The importance of privacy: how Big Data Analytics can be abused by big corporations

Large corporations like Amazon Facebook and Google now have the ability to monitor their userbase in an unprecedented way. Never before could a company gather as much data on their userbase and the effectiveness of their advertising and attempts to sell products. For instance, Facebook can collect data pertaining to the personality, likes and dislikes, and even political views of their users and with the help of big data analytics firms process this information into usable market tactics and business decisions. One high profile case of misuse of data analytics can be seen in the Cambridge Analytica Facebook data scandal “The Times [reported that in 2014 contractors and employees](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html) of Cambridge Analytica, eager to sell psychological profiles of American voters to political campaigns, acquired the private Facebook data of tens of millions of users — the largest known leak in Facebook history.” – The New York Times[1]. Cambridge Analytica used the data generated from tens of millions of American citizens in order to build up an idea of their political leanings. This Data was then used by interested parties in order to target ad campaigns and misleading news articles in order to sway potential voters  
Cambridge Analytica was again caught up in another scandal involving misuse of Facebook data in 2016 when a former Cambridge employee told the British parliament that Cambridge helped to swing the electorates views towards a withdrawal from the EU ““I now feel sick about what happened,” Mr. Sanni said in his testimony. The officials of Vote Leave “used two 22-year-olds to cheat in the referendum.””- The New York Times[2]. According to this former employee Shahmir Sanni Cambridge used data collected from Facebook, without the consent of the Facebook users in question, to glean the information necessary to help sway the outcome of the UK Brexit vote in favour of leaving by providing lists of people who could have be targeted by political ads and misleading news articles.  
All of this information on the political leanings of the Facebook users whose information had been taken was created by the use of big data analytics, using only the data available on their page “The data Cambridge collected from profiles … included details on users’ identities, friend networks and “likes.” Only a tiny fraction of the users had agreed to release their information to a third party.”- The NY Times[3].  
The Cambridge Analytica case shows how a normal worker in a large corporation such as Facebook or amazon could be told by their superiors to gather useable information from big data analytics without realising that what they were doing was unethical. It is not in their hands what is done with the information they collect or how the data they collect is acquired, it is in the hands of the higher ups in the company, the decision makers. Because of this it is easy for data breaches such as this to go unnoticed by the average joe worker in large firms such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook.   
Large firms such as Amazon and Google use Big Data Analytics to learn about the wants and needs of its users and can use this information to advertise to them items they believe the consumer might need however an issue arises from this because Amazon could use this information if they so desired to promote their own products and hide other companies who sell on their platform from the consumer in order to ensure the consumer buys from them. In this way amazon could put smaller businesses out of business in the guise of providing them with a place to advertise and sell their products. Search for anything on Amazon and their own brand items will be the first to be displayed always if they wanted to they could hide competitors easily.  
Often times with Big Data Analytics companies can know something about their consumers before their consumers know it about themselves. In the early 2000s Target the largest corporation in America began tracking each customers buying habits and extracting useable information from these buying habits such as knowing when to send which customer which coupons in order to get them to shop in Target more. In order to get this usable information Target hired Andrew Pole a statistician in order to figured out customers buying habits. One such item of information he could find out was when a customer was pregnant and and how far along they were in their pregnancy and so on and so forth. This seemed to work for target “Duhigg suggests that Target's gangbusters revenue growth -- $44 billion in 2002, when Pole was hired, to $67 billion in 2010 -- is attributable to Pole's helping the retail giant corner the baby-on-board market, citing company president Gregg Steinhafel boasting to investors about the company’s “heightened focus on items and categories that appeal to specific guest segments such as mom and baby.”” – Forbes [4]. This large increase in profits can show how useful big data analytics can be in business decision making although it can also have unforeseen consequences. In one store in Minneapolis the manager was confronted by an angry father who claimed Target was trying to encourage his young daughter to get pregnant by sending her diaper and crib coupons ““My daughter got this in the mail!” he said. “She’s still in high school, and you’re sending her coupons for baby clothes and cribs? Are you trying to encourage her to get pregnant?””- Forbes [4]. In this case his daughter was pregnant without the father knowing it which was quite the surprise for him. Not an unethical use of data but still and unforeseen consequence big data analytics  
The use of Big Data Analytics can be very beneficial for companies but using this information unethically can also be very profitable for them. It is important that these data firms are monitored appropriately and prevented from carrying out unethical business practices in their pursuit of profits. As was the case with Cambridge Analytica with their political use of large unethically sourced Data. In conclusion it is vitally important that the people’s privacy is maintained when using their information for Big Data Analytics

[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html>  
[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/24/world/europe/uk-brexit-vote-leave-shahmir-sanni.html>

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html>  
[4] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2012/02/16/how-target-figured-out-a-teen-girl-was-pregnant-before-her-father-did/#2747890d6668>