

The Cambridge Analytica Saga: The Hindu Explains

Things got worse for CA when UK broadcaster Channel 4 aired a program in which the company's (now suspended) CEO Alexander Nix described some of its dubious election strategies to an undercover reporter. | Photo Credit: [REUTERS](#)

Cambridge Analytica (CA) is a data analytics and political consulting firm set up in 2014 with the help of Steve Bannon, former chief strategist of United States President Donald Trump and former head of alt-right media platform *Breitbart News*. It was formed as a subsidiary of SCL, a British company that describes itself as specialising in data, analytics and strategy. Mr. Bannon helped secure funding for CA from American billionaire Robert Mercer and his family, who are major donors to right-wing causes and Republican party campaigns.

Chris Wylie, a 28-year old former employee of the company, revealed details of the company's *modus operandi* to journalist Carole Cadwalladr in an expose published in the *Observer* newspaper last weekend.

According to Mr. Wylie, CA acquired the data in 2014 via personality profiling app *thisisyourdigitallife*, built by Aleksandr Kogan, an academic at Cambridge University. While the app was downloaded by just 2,70,000 Facebook users, it pulled in data from the "Facebook friends" of these users, allowing CA to harvest the data of 50 million users, without their consent.

Information campaigns were then microtargeted at these users based on their preferences and vulnerabilities (for instance). Mr. Kogan has denied he was aware his tool was possibly being used illegally and says he is being scapegoated by Facebook and CA.

Short of deleting your account, what can you do to limit Facebook's data collection?

Things got worse for CA on Monday when UK broadcaster Channel 4 aired a program in which the company's (now suspended) CEO Alexander Nix described some of its dubious election strategies to an undercover reporter. These strategies included using women and offering deals that are "too good to be true" to politicians, and video-recording these interactions and posting them online in order to discredit a candidate.

SCL, CA and their partners have been involved in political campaigns around the world, including in India, where SCL partnered with Ovlano Business Intelligence Pvt Ltd., which had claimed on its website (now unavailable) to have worked with the BJP, Congress and the JD(U). Both the Congress and BJP traded charges on Wednesday on this issue.

Cambridge Analytica controversy: Urgent need for data protection laws, say experts

Facebook, in a statement, denied that Mr. Kogan's app involved data breaches but said that Mr. Kogan did not abide by Facebook's rules when he passed on the information to CA/SCL, a fact that came to Facebook's notice in 2015. The social media platform consequently deleted the app and asked Mr. Kogan and others who had been given the data to certify that it had been destroyed.

After the Wylie story broke last weekend, it had come to light that at least some of the data still existed, prompting Facebook to send cybersecurity analysts to CA's London offices for a data audit. These auditors were subsequently recalled owing to a parallel U.K. government inquiry.

CA is being investigated by the U.K.'s Electoral Commission for its role in the Brexit referendum as

well as by the Office of the Information Commissioner (OIC), based on previous reports about its dubious methods.

In the U.S., Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is investigating Russian links to the Trump campaign, is looking into CA's role in this affair as well.

A House of Commons parliamentary committee has asked Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to appear before it to answer questions on CA's data usage. Across the Atlantic, lawmakers have said Mr. Zuckerberg should appear before the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament has said it will investigate the issue.

In the wake of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data breach controversy, Anand Mahindra, chairman of the \$19 billion Mahindra Group, has mooted the

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