

Cambridge Analytica, Facebook and data breaches

In focus: Cambridge Analytica harvested data without users' consent.

What is Cambridge Analytica (CA)?

CA is a data analytics and political consulting firm set up in 2014, launched with the help of Steve Bannon, former chief strategist to U.S. President Donald Trump and former head of the alt-right media platform, *Breitbart News*. The company was set up as a subsidiary of SCL, a British company which describes itself as specialising in data, analytics and strategy. Mr. Bannon helped secure funding for CA from American billionaire Robert Mercer and his family, major donors to right-wing causes and Republican Party campaigns.

What is the controversy around CA?

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

According to Mr. Wylie, CA acquired data in 2014, via a 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 also pulled in data from the "Facebook friends" of these users, allowing CA to harvest the data of 50 million users, without their consent, according to Mr. Wylie. Information campaigns were then micro-targeted 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 made a scapegoat by Facebook and CA.

Things got worse for CA on Monday when the U.K. broadcaster Channel 4 aired a programme 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 Ovleno Business Intelligence Pvt. Ltd., which had claimed on its website (now unavailable) to have worked with the BJP, the Congress and the JD(U). Both the Congress and the BJP traded charges on Wednesday, on this issue.

Where does Facebook stand on all this?

Facebook, in a statement, denied that Mr. Kogan's app involved data breaches, but said that he 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.

What now for CA and Facebook?

Cambridge Analytica is already being investigated by the U.K.'s Electoral Commission for its role

in the Brexit referendum as well as by the U.K.'s 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.

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