

Facebook and "The Great Hack"

by Kayleigh Dray via reg - ICH *Saturday, Jul 27 2019, 9:09pm*

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The most important documentary of our time!

We are all, to some degree, aware of the shadowy connections between Cambridge Analytica (CA), the US election and Brexit. And we all know that CA did 'something bad' with our data. However, unless you have a degree in tech, it can be hard to understand why so many people believe that social media - specifically Facebook - is manipulating our opinions, our lives, and our society.

Thankfully, Netflix's *The Great Hack* is here to help us understand how "the dream of a connected world" tore us apart.

The documentary - directed by Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim - focuses on three principal characters. There's British journalist Carole Cadwalladr, who famously exposed CA's ties to the Trump and Brexit campaigns (and has been the target of much online harassment ever since). There's New York professor and privacy campaigner David Carroll, who attempts to recover his stolen data from CA.

And then there's former CA employee Brittany Kaiser, whose explosive testimony helped Cadwalladr to uncover the truth - and whose blurred role as victim/villain of the piece easily makes her one of *The Great Hack*'s most compelling characters.

The opening scenes of *The Great Hack* make it very clear that the film aims to help us better understand how our data is being manipulated and essentially kept from us by Facebook. And it does so initially by disputing a popular conspiracy theory: that Facebook is somehow 'listening' to our conversations.

This is not the case, Carroll says, no matter how much it may feel as if it is. Instead, Facebook gives "any buyer direct access to [our] emotional pulse" because it allows them to monitor - and, subsequently, influence - our behaviour. How?

It's a very good question - and one which can be answered with another.

Have you ever taken a personality quiz?

It was recently reported that data has surpassed oil as the most valuable resource on earth. However, as suggested by *The Great Hack*, Cambridge Analytica was quicker than most to recognise the potential profit in harvesting personal data. Indeed, the company appealed to clients by claiming they could provide 5,000 data points on every single American voter - and, as the documentary goes on to claim, it was able to deliver on this promise through the tried-and-tested method of Facebook personality quizzes.

It's a format that pretty much anyone who uses Facebook will be familiar with: a seemingly innocuous string of questions, which reveal something unique - or not so unique - about you as an individual. However, there was more to these particular quizzes than first met the eye. Because,

using psychological research, including the OCEAN score (which examines five key personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism), the folks at CA were able to use the results of these quizzes to build psychographic profiles of social media users.

Even more disturbing? According to *The Great Hack*, those of us who took such a quiz inadvertently allowed CA to scrape data from our entire friend network (yet another reason to monitor our security settings) and handed them the keys to millions of people's personal information in the process.

As Facebook CTO Mike Schroepfer confirmed in 2018: "In total, we believe the Facebook information of up to 87 million people - mostly in the US - may have been improperly shared with Cambridge Analytica."

As reported by *Cadwalladr* in 2018, CA used this data to influence the Trump and Brexit campaigns. Millions of adverts, explains the documentary, were targeted at all voters - but specifically at a group which has since been dubbed 'The Persuadables'.

Right-wing votes were assured Trump voters, staunch liberals firmly in the Hillary Clinton camp - a 'Vote for Trump' ad sent to either of these groups would be a waste. Instead, CA used their harvested data to identify the people who were on the fence. Or, to put it more bluntly, the people whose minds could be changed.

With this data in hand, CA set to work on making personalised ads, with the aim of exploiting these individuals' insecurities, worries and prejudices. And they did this "until [The Persuadables] saw the world the way we wanted them to see it".

Cadwalladr was one of the first to suspect that CA may have had information on millions of Facebook users without their knowledge. She, along with many others, believed that the information was used "to build a system that could profile individual US voters, in order to target them with personalised political advertisements" - and so she set out to prove this. Her investigation took her from triumphant Brexit campaigners, to Trump, to Cambridge Analytica. The links seem indisputable, but she needed first-hand accounts to back up her claims.

One such account came in the form of Christopher Wylie, a former CA employee who had worked with Aleksandr 'Dr Spectre' Kogan to obtain the data - and whom *Cadwalladr* convinced to come forward to reveal his role in the whole affair.

"We exploited Facebook to harvest millions of people's profiles," he told her, after bravely agreeing to go on the record. "And [we] built models to exploit what we knew about them and target their inner demons. That was the basis the entire company was built on."

Wylie's testimony was not enough, however, and so the documentary's focus switches to Kaiser. Kaiser was 21 when she began her career as an intern on the Obama 2007/8 campaign, helping to run its Facebook page. Later, she became the director of business development for Cambridge Analytica - and set to work on the company's Trump and Brexit campaigns (which she has since described a "weapons-grade communications tactic"). Her star rose quickly, and she found herself enjoying the many perks that came with her job - something which is underlined throughout the film with shots of her boarding private planes to expensive hotels in far-flung locations. We even learn that Steve Bannon - formerly Trump's campaign manager - handed Kaiser the keys to his luxurious townhouse.

However, when the company's shady dealings were exposed by Wylie, Kaiser decided she'd had enough of "making excuses for old white men". It was then, and only then, that she decided to testify against them as part of a parliamentary inquiry - and, without giving too much away (spoilers ever our watchword here at Stylist), Kaiser's story reaches sky-high levels of drama as it unfolds on screen.

What the documentary does well - very well, in fact - is what many newspapers and tech reports have so far failed to do: break the Cambridge Analytica story down, so that it's far more accessible (and understandable) for the average Jo Bloggs. In doing so, it forces us to recognise the value and importance of our personal data - which is no small feat. After all, it can be hard to sum up any interest in data harvesting when it feels as if every single website is doing so (do YOU accept 'Cookies' without a second thought? Exactly!).

But, while *The Great Hack* gets a lot right, it gets a lot wrong, too. It lacks the cinematic panache of the critically-acclaimed *Fyre*, and, while it engages with the debate surrounding data mining and fake news on a surface level, it fails to dissect or scrutinise the details it uncovers (when filmmakers sit down with Kaiser, they take her version of the facts at face value - and allow her to present herself as something akin to a human rights activist, without ever challenging her on the decisions she made prior to joining CA).

Instead, the documentary focuses on painting a damning picture of Cambridge Analytica - the indisputable villain of this particular story - and insists that the company is solely to blame for Trump and Brexit. Which is, obviously, incorrect.

CA may have exposed voters to a carpet bomb of biased ads and news reports, but it didn't force them to check those ballot boxes. They weren't bullied, or threatened, or coerced into making the choices they did. Their agency was not wrested from them.

It has always been up to us to read beyond the headlines. To do more than skim through the comments on Facebook. To do our own research, to ask questions, to challenge our opinions. To, above all else, form a more well-rounded view of the world - one which allows us to see past the fakery and the falsities when they are forced under our noses by politicians, shady institutions and social media trolls.

As former NY Times editor Trish Hall previously explained to Stylist: "We are much more inclined to believe statistics that support our point of view - something that scientists call the confirmation bias - and we're very energetic in demolishing those that do not.

"If we are going to become more cohesive and more able to move the world forward," she continued, "then we need to understand other points of view. We can do that [by seeking] out media with which we do not agree."

It is up to us to break the bubble. Because - while we can slap legislations on Cambridge Analytica, and while Facebook may have since updated its privacy laws - we will never be able to get at the whole truth if we allow ourselves to exist within echo boxes of our own making. People will always share their opinions, and we will always be exposed to fake news. And, unless we make smarter, savvier choices about the media we consume, we will always be susceptible to manipulation.

Unless we recognise this enormous responsibility, democracy will die - not with a bang, but with a whimper. And that, friends, is *The Great Hack's* most important takeaway.

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/51994.htm>

Inverse Times Open Publishing. <http://inversetimes.lingama.net/news/story-752.html>