls provided a very powerful insight into tracking the electorate. When Trump's Access Hollywood tape with Billy Bush was broadcast on national television, his ratings went down in some states while went up in others. Therefore, the digital team was quick to communicate this to the campaign and thereby they could allocate resources in a targeted way.
- Cambridge Analytica also specialized in predictive models. Initially they started on with donor models, which was highly likely in attracting small \$10 or \$15 donations from voters. Later they worked on preference, unregistered partisanship & turnout models and issue-based models. With the help of such models, they were able to develop a matrix and segment people on how they were likely to behave. For instance, from Core Trump supporters, you could expect a donation. From the persuadable group, you can expect votes by giving them the motivation through targeted messaging.
- Cambridge Analytica helped the Trump Campaign optimize geographically based media buys going after very small pockets of Trump supporters. Cambridge Analytica worked with the Trump campaign by aiding them place targeted digital adverts on social media and on the television and carry on research and audience segmentation based on predictive models to reach out to various voter groups.
- The Trump campaign devised a negative strategy that would shrink the electorate, instead of expanding it. This was voter suppression. Trump Campaign's digital front targeted white liberals, women and African American voters through Facebook's dark posts or non-public posts, whose viewership can be controlled. The strategy was to spread negative comments that may affect Hilary Clinton's credibility through these targeted posts.
- Additionally, as discussed earlier, Cambridge Analytica performed psychographic profiling along with big data analytics to segment and target voter groups. Moreover, help them position the Trump brand for president in the minds of the voter using Addressable Advertising Technologies like customized digital advertising, addressable TV and linear TV optimization, abandoning the concept of blanket advertising.
- Cambridge Analytica along with the campaign's digital forefront aided the campaign in online fundraising. The digital operations, through online fundraising, was the largest source of campaign revenue, raising close to over \$250m.

Trump's Electoral College victory in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election was clearly the result of the combined efforts of Trump's populist controversy-making tendencies and the campaign's digital forefront led by Cambridge Analytica's efforts. None of which would have been possible if they would not have had Facebook data of millions of individuals in the United States for running their models and providing the campaign insights on what could be done over the course of the election for ensuring a Trump victory. The smartest way suggested by the data team was an Electoral College victory, which meant winning states that had a high number of Electoral College votes compared to populous states. By doing so, Trump targeted his efforts on the voting populace of such states, rather than leaving them scattered

4. VIRTUAL INTRUSION: A CASE FOR ETHICAL BUSINESS STANDARDS:

The Cambridge Analytica-Facebook data scandal is the first of its kind in the internet's 30-year long history. Moreover, the scope for such data breaches is high, given that we now live almost entirely in a virtual world where data is both fuel and consequence of every transaction. Appallingly, the scale at which things have started escalating to is shocking, to the point that someone else can influence an individual's decision of great pertinence in relation to self, without the individual knowing. If psychographic profiles of people are made available or public, we must not forget that there are affluent stakeholders in the society who may benefit by influencing our interactions in their favour. For all these reasons, this data scandal can be treated as a case of 'Virtual Intrusion.' Rivetingly, we also have lessons to learn from this privacy breach.

By the construct of this data scandal, there are three different stakeholders in this case. Cambridge Analytica – The Data Analytics firm working towards the goals of their clientele, Facebook – A huge repository of people's

personal data, and individuals (in this case, also other application development platforms) that collect data from Facebook users legally and sell them on to others illegally. Therefore, the fix in this case is, firms like Cambridge Analytica have to conform to some ethical business standards that prevent from indulging in such shady and malicious activities. Stringent rules and regulations in place that prevent firms like Facebook from letting out data. Moreover, regulators who can step in anytime to penalize colluders (individuals) and application development platforms for any misdemeanours and effectively oversee or penalize non-conformance and place a check on firms like Facebook and Cambridge Analytica.

Elections and other democratic processes, offer a gigantic laboratory for marketing & data analytics firms and political campaigners to test their most modern marketing techniques and analytical models. For many reasons, the limited amount of time, the high energy, the indeterminable spirit to be the best, and the 'one winner' concept at the end of the election or the unwinding of the democratic process, motivates political campaigners and firms like these to go out of the way to secure a lead or victory. Political campaigners must be careful and as their role states, must not make choices for personal gain that afflict or endanger the many. The following are some suggestive tenets that could form the basis of ethical standards for data analytics firms and others in similar businesses:

- Full Disclosure: Firms are supposed to make full disclosure of what is being collected and for what purposes without indulging in intricacy and trickery in an effort to mislead the user.
- Compliance: Firms have to comply with all data collection laws that are in place to safeguard consumers' data. Stringent laws such as 'California Online Privacy Protection Act' and the EU General Data Protection Regulation that deal with how user data has to be treated are globally good examples of some stringent data protection rules and regulations.
- Internal Ethical Check: Firms are supposed to have some internal business ethics, where there is a company-wide responsibility of securing customers' data. Customer data should be accessed only on a need-to-know basis and should not be available across the firm's domain.
- Developing a good privacy policy: Firms have to develop a good privacy policy that comply with all the regulations in the place and ensure customers of complete virtual protection. The privacy must specify what you may do with the data, for how long you may hold it and who all may have access to it.
- User's Consent: A user consent is both the affirmation of the customer's consent for accessing their data and their legally binding position to the firm's privacy policy. It is important for the firm to run the customer through their privacy policy before asking for their consent. This is where things get a bit out of knack! Because most privacy policies are legal documents filled with jargon. Firms have to step-up a bit and make it easy for the customer to comprehend. For instance, firms could adopt the style of simple explainer videos to help the customer understand their privacy policy.
- Limiting Third-party Access: Firms are encouraged to limit third-party access to sensitive customer-related information, as they may not be able to indefinitely guarantee data protection.
- Auditing Privacy Practices: An audit ensures whether the firm complies with the privacy policy and other privacy regulations and norms. Firms are encouraged to produce annual reports of such nature for regulatory agencies and the public.

Firms and other business interests cannot be left on their own to safeguard user privacy. Henceforth, at least for the time being, regulators have to step-in and monitor the industry. As a closing remark, I suggest a global regulatory standard of ubiquitous nature has to be passed and accepted internationally to contain this data drain. Moral suasion coupled with austere regulatory controls is the need of the hour.

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