

# Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal

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The **Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal** was a major political scandal in early 2018 when it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica had harvested the personal data of millions of peoples' Facebook profiles without their consent and used it for political advertising purposes. It has been described as a watershed moment in the public understanding of personal data and precipitated a massive fall in Facebook's stock price and calls for tighter regulation of tech companies' use of personal data.

The illicit harvesting of personal data by Cambridge Analytica was first reported in December 2015 by Harry Davies, a journalist for *The Guardian*. He reported that Cambridge Analytica was working for United States Senator Ted Cruz using data harvested from millions of people's Facebook accounts without their consent.<sup>[1]</sup> Facebook refused to comment on the story other than to say it was investigating. Further reports followed in the Swiss publication *Das Magazin* by Hannes Grasseger and Mikael Krogerus (December 2016), (later translated and published by *Vice*), Carole Cadwalladr in *The Guardian* (starting in February 2017) and Mattathias Schwartz in *The Intercept* (March 2017). Facebook refused to comment on the claims in any of the articles.

The scandal finally erupted in March 2018 with the emergence of a whistle-blower, an ex-Cambridge Analytica employee Christopher Wylie. He had been an anonymous source for an article in 2017 in *The Observer* by Cadwalladr, headlined "The Great British Brexit Robbery". This article went viral but was disbelieved in some quarters, prompting skeptical responses in *The New York Times* among others. Cadwalladr worked with Wylie for a year to coax him to come forward as a whistleblower. She later brought in *Channel 4 News* in the UK and *The New York Times* due to legal threats against *The Guardian* and *The Observer* by Cambridge Analytica.

The three news organisations published simultaneously on March 17, 2018, and caused a huge public outcry. More than \$100 billion was knocked off Facebook's market capitalization in days and politicians in the US and UK demanded answers from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The scandal eventually led to him agreeing to testify in front of the United States Congress.

## Contents

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**Process**

**Characteristics of the data**

**News coverage**

**Use of the data**

**Responses**

**Testimony to Congress**

**Successors**

**See also**

**References**

**External links**

## Process

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Aleksandr Kogan, a data scientist at Cambridge University, developed an app called "This Is Your Digital Life"<sup>[2]</sup> (sometimes stylised as "*thisisyourdigitallife*").<sup>[3][4]</sup> He provided the app to Cambridge Analytica.<sup>[3]</sup> Cambridge Analytica in turn arranged an informed consent process for research in which several hundred thousand Facebook users would agree to complete a survey only for academic use.<sup>[3]</sup> However, Facebook's design allowed this app not only to collect the personal information of people who agreed to take the survey, but also the personal information of all the people in those users' Facebook social network.<sup>[3]</sup> In this way Cambridge Analytica acquired data from millions of Facebook users.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Characteristics of the data

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*The Observer* and *The New York Times* reported that dataset has included information on 50 million Facebook users.<sup>[5]</sup> While Cambridge Analytica claimed it had only collected 30 million Facebook user profiles,<sup>[6]</sup> Facebook later confirmed that it actually had data on up to 87 million users,<sup>[7]</sup> with 70.6 million of those people from the United States.<sup>[8]</sup> Within the United States, Facebook estimated that California was the most affected U.S. state, with 6.7 million impacted users, followed by Texas, with 5.6 million, and Florida, with 4.3 million.<sup>[9]</sup>

Facebook sent a message to those users believed to be affected, saying the information likely included one's "public profile, page likes, birthday and current city".<sup>[10]</sup> Some of the app's users gave the app permission to access their News Feed, timeline, and messages.<sup>[11]</sup> The data was detailed enough for Cambridge Analytica to create psychographic profiles of the subjects of the data.<sup>[5]</sup> The data also included the locations of each person.<sup>[5]</sup> For a given political campaign, the data was detailed enough to create a profile which suggested what kind of advertisement would be most effective to persuade a particular person in a particular location for some political event.<sup>[5]</sup>

## News coverage

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In December 2015, *The Guardian* reported that Cambridge Analytica used the data at the behest of Ted Cruz.<sup>[1][12]</sup> Cambridge Analytica also assisted with President Trump's campaigns.<sup>[13]</sup>

On March 17, 2018, *The Observer* (*The Guardian*'s sister paper, published online on theguardian.com) and *The New York Times* broke the story simultaneously. *The Observer* worked with Christopher Wylie, a former employee of Cambridge Analytica, for more than a year before bringing in *The New York Times* to report the story in the US.<sup>[5][3][14][15][16]</sup> *The New York Times* reported that as of March 17, 2018, the data was still available online.<sup>[5][3]</sup>

Some, such as Meghan McCain have drawn an equivalence between the use of data by Cambridge Analytica and Barack Obama's 2012 campaign, which, according to *Investor's Business Daily*, "encouraged supporters to download an Obama 2012 Facebook app that, when activated, let the campaign collect Facebook data both on users and their friends."<sup>[17][18][19]</sup> PolitiFact (a fact checking organization) has rated this "Half-True" since "in Obama's case, direct users knew they were handing over their data to a political campaign" whereas with Cambridge Analytica users thought they were only taking a personality quiz for academic purposes, and while the Obama campaign used the data "to have their supporters contact their most persuadable friends[,] Cambridge Analytica targeted users, friends and lookalikes directly with digital ads."<sup>[20]</sup>

## Use of the data

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Political event for which politicians paid Cambridge Analytica to use information from the data breach include the following:

- Ted Cruz 2016 presidential campaign in the United States in 2015/2016<sup>[1][21][22]</sup>

## Responses

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Facebook director Mark Zuckerberg first apologized for the situation with Cambridge Analytica on CNN,<sup>[23]</sup> calling it an "issue", a "mistake" and a "breach of trust"; in effect, he reminded them of their Right of access to personal data. Other Facebook officials argued against calling it a "data breach", arguing those who took the personality quiz originally consented to give away their information.<sup>[24]</sup> Zuckerberg pledged to make changes and reforms in Facebook policy to prevent similar breaches.<sup>[25]</sup> On March 25, 2018, Zuckerberg published a personal letter in various newspapers apologizing on behalf of Facebook.<sup>[26]</sup> In April they decided to implement the EU's General Data Protection Regulation in all areas of operation and not just the EU.<sup>[27]</sup>

Amazon said that they suspended Cambridge Analytica from using their Amazon Web Services when they learned that their service was collecting personal information.<sup>[28]</sup> The Italian banking company UniCredit stopped advertising and marketing on Facebook.<sup>[29]</sup>

The governments of India<sup>[30][31]</sup> and Brazil<sup>[32][33]</sup> demanded that Cambridge Analytica report how anyone used data from the breach in political campaigning, and various regional governments in the United States have lawsuits in their court systems from citizens affected by the data breach.<sup>[34]</sup>

On April 25, 2018, Facebook released their first earnings report since the scandal was reported. Revenue fell since the last quarter, but this is usual as it followed the holiday season quote. The quarter revenue was the highest for a first quarter, and the second overall.<sup>[35]</sup>

In early July 2018, the United Kingdom's Information Commissioner's Office announced it intended to fine Facebook £500,000 (\$663,000) over the data scandal, this being the maximum fine allowed at the time of the breach, saying Facebook "contravened the law by failing to safeguard people's information".<sup>[36]</sup>

In March 2019, a court filing by the U.S. Attorney General for the District of Columbia alleged that Facebook knew of Cambridge Analytica's "improper data-gathering practices" months before they were first publicly reported in December 2015.<sup>[37]</sup>

In July 2019, the Federal Trade Commission voted to approve fining Facebook around \$5 billion to finally settle the investigation to the scandal, with a 3-2 vote.<sup>[38]</sup>

Facebook established Social Science One as a response to the event.

## Testimony to Congress

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During his testimony before Congress on April 10, 2018, Mark Zuckerberg said it was his personal mistake that he did not do enough to prevent Facebook from being used for harm. "That goes for fake news, foreign interference in elections and hate speech." During the testimony, Mark Zuckerberg publicly apologized for the breach of private data: "It was my mistake, and I'm sorry. I started Facebook, I run it, and I'm responsible for what happens here."<sup>[39]</sup>

Zuckerberg said that in 2013 researcher Aleksandr Kogan from Cambridge University had created a personality quiz app, which was installed by 300,000 people. The app was then able to retrieve Facebook information, including that of the users' friends, and this was obtained by Kogan. It was not until 2015 that Zuckerberg learned that these users' information was shared by Kogan with Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica was subsequently asked to remove all the data. It was later discovered by *The Guardian*, The New York Times and Channel 4 that the data had in fact not been deleted.<sup>[40]</sup>

## Successors

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According to the Associated Press, a company run by former officials at Cambridge Analytica, Data Propria, has been working for President Donald Trump's 2020 re-election effort.<sup>[41]</sup>

## See also

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- AggregateIQ
- BeLeave
- *The Great Hack*
- Russian interference in the 2016 Brexit referendum
- Timeline of investigations into Trump and Russia (2019)

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## External links

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- BBC Coverage (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/c81zyn0888lt/facebook-cambridge-analytica-data-scandal>)
  - The Guardian Coverage (<https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files>)
  - Carole Cadwalladr @TED2019: Facebook's role in Brexit — and the threat to democracy ([https://www.ted.com/talks/carole\\_cadwalladr\\_facebook\\_s\\_role\\_in\\_brexit\\_and\\_the\\_threat\\_to\\_democracy/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy/transcript))
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