

The Subversion of Democracies and “The Global Surveillance State”. Don’t Forget About Cambridge Analytica

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Global Research, September 26, 2023

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)

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In a masterpiece of investigative reporting by Carole Cadwallr on the aggressive infiltration and subversion of democracies worldwide by Cambridge Analytica, a troubling story emerged.

Having extensively researched their operations, assisted by internal whistleblowers, she exposed how a small but powerful political consultancy, cut adrift from democratic oversight and shielded by opaque corporate governance, essentially rigged elections. Whilst I believe Cadwallr is ill-informed and mistaken on Russiagate and Julian Assange, her work bringing the scandal of Cambridge Analytica to public attention is nothing other than heroic and I, albeit begrudgingly, as a supporter of Assange, admire her for that.

The work earned her an Orwell Prize and forms the basis of a new model of understanding ostensibly democratic elections, a democratic theory reconfigured for the data age. Internet society at once liberates the best instincts of humanity, whilst simultaneously empowering its worst pathologies. In its infancy a vibrant, lively community characterized by unfettered peer to peer interaction, a data commons as such, the web, as of late with the triumph of social media, has seen a regression in dynamics. The surface internet, monopolized by Silicon Valley corporations, operates in a way akin to empire. It is in this context that Cambridge Analytica was able to operate with a toxic culture of impunity.

One aspect of the mechanics of democracy in the Information Age salient to the Cambridge Analytica scandal is that citizens are treated as data sets. They are no longer a vibrant pastiche of individuated opinions and pluralistic interests but dehumanised items, alienated from basic humanity by a rigged system which views us as tasty numbers.

Rather than given the mental freedom to come to conclusions as independent, free thinking agencies, we are subtly handled and manipulated by a plutocratic apparatus with perverse

motives. The pragmatics of this political regime are orders of magnitude at odds with the pragmatics of sensible, ethical policy.

Oligarchs and plutocrats consider an informed populace as an existential threat. They see a situation where citizens use the bargaining power of their vote and allegiance as a nightmare. Cambridge Analytica was one of the most insidious conduits for repressing the tendency to vote rationally and in the collective interest.

They did this by using psychological hacks—insights of behavioural psychology maliciously applied—to program citizens to vote for the candidates they were paid by. These candidates had absolutely no intention to rule in the public interest.

The terrifying reality is that political campaigns did not employ Cambridge Analytica, but were instead subsidiaries of Cambridge Analytica, aggregating personal data in bulk to be crunched in the big data matrix. This matrix chewed up conscientious citizens and spit them out as passive supporters of tyrants and captive, compliant consumers, both of commodities and erroneous political narratives.

One of the establishment critiques of socialism is the idea that social collectivism is undesirable and a product of brainwashing by the state. They say the expression of a group ego, coerced into falsely identifying its interest as the continuity of socialism, is a devolved state of human civilization to which capitalism is superior.

In truth it is the neoliberal transnational surveillance super state and its ideology of capitalist realism that operates as an unimpeachable authority, under which whole populaces are subsumed, often brutally. The supposed ontological validity of liberalism is in fact a false positivism, in which the biased beliefs of imperialists are presented as inherently true and articles of supremacy.

For better or worse our society is totally immersed in web technology. Knowledge and understanding of how to use it for political purposes is unfortunately amassed in the hands of corrupt elites. There is vast asymmetry of power between citizens and the ruling class, although the cypherpunk community grafts for a reversal of this trend, with a genuine grasp of the philosophical aspects of the computer empire.

Sheldon Wolin, a peerless critic of empire, wrote of “democracy incorporated,” a deeply considered explanation of how a cartel power structure emerged in the US. This structure sets political dynamics domestically through information control and augmentation of the corporate state, and internationally, through reckless military adventurism. Setting a disgusting precedent, the Iraq war was the first major historical war in which contractors outnumbered soldiers on the ground.

Cultivating baseline support for this regime of global hegemony within the tax bases of the West is a large part of the long term strategic plan of organisations like Cambridge Analytica. Tax payer money is being wrongfully invested in the creeping effort to institute a US caliphate in the resource rich Middle East. This money is being diverted from schools, libraries and hospitals, into manufacturing bombs. A reasoning citizen would oppose this. A passive citizen absorbing propaganda on TV and online would not think about this at all. Assange, perspicacious as ever, said the goal is not to win the war but to perpetuate it forever.

The Trump administration, despite stating its opposition to the democrats as war ideologues, proved that as policymakers they were more of the same. Trump failed to close Guantanamo Bay, maintained the U.S. military presence in the occupied Middle East and appointed troglodyte John Bolton to an influential foreign policy position.

Trump gained support by appealing to base instincts and emotions, like fear, and Cambridge Analytica was a key part of this strategy. The administration targeted tailored messages subtly encoded with political biases on Facebook to susceptible people. This triggered knee jerk responses, an apoplectic mentality, which made easy the assimilation of those targeted, into the political machine.

Data on the psychological profiles of citizens is not in the hundreds, or thousands, but in the millions, entire nations calculatedly studied and manipulated. The Cambridge Analytica algorithm was explicitly designed to extract as much data as possible, infecting the Facebook ecosystem by not only extracting data from singular profiles but also every one of their friends.

This constitutes a feedback loop where the output of purposeful disinformation galvanizes the input of attention and data entry from consumers of web technologies, wherein the behemoth breeds.

The digital realm has long been a source of useful information for political campaigners. In the UK, before Cambridge Analytica, a piece of software called Mosaic was developed to help categorize types of voters, distinguished by their socio-economic status and cultural values.

This software enabled political parties to identify the most persuadable subsections of society and thus optimize their messaging and branding. Perhaps its worst effect was to erase the notion of a working class unified in solidarity in aspirations for justice and peace.

This means that digital technologies can be considered weapons. Although not immediately injurious or lethal they exert a tremendously negative long term effect on societies and individual minds, killing off civic society and hijacking personal and public consciousness.

The days of truthful, meaningful policy and earnest manifestos from honest politicians, approved or declined at the ballot box, are long gone. The institutions of power today are so vast, convoluted, opaque and duplicitous as to be too complex to be comprehended by immediate perception. A finely attuned instinct however is suffice to gain a sense of the evil at work.

The objective of Cambridge Analytica, aligned to the wider agenda of the neoliberal global surveillance state, is to hijack the organs of perception in order to create a docile, neutralized citizenry that doesn't even know that it doesn't know.

Animosity toward globalization is not always rooted in antisemitic falsehoods but often in a deep sense of cultural displacement engendered by the emergence of transnational power structures adrift from democratic oversight and controlled by unelected bureaucrats.

The antidote to the kind of world that Cambridge Analytica aspires to create is a resurgent activist public rooted in deep moral character and ethical conviction. The Thatcherites say such a thing does not exist so as to erase it from our imaginations. The awakening of the peasants of the new serfdom of globalization is a viable possibility and something to aspire

to.

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