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Cambridge Analytica: Laissez Faire Data-pitalism, A Conversation About Responsibility and Accountability

The conversation over ethics and technology in the modern age is complicated, though intuitively we'd think otherwise. It would be easy to say that companies should act in the best interest of their customers or audience, and that information about an individual's private life is something to be held sacred. Yet, questions about responsibility, accountability, choice, and the greater good throw a wrench in the works. Should a person venture down these logical paths, they would likely find themselves arriving at some uncomfortable conclusions.

The subject today is that of Cambridge Analytica, the procurement of data by the company, and the ways it uses that data. Here in America, many above a certain age will recognize the name of that company as one of infamy, while others will think of it as unimportant, maybe even fake news. However, through influencing online conversation and playing an undeniable role in influencing both the 2016 US election as well as the Brexit event, only two major political events of many they've had a hand in both big and small, Cambridge Analytica showed the world how much power there is in data, and it changed the way society views the digital age and social media for years to come.

The problem begins with Facebook and the policies it had on how data generated by the platform could be used by developers, advertisers, and others. In the case of Cambridge Analytica, they obtained the data on 50 million individual profiles through Dr Aleksandr Kogan of Cambridge University, who had an app with enormous data generation abilities. Users on the platform were paid to download the app, where they would fill out a survey providing data on their personalities, but in the background, the app scrubbed their profiles for information. Kogan had access to all this information. This data could be entered into an algorithm that had "better than human-level accuracy at predicting your behavior" according to Christopher Wylie, a data scientist, and former Research Director for Cambridge Analytica. This algorithm would then predict how an individual would vote in the upcoming election.

Most would argue it was irresponsible and unethical of Facebook to allow this level of access to users' data, but what's worse about this situation is in how this app could not only gather this data on the individual, but also from all the accounts of the individual's friends list. With only a few hundred thousand accounts downloading the app, Kogan and then Cambridge Analytica gained access to thousands of data points on millions of individuals.

According to Brittany Kaiser, another former Cambridge Analytica employee and whistleblower, "Data has surpassed oil as the world's most valuable asset, and it is being weaponized to wage cultural and political wars." I think we can say with confidence this statement is factually true. As a species, human beings do not have the best memory. It is flawed and easily manipulated, even when concerning ourselves. How many data points can an individual come up with about themselves off the top of their heads? A few dozen, maybe? And

how much damage could be done if much of those few dozen data points got into the wrong hands?

A computer's memory isn't flawed, and with ever increasing redundancies to prevent data loss in the event of physical device failures, a computer's memory functionally never forgets. Compared to the few dozen things we can remember about ourselves on a good day, the thousands and thousands of data points about us that have been collected and stored should be more than concerning.

Using micro-targeting and psychological constructs, combined with the data they obtained, psychological profiles were created of millions of US citizens. These profiles helped Cambridge Analytica to understand what framing, topics, content, tone, and messaging these users were susceptible to, where it was consumed, and provided insight into how many times they'd need to "touch" a user to change how they think about something. Cambridge Analytica went on to use this data to target what they called "The Persuadeables," or voters who's minds they thought they could change, specifically those in swing states.

Cambridge Analytica employed scientists, psychologist, and strategists, but also designers, videographers, and photographers. Using these creatives, Cambridge Analytica created thousands of pieces of content. This content would be sent to their targeting team and then injected into the internet for these Persuadeables to find.

Christopher says the way they thought about it was "Persuade, not manipulate" which, through some mental gymnastics, gave him and others at Cambridge Analytica the sense they weren't acting unethically. However, to illicit emotional responses in another person to achieve

a specific outcome is manipulation, arguably an unethical act, and that's exactly what Cambridge Analytica was doing. Considering this entire controversy surrounds the decisions made by a single company, it is entirely reasonable to assume we are still being manipulated to this day, in similar ways as before, but also likely in entirely different ways we haven't even thought to consider.

While Christopher acknowledges his role in the company was a mistake, and that he acted in an unethical manner, others from Cambridge Analytica don't believe they did anything wrong, and none more so than its former CEO, Alexander Nix. When he's given public statements on his company's actions, he has only defended and denied them. Even when testifying before a UK Parliament committee, he said the company had never used Facebook data while being fully aware the company was founded on using Facebook data. Nix takes the perspective that Facebook gave him the data, and its users agreed to give their data to Facebook through using its services, therefore there is no moral or ethical shortcoming on his part.

Does the contrast between the handling of the fallout from this information going public by Nix and Wylie absolve Wylie of wrongdoing? I don't believe so, but he has come forward and released this information as a whistleblower, and when he says "I was instrumental, I was at the center of it. But I was naïve, I made a mistake, I made a big mistake, and that's why I'm talking to you now," he seems sincere in his regrets over what he has done. What else could he do besides keep his mouth shut? Of the two options, his choice was the ethically correct one from the perspective of the public, and really what more can be asked of someone than to do the right thing once they accepted responsibility for what they've done before? Christopher

recognizes that data is being weaponized against the very users who generate it, meaning it is being used to manipulate the public into thinking and acting in ways which are counter to its own best interests, like being convinced to vote for a candidate who may act in the best interest of the very companies who collect and use their users' data against them.

Facebook's actions however, allowed Cambridge Analytica to happen. Social media platforms like Facebook have a responsibility as stewards of the data generated as a consequence of the use of their platforms, and that responsibility includes considering the potential outcomes of that data getting into the wrong hands. But as we've seen the last few weeks, Facebook time and again makes public statements of accountability while internally, changing little in how they do things. This is an entitlement and accountability problem with big tech in general, and one the public cannot resign themselves to if they ever want to have control over their own data again.

However, that now begs the question: who is truly responsible for the Cambridge Analytica situation? Is it Facebook? From the perspective of the company, did they act in an unethical manner? We as its users have given the company not only our information, but our consent for its collection and use through our disregard for Terms of Use agreements. While the data being exploited is being generated on these platforms, it is being generated by us, the user. Do we have no responsibility to protect our data? And when we cannot protect, don't we have a responsibility to consider what data we generate?

From Facebook's perspective, it would be entirely reasonable to suggest that it is we who are acting unethically, as we all agree to a user contract when creating an account, and

then we act as though we are entitled to altering said contract when we feel slighted by it. Facebook is only doing what any company does: generate profit while providing a product or service which its users want and voluntarily use.

Am I concerned about my data being used in unethical ways to influence future elections? Of course I am, just as most are. However, I recognize that I agreed to my data being generated and used by the company as it sees fit when I made my account. According to the contract I agreed to, I have no right to dictate to the company how it may or may not operate. So, if I am concerned about my data being used unethically, I would then argue it is my responsibility to take great care in what kinds of data I produce, as well as to educate myself on how data-driven psychological manipulation works, what it looks like, and how to protect myself from it.

This is accountability, and in a world where we scream and demand that companies make responsible decisions regarding their customers and users, and hold themselves accountable for their actions, I believe we must hold ourselves to those same standards. If we can't, or worse yet if we won't, then I see no moral argument we can make stating that companies should do so, either.

Sources:

- *The Great Hack*, Netflix

   Cambridge Analytica whistleblower: 'We spent $1m harvesting millions of Facebook profiles', The Guardian - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXdYSQ6nu-M

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