



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on March 20, 2018

Did Team Trump Manipulate Facebook Users' Data in 2016 Election?

With the focus over the past few years being on liberals using social media to manipulate elections, it appears that the same practices by those called conservatives has been overlooked. Until now. Recent revelations seem to show that Trump consultants were not one bit above harvesting the Facebook data of millions of voters — and using that data to manipulate those voters — to put “the Donald” in the White House.



“All is fair in love and war” and “politics makes strange bedfellows.” These two tropes are so much a part of the American psychology that the implications of what happens when they are merged rarely occurs to many. Add into the mix the truth that [Big Data knows you better than you know yourself](#), and the implications for data-mining for the purpose of manipulating elections are staggering.

In 2014, a 24-year-old self described “gay Canadian vegan” named Christopher Wylie created what he calls “Steve Bannon’s psychological warfare mindf**k tool.” That psychological warfare tool was a complex data-mining/analysis/manipulation program used “to bring big data and social media to an established military methodology — ‘information operations’ — then turn it on the US electorate,” [according](#) to Wylie’s interview with *The Guardian*. The company he built is Cambridge Analytica, and it is owned by a company called SCL.

Wylie claims that he intended to create the program, but did not intend for it to be used to help Trump get elected. As *The Guardian* reports:

In 2014, Steve Bannon — then executive chairman of the “alt-right” news network Breitbart — was Wylie’s boss. And Robert Mercer, the secretive US hedge-fund billionaire and Republican donor, was Cambridge Analytica’s investor. And the idea they bought into was to bring big data and social media to an established military methodology — “information operations” — then turn it on the US electorate.

As the *New York Times* [explains](#), the relationship between Bannon and Mercer on the one hand, and Cambridge Analytica on the other, actually began during the 2014 midterm elections and with a bit of a snag:

As the upstart voter-profiling company Cambridge Analytica prepared to wade into the 2014 American midterm elections, it had a problem.

The firm had secured a \$15 million investment from [Robert Mercer](#), the wealthy Republican donor, and wooed his political adviser, Stephen K. Bannon, with the promise of tools that could identify the personalities of American voters and influence their behavior. But it did not have the data to make its new products work.

So, Wylie had built the weapon, but didn’t have the ammunition. The simplest answer was to get it from the platform that has data on almost every millennial and most boomers: Facebook. According to former



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employees of the company, Cambridge Analytica paid a third party researcher to acquire the data from Facebook. The pricetag was over \$1 million. Facebook says that researcher told the social-media giant that the data was for an academic study. In that one breach alone, Cambridge Analytica mined the data of more than 50 million Facebook users.

When Facebook leadership learned what the data had actually been used for, Paul Grewal, a vice president and deputy general counsel for the social-media giant, responded by saying, “This was a scam — and a fraud,” adding that the company was taking action: Facebook has suspended the accounts of Cambridge Analytica, Wylie, and the researcher, Aleksandr Kogan, a Russian-American academic. That’ll teach ‘em. This writer has had his Facebook account suspended in the past for being rude to another user. It is difficult to believe this is being treated the same as that.

After all, the personal data collected by Facebook (which is another issue all by itself) on millions of users — data that contains enough personal details to create a startlingly accurate psychological profile — was simply handed over to someone because he claimed it was for academic research. That “researcher” then sold the data for more than a cool million. It was then used — according to Wylie and others — to manipulate voters in the 2014 midterms before being used again to sway the electorate for Donald Trump.

And that is just the beginning.

Wylie, who in late 2014 left the company he helped found, says the current leadership is ruthless in the American “culture war.” “Rules don’t matter for them. “For them, this is a war, and it’s all fair,” he told *The Guardian*. He added, “They want to fight a culture war in America. Cambridge Analytica was supposed to be the arsenal of weapons to fight that culture war.”

Wylie appears to be fine with harvesting the data of millions of Facebook users without their consent (or even knowledge, for that matter) and using it to manipulate their votes. He just seems to take exception to that tool being used to help elect the likes of Donald Trump.

But that is exactly what he claims happened. And *The Guardian* says he has the paper trail to prove it. As Carole Cadwalladr wrote in the article, “He ended up showing me a tranche of documents that laid out the secret workings behind Cambridge Analytica.”

So, it appears that Team Trump did what the Right has rightly condemned Team Clinton for doing: manipulated personal data to win the White House. Only this time, there appears to be documented proof.

And — as the late-night infommercial announcer says, “But wait, there’s more!”

Having proof of concept in the election of Trump, Cambridge Analytica has expanded the database from more than 50 million to 230 million and the parent company, SCL is now using Wylie’s “psychological warfare mindf**k tool” for the Military Industrial Complex. From *The Guardian*:

Cambridge Analytica’s parent company, SCL, had won contracts with the US State Department and was pitching to the Pentagon, and Wylie was genuinely freaked out. “It’s insane,” he told me one night. “The company has created psychological profiles of 230 million Americans. And now they want to work with the Pentagon? It’s like Nixon on steroids.”

Wylie may well have understood how data-mining and analysis work, but he appears to have a lot to learn about the way the world works. Tools are indifferent to political parties and ideologies. They have no loyalty. What works for one, will work for the other. Wylie reminds this writer of a line in the original



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Jurassic Park. Discussing cloning dinosaurs, one character says that the scientists involved spent so much time trying to figure out if they *could*, that they never stopped to consider whether they *should*.

And there's the rub. This tool should never have existed. But Facebook (or any other company or entity, for that matter) should never have had the data to arm the tool, either. Privacy matters, and data leakage via social media erodes privacy. In a world where people cared enough about maintaining their privacy to refuse to buy into "surveillance as a feature," this could never have happened.

Oh, and just to put in the for-what-it's-worth column, Facebook is already paying a heavy price for the part the company played in this. Reuters reported that Facebook stock shares are in sharp decline as a result of this. In fact in the couple of days since this story first broke, the company has already lost more than four percent of its value as investors dumped their shares. Reuters also reported that "one Wall Street analyst said the reports raised 'systemic problems' with Facebook's business model and a number said it could spur far deeper regulatory scrutiny of the platform."

Financial woes are not the worst of it, though. According to the Reuters piece, "The head of European Parliament said on Monday that EU lawmakers will investigate whether the data misuse has taken place, adding that the allegation is an unacceptable violation of citizens' privacy rights." And the company is being investigated by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). That investigation is looking into whether the use of personal data from 50 million Facebook users by Cambridge Analytica violated a 2011 consent decree the tech company signed with the FTC. And there are indications that the company may find itself the subject of at least one congressional investigation. Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, a Democratic member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, wants Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg to appear before the committee to answer for having Facebook users' data used "to target political advertising and manipulate voters."



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