

## Cambridge Analytica's business isn't data

As the Cambridge Analytica (CA) scandal unfolds, the Western world is meeting a little-known part of its political industry, the one that has operated in developing nations since at least the 1990s. CA's methods as revealed by the UK's *Channel 4 News*, whose reporter posed as a potential Sri Lankan client, may be a bit extreme—but for the most part, the consultancy has been one of many firms that have brought Western-style electioneering to lawless environments in which it has been blatantly abused.

In the US, political marketing developed from an art into a science by the 1980s. By the end of the following decade, the US had an industry of about 7,000 people who worked on campaigns, political scientist Christian Schaffer wrote in 2006. The US market became too competitive for all these professionals. This, however, was the era of Pax Americana, when most countries' establishments sought American knowledge and at least the external veneer of Western democracy. The Global Political Consultancy Survey of 1998-2000 revealed that 57% of the top US political consultants also worked overseas—in post-Communist countries, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East. Sometimes, from Honduras to Israel, opposing politicians were being advised by different US consultants.

The same survey showed that campaign professionals from Western Europe—especially the UK, France and Germany—were also in demand. In the post-Communist world in particular, their experience was deemed at least as relevant, if not more so, than their US colleagues'. That's where London-based Cambridge Analytica comes in, too. Political consulting is a globalized market now.

Most of the experience amassed by the consultants is unavailable to the public because their contracts in non-Western nations are secretive. Some case studies are well-known, however. In 1996, *Time* magazine did its *Yanks to the Rescue* cover story on the involvement of US campaign professionals in Russian President Boris Yeltsin's re-election. It described some of the "American-style dirty tricks" the consultants came up with, such as having Yeltsin's principal opponent, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, trailed by "heckling 'truth squads' designed to goad him into losing his temper." It was the Americans (if they said so themselves—Russian campaign managers, including Yeltsin's daughter Tatyana Dyachenko, named in the *Time* story as their ultimate point of contact, later disputed their role) who persuaded the Yeltsin campaign to go all-out negative on Zyuganov and communism, a strategy that ultimately worked.

Another story of that type, written by Franklin Foer for *The Atlantic*, appeared earlier this year. It dealt with the role of Paul Manafort in the political career of Viktor Yanukovych, the Ukrainian president deposed by his people four years ago. Manafort supposedly made Yanukovych a winner by teaching him to dress better, smile, make small talk and stay on message—which was a divisive one, pitting Ukraine's Russian-speaking east (Yanukovych's home region) against the nationalist west of the country.

What these American stories have in common is a certain contempt for the unpolished locals who supposedly couldn't have won without Western help. Reality is more complex. Both the 1996 Yeltsin campaign and the campaigns run by Yanukovych and his Party of Regions were incredibly, transparently corrupt. The Yeltsin re-election effort completely ignored campaign spending limits and devoured cash like a steam engine furnace. Media coverage was skewed in Yeltsin's favour, not just because journalists overwhelmingly backed him but because media owners were part of the campaign. Administrative pressure helped drive turnout—not as much as in subsequent Russian elections, but noticeably. As for Yanukovych, generously funded by eastern Ukrainian oligarchs, he and his allies actively bought votes both with targeted social spending and with

straight handouts—bags of buckwheat, as Ukrainians put it. Did the layer of Western varnish on all these non-American dirty tricks win the day? Did the Americans care about what was underneath the varnish? The honest answers are no and no.

Cambridge Analytica's foreign campaigns present a similar picture. The case studies published on the firm's website discuss polling, voter behaviour analysis and message crafting. One layer down, there are vicious negative campaigns and turnout suppression tactics such as organizing anti-election rallies in Nigeria in 2007. Deeper still, there's the entire arsenal of hybrid regimes that crave the outward trappings of democracy but feel the need to control it. Cambridge Analytica knows about that layer and, to an extent, relies on it to amass a successful portfolio. It doesn't, however, operate in that layer; like other consultants in similar situations, it gets paid to legitimize it with the outward appearance of Western-style adversarial campaigning.

The Kenyan opposition is demanding an investigation of Cambridge Analytica's role in "spreading divisive propaganda" ahead of last year's election won by President Uhuru Kenyatta. In the direct aftermath of the vote, however, the opposition wasn't saying it had been won through any kind of propaganda. It claimed the election commission had been hacked; earlier that year, the commission's head of technology had been murdered. Vote buying and shenanigans involving semi-literate rural voters are rife in Kenya, too. Was it Cambridge Analytica that carried the day for Kenyatta? The jury is out; the British firm, however, helped create evidence of a legitimate campaign—while US and Canadian consultants who were helping the opposite side build an alternative vote counting system were arrested and deported a week before the election.

On the *Channel 4* video, CA chief executive officer Alexander Nix said his firm could arrange honey traps and frame opponents for corruption. Developing world politicians, however, don't really need that kind of help from CA. They're better at this kind of thing than any Western operatives: It's their bread and butter in the corrupt systems where they know all the ropes. What they need is a consultant comfortable with their practices who's able to deliver the slides necessary for them to go through the motions of Western-style electioneering. Willingly or not, many Western political marketers play this role, which isn't unlike the one played by the developing world politicians' Savile Row tailors.

In recent years, since the emergence of the social networks and their successful use by Barack Obama, the consultants have been selling their clients a new suit: Big data. Nix tried to convince the *Channel 4* undercover reporter that his firm had done "all the data, all the analytics, all the targeting" for Donald Trump's 2016 campaign—something that is blatantly not true given that the campaign's digital guru, Brad Parscale, also worked with a team seconded by Facebook. But a real client wouldn't have bothered to fact-check Nix. Ultimately, big data gathering and analysis wouldn't be required in Kenya, Nigeria or a post-Soviet country. Bragging rights—"I used the same people who got Trump elected"—would be infinitely more valuable.

If the Cambridge Analytica scandal sheds some light on the overseas work of Western political consultants and results in some kind of regulatory crackdown on this opaque and ethically questionable industry—which is essentially all about commercialized election interference—it'll serve a useful purpose. But it's at best nearsighted to take CA's sales pitch at face value. The real problem with the overseas exploits of this and other firms is that the elections in which they take part often aren't genuine. Only the developing nations' own citizens can solve that one.

### **Bloomberg View**

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