

# **Manipulating People**

## A risky prospect in a data-driven world

---



### **Personalised psychological warfare... sound scary?**

The Great Hack is a story about the weaponisation of data for political gain. With the explosion of personal data being collected since 2000, such techniques are increasingly powerful. Given the potential to undermine the democratic process, violate individuals' privacy and incite violence, there is clear moral content (Moral Reasoning, 2020). This report explores the ethics of using psychological operations, particularly in the modern era, across three dimensions: manipulation, misinformation and the use of personal data.

---

---

## **How to... win votes and influence people?**

Manipulation featured in The Great Hack when Cambridge Analytica used “microtargeting” strategies. This involves identifying small subsets of the population that when targeted will have a disproportionate influence on elections.

The use of manipulation presented in The Great Hack was generally in support of personal and corporate objectives, rather than a desire to improve society more broadly. This undermines potential arguments in support of manipulation from the utilitarian and care frameworks, such as that Americans might be better off under a Trump administration or that those working at Cambridge Analytica needed to work to support their families. This is particularly the case given the large number of stakeholders who were negatively impacted compared to the few who stood to benefit.

There is a strong argument against manipulating voters from the virtue framework, where virtues of humanity and justice hold significant weight, based on a variety of religious and philosophical frameworks (Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman, 2005). Manipulating voters undermines their humanity, particularly within a democratic society, and may result in a political party winning the election based not on the will of the people but on the ability of a data analytics firm to exploit weaknesses in the democratic process.

Finally, the deontology framework also contains strong arguments against manipulating voters. Kant’s categorical imperative implies people should never be treated as a means to an end, such as to obtain political power (Wilcox, 2020b). Treating some voters as more valuable than others runs against principles of equity and fairness from John Rawls (Romanova and Smirnova, 2019). Finally, undermining the democratic process is inconsistent with procedural justice principles.

Appendix A contains arguments for and against manipulating others, across a range of ethical frameworks.

---

## **Not quite the whole truth... with free bonus content!**

Misinformation featured in The Great Hack in the content that was used to influence targeted individuals. This content included inaccurate statistics and imagery designed to evoke hatred and fear towards immigrants (Cadwalladr, 2019).

Persuasion is a key aspect of our social fabric, and it is particularly evident in the realms of advertising and politics. However, when based around emotion rather than logic or moral arguments, the credibility of such communication becomes increasingly questionable. Unfortunately, around 80% of advertising is based on emotion (Romanova and Smirnova, 2019). This can mislead consumers into buying things they don't need, or encourage voters to support people or policies that are actually inconsistent with their values.

Many people espouse the virtue of truthfulness; however, in the real world there's a broad spectrum between the whole truth and a blatant lie. The further along the spectrum you go, the easier it is to argue that an ethical line has been crossed.

While misinformation can increase the effectiveness of psychological operations, it seems to be most often associated with personal, often nefarious aims, rather than enhancing the wellbeing of society. When this is the case, there are strong arguments against misinformation from a range of ethical frameworks. For example, the use of hate speech demonstrates a lack of compassion for minority groups (care framework), and misinformation violates the principle of fair and accurate communication (justice framework).

Appendix B contains arguments for and against the use of misinformation, across a range of ethical frameworks.

---

## **Every breath you take, every move you make...**

Personal data featured in The Great Hack where Cambridge Analytica built psychographic profiling products based on data taken from millions of Facebook accounts without their consent. This allowed Cambridge Analytica to be more efficient, in targeting a subset of voters that were more likely to be influenced, and in ways that were more likely to be effective.

While this approach allowed Cambridge Analytica to better achieve its objective of influencing elections, within a utilitarian framework we also need to consider whether this action maximises utility across all stakeholders. Given that the actions taken by Cambridge Analytica appear to be focused more on personal gain than on maximising social outcomes, exploiting personal data in this manner is unjustified.

Similarly, while personal data has the potential to be beneficial in some circumstances, the deontological framework argues strongly against exploiting personal data specifically for personal or corporate gain. Privacy rights form a foundation on which other human rights are built, and are essential to protecting human dignity and autonomy (Wilcox, 2020b). The approach taken to identify and exploit “vulnerables” does not respect these people’s essential humanity. David Carroll’s inability to obtain his personal data also indicates a lack of procedural justice in the way personal data was being used.

There is a clear knowledge and power imbalance between Cambridge Analytica and other stakeholders, including the data suppliers whose personal data is being used, and the citizens who are impacted by election outcomes. Within the care framework, the data subjects have greater care needs than the data users, however these needs are unmet in the context of manipulation and misinformation, and where there is no hope of obtaining informed consent (Azhar and Véliz, 2020).

Appendix C contains arguments for and against the exploitation of personal data, across a range of ethical frameworks.

---

## **It sounds scary, because it is.**

It is difficult to defend the use of psychological operations, particularly in the manner presented in The Great Hack. There are strong arguments, from multiple ethical frameworks, against manipulating others for personal or political gain. This appeared to be the main motivation of Cambridge Analytica, with no evidence of a desire to improve society more broadly, and a disregard for the broader implications of their actions.

When misinformation is used to more effectively manipulate others, we encounter additional ethical concerns, particularly when this involves hate speech that may impact minority groups or lead to physical harm. The use of personal data was also instrumental in allowing Cambridge Analytica to have a disproportionate impact; however, this adds further ethical concerns around privacy and the lack of informed consent.

That the weight of evidence argues against Cambridge Analytica's use of psychological operations to manipulate elections should come as no surprise. Cambridge Analytica was forced to close operations following the scandal, and this was largely in response to public backlash, rather than legal consequences. If they had taken a more ethical approach, such as helping politicians to better understand the will of the people, perhaps they would still be in business today.

---

## Appendix A: Manipulation Evaluation by Framework

The table below contains arguments for and against attempting to manipulate people, in the ways portrayed in The Great Hack, by ethical framework.

Framework	Arguments For	Arguments Against
Consequentialism (incl. Utilitarianism)	If Cambridge Analytica believes the majority of Americans would have greater utility under a Trump government, they may justify manipulating a small proportion of voters to achieve that outcome.	Evidence in The Great Hack suggests Cambridge Analytica were primarily motivated by personal financial gains. Brittany Kaiser in particular cited a prior focus on human rights, and supporting Obama and the Democratic party, in conflict with her later actions in a senior role at Cambridge Analytica.
Deontology (incl. Justice)	We should consider the rights of all stakeholders, including business owners and employees, who have the right to work, to free choice of employment and to participate in the political process. This includes Cambridge Analytica and their employees.	In exercising our rights, we must consider and respect others' rights, such as the right to dignity and education that promotes understanding, tolerance and friendship (United Nations, 1948).  Kant's categorical imperative implies people should never be treated as a means to an end, such as to obtain political power (Wilcox, 2020b).
Care	In The Great Hack, Brittany mentions her family's financial troubles, including losing their home. She argues "you have to work for the people who will pay you".	The impact on millions of impacted individuals is greater than the impact on the few culpable stakeholders. The "vulnerables" who were targeted in particular likely have greater care needs (e.g. youth who are still maturing) and should not be exploited.
Virtue	Courage and wisdom are shared virtues across many philosophies and religions (Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman, 2005). Not everyone has the wisdom to see, nor the courage to accept, the path we must take, to form a better society. It takes courage to influence others.	Humanity and justice are also shared virtues, and arguably hold the most weight (Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman, 2005). The use of manipulation presented in The Great Hack was generally in support of personal and corporate objectives, rather than a desire to improve society more broadly.

---

## Appendix B: Misinformation Evaluation by Framework

The table below contains arguments for and against spreading misinformation, in the ways portrayed in The Great Hack, by ethical framework.

Framework	Arguments For	Arguments Against
Consequentialism (incl. Utilitarianism)	Misinformation may increase the effectiveness of the communication strategy, which may support a justifiable end.	The justifiable end is often based on a definition of “good” which is biased towards personal objectives; the early philosophers, and those with better moral awareness, would focus more on the general wellbeing of society (Wilcox, 2020a). There was no evidence of this being the objective of Cambridge Analytica in The Great Hack.
Deontology (incl. Justice)	Humans have the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to hold opinions without inference (United Nations, 1948).	In exercising our rights, we must consider and respect others’ rights, such as the right to liberty and security and to not be subjected to inhuman treatment (United Nations, 1948). Where the use of social media platforms results in physical conflicts or even genocide, the principle of nonmaleficence applies (Wilcox, 2020b).  Interactional justice demands fair communication with accurate and truthful information (Wilcox, 2020b).
Care	Some stakeholders may benefit from a “simpler” story, such as teaching kids moral principles through fairy tales.	Spreading propaganda hurts both those who the propaganda is biased against, as well as those whose wisdom is undermined.
Virtue		Philosophers such as Aristotle believe truthfulness underpins a flourishing society (Wilcox, 2020d).

---

## Appendix C: Personal Data Evaluation by Framework

The table below contains arguments for and against exploiting personal data, in the ways portrayed in The Great Hack, by ethical framework.

Framework	Arguments For	Arguments Against
Consequentialism (incl. Utilitarianism)	Personal data makes psychological operations (and most other things) more efficient, as the message can be tailored to each individual and delivered to relevant individuals. Reducing the cost of any operation will improve utility overall.	Just because something can be done more efficiently, doesn't mean it should be done. Amplifying a poor decision just makes things worse, relative to making a better decision. We should consider whether alternatives, such as transparency and constraints around consent, provide greater utility overall.
Deontology (incl. Justice)	Distributional justice might support the use of personal data to help allocate resources fairly, although this is of limited relevance to the scenarios presented in The Great Hack.	Privacy rights form a foundation on which other human rights are built, and privacy is recognised in the United Nation Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Privacy is essential to protect human dignity and autonomy (Wilcox, 2020b).  Procedural justice requires that individuals can access their own data and participate in the decision-making process with regards to how their data is used (Wilcox, 2020b). David Carroll's inability to obtain his personal data indicates a lack of procedural justice.
Care		There is a knowledge and power imbalance between those who provide personal data and those who use it to further their own aims. It is often not possible to provide true informed consent, given the broad scope of possible uses and lack of transparency, particularly when data is shared with third parties (Azhar and Véliz, 2020). Data subjects have greater care needs than data users.
Virtue	Personal data has the potential to allow humanity to flourish, through tailored healthcare, education, entertainment etc.	The manner in which personal data was exploited in The Great Hack did not give rise to any such benefits. Misuse of personal data undermines its integrity and may hamper such ambitions.



---

## References

Azhar, A. and Véliz, C. (2020). Should We End the Data Economy? [online] Harvard Business Review. Available at: <https://hbr.org/podcast/2020/11/should-we-end-the-data-economy> [Accessed 20 Nov. 2020].

Cadwalladr, C. (2019). Facebook's role in Brexit -- and the threat to democracy. [online] www.ted.com. Available at: [https://www.ted.com/talks/carole\\_cadwalladr\\_facebook\\_s\\_role\\_in\\_brexit\\_and\\_the\\_threat\\_to\\_democracy#t-202837](https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy#t-202837) [Accessed 19 Nov. 2020].

Dahlsgaard, K., Peterson, C. and Seligman, M.E.P. (2005). Shared Virtue: The Convergence of Valued Human Strengths across Culture and History. *Review of General Psychology*, 9(3), pp.203-213.

Moral Reasoning. (2020). UNSW Sydney.

Romanova, I.D. and Smirnova, I.V. (2019). Persuasive techniques in advertising. *Training Language and Culture*, [online] 3(2), pp.55-70. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334127915\\_Persuasive\\_techniques\\_in\\_advertising](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334127915_Persuasive_techniques_in_advertising) [Accessed 19 Nov. 2020].

The School of Life (2015). POLITICAL THEORY - John Rawls. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-JQ17X6VNg&feature=youtu.be> [Accessed 20 Nov. 2020].

United Nations (1948). Universal declaration of human rights. [online] United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> [Accessed 19 Nov. 2020].

Wilcox, T. (2020a). Consequentialism. UNSW Sydney.

Wilcox, T. (2020b). Deontology. UNSW Sydney.

Wilcox, T. (2020c). Justice Part 2. UNSW Sydney.

Wilcox, T. (2020d). Virtue Ethics. UNSW Sydney.