Bits & Bytes: Are You Persuadable?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I heard the news that a data science company named “Cambridge Analytica” and its parent company filed for [insolvency proceedings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insolvency) and closed operations. It was on the trip home from work on 1 May last year (of course the date is not from my memory). I just felt sad about a data science company being forced to shut down because of breaking privacy laws. I had forgotten this news until last weekend when I heard a radio interview with David Carroll who is a Media Design Professor in New York.  Sometimes we are interested in a bit bigger world than just ourselves, our family and our work.  The hearing of this radio talk was that kind of event for me as it talked about very serious and important issues regarding data. With a bit of further research I found a very touching talk by Carol Cadwalladr who is a journalist at “The Guardian”.  **Carol’s visit to South Wales**  From the Brexit vote in 2016, the highest “Leave” votes in the country came from South Wales (as much as 62%). Carol visited there and conducted interviews with some people. She found that most interviewees who told her they voted for “Leave” did it because the EU had not done anything for them. The truth is that actually the EU spent about 450M pounds to construct schools, roads and a sport center in Wales. Interestingly, people had more imitated figures and mistruth about their own city. One lady told that she had read all kinds of scary stuff on Facebook and tried to find the stories on Facebook to show them to Carol. But there was no such story – everything had gone completely dark. | |
|  |  |
|  |  |
| **News feeds on Facebook**  How many notifications do you receive from Facebook every day?  Any change of your network triggers news feeds, and notifications are sent out automatically.  Apart from Mark Zuckerberg’s claim (and maybe his intention) that their teams are focusing on helping us find meaningful social interactions, some people use the platform for trafficking fake news and misinformation.  The biggest problem of the news feed is that the contents are not traceable – impossible to research anything. We do not know who saw what and what impact they had.  **What does Online Vote Mean?**  Most of us understand what it means to vote online, as we practice it in NZ. However along with Online Voting a candidate can spend any amount of money on Facebook, on Google or on YouTube ads to exercise micro-marketing. Nobody will know how much money has been used or for what as they are black boxes. There is no way for us to keep this transparent.  **Facebook – Cambridge Analytica (CA) Data Scandal**  “Cambridge Analytica” was a data science company in the UK. They had harvested 5000 data points for each voter in America according to their own advertisement. It sounds a great collection of data – obviously a lot of data science work would be involved. Their main business sector was electoral marketing using sophisticated algorithms.  They used an application called “This is your digital life” to take a survey for several hundred thousand Facebook users. They did this with informed consent stating that they collected data for an academic research only. They also used Facebook’s network to harvest 87M users’ information without consent – with almost 71M users from the US.  Their algorithms for helping their clients (electoral candidates) were to segment people to find a class called “PERSUADABLE”.  This is because the “PERSUADABLE” people were their main target of marketing for some political event.  A number of journalists from the UK and Switzerland reported on CA’s illegal activities from 2015. Around that time the awareness of this issue was very immature in most countries including the US. Those reports led to some skeptical responses from some other journalists including at “The New York Times”. When an ex-employee of CA (Chris Wylie) emerged in March 2018 as a whistle blower the scandal finally erupted. | |
| **David Carroll’s Law Suit against CA**  Professor David Carroll is teaching media design. He has had an awareness on unlawful data collection by data analytical companies using social media ad tools. There are a number of algorithms to predict people’s behaviors and actions based on data acquisition. Even some groups are feeding us a strong fear through online platforms.  He had a legal battle against CA to recover his personal data held about him in 2017. He won the law suit, and the company had been ordered to release David’s data. But, they did not to comply with releasing David’s data. Rather than release it, CA’s parent company (SCL) took on criminal charges and pleaded guilty for not complying and fined 15K pounds.  David had continued legal fight to stop CA’s liquidation, but a judge ruled against David and lets CA go away.  **Facebook on the Scandal**  In March 2018, Mark Zuckerberg first apologized for the situation with the scandal on CNN. However, not fully. He and other Facebook officials emphasized that the scandal was just an issue and a mistake – they called it as “Breach of Trust” against calling “DATA BREACH”.  In April, they decided to implement the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation.  In June, the UK’s Information Commissioner’s Office announced to fine Facebook 500K pounds, which is the maximum they allow.  In March 2019, the US Attorney General for the District of Colombia filed about an allegation of the Facebook knew of CA’s Improper data collecting activities.  In July 2019, the Federal Trade Commission approved fining Facebook 5B USD to settle an investigation into the company’s privacy violations. | |
| <https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy#t-841170> | |
| **Carols’ message**  Most interesting comments on this issue come from a Ted Talk by Carole Cadwalladr.   * Hate Crime: The same use of Hate and Fear campaign on Facebook in global level – Britain, America, France, Hungary, Brazil, Myanmar and New Zealand. * CA had profiled people politically in order to understand their individual fears to better target them with Facebook ads. * Ex-owner of CA (billionaire Robert Mercer) and Facebook threatened to sue the publisher (The Gardian) multiple times. * 100 years ago, the biggest danger in the South Wales coal mines was gas. Now, a hundred years of electoral laws are disrupted by technology. * Democracy is broken - Spreading lies in darkness, paid for with illegal cash is not democracy. * To say that will be better in future is not enough, we want to know the truth to have a free and fair election ever again. | |